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January 2024

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# Michigan Reading Journal

*A Journal of the  
Michigan Reading Association*

Winter 2024  
Volume 56, No. 2

## In This Issue:

- Back to the Future: Looking at Nostalgic Practices to Conceptualize a More Inclusive Literacy Future (Part 1)
- Awareness & Access Matter: Making Professional Associations Available to Support Literacy Teachers' Ongoing PL
- Prioritizing Social Emotional Learning with Interactive Read-Alouds
- Building a Beloved Community of Literacy in Professional Spaces
- Literacy Across the Disciplines: A Way to Re-Engage Secondary Students



- L is for Liberation and P is for Prism: Children's Books for The Next Generation of Co-Conspirators and Community Changemakers
- Reviews of Books Centering Justice + Liberation

# Michigan Reading Journal

Volume 56, Number 2

Winter 2024

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The *Michigan Reading Journal (MRJ)*, ISSN 0047-7125, is published by the Michigan Reading Association (MRA), an intermediate council of the International Literacy Association. The *MRJ*, dedicated to the dissemination of information to improve the teaching of reading, presents articles on a wide spectrum of topics and issues in reading, language arts, and literature, preschool through adult levels. The *MRJ* incorporates articles that address both theory and practice.

The MRA was founded in 1956. The *MRJ* has been published since the spring of 1967 and is abstracted and indexed in the "Current Index to Journals in Education" of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). Membership in the MRA includes a subscription to the *MRJ*.

Because The *MRJ* represents an open forum, the viewpoints expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect or imply endorsement or advocacy by the MRA, its officers, or its members. Open access to The *MRJ* is available through Grand Valley State University's Scholarworks system at <[scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj)>.

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The editors of and contributors to the *Michigan Reading Journal* offer our sincere thanks to colleagues who have served as volunteer peer reviewers within the past twelve months.

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# President's Message...

by Andy Schoenborn, MRA President

Turning the page to a new year is always a time for reflection. Yet, as teachers, we find ourselves almost in a constant state of reflection and piles of questions pop up:

Am I enough?  
Will I ever figure it out?  
Did I reach that *one* student?  
Why can't my department see what I see?  
How can I meet the diverse literacy needs of students?  
When do I push back on pedagogy and when do I embrace it?  
Why can't I find that *one* strategy or project that engages *all* students?



**Andy Schoenborn**

It turns out that teaching and literacy are always in flux.

And, maybe, that is what drew us -- even subconsciously -- to the profession. As teachers, we are learners first and, as teachers, we have dedicated our lives to learning. In other words, we have chosen a life of growth, change, and reimagining.

Still, knowing all of this doesn't necessarily make us feel better in the moment. However, like a pile of questions, we have a choice regarding our responses to them.

We can add to the pile of worry, or we can stack small wins and, in turn, begin discovering joy.

Small wins arrive in seemingly unexpected places: a phone replaced by a book; an attempt at writing; a hallway conversation ending in a smile; a fist bump that pulls you into a hug; a poem read by a student who often refuses to speak; a student who asks if it is okay to read a book above their reading level; or an unexpected connection at a conference.

Oh! As for that pile of questions here are some answers:

Yes.  
You may.  
Keep trying.  
Seek first to understand.  
Challenge book bans and censorship.  
Trust yourself, your learning, and your skill set.  
It doesn't exist. There is no silver bullet in education.

In a world looking for answers, we often live in the grey as teachers, and that's okay.

In the spirit of beloved community and opportunity, we are grateful for your contributions to the profession—both small and significant—of our volunteers, librarians, authors, speakers, coaches, keynotes, and, most importantly, all of you.

We encourage you to make space for authentic and genuine joy in your classroom as often as possible. It is one way to turn the page on a new year and resolve to stack small wins.

Yours in literacy,

Andy Schoenborn  
MRA President



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# President-Elect's Message...

by **Liz Lietz**, MRA President-Elect and 2024 Conference Chair

As we transition from one calendar year to the next, we reflect on the past *and* look to the future.

During 2023, the Michigan Reading Association has grown its membership, convened a successful conference for its members, curated powerful stories and articles for the *Michigan Reading Journal* and *Kaleidoscope*, bestowed awards upon authors, educators and literacy champions, and supported connections through community networking and learning opportunities. The MRA Executive Board continues to plan for a joyful, engaging year ahead in 2024.



