

Making Literacy Connections

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Selecting Quality Literature

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As educators, we know how important it is for children to read and it is more important that children are reading high quality literature. Educators must know how to choose quality literature for children and must be thoughtful and critical about these literature choices. Children should be exposed to an abundance of quality literature that consists of; narrative text or also named fiction and informational text or also known as non-fiction. Both types of text should contain vocabulary which challenges the child while supporting their vocabulary growth and topics that interest them. All quality children books should contain rich vocabulary that assists in building the child’s vocabulary and knowledge, topics that are interesting and relevant to children, a plot, setting, and characters on the cover and within the book that can provide children with the ability to make predictions about the story.

Quality children’s literature books should be sturdy and able to withstand the wear and tear of the age group they are intended for and finally, quality literature should contain illustrations which support and enhance the text (Yellin & DeVries, 2011). There are specific criteria for choosing both narrative and informational text for children. This paper will cover definitions and descriptions of narrative and informational text, characteristics of quality literature and the criteria in choosing narrative and informational text. It will discuss how children can be engaged when using narrative and informational text and the reasons educators should incorporate both types of genres into their classrooms. Finally, it will provide examples of high-quality narrative and information text and other resources to obtain high-quality literature.

Narrative Text

What are Narrative Texts?

The International Literacy Association defines Narrative Text as “Written or oral language designed to recount a sequence of related events or to tell a story. Narrative can take the forms of song, poetry, drama, or prose” For reference, narrative text can also be called fiction or a story. There are many sub categories of

narrative children's literature. Some of types of narrative text that will be discussed in this paper are poetry, picture books, traditional and modern fantasy and finally, realistic and historical fiction. These sub categories regularly used in read-alouds and lessons with young children.

Types of Quality Children's Narrative Literature

There are several types of narrative literature that will be discussed, poetry, picture books, traditional and modern fantasy and realistic and historical fiction. A brief description will be provided of each and criteria to be used when choosing each type of literature for children. Poetry, means language intended to create an emotion or an experience for the reader (Yellin & DeVries, 2011) The International Literacy Association defines poetry as, "A genre of literature in which heightened attention is given to the form of the language, including sound and rhythm, and which makes frequent use of literary devices, such as figurative language." Poetry should be age appropriate and use vivid, rich vocabulary. It should also contain literary devices which should be developmentally appropriate for the child to understand or easily explained by the teacher. The child should be able to connect with the poem and it should produce strong feelings about what is read. Poetry is especially important for young children as they are beginning to read and learn reading skills.

Exposing very young children to nursery rhymes and rhythmical poetry helps develop early reading skills such as phonological awareness, word decoding and identification (Yellin & DeVries, 2011). The next type of narrative literature is picture books. As described in much of the literature, picture books are books where the text, and the picture work together and the illustrations are just as much a part of the story as the written words (Hoffman, Teale, & Yokota, 2015). This idea of the illustrations working along with the text to create one whole rich literary work is confirmed by Yellin and DeVries (2011): "In a quality picture book, both the text and illustrations must be in harmony as well...[The resulting book] provides the child with a visual experience [and] has a collective unity storyline, theme or concept, developed through the series of pictures of which the book is comprised" (p. 119).

It is exceptionally important to understand the literary elements that comprise a quality narrative are especially depicted in picture books because every genre can be found in picture books (Yellin & DeVries, 2011). Next, traditional and modern fantasy are imaginative stories that mesmerize with unrealistic occurrences such as magic. Traditional fantasy is fictional stories like fairy and folktales, which

are passed down and modern fantasy are stories that were written recently and reflect today's society and have an identifiable author. Finally, realistic and historical fiction. They may include real elements such as people or places but are written from the imagination of the author. Realistic fiction contains real-life problems children might experience. It will also contain non-stereotypical characters; the characters are all believable and the text is easily understood. Realistic fiction contains many critical literacy topics such as death, divorce, disability, and gender roles. Many of these books are thought provoking and can stimulate meaningful conversations with children.

It is up to the educator to assess if the topic is developmentally appropriate for a specific group of children (Yellin & DeVries, 2011). Finally, historical fiction is based on research and historically accurate information, and illustrations that are accurate for the time, but the story is still from the imagination of the author. Yellin & DeVries, 2011 asserted:

Time is an abstract concept difficult for very young children to grasp. Long ago could be a month, a year, or any time before they were born. Events that took place hundreds of years ago may be difficult for young children to fathom. (p. 324)

Exposing children to historical fiction early in reading provides them with familiar topics they will learn about in informational text books, they will read as they get older. The next section will describe the literary elements of narrative children's literature.

Literary Elements in Quality Children's Narrative Literature

Quality narrative literature contains several essential literary elements. A brief overview of the characteristics of quality literature will be provided for each literary element. The literary elements to be examined consist of theme, characters, plot, setting, point of view, style and finally illustrations. The first literary element to be described is Theme. According to Hoffman et al. (2015), "Theme is a broad, overarching idea in a text that is usually communicated implicitly through multiple features of the narrative, including plot, characters, character's actions, dialogue and setting" (p. 12). Additionally, the theme can often be the message the author is trying to convey to the reader about humanity, oneself, society or a difficult life changing topic such as death. The theme should also reflect the child's interest and be a topic a child could imagine happening in their own lives.

The next literary element in quality children's literature is Characters. Readers should find the characters in quality literature to be realistic and not stereotypical, except in the case of fantasy fiction (Yellin & DeVries, 2011). Furthermore, Hoffman et al. (2015) confirmed, "High-quality characters include round characters- characters who are dynamic, changing and malleable." In contrast, flat (stock) characters are stable, fixed and unresponsive to difference in particular events or characters" (p.12). When looking for quality literature for children, look for books that contain characters that are like real people who make decisions, exhibit human like feelings and decisions towards the plot and the other characters in the book. The third literary element is the plot of the story or the structure of events in a story (Yellin & DeVries, 2011). Children's literature should be interesting and suspenseful, the reader should not be able to immediately identify what is going to happen in the story. Hoffman et al. (2015) asserted, "An engaging, complex plot interests' readers and drives their desire to know what happens next, especially in relation to a story's resolution" (p. 14).

Next, the setting of narrative text can be in the past, present, or future. The setting can take place in a known location or somewhere which is ambiguous and only provides details to confirm the location is in a city, suburb or a rural location (Kiefer & Huck, 2010). When selecting quality literature for children, the setting should be a place that they may have been to or are interested in going. The next literacy element simply tells the reader whom the author chose to tell the story and how they are going to tell that story, the Point of View. For younger children, you should choose literature that is in the first person and uses "I". A teacher can help the child understand what it means by point of view by utilizing books in first person. Yellin and DeVries, (2010) explained, "point of view is not an easy concept to grasp because they tend to focus on the plot and the characters, with little concern for who is telling the story" (p. 139). Starting with literature in the first-person provides the teacher with a strategy for teaching point of view using literature and discussion.

Another element of narrative literature that is important to examine when choosing quality literature is Style. The style of writing is simply the words the authors choose and the arrangement of those words in the story (Kiefer & Huck, 2010). Furthermore, style includes word choice, grammatical structure, and literary devices. The words in children's books should be chosen wisely as most literature for children is short. You want to get the most out of a piece of literature you can in regard to rich vocabulary. Such as interesting and vivid verb choice and nouns that create a specific and rich image in the child's mind. Children's literature should

contain various sentence structure, not only simple sentence but also including compound sentences (Yellin & DeVries, 2010). Some questions that can be asked while choosing quality children's narratives and assessing the style of the piece as Kiefer and Huck (2010), described: "The best test of an author's style is probably oral reading. Does the story read smoothly? Does the conversations flow naturally? Does the author provide variety in sentence patterns, vocabulary, and use of stylistic devices?" (p. 20).

The final literary element that will be examined is Illustrations. Illustrations in children's literature should be used to enhance or supplement the text or develop the story. Yellin and DeVries, (2010) explained that "They are responsible for creating the mood of the story through color, tone and line; for enhancing characterization by depicting facial expression and other body language; and for augmenting the plot" (p. 150). As educators are choosing quality literature for children, they must look for and use literature that contains these characteristics in the literary elements. The next section will discuss why educators should use narrative text with young children.

Why use Narrative Text with Young Children?

Many of the occasions that educators use narrative text with children in their classrooms are during read-alouds. Hoffman et al. (2015), discussed how the quality of literature impacts the quality of the read-aloud discussion, these scholars asserted, "some children's books provide more to think and talk about than other. To help children process complex texts in read-aloud discussions, it is important for teachers to first choose texts that can support complex interpretations." These scholars also stated that "Appropriate narratives for young children contain accounts of connected events that typically surround a central problem and lead to a resolution." We use quality narrative text in our read-alouds to provide our children with rich vocabulary, and the opportunity to use their critical thinking with literature. Yellin and DeVries, (2010) confirmed

When fiction is shared with preschool children, they develop a literate register, the syntax, and semantics common to literature (Cox et al., 2004). They learn that stories have setting characters, and plots, which may involve a problem that needs to be resolved. Through listening, they learn that book language (in which complete sentences are used) is different from oral conversations (in which sentences are often not completed). (pp. 120-121)

The next section will provide strategies for using narrative text with young children.

How to use Narrative Texts with Young Children?

It is not only important to know how to choose quality literature but also how to use that literature with children. When you have the right tools, it makes teaching that much more effective for children's reading development. Zeece (2010) stated that "Well-selected and appropriately shared books serve as an effective vehicle for helping children connect speech and print to the features and characteristics of words" (p. 346). One of the most common strategies that teachers use narrative literature is through read-alouds, it is however even more important to know how to use the literature to create rich and thoughtful discussions about texts during these lessons.

Hoffman et al., (2015) confirmed, "Read alouds that engage young children with complex texts rely on interactive discussions focused on interpretations of text that may vary with the backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences of the children listening" (p.9). They also discuss how read-aloud discussions promote comprehension and analysis of text (Hoffman et al. 2015). There are many other strategies that can be used with children and children's literature, but it should be thoughtful and purposeful.

In one study, two teachers used intentional techniques with literature and were much more effective with their children's literacy engagement. Some of these strategies were to generate excitement about reading, provide children with opportunities for collaboration such as working in small groups. The teachers also used literature to make home-school connections. In using this strategy, children can make authentic and rich connections to the literature (Duke et al., 2018). Show your students how you are genuinely excited about sharing literature with them and diversify the types of activities which are used with the books chosen. The next section will provide examples of award-winning children's narrative literature and provide where the literature can be located.

Award-winning Children's Narrative Literature Examples

Caldecott Medal Winners

The Caldecott Medal is awarded annually to the artist for the most distinguished American picture book for children. Below are the books that were awarded the Caldecott Medal from 2016-2019 and those that have been honored from 2016-2019.

2019

- *Hello Lighthouse*, illustrated and written by Sophie Blackall, published by Little, Brown and Company, a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

2018

- *Wolf in the Snow*, illustrated and written by Matthew Cordell (Feiwel and Friends/Macmillan)

2017

- *Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat*, illustrated and written by Javaka Steptoe (Little, Brown and Company, a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.)

2016

- *Finding Winnie: The True Story of the World's Most Famous Bear*, illustrated by Sophie Blackall, written by Lindsay Mattick (Little, Brown and Company, a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.)

Caldecott Honor Books

2019

- *Alma and How She Got Her Name*, illustrated and written by Juana Martinez-Neal, published by Candlewick Press.
- *A Big Mooncake for Little Star*, illustrated and written by Grace Lin, published by Little, Brown and Company, a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.
- *The Rough Patch*, illustrated and written by Brian Lies, published by Greenwillow Books, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.
- *Thank You, Omu!*, illustrated and written by Oge Mora, published by Little, Brown and Company, a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

2018

- *Big Cat, Little Cat*, illustrated and written by Elisha Cooper (Roaring Brook Press/Holtzbrinck)
- *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut*, illustrated by Gordon C. James, written by Derrick Barnes (Bolden/Agate)
- *A Different Pond*, illustrated by Thi Bui, written by Bao Phi (Capstone Young Readers/Capstone)
- *Grand Canyon*, illustrated and written by Jason Chin (Roaring Brook Press/Holtzbrinck)

2017

- *Leave Me Alone!* illustrated and written by Vera Brosgol (Roaring Brook Press/Holtzbrinck)

- *Freedom in Congo Square*, illustrated by R. Gregory Christie, written by Carole Boston Weatherford (Little Bee Books/Bonnier)
- *Du Iz Tak?* illustrated and written by Carson Ellis (Candlewick Press)
- *They All Saw a Cat*, illustrated and written by Brendan Wenzel (Chronicle Books)

2016

- *Trombone Shorty*, illustrated by Bryan Collier, written by Troy Andrews and published by (Abrams Books for Young Readers, an imprint of ABRAMS)
- *Waiting*, illustrated and written by Kevin Henkes (Greenwillow Books/HarperCollins)
- *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer, Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement*, illustrated by Ekua Holmes, written by Carole Boston Weatherford (Candlewick Press)
- *Last Stop on Market Street*, illustrated by Christian Robinson, written by Matt de la Peña (G.P. Putnam's Sons/Penguin)

Other Resources

- Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) a division of The American Library Association (ALA)
<http://www.ala.org/alsc/>
- Children's and Teacher's Choice Reading Lists from the International Literacy Association
<https://www.literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/reading-lists>
- Readwritethink- from National Council Teachers of English (NCTE) provides resources for teachers.

<http://readwritethink.org>

Informational Text

What are Informational Texts?

The International Literacy Association defines Informational Text as, "Texts used to teach or convey knowledge about a topic in math, science, and social

studies.” Additionally, Yellin and DeVries, 2011 affirmed, “They cover a broad range of areas and topics-animals, plants, outer space, countries, and cultures, geographical wonders, people and occupations, math, science, physics, cooking and more-and many are written specifically for young children” (p. 244). Most of the categories of nonfiction that are written for adults are also written for children. Many of the types of informational texts written for young children are, concept books, nonfiction picture books, biographies and autobiographies, life-cycle books, identification books, and many more (Kiefer & Huck, 2010; Yellin & DeVries, 2011). The next section will describe the criteria to look for when selecting quality informational texts for children.

Characteristics of High-Quality Informational Text

It has been argued that children tend to choose fiction literature because they are familiar with it and it is what is typically read to them. It is the responsibility of the adult to take an interest inventory of their children and expand their reading repertoire. An educator can use a child’s interest in a topic from a fiction book and find informational texts about the subject. Yellin and DeVries (2011) expanded:

After an adult has interested the child in informational books, the adult can constantly encourage the child to select from a variety of books that continually build on the base of what intrigues the child. These books should also present various perspectives on the topic. (p. 247)

It is important for educators to remember that children are curious about their world and one of the best resources that can be used is high-quality children’s informational text.

This section will cover the criteria for evaluating and selecting quality informational. An overview of the criteria for evaluating informational text will be covered. The criteria consist of accuracy, organization, design, and style. Once an educator knows the criteria, it will make it easier to choose quality, developmentally appropriate informational text for children. First, accuracy described in the literature as the most important standard to evaluate when choosing children’s informational literature. The first area to evaluate in informational text accuracy is, what are the author's credentials or where did they obtain their information from. Authors of non-fiction should be experts in their fields (Kiefer & Huck 2010; Yellin & DeVries, 2011). The content of the books should be factual and up-to-date. The information could have been factual at the time of printing but over time with new research the information could be inaccurate (Kiefer & Huck 2010). It is also important that the complexity of

information is appropriate for the age group that will be reading the book (Yellin & DeVries, 2011).

Next, the organization of the text will be discussed. Organization simply refers to how the text is structured. This seems simple, but the organization of informational text can make it much easier on the reader. There are many types of ways in which informational text can be structured, it is important for educators to understand each format and which format is appropriate for children. Some text formats used to organize informational are, compare and contrast or the similarities and differences of topics and items, questions and answer or cause and effect. Yellin and DeVries (2011) explained “The organization that is easiest to understand, and thus appropriate for preschool children, is description/enumeration because only one concept is being explained” (p. 249). Additionally, compare and contrast is noted as the second easiest format for young children to use (Yellin & DeVries, 2011).

The organization that the author chooses for the book should make sense for the topic, and the books should flow logically. Next, the design and style should be appealing to the reader and should have readability, the illustrative material must complement and enhance the text, and the author should use vivid vocabulary. The style and design of writing in informational text can decide if children will be attracted to the book. If it will be interesting enough to capture their attention. Yellin and DeVries (2011) asserted,

Often young children like only to look at the picture and not read the text. Authors realize that face, so in order to get children to listen to or to read the text they use a writing style that intrigues readers. (p.252)

Authors can do this for example by the choices in verbs, nouns, and adjectives they use in text, ensuring that they are vivid and interesting to the reader. For example, instead of using the verb cry an author may use blubber, whimper, or bawl. With the use of interesting and different kinds of verbs keeps the reader’s attention and increases their vocabulary.

It is important to take note when choosing informational text for young children, the author should be objective about the topic and provide varying points of view, which can bring about a natural reflection about the topic from the reader. Kiefer and Huck (2010) confirmed, “Authors who fail to acknowledge more than one viewpoint or theory fail to help children learn to examine issues. Even young children should know that authorities do not agree, though the content might be simple” (p. 502). Educators can also offer children several informational text on the

same topic, to ensure children read or listen to multiple perspectives on the topic. Children can also use the books on the same topic to compare how the authors presented the information. The next section will discuss why it is so vital for educators to use informational text with young children.

Why use Informational Text with Young Children?