**Liz Lietz**

I am grateful for small, everyday moments that have brought me joy this year: finding time to read a few chapters in a good book; journaling; sharing a meal with a friend; playing a board game with my children; spying a rainbow after a summer storm.

I am grateful for every MRA member who supports literacy in their school and community. I am grateful for family, friends and colleagues who love and challenge me. It has been a pleasure to read through the session proposals and to hear about the wonderful ways this literacy community is bringing JOY to students.

Looking forward, I am honored to invite speakers, presenters, authors and participants to our spring conference in the service of Discovering Joy!

To that end, we need you to lend YOUR voice to our final stage of planning. Please use the links below to share something for which YOU are grateful, and we will display the collection at the spring conference and on our digital and social platforms. We also invite you to share a song that makes you feel JOYFUL—we will use your submissions to create a conference playlist to help us Discover JOY together!

Sincerely,

Liz Lietz  
MRA President-Elect  
2024 Conference Chair



<https://bit.ly/MRA24gratitude>



<https://bit.ly/MRA24playlist>

# From the Editors...

by **Laura Gabrion, Rui Niu-Cooper, Leah van Belle, and Jenelle Williams**

Dear Readers,

Winter is often a time of reflection and renewed commitment, both professionally and personally. We hope that this issue supports you in considering your past practice and goals for the future as literacy professionals. As a reminder, the editorial team has named four themes of empowerment to carry across all issues of the 2023-24 academic year: literacy as community, agency, liberation, and joy. We invite you to make connections to these themes as you explore this issue of *Michigan Reading Journal*.

*Literacy as Community*

*Literacy as Agency*

*Literacy as Liberation*

*Literacy as Joy*

## **Bridging Research to Practice**

In “Back to the Future: Looking at Nostalgic Practices to Conceptualize a More Inclusive Literacy Future (Part 1),” Rebecca Witte and Darreth R. Rice investigate four different educational theories and two nostalgic practices to determine the feasibility of classroom use in more inclusive ways. Kathleen S. Howe considers recent declines in membership in educator professional organizations in “Awareness & Access Matter: Making Professional Associations Available to Support Literacy Teachers’ Ongoing PL.” “Prioritizing Social Emotional Learning with Interactive Read Alouds” by Lindsay Stoetzel and Kelly Vigants provides recommendations into the ways in which SEL can be embedded within core literacy practices in meaningful ways. Finally, Elizabeth Petroelje Stolle and Jennifer L. Vanderground, in “Building a Beloved Community of Literacy in Professional Spaces,” paint a picture of using learning labs and professional learning communities to support educators’ personal and professional growth.

## **Voices from the Region**

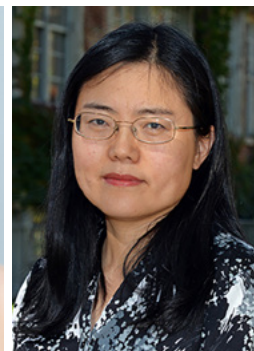
In “Literacy Across the Disciplines: A Way to Re-Engage Secondary Students,” Jenelle Williams makes a case for providing meaningful reasons to read, write, and speak in all secondary courses as a way to re-engage students.

## **#BookJoy**

Books reviewed in this issue center literacy as liberation— one of the journal’s four year-long themes. Whether picture book format nonfiction like *Equality Calls: The Story of Voting Rights in America* and *Together We March: 25 Protest Moments That Marched Into History*, poems like *Woke: A Young Poet’s Call to Justice*, or



**Dr. Laura Gabrion**



**Dr. Rui  
Niu-Cooper**



**Dr. Leah van Belle**



**Jenelle Williams,  
Ed.S.**



allegorical stories like *Farmer Duck* or *Terrible Things*, books for young people can invite them into the collective struggle for justice and liberation. Reviews in this issue include recent publications and “classic” texts that are not as recently published, but still present engaging, powerful opportunities for reading, thinking, feeling, and calling to action.