As discussed, it is important for children to be exposed to narrative and informational text. Correia, (2011) stated, “Informational text supports children’s overall literacy development by expanding vocabulary and background knowledge, while also exposing them to the language and structure of expository text” (pp. 100-101). Children are motivated to read informational texts because they are curious about their world. It is the job of the educator to provide children with quality informational text and to teach them how and why we use them. We want children to be comfortable with all genres of text and choose them on their own, we do not want children to be intimidated by a genre of reading.

Informational text exposure is important for children because it constructs background knowledge, children learn new and technical vocabulary and they learn about types of text features such as a table of contents and glossary that are used in many informational texts. Children learn about the language used in different disciplines and academic areas and informational text can begin discussions about topics which may not come up in narrative literature (Yellin & DeVries, 2011; Yopp, 2012). It is also important to explain to children why we use informational text. There are numerous benefits of using informational materials with young children and such as, using them for all the everyday reasons adults use nonfiction materials such as reading the newspaper to stay informed, reading a recipe to make dinner, checking the weather, reading a journal article in your field of work or discipline to stay up to date on the latest research. Children may find informational text more interesting than narrative text. Informational text can help children to understand other types of written literature structure and concepts of print (Duke, 2014).

How to use Informational Texts with Young Children?

There are various ways teachers can incorporate informational text into their lessons. Throughout the literature, it is argued that informational text can and should be used in read-alouds as much as stories and non-fiction literature. Much of the literature also discusses that narrative text and informational text should be used together. One of the strategies discussed in the literature is called REAL Time, which stands for Read, Explore, Ask, & Learn. Bingham et al. (2018) described, “teachers use this framework to pair complex storybooks with one or more

informational text in order to develop children’s understanding of key vocabulary and important real-world concepts” (p. 467). As the scholars explain, children are naturally curious and want to know more about the world around them.

Utilizing fiction books provides the topic and helps to interest the child then the informational books are used to provide factual material about a topic and complex vocabulary about a topic that may not be in the fictional literature (Bingham et al., 2018). In order to cover the interests of many students at once, having reference material available. They can be available in the class library and students can share them with one another, which can pique the interest of another student in the class. Following current events can also be a useful way to incorporate the use of an informational text in the classroom. Students can look at newspapers or magazines Duke (2014) suggested using a periodical geared directly toward children such as, National Geographic Young Explorer (p. 60).

Award-winning Children’s Informational Text Examples

Sibert Medal Winners

The Sibert Medal is awarded annually to the author(s) and illustrator(s) for the most distinguished American informational book for children. Below are the books that were awarded the Sibert Medal from 2016-2019 and those that have been honored from 2016-2019.

2019

- *The Girl Who Drew Butterflies: How Maria Merian’s Art Changed Science*, written by Joyce Sidman, and published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

2018

- *Twelve Days in May: Freedom Ride 1961*, written by Larry Dane Brimner (Calkins Creek/Highlights)

2017

- *March: Book Three*, written by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, and illustrated by Nate Powell (Top Shelf Productions)

2016

- *Funny Bones: Posada and His Day of the Dead Calaveras*, written and illustrated by Duncan Tonatiuh (Abrams Books for Young Readers/ABRAMS)

Sibert Honor Books

2019

- *Camp Panda: Helping Cubs Return to the Wild*, written by Catherine Thimmesh, and published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
- *Spooked!: How a Radio Broadcast and The War of the Worlds Sparked the 1938 Invasion of America*, written by Gail Jarrow, and published by Calkins Creek, an imprint of Highlights
- *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees*, written and Illustrated by Don Brown, and published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
- *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga*, written by Traci Sorell, illustrated by Frané Lessac, and published by Charlesbridge
- *When Angels Sing: The Story of Rock Legend Carlos Santana*, written by Michael Mahin, illustrated by Jose Ramirez, and published by Atheneum Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division

2018

- *Chef Roy Choi and the Street Food Remix*, written by Jacqueline Briggs Martin and June Jo Lee, illustrated by Man One (Readers to Eaters)
- *Grand Canyon*, written and illustrated by Jason Chin (Roaring Brook Press/Holtzbrinck)
- *Not So Different: What You Really Want to Ask about Having a Disability*, written by Shane Burcaw and illustrated by Matt Carr (Roaring Brook Press/Holtzbrinck)
- *Sea Otter Heroes: The Predators That Saved an Ecosystem*, written by Patricia Newman (Millbrook/Lerner)

2017

- *Giant Squid*, written by Candace Fleming and illustrated by Eric Rohmann (Roaring Book Press, a division of Holtzbrinck Publishing Holdings Limited Partnership)
- *Sachiko: A Nagasaki Bomb Survivor's Story*, written by Caren Stelson (Carolrhoda Books, a division of Lerner Publishing group, Inc.)
- *Uprooted: The Japanese American Experience During World War II*, written by Albert Marrin (Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC)
- *We Will Not Be Silent: The White Rose Student Resistance Movement That Defied Adolf Hitler*, written by Russell Freedman (Clarion Books, an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company)

2016

- *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans*, written and illustrated by Don Brown (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)
- *The Boys Who Challenged Hitler: Knud Pedersen and the Churchill Club*, written by Phillip Hoose (Farrar Straus Giroux)

- *Turning 15 on the Road to Freedom: My Story of the 1965 Selma Voting Rights March*, written by Lynda Blackmon Lowery, as told to Elspeth Leacock and Susan Buckley and illustrated by PJ Loughran (Dial Books/Penguin Group (USA))
- *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer, Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement*, written by Carole Boston Weatherford and illustrated by Ekua Holmes (Candlewick Press)

Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) a division of The American Library Association (ALA)

<http://www.ala.org/alsc/>

Other Resources

- Children's and Teacher's Choice Reading Lists from the International Literacy Association

<https://www.literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/reading-lists>

- Readwritethink- from National Council Teachers of English (NCTE) provides resources for teachers.

<http://readwritethink.org>

- Orbis Pictus award for outstanding non-fiction from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

<http://www2.ncte.org/awards/orbis-pictus-award-nonfiction-for-children/>

Final Thoughts

Overwhelming emphasis in the literature argued balancing genres of literature that children are exposed to. Children should not only have quality narrative and informational text available to read on their own, but educators should be using both genres in read alouds. The use of both genres in activities is also useful. Children can be exposed to the same topic in both narrative and informational forms. By exposing children to high-quality narrative and

informational text, the educator is giving them a wealth of knowledge and providing them with rich language and topics that are also developmentally appropriate. As Yellin and DeVries (2011) discussed:

Authors who write effectively for infants through primary grades understand children's stages of linguistic, cognitive, moral and social development. They also understand children's attention span. Quality books intended for this age level offer text that is appropriate for this age and illustrations that help children understand the text. (p. 4)

These authors went on to state that

As you select books, remember that the main purpose of quality fiction is to bring pleasure, if readers learn new information or better understand human nature from reading fiction, then they receive a bonus (Lukens, 2003). The main purpose of nonfiction, on the other hand, is to inform and expand the reader's knowledge. (p. 8)

This paper covered what narrative and informational text are, characteristics of and how to choose both high-quality narrative and informational text and the reasons that educators should incorporate both types of genres into their classrooms. It will also discuss how children can be engaged when using narrative and informational text and finally, provide examples of high-quality narrative and informational text and other ways to obtain high-quality literature.

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Tips for Effective Hyperdocs and Distance Learning

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March 12th, 2020—the day our schools closed. Teachers across the county, state, and country transitioned to distance learning; many used hyperdocs for instruction. A hyperdoc is an interactive digital document that allows for student inquiry, collaboration, accountability and formative assessment. It includes all the pieces of a strong lesson, and can easily be used in a virtual environment - making it a good, quick fix. But students and parents alike were confused by much of the content in these hyperdocs. Teachers complained there were too many places to check, and feedback took hours.

A good fix, but how can we make them better for this upcoming school year?

I thought about hyperdocs and my students who needed specific reassurances - such as the student who raises her hand moments after I review the directions and asks “*Wait, what are we supposed to do?*” How do I support *that* student in a virtual environment? How do I create hyperdocs that ensure accessibility to our students with disabilities or English learners from afar? What does a hyperdoc that supports all the components of literacy—reading, writing, listening, and comprehension—look like? These questions and more raced through my mind as I reviewed effective hyperdocs. Four categories emerged: directions, design/comprehensibility, checks for understanding, and choice.

Directions

Have you ever noticed that directions always make sense to the speaker? The instructions I provide always make sense to me! But when I look out to a sea of blank faces, I can quickly ascertain that I missed the mark. In these cases, my students ask clarifying questions, peer over to the person next to them, or watch me at the board. The next time I teach that lesson, I change my directions to include this clarification. Remote learning does not easily allow students to ask quick questions, nor does it allow such adjustments to be made swiftly. This means that as teachers, we have to ensure clarity before sharing resources.

When providing directions to students virtually, we must ensure they are even more explicit than those given in the classroom. A typical direction that might include “*Open your journal and respond to the third prompt*” might now require a supplemental video demonstrating where to find the journal and to what prompt

students should respond. It is also necessary to break up the directions into precise action-orientated tasks that are easily digestible for students - creating clear short steps that students can follow. So “*Open your journal and respond to the third prompt*” might now become, “*First, open your journal in Google Classroom. Click here for video directions on how to find it. Then, go to slide three and respond to the prompt using complete sentences.*”

Design/Comprehensibility

Design is the organization of a hyperdoc. In order to save yourself and your students undue stress, there are four considerations for hyperdoc design.

1) Design with the end in mind. When students finish their work, how will you collect it for feedback/submission? Do you want to open 120 hyperdocs? Do you have to open four different programs? If it takes you too long to go through each student's work, it is too much.

2) Aesthetics matter! When it comes to the physical design, less is always more. Always. If something is visually overwhelming to you, even the slightest, it is even more overwhelming for our students. Streamline and color-coordinate. Keep accessibility in mind. Try using a color palette with just a few colors.

3) Make it meaningful. Virtual learning has no room for fluff. Each activity needs to be meaningful and action-oriented (just like the directions - are you seeing a theme here?). Instead of asking students to create flashcards for their vocabulary (which let's be honest, very few will do), include a link where they can play some Quizlet games for their vocabulary work. Design your activities so they are interactive, and students can engage directly in the hyperdoc (try to keep all work in one place—I promise it will be easier).

4) Ask someone else! Let's admit it. We are biased. We'll spend hours designing our hyperdoc to make it pretty AND easy to understand - of course it's not overwhelming! Ask someone else to walk through your hyperdoc while thinking about if the formatting and aesthetics make sense.

Life is all about balance, and so is your hyperdoc.

Checks for Understanding

Checking for understanding is another critical aspect of any strong lesson plan. It allows the students to receive feedback, and to know if they're on track. However, when we assign a student work that is completed asynchronously, it can be challenging to give immediate feedback to guide that student's understanding. Thus, it is easy for students to carry misconceptions.

In a virtual learning environment, we all should err on the side of caution. Assume students forget. When you ask them to identify the parts of the plot, include your

slide deck and video reviewing the terms. You could even use a YouTube video that has already been created (www.youtube.com). But what about the application of the content, not just vocabulary? By putting in frequent self-graded formative opportunities such as Google Forms, Quizizz, EdPuzzles, students will be able to get immediate feedback and be able to reach out to you with questions or reflect on their own thinking (www.google.com/forms, www.quizizz.com, www.edpuzzle.com). It's even more fun if you design these checks for understanding as games—I promise, the kids will never know!

Choice

A virtual environment might not be what you or your students asked for but giving choices can ease pressure and create student ownership. A choice menu can provide a variety of multimodal experiences for students, allowing them to choose the method that best fits their learning style. You can create a menu of learning activities, use reflection to guide students towards certain activities based on their understanding, or use formative data. This allows you to include content that supports various levels of learners, including English Learners and Students with Disabilities. Want to suggest a particular activity for one of your students based on need? Leave them a comment suggesting it—*“I think this activity would be perfect for you! Could you please begin with it, and then you can choose another activity from the menu?”* Including choice may sound overwhelming—you must create so many more options than the one or two you would use in the classroom—but don't reinvent the wheel! My first choice when planning lessons—starting with Google.

Keep in mind that after all this, after you've spent hours designing the perfect literacy learning experience virtually, there will be errors. You will share a link improperly or forget to link something entirely. It will happen, and there will be confusion, and it will be okay. Give yourself and your students grace. Because after you've spent hours designing this experience, you're going to get an email that says, *“I don't know what to do!”* and you're going to need some grace.

More of a visual person? Review the presentation [here](#). The linked presentation will walk you through getting started, provides links and tutorials.

Ten Ways to Build Relationships with Students in a Virtual Environment

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The relationship between the teacher and student is the cornerstone of the learning environment, even when the environment is entirely virtual. Strong teacher-student relationships bolster learning, improve classroom management, and support students' social emotional health. As many school systems are engaged in 100% distance learning in the fall due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these relationships are more important than ever.

At the time of this writing, we are heading into the winter. Cases are rising in the United States, which remains one of the most impacted countries. Considerations for the public's physical health is the country's biggest priority when fighting the virus, but concerns for mental health move to the forefront as we assess the impact of fear and uncertainty on students. Distance learning provides an opportunity to expand students' support groups to include additional trusted adults and to learn new research and technology skills that have become essential in a school and work environment. While the pandemic's scope is almost certain to permanently reshape daily routines and societal structures, such as work and school, on a near permanent basis the tools and skills our students and teachers learn will continue to benefit the missions of public education.

Every teacher affected by the pandemic has been thrust into the role of a boots-on-the-ground researcher, and what they all have in common is knowing that relationship building, perhaps now more so than in previous years, has to occur early and continue throughout the year. Our team met to discuss and name recommendations for building relationships in a virtual environment. We offer 10 recommendations.

1. **The Power of a Name.** Good relationships make us feel valued—to be heard and seen. In a virtual environment, it is challenging to greet each student by

name as they tend to appear simultaneously, but well worth the effort. Particularly in a virtual environment, students should feel noticed, never invisible or like an audience member. They should feel like their online presence is valued. We offer three recommendations for the use of names. First, students should hear their names often during a synchronous class session. Teachers affirm each student's contribution and validate their individual identities when names are used.

Second, teachers must learn to pronounce students' names correctly and ensure that all students in the community do the same. We offer the resource of *My Name, My Identity* <https://www.mynamemyidentity.org/> to explore the importance of this concept.

Lastly, we recommend that teachers invite students to share the history of their names. Names are deeply personal and steeped in family culture, language, religion, and interests. Students may be named after family members, friends, historical figures, or have other connections. Glenn Singleton, author of *Courageous Conversations*, for example, often shares that his parents named him Glenn after John Glenn, the first American to orbit the Earth (Singleton, 2015). Some of our students have shared with us how teachers or peers have either "Americanized" their names for ease of use or have made fun of the name and their own ineptitude in pronunciation of their names.

We offer another example from middle school with the understanding that middle school is a formative time, during which students are trying to forge new identities and move away from who they were as children. One of our students decided to go by his middle name, Trey, at the start of the year, the logic being "new year, new name." His history of using his middle name was founded on the spot while sharing with the classroom. As we know identity evolves. These stories teach us humility, history, and most importantly about our students' identity. In the digital environment, some teachers will use FlipGrid to invite students to record a correct pronunciation of their name and their history. This serves as a reference for all and builds community.

2. Check-ins and Check-outs with Active Engagement. In an online environment, teachers are encouraged to begin the session with community builders for checking in and checking out. These activities are usually brief and are designed to energize the space and build relationships among the students. It is a way for students to have a voice and express themselves. Everyone participates either verbally or in writing (e.g., Padlet, chat box, Google Form, poll). One way to check-in and check-out of a virtual class meeting, begins by the teacher posing a question and students respond in the chat feature or other online tool. Such as "Would you rather live in a cave or a treehouse? Why?" Have a few students share while everyone reads the

chat. See Figure 1 for other check-in and out prompts. The same kind of engagement activity can be used to end a class session.

Figure 1: Possible Check-in and Check-out Prompts

- Use the weather to describe your mood right now?
- What is your favorite book? What are you reading right now?
- Tell me something good about this week.
- Select two or three images and have the students voice which option reflects what they most feel/connect with (e.g., a calm lake, a roller coaster, a tightrope walk)
- 30 second challenge - students drive a brief verbal summary of the class meeting
- 5 words or less: students write what “stuck” with them from the lesson

In our district, this protocol is consistently used with adults in meetings. We refer to “Connections before content” in a virtual environment.

3. Virtual Small Groups. As with brick-and-mortar classrooms, relationships thrive with positive one-on-one and small group interactions. Given the reduction in synchronous time with students, this can be challenging. Small groups online are fun ways for students to connect, collaborate and build relationships with each other and with the teacher. Consider scheduling small groups and sharing virtual spaces to collaborate on the work. Google documents, PowerPoints, Padlet and other online tools allow everyone to contribute online. Using a small group feature, increases students talk-time and allows each student to engage not only with the teacher, but with the other students. During our time in the virtual environment our students have indicated two important factors when considering small group virtual work. First, students do not speak in a small group unless they “know” or are comfortable with the other students in the virtual classroom; therefore, we recommend first using break out small groups socially. Have students introduce themselves and share about a topic (e.g., hobbies, reading, plans for the weekend). This could happen as a daily warm up for 3-5 minutes with small groups.

Second, use a discussion protocol which provides a specific set of guidelines for discussion. In the absence of structure, we have found that students go immediately to the written piece of the assignment without engaging in conversation.