One of our goals as an editorial team is to continue growing the diversity of voices and experiences in the journal, and we hope to increase representation across the regions of our state and beyond. As such, we are committed to supporting literacy educators as writers through constructive, focused feedback and creating opportunities for first-time and seasoned authors alike.

As co-editors, we are grateful to our authors and to the many people who work behind the scenes to publish each issue of *Michigan Reading Journal*. We are so fortunate that through these efforts, MRJ continues to be an open and accessible journal available to a global audience on Scholarworks at [scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj).

Sincerely,

Laura Gabrion, Rui Niu-Cooper, Leah van Belle, and Jenelle Williams

Co-Editors, *Michigan Reading Journal*

[mra@michiganreading.org](mailto:mra@michiganreading.org)



# Back to the Future: Looking at Nostalgic Practices to Conceptualize a More Inclusive Literacy Future (Part 1)

by Rebecca Witte and Darreth R. Rice

Hop back into the DeLorean with us for a trip back to 1985 to an age when Swatch Watches, Teddy Ruxpin, and the original Super Mario Brothers were “all the rage.” If you are like us, children of the 80s, we reminisce about our favorite childhood toys, games, and shows. In fact, we see remnants of our childhood being recycled in popular culture from scrunchies to books like the *Babysitters Club* and movies like *Barbie*. Besides artifacts and media, we also retain influential memories of our early literacy experiences. Nostalgia brings up feelings of warmth for the past, of sentimental longing, or affection for certain personal history. As former students, classroom teachers, and now teacher educators, we have felt ourselves being pulled into our past selves remembering and questioning the methods and strategies--both with fondness and with frustration-- that were “en vogue” during our elementary years. We think of programs and strategies like The Letter People, SRA (Science Research Associates) reading kits, leveled reading groups (usually named after woodland birds), Young Authors, and other teaching practices that helped define our literacy memories.

Fast forward (like a VCR) to the late 1990s/2000s when we entered our teacher prep programs. Here we learned how to compose integrated units, utilize instructional strategies that moved away from literal text-based questions of our past, and integrate learner knowledge into comprehension. We discovered how to SWBAT (Students Will Be Able To) our lesson plans. In our Language Arts methods courses, we were cau-



**Rebecca Witte**



**Darreth R. Rice**

tioned against ability groupings and round robin readings. Instead, we incorporated methods such as KWL (Ogle, 1986) and QAR (Raphael, 1982) to activate schema and build on shared knowledge. That being said, we were less hindered by the extreme pressures of state standards, high-stakes assessment-driven instruction, and merit pay.

While conceptualizing this project, we hoped to revitalize some long-forgotten literacy practices into classroom best practices. We asked ourselves, (1) *how can we provide teachers different ways to engage today's learners to holistically meet the students' needs*, and (2) *in what ways can we provide teachers with a concrete and conceptual tool to evaluate their other literacy practices?*

We present a series of two articles focused on sharing our conceptual tool (an analogy to the popular 80's toy—the View-Master<sup>®1</sup>) and the research used to craft it. The crux of this article is sharing a brief overview of the research and the tool itself. We demonstrate the use of this with a classroom writing practice, dialogue journaling, and how

<sup>1</sup> View-Master<sup>®</sup> and its component parts (reels) is a registered trademark of the Mattel, Inc. corporation.

it aligns with the tool. This article wraps up with some tips for teachers to begin to implement dialogue journaling in their own classrooms. In a subsequent issue of the *Michigan Reading Journal*, we will offer you a look into a reading practice, readers' theatre, and how it aligns with the conceptual tool. We will close out the series with concrete steps for teachers to use these theories in their own planning of classroom experiences.

Before moving on, we consider the fact that we can look back with nostalgia on our educational journeys. But, nostalgia is also subjective. We also recognize that as two White, upper-middle-class women who have taught in the elementary setting prior, we can look back at our childhood education and our teacher preparation programs with varying degrees of affection. However, we also recognize that there are many adults and students that cannot view their education with nostalgia. Instead, the memories of schooling are oppressive, irrelevant, and painful. In far too many cases, Black and Brown students have been underserved in K-16 settings. For these students, schooling practices are remembered not with nostalgia, but rather with apathy and resentment, and as a time of erasure of languages, identities, and histories. We acknowledge that we have contributed to harm in the form of curricular erasure and holding a standard to White mainstream norms. Far too often, we have let the pressure of assessment and/or parent pushback drive our curricular choices. We now take up this work as one possibility for a more student-centered, inclusive pedagogy.

### **Background and Context**

Imagine with us that you find yourself sitting on the carpeted floor of your best friend's well-lit bedroom. Carefully, you select the appropriate reel—the circumference of each reel contains tiny film pictures—and slide it into the top of the View-Master®. When you put in the reel and look through the View-Master®, you can see the tiny pictures magnified in three dimensions. As you bring the hard red plastic View-Master® to your eyes and click the lever on the side to advance the pictures, you are instantly transported to a new reality of an under the sea adventure, Indiana Jones escapades, or Disney cartoons. For us, this served as a primitive

YouTube. While we share an affinity for the View-Master® as both a childhood toy and useful conceptual analogy, we also recognize the metaphoric parallel to the work that we, as teachers, do when creating an inclusive lesson plan.

Important for understanding our analogy are the reels (the different theories) and the View-Master® apparatus (teacher-curated practices). We demonstrate the use of this analogy in practice by focusing its use with dialogue journaling and readers' theatre (next article). As part of this analogy, we also want to highlight the dual role of the teacher as both the organizer and a participant of the experience through their choice of reels (theories) and practices.

While we think our analogy is pretty “rad,” we understand that is not a perfect match. Our View-Master® analogy has the potential to come across as oversimplified. In addition, reels cannot be used together in the View-Master® like real-life classroom practices need to be. We also admit that while our View-Master® analogy may seem innocent and neutral, teaching and literacy instruction is not apolitical or neutral. Literacy learning and teaching is complex and complicated. The decisions that individual teachers make in selecting reels and practices have consequences. In understanding this, developing a teaching stance that weaves in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) or other sociocultural frameworks, like humanizing or social/emotional learning, enhances the teacher's ability to one, recognize the assets of individual students, and two, reach multiple aspects of the student's identity.

### **The Reels**

In this endeavor, we investigated four different educational theories and two nostalgic practices to determine the feasibility of classroom use in more inclusive ways. We identified the two major categories for the theories: academic and sociocultural. Each is important when considering literacy education in context with today's teaching demands. Within the academic category, both standards and teacher-tested activities need to be considered. For the sociocultural category, we examine components related to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,

social and emotional learning, and humanizing pedagogy. Each reel represents a pertinent theory through which to consider the impact of current classroom practices. First, we provide background and justification for each theory (reel), and then we use the reel to legitimize two nostalgic literacy practices as they shift into a classroom best practice. For this paper, we focus on the nostalgic practice of dialogue journaling. In the next article, we focus on readers' theatre and conclude with showing how the theories (reels) can help determine practices that do or do not work.

### ***Academic Reel as Mechanism for Literacy Growth***

In order to determine the viability of a classroom practice, it needs to meet certain academic standards to make it worthy of consideration. For our academic reel, we look to recognized standards, like the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts (ELA), and recommendations from the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) and the National Reading Panel (NRP). While we understand the valid push-back against standards, as they do not reflect the needs of every individual student and are often prescriptive, we also recognize the reality that many teachers are not allowed "wobble room" to deviate from them. In this way, we offer up an academic reel/theory to legitimize dialogue journaling (this issue) and readers' theatre (upcoming issue) as both academically rigorous best practices in addition to the other possibilities our reels have to offer.

### ***Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Reel as Honoring Student Knowledges***

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), since its inception in 1995, has been an important framework for teaching, especially for Black and Brown students. In CRP, Ladson-Billings (1995) focuses on student success and positive orientations toward Students of Color, rather than on the deficit-based thinking that is so often the narrative. In her original work, she noted three important factors associated with CRP. The first factor addresses the priority of academic success for Black and Brown students. Teachers who embody CRP understand that achievement goes beyond standardized assessments, but rather honors the many ways

that students engage with learning by reading, writing, speaking, and computing, all of which are enriched by asking questions and working collaboratively. Second, CRP recognizes cultural competence as an essential factor in teaching. Ladson-Billings (1995) notes how important it is for students to maintain their cultural integrity within their academic success. This means understanding how students interact within their cultural communities and finding ways to build on those strengths. Finally, CRP promotes cultural critique. Valuing critical consciousness allows students to forefront their knowledges and evaluate inequities. Overall, through her body of work, she found that the most successful teachers of Black students were those that held high expectations for their students, valued community, fostered collaboration, and viewed knowledge as changing, as well as looked for opportunities to both share knowledge and to be critical.