Figure 2: Examples of Reading and Discussion Protocols

- *Save the Last Word*: One student selects a quotation from the text and reads it aloud. Other students take turns responding to the text, and the original student closes the discussion with a reflection.

Step 1: Everyone identifies a quotation in the text

Step 2: One person reads his/her quote

Step 3: Everyone in the group responds to the quote

Step 4: The person who shared the quote shares why he/she choose the quote – the last word

Step 5: Repeat

- *Single Sentence Summary*: Each person writes a single sentence about the content of the reading or project and each person shares.

- *Sentence-Phrase-Word*: In your discussion group, review the text that you have read, and each select your own:

Sentence that was meaningful to you, that you felt captures a core idea of the text

Phrase that moved, engaged, or provoked you

Word that captured your attention or struck you as powerful

As a group discuss and record your choices. Begin each sharing with your words, then phrases, then sentences. Explain why you made the selections you did. Create a chart similar to the one shown below. Include small page numbers by each word, phrase, or sentence from the text. Looking at your groups' collective choices of words, phrases, and sentences, reflect on the conversation by identifying:

What themes emerge?

What implications or predictions can be drawn?

Were there aspects of the text not captured in your choices?

- *Teacher Constructed Protocols*: Teachers can create their own guidelines that specifically match their assignment. Be specific about participation from each student.

4. **Be Flexible and Creative.** Teachers, students, and their families are handling emotional and physical work during the pandemic. There is no guarantee of a

common schedule, reliable access to the Internet or computers, access to learning materials and texts, daycare, time with family and friends.

Everyone, including teachers, is juggling schedules and priorities. Be flexible with assignments and support for students. Be creative and remember that virtual learning should include laughter, smiles, joy, and energy. One of our teachers shares a joke-of-the-day, while another offers “Babies and Bunnies” during which she shares pictures of her young children and their pets. Another teacher engages in a few minutes of yoga and meditation exercises with students during breaks.

5. **Snail Mail Revisited.** It may seem counterintuitive with available technology, but snail mail supports building relationships for distance learning. Teachers have noticed that the “art of the letter” is evolving with students in our collective, stay-at-home circumstances. Teachers and students are using letters and cards to connect. In addition to the functional benefits of writing to communicate, students value the individual mail. Some of us (those that predate the Internet) remember the thrill of pen pals and waiting for the mail to arrive. Teachers and students are asking each other questions and showing interest in each other’s wellbeing: “How is your family?” “What are you doing to keep yourself busy?” “How is it going babysitting your younger sibling?” When teachers send a handwritten note home about progress or a postcard to praise a student’s work, there is a great opportunity to positively affect the student and family. Teachers can send students a birthday card or just a note to let them know you’re excited to have them in your class. Students can take on pen pals and check-in on other friends and families with actual written correspondence.
6. **Keep it Active. Keep it Fun. Play games.** Teachers have many technology options for involving students in online activities and games to reinforce learning and build community. Online games, such as Quizizz Live have the same team building effects as in the classroom and can be used in synchronous as well as asynchronous learning. Relationships can develop when students relax, laugh and smile. Games and activities are an important part of a positive experience. Another example, have kids share their favorite learning videos or memes. Figure 3 showcases a few free possibilities.

Figure 3: Games in a Distance Learning Environment and in Class

- *Jeopardy Labs:* This website offers the option for teachers to create their own Jeopardy questions or select a game created by other users. As a review activity, students could write content-specific review questions that teachers can then use to create a review game for everyone to play or teachers themselves can write the questions. The website allows for team scoring in-game. Students could also be sent to breakout groups with the link for several small-games to be played rather than one whole-group game if

preferred. Consider writing a “Final Jeopardy!” question to offer one last challenging question.

- *Quizizz*: This is a free online game platform with trivia and content capacity.
- *Kahoot*: This is a game-based learning platform in which students and teachers can create trivia or content quizzes. Students use their phones to answer and complete for three trophies.
- *Polls*: Many virtual platforms include a poll feature. Teachers may use this as a check-in (Which photo describes how you are feeling?) or as a check for understanding. It is anonymous and fun!

7. Provide feedback and Solicit Feedback. In addition to written feedback, audio and video feedback is more important than ever. Be sure to use all feedback tools available to you! Many online formats include audio, video, and written options for feedback. Virtual break out rooms allow small group discussion and conferring, while tools such as JamBoard, Google Docs, exit tickets, FlipGrid, and Twitter provide other avenues to communicate. Remember to also solicit feedback among students and for yourself. In the virtual environment, there are a number of tools which allow a check for understanding or community development such as the chat feature, polls, questions and answers.

We are all social creatures and the more we are able to see and hear our peers the more we feel seen and heard. Use tools to create dialogue and learn from one another. Tools and strategies for feedback are listed in figure 4.

Figure 4: Highlighted Tools and Strategies for Providing Feedback to One Another

- *Individual or small group conferences.* Teachers in our district are using class time and time during a period named Learning Lab to confer with individuals or small groups about reading and writing. Many teachers confer with a few students each day from each class about their independent reading.
 - *Use FlipGrid:* Flipgrid is a free online tool in which you record your response or feedback to another person. Book clubs can interact asynchronously over time. Teacher can give a visual recording of what s/he thought regarding any reading, writing, or projects.
 - *Digital notebooks and other electronic versions of writing:* Digital notebooks allow teachers to insert comments. Some tools such as Turnitin offer audio comments as well.
 - *Use polls, questions and answers, and the chat features in virtual settings.* These tools are invaluable for checking in with students for understanding during class.
- 8. Office Hours.** Teacher office hours provide an opportunity for lighter conversations with students and families in addition to answering questions about instruction. This is an effective tool to connect with families. One-on-

one or small group office hours can be useful in relationship building and promoting social and emotional learning. In a one-on-one virtual setting, students may be more likely to communicate learning challenges or other issues, particularly if they are hesitant to share in a group. When students use the office hours to resolve problems and take ownership of their learning, they develop important self-advocacy skills. They also build relationships with families and help us understand our student's daily contexts.

9. Use Common Anchor Texts. Selecting an engaging common text for a virtual session to metaphorically *anchor* the learning. These texts, picture books, poems, short stories or information articles, can serve as a common instructional experience and can also invoke emotional-social responses. Community is fostered when kids share their opposing views or their jubilation at the climax of a story. Sharing a common text provides students with a model of reading fluency, develops background knowledge and concepts, and increases vocabulary development. Utilizing an anchor text provides a context for student discussion and discourse; it provides a common reference for conversation and connections to life and other texts. If you record the read aloud of a common, anchor text, it can also be used as either a pre-teaching or reteaching opportunity. Rereading or re-listening supports thinking and comprehension. While the choices are endless for classrooms, a few middle school recommendations include: *School's First Day of School* by Adam Rex, "Charles" by Shirley Jackson, and "Eleven" by Sandra Cisneros. At the high school level several of our teachers are using collections of poetry as common texts including: *An American Sunrise* by Native American Poet Laureate, Joy Harjo and the *100 Best African American Poems* by Nikki Giovanni.

10. The Importance of Empathy. By now, teachers and students have both heard the statement, "We are in unprecedented times." For a relationship to be authentic, teachers and students must acknowledge the challenges we face. Teachers want to develop relationships with students, both in the physical and virtual classroom, because they care about the student's growth as a learner and as a person. Teachers are encouraged to be mindful and plan to insert moments of empathy into the virtual environment to strengthen connections and relationships.

1. What do you miss the most about the physical classroom?
2. What is your energy level like today?
3. Tell me about how you are doing with the class. What is going well for you? What would you like to see done differently?

We offer these top ten suggestions for building relationships in a virtual environment. They are built on our own experiences teaching and learning. Like you, it is our hope that we will return to a "brick and mortar" school where we will

embrace—literally and figuratively—our students. Distance learning, however, has turned a corner and will likely continue to be part of our pedagogy. Teachers across the globe have scaled the learning curve of integrating technology in our classrooms out of pure necessity and these skills will not be abandoned when we have students in front of us. The pandemic has thrust us fully into the digital age, and as the situation evolves and eventually resolves, the lessons we bring with us will form the ground our future students will walk upon. Some lessons will be easier to learn than others, but all of them will require thoughtful reflection on the part of teachers and students.

Building these relationships is what will ultimately determine whether our nationwide experiments with distance learning are ultimately successful. Any kind of substantial change to the foundation of our education system is guaranteed to come with bumps in the road, but navigating over these bumps requires patience and, most importantly, trust. Our experiences revealed to us that this trust can be built through many of the methods detailed here, and that trust breeds the patience needed to face an uncertain future. These positive relationships benefit the mental health of both teachers and students, and they allow curriculum to be taught in an effective manner.