Over the years, CRP has adapted and extended as scholars push the concept further. Paris and Alim (2014) offer a shift to Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy to think about the multiplicity of identities of students and also suggest new ways into youth culture, like HipHop. Now considered a "buzzword," CRP can be misrepresented (Ladson-Billings, 2014) in classrooms, like only having diverse books in a classroom library. Because of this, we want to look at CRP practices that assume Ladson-Billings' (2014) intention: "the ability to link principles of learning with deep understanding of (and appreciation for) culture" (p. 77). We view Ladson-Billings' work as a framework to guide our thinking in the CRP reel.

Sometimes discussions involving CRP run the risk of triviality or misuse like "if you do X practice, then you are doing CRP," which is misleading. CRP is an embodiment of teaching, or even a way of being in the classroom. For this article, our intention is not to promote one particular practice as "doing CRP," but to use the theory of CRP over certain practices to see if there is potential for CRP to thrive within it. While a practice may show overwhelming potential in one area of CRP, there are many factors to consider. For instance, the commitment of the individual teacher is

an overwhelming factor. It is how a teacher uses the practice that makes it culturally relevant.

### ***Social/Emotional Reel as Support for Individualized Growth***

In addition to considering students' academic and cultural needs in education, teachers also have to appraise their growth as an individual by focusing on their social and emotional development. While there are eight tenets of social and emotional learning according to Mussey (2019), for our reel we will focus on just two: creativity and cultivating connections. As stated in Mussey (2019), creativity must be inclusive and taught. Additionally, teachers need to allow for time and space, so students can develop their creativity. Fostering creativity through intentional instructional best practices can reverse the trend of schools "killing creativity," according to Sir Ken Robinson (2006). The second tenet of social emotional learning that we will focus on in this paper is cultivating connections. According to Mussey (2019), there are seven essential elements of cultivating connections with children. These essentials include humility, gentleness, patience, compassion, empathy, peace, and unity (Mussey, 2019). Ensuring that these activities are part of your practice will not only develop a student's social emotional self, but it will foster a sense of community within your classroom. This sense of community will support an environment ripe for learning.

When applying the social/emotional reel, teachers should consider the tenets that best fit that type of activity. For the sake of our project, we focused on creativity and cultivating connections because of the classroom activities we chose to examine: dialogue journaling and readers' theatre.

### ***Humanizing Reel as Invitation for Collaboration***

Students are not blank slates waiting to be supplied with knowledge, nor are they insufficient accounts where teachers need to make deposits. Our final theory epitomized this statement. The humanizing reel is built from the work of Paulo Freire. Freire (1968) speaks about this *banking model* of education in his text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where he argues against the idea

that students are empty vessels to be filled. Teachers should instead be "in dialogue" with the learner who "assumes the role of knowing subject" (Freire, 1998, p. 485). Through this conversation between student and teacher, education becomes more *problem-posing* and less like the *banking model* (Freire, 1968). Students then learn to become masters of their own thinking. When students feel like they are in control of their learning and feel like they are recognized as "knowing," they can discern when learning experiences are not empowering them. They are critically conscious of their own educational experiences (Freire, 1968). In using this reel, teachers need to examine a practice by looking at whether the activity empowers students in their own learning journey. Moving forward, we illustrate how we utilized these theories (reels) to support the use of one nostalgic literacy practice: dialogue journaling.

## **The Focal Practice (a.k.a. The View-Master®)**

### **Dialogue Journaling: Past and Present**

Dialogue journals, in their original form, were described as "a bound composition book in which each student carries on a private written conversation with the teacher for an extended period of time" (Staton, 1988, p. 198). Their objective was to create a student-centered, interactive, non-evaluative space for a student and teacher to communicate. The concept of a dialogue journal continues to evolve. Dialogue journals now include peer-to-peer communication (VanSluys & Laman, 2006), as well as conversations including families and school. In some cases, teachers have utilized them in the context of content areas. Written conversations, dialogue notebooks, or dialogue journals are all names for the same concept: an on-going, student(s)-led conversation with a peer, mentor, or teacher. Since the 1980s, the popularity of dialogue journals has blossomed and waned. In an age where connections with students is essential, and classroom writing is starved, there is a need to reevaluate this practice.

A brief history of dialogue journaling reveals an emergence of research done in the 1980s, notably by Reed (1988). From there we see the amount and use of dialogue journals expand. Researchers, like Peyton (1993,

1997), Peyton & Seyoum (1989), and Staton (1988), began examining the use of dialogue journals. By this time, researchers had already documented the benefits of using dialogue journals with special populations like linguistically diverse students (Peyton, 1997; Reyes, 1991; Staton, 1988;) and students who receive special education services (Staton, 1988; Wollman-Bonilla, 1989).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a rise in research using dialogue journals. Dialogic journals now appear in a variety of spaces and places from graduate-level classes (Roe & Stallman, 1994), to the college classroom (Garmon, 2001), to elementary schools (Hail et al., 2013; Van Sluys & Laman, 2006), to children as young as kindergarten (Hannon, 1999), and in every grade level in between. Dialogue journal participants have consisted of duos and trios used to connect peers (Van Sluys & Laman, 2006), teachers and students, “buddies” across levels, and even home and school (Finnegan, 1997).

For the teacher, not only does journaling involve student-centered writing, but it also provides an avenue for meeting children at their instructional level (Bode, 1989), offers a peek into students’ home and cultural lives, and allows the teacher to use each child’s unique fund of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and connect it back to the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Stillman et al., 2014). Moreover, dialogue journaling offers opportunities to forge relationships with teachers and peers.



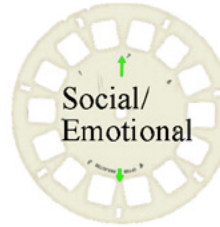

***Dialogue Journaling through an Academic Reel***

Dialogue journals, when examined through an academic reel, hold promise (see Table 1 for overview). For instance, when investigating the CCSS for ELA in 4th grade, dialogue journals could fit under “Range of Writing” as students “write routinely over shorter time frames for a range of discipline specific tasks, purposes and audiences” (CCSS, 2010). Dialogue journals offer an opportunity to write for a specific audience (teacher or possibly another student) in shorter writing time frames.

**Dialogue Journaling: Reimagining the Future**

**Table 1**

*Dialogue Journaling Filtered through Multiple Reels*

Filter adjective and Level of impact of reel				
Evidence to support impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- provides daily writing opportunities</li> <li>- creates a community of writers</li> <li>- writing for a variety of purposes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- draws in students’ cultural and linguistic lives (Moll et al., 1992)</li> <li>- space to process events and hold critical conversations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- allows for creativity to practice and play</li> <li>- provides connections (teacher to student, peer to peer)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- student-led</li> <li>- potential to engage in critical thinking</li> </ul>

Graham et al. (2012) in the WWC practice guide “Teaching Elementary School Students to be Effective Writers” recommend several key practices. One of the recommendations is daily writing time to improve writing skills. The WWC advises that 30 minutes be spent on writing techniques and strategies and another 30 minutes in practice. A dialogue journal provides both daily writing time and practice in writing. Another recommendation (Graham et al., 2012) calls for teaching students to write for a variety of purposes. In the suggestions given, dialogue journaling embraces the purpose of “providing a means of self-reflection, and sharing of experiences, ...and providing entertainment” (Graham et al., 2012, p. 12). Depending on how the teacher decides to utilize it, dialogue journaling offers a host of writing purposes. Lastly, Graham et al. (2012) recommend creating a community of engaged writers. It is here that dialogue journaling holds the most promise. By using self-selected topics and prompts, students have the potential to be more motivated and engaged while also creating richer connections to one another and the teacher. Although dialogue journaling is not listed in the suggested practices for the WWC or CCSS, we still see strong connections, thus holding promise as a classroom best practice.