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Turning into the Book Talk Channel: Motivating Students During Remote Instruction

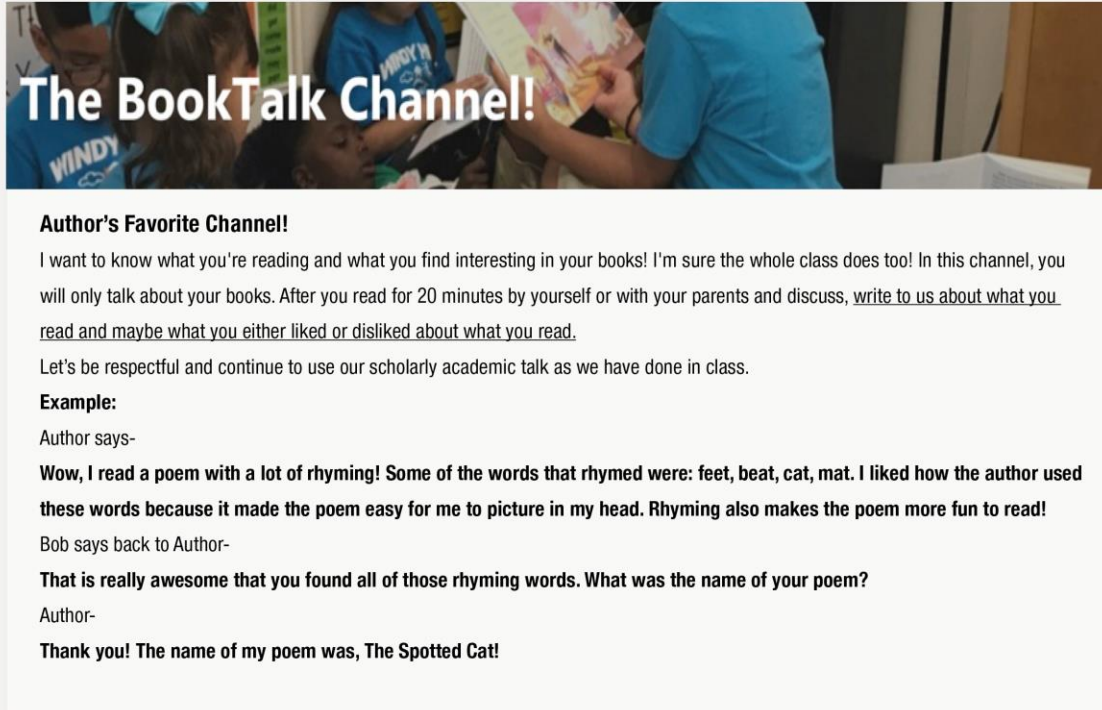
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Lunetta Williams, University of North Florida

In many learning environments that foster prominent digital instruction whether that be homeschooling or individual supplemental learning within the classroom, students are expected to accomplish a great majority of their learning in isolation. With the exception of a portion of interaction with their teacher for accountability purposes, collaboration with peers seems uncommon among many current digital education platforms. This feature of online instruction is an imperative contributor towards students' motivation to read (Wigfield, Gladstone, & Turci, 2016; Williams & McDaniel, 2017) and ultimately their reading achievement (Allington, 2014; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). In this article, Ms. Bradley shares a strategy, "The Book Talk Channel," that allowed her students to interact with each other during remote instruction due to COVID 19.

A digital learning platform familiar to many schools during the Coronavirus Pandemic within a northeastern county in Florida was "Tiger Homeroom" (all names are pseudonyms) ran by Microsoft Office Teams. Primary features of this platform that made social networking among students feasible were the channels that provided curricular instruction. In Bradley's second-grade classroom, she used The Book Talk Channel which was a gateway for students to engage in social interaction and critical thinking about their independent reading. The construction of this tool also catered to this generation of students who are impacted by the era of social media in which we presently live. Typically, students would take three days out of the week to select a physical or digital book of their liking and read it for 20 minutes. After their read, students shared brief summaries or discussed their reactions in The Book Talk Channel with their peers (see Figure 1). Students frequently exchanged feedback if they expressed curiosity or excitement towards one another's books. It was also very common for students to quickly reply to one another if they recognized someone reporting a book that they had previously read.

Figure 1

Description of The Book Talk Channel



In relation to an in person literature circle where students are listening and responding to their peers' reactions towards a text (Day, Spiegel, McLellan, & Brown, 2002), a benefit to The Book Channel was that rather than being automatically clustered off into differentiated groups which can impede students from learning about possible books that might interest them, the whole class had liberty to share books that were on a range of reading levels. This could further encourage those prodigal readers to take ownership of certain kinds of texts that they viewed as untouchable in the past.

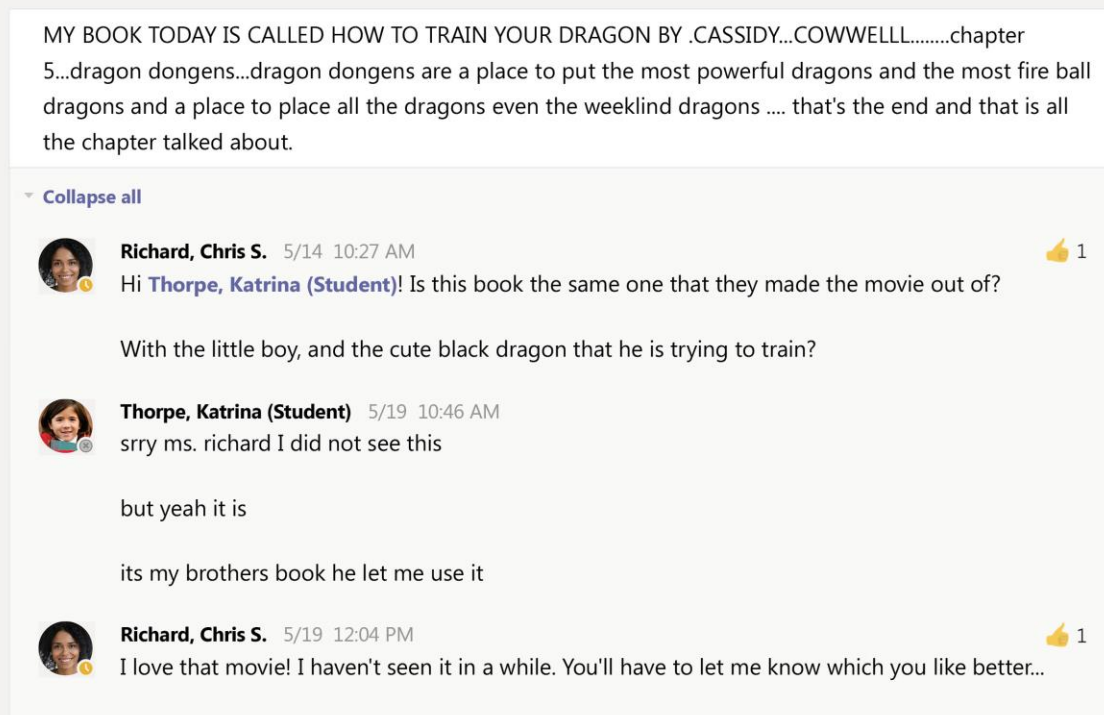
In Bradley's experience, similar to the instant message set-up of Facebook or Instagram, The Book Talk Channel presented student-friendly communicative features that further enhanced students' excitement to read. The emoji features and opportunity to incorporate popular lingo (e.g. wink face, heart, ik- I know) within the summaries and feedback responses were prime attributes of the channel that captivated students.

Another highlight of The Book Talk Channel was the flexible access granted to teachers and other educators (i.e., interventionists, coaches) to monitor students' conversations, chime in with their own feedback, and publish book summaries. Students could additionally view their teacher's responses as a guide for how they

constructed their personal summaries and reactions about what they read as well as how they provided feedback to their peers' posts. In Figure 2, a reading interventionist, Ms. Richard, responded to Katrina who posted a summary, and related the book to a popular children's movie. It is likely that this not only further enticed Katrina's interest in reading that particular book, it simultaneously impacted other students who were attentive to the feedback and had not read the book yet.

Figure 2

Example of The Book Talk Channel



Overall, it is imperative that teachers provide opportunities for students to engage with their peers during reading, as social motivation can increase the desire to want to read, and reading volume impacts reading achievement (Allington, 2014). The Book Talk Channel is one strategy that offers such an opportunity. Not only does this strategy allow students to discuss texts with others, it can also entice students to want to read texts that their peers have read, further increasing reading volume. Teachers should consider the use of social interaction, an important motivational factor, as they engage students during remote instruction.

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Improving Equity Through Books

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As a first-grade teacher in a small, Massachusetts town, I entered the teaching profession in 1988 without a single course in equity, racial identity development, language acquisition, or cultural competence...all gaps that were quickly exposed by my first-grade students. On a chilly December morning, I read aloud *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats and smiled to witness the children's enchantment as Peter explored his world and made angels in the newly fallen snow drifts. My satisfaction quickly soured when David asked, "Why is Peter's skin dark?", Amanda added, "Why do we call people black when they are really brown?" and Roland pointed to a classmate, asking, "Is Geoffrey black?" Geoffrey, the child of Puerto Rican immigrants, was the only student of color in my classroom. I was totally unprepared for the conversation and disheartened about how much I still needed to learn. More the three decades later, I suspect many teachers continue to be struck by this same realization.