In order to present a fuller picture of the academic and personal potential benefits of journaling, we focus on Dyson (2021) in her book *Writing the Schoolhouse Blues* as she follows Ta’Von through his early schooling experiences. In second grade, Ta’Von’s journal writing flourishes through the use of a daily journal. In it, Ta’Von writes about his developing passion for blues musicians—a passion he shares with this grandma. During that year, his journal fills with information on individual blues musicians, song lyrics, and references to guitars—all topics clearly important to Ta’Von. These “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al., 1992) Ta’Von brings to the classroom practice for journal writing. Besides the student-centered content, Dyson (2021) notes the academic skills Ta’Von developed through his journal writing: letter-sound knowledge in spelling, decoding, rereading, and revising. Unfortunately, all these benefits are muted as this “not real” (according to

Ta’Von) journal writing was overlooked by the teacher, and it never informed his overall writing abilities. Only the state-mandated writing and reading assessments were taken into account. The missed opportunity of teacher and peer audience did not allow Ta’Von’s funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and passions to be displayed in the classroom, as Ta’Von, one of the only Black students in a predominantly White classroom, tried to negotiate a sense of belonging. Although Dyson (2021) concentrates on themes of belonging, “smartness,” and equity, Ta’Von’s writing experiences tell us about how journal writing can be a holistic practice of integrative writing skills.

### ***Dialogue Journaling through a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Reel***

The practice of dialogue journaling, summarized in Table 1, holds the potential to be aligned with components of CRP. While the research in dialogue journaling does not cite Ladson-Billings (1995) directly, there are several important overlaps. The first component of CRP is foregrounding academic success for marginalized youth. While academic success can be defined quite broadly, dialogue journaling creates a non-evaluative space for students to communicate without the pressure to perform or conform. In this way, dialogue journaling can create positive orientations toward writing and promote academic success. What dialogue journaling does offer is recognizing cultural competency, the second component of CRP. Stillman et al. (2014) show that dialogue journals can be asset-based practices, important for drawing in students’ cultural and linguistic lives. For the teacher, this allows opportunities to see each student’s unique fund of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and use this knowledge in the curriculum. The third component of CRP is critical consciousness. This is one area where the individual teacher is an influential force in how the dialogue journal is utilized. If the teacher allows the students the space to process events and topics related to what is important to them, then dialogue journals critical consciousness can be furthered. Kaczmarczyk et al. (2019) found that the practice of dialogue journaling can be used to approach critical issues like race that require critical conversations.

### ***Dialogue Journaling through a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Reel***

Using an SEL reel, the practice of dialogue journals is potentially high on both creativity and connection (see Table 1). Giving students non-evaluative spaces to play with writing is not only research-based (Troia, 2014), but it is authentic and motivating (Peyton, 1997; Staton, 1988). Depending on the type of journal utilized, students in these spaces are free to ask questions, play with knock-knock jokes, spin stories, or give their expertise on guinea pigs, allowing their creativity to blossom. In turn, this fosters their unique sense of self and further develops their social emotional learning.

Through the practice of ongoing dialogue between teacher and student, dialogue journaling offers opportunities to forge relationships and cultivate connections. Whether peer-to-peer or teacher-to-peer journals, the connections solidified through writing can lead to increased community within the classroom.

This practice is teacher-dependent. As Hall and colleagues (1997) discovered, power dynamics between teacher and student is an important factor to keep in mind. As students share potentially weighty topics such as divorce or abuse, the teacher's response is crucial. Offering a generic response would seem further damaging. For topics where the teacher must report the information (i.e., abuse), consider not responding in the journal and addressing that topic in a more direct way using your school resources (e.g., counselor, administrator, etc.). Understanding the teacher responsibility in terms of SEL and the necessary response is important to consider.