In this article, I will outline concerns, illustrated in my first year of teaching, for public educators to become culturally responsive teachers who effectively serve all students. I will share a few factors that contribute to this gap in educational practice including both a mismatch in hiring between our student populations, teachers and administrators, and a lack of systematic focus in higher education and public schools to prepare staff for diverse populations or to institute equity focused policies. Following this discussion, I will share my own experience in two high-performing school districts to engage communities and staff in equity work. I will describe the efforts at the organizational level to continuously address equity. Lastly, I will advocate for equity book clubs as an ongoing strategy for schools, departments, or any group of leaders committed to serving culturally and linguistically diverse students. This article is intended to stimulate conversation about how we become culturally responsive individuals and organizations, promote reflection, and challenge educators to engage in a continuous effort to consider concrete practices which serve our diverse students.

According to the National Center of Statistics, the public teaching force (2015) in elementary and secondary schools is overwhelming white (82%). Simultaneously, our public-school student populations are increasingly diverse. Between fall 2000 and fall 2017, the percentage of White public-school students decreased from 61 to 48 percentage points, and the percentage of Black public—school students decreased from 17 to 15 percent. In contrast,

the percentage of Hispanic public-school students increased from 16 to 27 percent during the same period. (US Department of Education, 2016) Additionally, the number of English learners in public schools continue to increase. The US Department of Education reported in 2015 that about 4.8 million students or 9.5% of public-school students are enrolled across the country.

The cultural dissimilarity between student populations, teachers, and administrators is problematic, especially when few of our K-12 professionals complete coursework that equips them to address racial, cultural, and linguistic competence. Our students become frequent witnesses to narrow worldviews and perspectives in their classrooms. It has become disturbingly common to hear stories in which well-meaning teachers engage in activities that one might describe as ranging from somewhat insensitive to blatantly racist. A few examples include the following:

- An African-American parent formally complains about her child's social science teacher who, while teaching about the cotton gin and its role in the Industrial Revolution, instructs students to pick cotton and manually separate the seeds (Kay, 2018)
- A tenth-grade teacher asks her students to use rhetorical arguments and write a persuasive piece as if they were members of the Nazi party in 1940's Germany (Kay, 2018)
- An elementary school apologizes for insensitivity when a physical educator runs students through an obstacle course as a re-enactment of enslaved people escaping on the Underground Railroad. (Collazo, 2019)
- A middle school teacher shares an audio recording of Eli Wiesel's novel *Night* and, concerned that he is short on time, chooses to speed up the playback, undermining the meaning and expression of the heart-wrenching descriptions of the camps (personal observation).

These instances reveal a lack of racial consciousness and illuminate harmful examples of insensitivity and humanity to our students not only of color, but also for our white students who subconsciously learn to devalue others and center themselves.

It would be easy to blame institutions of higher education for not preparing teachers to embrace the diversity in our schools and meet the interests and talents of our students. While there is a significant need to integrate courses and discussion of racial identity development and acquisition of literacy and language for English learners, these changes are only part of a much-needed shift in thinking and practice. Teacher preparation programs at universities and colleges can influence young educators for four years, while school systems offer professional development for eight to twelve times that amount to a career teacher. Colleges, universities, and school systems have great influence on the lives of educators. We need to advocate

for these institutions to serve our public-school communities by engaging in formal study of the intersection of race, culture, gender, language and religion (Crenshaw, 2017) and promulgating those findings in our schools.

Likewise, school systems have a profound impact on teaching and learning for both teachers and students and many school districts embrace their mission to educate *all* students. When I transitioned from teaching to administration, I was fortunate to work for an urban/suburban district outside of Washington DC that was purposefully focused on equity. This district created a cultural competence steering council with a diverse set of employees including people serving across leadership roles from central office and the schools. The steering committee of more than 30 individuals included staff from the Department of Teaching and Learning, Human Resources and Talent Development, Technology, Transportation and Student Services. The Offices of Minority Achievement and English Learners were also instrumental in the work. For the first three years, every administrator was assigned to a study group of individuals having disparate genders, generations, races, and ethnicities to engage in conversation intended to prompt personal, organizational, and societal change toward social justice. Each study group met 4-6 times a year and were professionally facilitated by trainers who had participated in a minimum of 40 hours of Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED) training (<https://nationalseedproject.org/about-us/about-seed>).

During the inaugural year, our study groups participated in a two-day seminar with Glenn Singleton and read his book, *Courageous Conversations: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* (Singleton, 2014). Twice a year, the entire leadership body came together to hear from expert speakers including Gloria Laden-Billings, but also from our colleagues of color and our students. This work was sustained, evolved, and transitioned to the schools, leading to productive change including closing of opportunity gaps, increased student achievement and graduation rates, renewed focus on hiring teachers and administrators of color, development and implementation of an assistant-to-teacher program to increase bilingual teachers, and a decrease in suspension and disproportionate discipline reports.

I was fortunate to work in a school system that valued equity through sustained discourse, study, and action. We worked intentionally for concrete, actionable change including changes in policy, monthly examination of suspension and discipline data, the creation of affinity groups (e.g., middle school black scholars, summer literacy academy for boys of color), special programs and community engagement. A decade later, time has passed; personnel have turned over and priorities have shifted. Nonetheless, our shared experiences on that cultural competence steering committee rippled outward, leading to professional and personal growth of thousands of teachers, administrators and students and continue to be reflected in classrooms today.

I am now working in another large and diverse school system in Virginia focused on addressing equity with a number of recent, concrete actions including, but not limited to the creation of an Office of Equity, the acquisition of staff positions, an equity audit, professional learning series required for all staff, an investment of diverse reading materials in K-12 classrooms, and the development of a culturally responsive framework.

In addition to this equity work at the system level, each individual has the power to impact change in their own sphere of influence. For example, during this past year, and in response to inequity within schools and communities, roughly one-hundred teachers from our secondary English and reading leadership teams, launched equity book clubs. We began by identifying ten potential titles (see Table A) from recognized leaders in the field of equity. We also ensured that there were different formats and genres available. For example, *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates and *Waking Up White* by Debra Irving are written as personal narratives, while *Excellence Through Equity* by Blankstein and Noguera is a collection of articles focused on closing achievement/opportunity gaps. *So You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo and *We Got This* by Cornelius Minor provide strategies for educators to effectively reflect on their own practices and teach diverse students. The twenty-year anniversary publication of *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* by Beverly Daniel Tatum (which in my view should be required reading for all teacher candidates) blends research, history, and practice, beginning with an explanation of the historical context of the past thirty-years and describes how racial development affects every moment of a child's experience in life and school.

Figure 1: Equity Books

1. *Excellence Through Equity: Five Principles of Courageous Leadership to Guide Achievement for Every Student* by Alan Blankstein and Pedro Noguera
2. *Between the World and Me* Ta-Nehisi Coates
3. *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* by Robin DiAngelo.
4. *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood...and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education.*
5. *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students* by Zaretta Hammond.
6. *Waking Up White: And Finding Myself in the Story of Race* by Debra Irving
7. *How to be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi.
8. *We Got This: Equity, Access, and the Quest to Be Who Our Students Need Us to Be* by Cornelius Minor
9. *So You Want to Talk About Race?* by Ijeoma Oluo
10. *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race* by Beverly Tatum

Overall, more than 20 equity book clubs were formed, meeting quarterly throughout the school year. After reviewing the list of Equity Books, each club's participants selected one title with the greatest personal and professional appeal. Each club was provided with reading and discussion protocols (Figure 2) and considered three guiding questions:

1. How does this book study support my own understanding of my identity and its relationship to racial and cultural awareness?
2. How has this book study changed my thinking? How will it change my instructional practice?
3. How will I have meaningful conversations about race and other challenging topics with my students and colleagues?

The equity book clubs effectively generated conversation and reflection across teachers and schools to build a culturally relevant pedagogy, beginning with building relationships. While the Office of Secondary English and Reading provided one professional text for each teacher, many teachers traded texts and read 2 or 3 titles due to the high level of engagement.

Figure 2: Reading and Discussion Protocols

A **protocol** consists of agreed upon guidelines for **reading**, recording, discussing, or reporting that ensure equal participation and accountability. **Protocols** hold each student accountable and responsible for learning. They teach students how to lead their own learning.

Text-based **discussion protocols** are user-friendly tools that can help adult learners construct meaning from reading a shared text. **Protocols** provide a structured process or set of guiding steps for participants to follow.

Read and Say Something

Students pair up and read a predetermined chunk of text. When they reach that point, they turn and say something about the text. This focuses on comprehending digestible pieces of content.

Think-Pair-Share

Think-Pair-Share Students have time to individually reflect on their response before sharing it with one other student. Pairs report on their conversations to the larger group.

Coding / Noting Passages

Offer guidance to students on how to identify passages for reflection and dialog. Note passages that supports their thinking. Use the following coding:

- √ = Check off a passage that you agree with. The ideas resonate with your own.
- ! = Mark a passage that is a new idea, or different way of thinking. Perhaps the idea is not new, yet it sparks a new idea in your thinking.
- ? = Label passages that spark a question. You want to learn more on the topic. Perhaps you do not agree or wish to challenge the statement.

Jigsaw

Jigsaw Students are assigned to review different material or readings in advance. They first meet in an “expert” group to become familiar with their specific resource and then meet in a “teaching” group to share their resource with the other students.

Save the Last Word

One student selects a quotation from the text and reads it aloud. Other students take turns responding to the text, and the original student closes the discussion with a reflection.

I Used to Think..., Now, I Think...

Reflect on your current understanding of this topic and respond to each of the sentence stems:

- I used to think... Now, I think...

Sentence-Phrase-Word

In your discussion group, review the text that you have read, and each select your own:

- Sentence that was meaningful to you, that you felt captures a core idea of the text
- Phrase that moved, engaged, or provoked you
- Word that captured your attention or struck you as powerful

As a group discuss and record your choices. Begin each sharing with your words, then phrases, then sentences. Explain why you made the selections you did. Create a chart similar to the one shown below. Include small page numbers by each word, phrase, or sentence from the text. Looking at your groups' collective choices of words, phrases, and sentences, reflect on the conversation by identifying:

- What themes emerge?
- What implications or predictions can be drawn?
- Were there aspects of the text not captured in your choices?

Four "A's" Text Protocol

The group reads the text silently, highlighting it and writing notes in the margin on post-it notes in answer to the following four questions:

1. What assumptions does the author of the text hold?
2. What do you agree with in the text?
3. What do you want to argue with in the text?
4. What parts of the text do you want to aspire to?

At our last sessions together, each group created a Most Important Points (MIP) chart and shared across book clubs (see Figure 3). While the list of MIPs is not comprehensive, it was clear that our community valued the exchange of ideas and identified personal and professional growth. This was also reflected in individual reflections at the end of book club (see Figures 4 and 5)

Figure 3: Most Important Points (MIP) Equity Book Highlights

1. Be willing to be uncomfortable and engage in conversations about race and privilege and how identities intersect in the classroom.
2. Identity is complex and ever changing; it is an intersection of race, culture, language, religion, geography, and many other cultural factors; as teachers we must understand our own identities and those of our students and peers.
3. Racial disparities are real. Consider education, housing, employment, and incarceration. Educate yourself about the facts.
4. Listen and believe people of color.
5. We must re-educate ourselves about the history of the county and about equity.
6. Culturally responsive teaching is creating a safe, nurturing environment in which you understand and respond to students who have diverse backgrounds and cultures; we must begin by understanding our own background and for many educators that is an understanding of whiteness and all of our own identities that we bring to the classroom.
7. Social norms are not the same for all people.
8. Everyone experiences unconscious assumptions and bias and our society is steeped in these historic biases; microaggressions occur on a daily basis for colleagues and students of color.
9. Relationships matter.
10. Be an anti-racist, which means intentionally speaking up and disrupting systems that marginalize people of color. Anti-racism is action, not a belief.
11. “Racists believe that the problems are rooted in a group of people; antiracists believe the problems are rooted in power and policies.” (Kendi, 2020).
12. White privilege does not mean your life hasn’t been difficult; it means that your color has not contributed to those challenges.

** There were also many concrete suggestions for instruction and building relationships.

Figure 4: Reflection from Middle School Teachers

Teacher #1

During our equity book club, I read [So You Want to Talk About Race](#) by Ijeoma Oluo. As a white woman in the current state of our nation, I am attuned to the

privileges that I am afforded solely based on the skin color I was born. As an educator, in an affluent community, where many believe that racism doesn't exist, it was difficult to come to terms with my role in dismantling racism.

Reading Ijeoma's book led me to take a hard look at what I know about my personal identity in this world. More importantly, I was forced to truly reflect on my own racial and cultural awareness, in a very uncomfortable way. I realized that this is the point, that I (we) need to be forced to be "uncomfortable". She is blunt and forthright, and honestly, confrontational, because that's what needs to happen. This book armed me with tools to have the necessary conversations to make others face their discomfort, as I had to do while reading. I refocused on what my role as a white woman should be in this conversation and recognized that if someone finds my conversation points offensive, then they had work to do that I could assist.

As an educator, I am a voice for my students, and my voice needs to shine in the face of hate and ignorance, because that is the *minimum*, they deserve from me. Ijeoma's book was just a starting point for me. I watched her videos, read other articles by her, and delved into additional books, like White Fragility by Robin DiAngelo. For me, the ultimate takeaway being a part of this equity book club was recognizing that I still had a lot of work to do in finding my most amplified voice and I was ready to do that vital work.

Teacher #2

So You Want to Talk About Race helped me to distinguish between *feelings and actions of individuals* (prejudice and discrimination) and *systems of power* (racism). It means that I can set aside my "but I'm a nice person!" inclinations to be defensive and instead interrogate the ways that I have benefited from systemic racism. *White Fragility* gave me tools to talk to other white people about race, the realization that it is much more MY job to talk to other white people about race than it is the job of Black colleagues and friends, and a plan for what to do when I mess up, as I inevitably will.

Figure 5: Reflection from High School Teacher

I work in a minority-majority school. When I walk into a classroom, I am almost always the only white person. So, I am acutely aware of the privilege I represent in that room. Though I have always been cognizant of that privilege, this year was the first time it has ever been acknowledged and specifically addressed in both professional development and instructional needs. Being aware of white privilege is also not the same thing as being actively anti-racist. I think one of the major changes to come out of our work in equity is that we are now addressing and naming things that we used to talk about only in veiled terms. We've talked about diversity for years but were never given the real tools to address it with our students. It's not enough to know about white privilege, white fragility, or systemic racism without understanding how those things have shaped our educational system, and by association shaped us, as educators. It's not enough to just know about them but not able to address them with our students.

Equity work has helped me be able to have more open conversations with my colleagues and students of color. It has helped me deal with my fragile whiteness, that makes us, white people, shy away from tough discussions surrounding race and, instead, face it head on. It has allowed me to more often and more willingly say, "I'm sorry. I was wrong. I will reflect on that and do better next time." It has helped me find the words to not just tell my students and colleagues of color that I support them words, but to actually show them with my actions. My instructional practice has reflected this work for the past year but moving forward it will be fully rooted here.

These experiences serve as two examples of public-school systems striving to facilitate an educational system that is equitable. While it is not the intention of this piece to present a comprehensive review of higher educational program curricula focused (or not focused) on equity nor to review organizational infrastructure evident in public schools to address equity, I will present four recommendations based on my experience.

First, organizations benefit from intentionality in hiring practices that value genuine diversity among staff and leadership. In 2018 10% of US public school students were English Language Learners, while students of color outnumbered their white peers (Pew Research, 2018). That same year, 82% of US teachers identified as white. We must seek to hire, grow and sustain faculty and administrations that resemble our student populations. While this idea is not new, schools would benefit from a renewed commitment to this outcome.

Second, institutes of higher education should offer and require coursework focused on the intersection of race, culture, gender, language and religion (Crenshaw, 2017). Teacher education programs do a disservice to educators and

their future students when a focus on pedagogy excludes our emerging understanding of how race, language, culture, and gender intersect in the classroom. We need revisions to teacher education programs which admittedly have limited time and a growing list of expectations.

Third, public schools need organizational equity structure. This might take the form of an office of equity, a standing steering committee of cultural competence, or professional learning programs which address teaching and learning in racially, culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. School systems can increase their effectiveness for all students when they establish effective systems, policies and sustained practices. They conduct periodic policy reviews through racial and cultural lenses. They facilitate the analysis of achievement, attendance, and discipline data. They also engage the community in dialogue about accomplishments and concerns in meeting the needs of our students.

Finally, educators need not wait for systemic or organizational change. We can educate ourselves and advocate for positive improvements for our students and ourselves. I have offered our work with equity books clubs as one model for continuous learning to raise awareness of diverse communities. When we engage in reader-driven equity book clubs, we sustain ongoing conversations and promote understanding of culturally and linguistically diverse students and peers. Books allow us to see into the lives of others and to consider our own; book clubs give us the opportunity to learn from one another and consider different perspectives. I think about students in my first classroom with their genuine curiosity and interest in others and wonder where they are today; what they think and how they are contributing to the world. Like many educators, I wish I knew then, what I know now. We need to do better. Our students cannot wait.

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