### ***Dialogue Journaling through a Humanizing Reel***

Dialogue journaling is ripe for potential when overlaid with the humanizing reel, as illustrated by Table 1. For Freire (1968), dialogue is the center of education. Dialogue journals give answers to the important questions posed by using a Freirian lens. First, the student takes control of their learning. By selecting topics and questions important to them and/or choosing how to answer open-ended prompts, students take the lead. Second, the student is in direct dialogue with

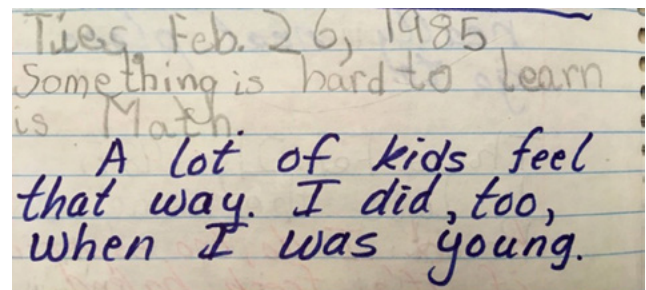
the teacher and possibly peers. Freire (1968) notes that true dialogue is not “depositing” ideas into students or exhibiting control over their ideas. Instead, dialogue is an “act of creation” (Freire, 1968). Implemented authentically, dialogue journaling becomes a conversation with another person, creating connection and community.

Beyond this, Freire (1968) argues that dialogue has the power to engage in and perpetuate critical thinking, which is the basis for authentic education. Building off research done by Kaczmarczyk et al. (2019), dialogue journals have potential in many areas, including approaching critical issues like race, gender, or other topics that require critical conversations.

### **Moving from Nostalgia to Best Practice: The Case for Dialogue Journals**

#### **Image 1**

*Excerpt from Rebecca White's 2nd grade Dialogue Journal*



Looking at Image 1 (from 1985!), you can see that the student, Rebecca White, is responding to a question prompting students to write about something that is hard for them. She writes about her struggle with math. In one sentence the teacher responds empathetically citing a personal connection. In this simple exchange, the teacher gained essential information about the student and was able to validate concerns. White, as the student, kept this journal from her second-grade teacher, remembering it and her teacher fondly as it developed a positive rapport and made her feel valued and supported. Not only can dialogue journals be considered nostalgic, like the image above, but dialogue journals can become a best practice incorporated in



classrooms, especially when the student's thoughts and writing are validated by the teacher.

Returning to Dyson (2021), Ta'Von's teacher provided a non-evaluative writing space that was humanizing in the sense that students were about to write about a topic of their choice. In saying this, though, we wonder how this journal writing practice would have been enhanced through dialogic—interactions with a teacher or peer, similar to the interaction in Image 1.

Dyson (2021) notes the importance of a shared writing experience for students. "Writing can be a means for self-expression and communication—but without a dedicated sharing time, and with a tight focus on skills, the intentions driving children's engagement with orchestrating their writing know-how can remain invisible" (p. 139). If Ta'Von's teacher read his entries and responded, like in a dialogue journal, she would have learned about his out-of-school passions and potentially leveraged them in official classroom work—effectively working toward more culturally relevant teaching. She also would have noted the length and depth of his writing abilities that state-mandated tests miss. Further, having an audience for his writing would have justified in Ta'Von's mind that his journal writing was "real." In that case, dialogue journaling could have provided an audience, giving his writing purpose, but also could have provided much needed information about his abilities. Imagine if Ta'Von's teacher could have taken a couple of minutes to read his journal entry and made a comment. What if his love for the blues could have been a point of conversation and connection? Even more, what if his love for the blues could have been incorporated into the literacy curriculum?

### **Strategies for Implementing Dialogue Journaling in Classrooms**

At first dialogue journaling may seem daunting, but it doesn't have to be overly time-consuming. As former classroom teachers, we understand the need to prioritize certain tasks and activities and that classroom time is precious. Because of that, we lay out six helpful strategies to make dialogue journaling manageable in your classroom.

- 1) **Think About Formats** - The authors have used both electronic and paper journals. Each method of journaling can serve a purpose and form a connection. Many journals are shared in a paper format (spiral-bound notebooks or paper stapled together), physically passed between teacher and student. Teachers may tend to favor this as it provides handwriting and writing practice. However, electronic journals also are effective. For instance, one of us [White] journaled with teacher candidates in a different state on a shared Google doc. Something similar could be done with elementary classroom technology simultaneously reinforcing typing skills.
- 2) **Decide on a Manageable Timeframe** - If dialogue journaling seems overwhelming, pick a specific timeframe. For instance, try it for four weeks at the beginning of the year and then decide if you want to continue. Another idea is to incorporate it as a choice for early finishers or during a literacy choice time (like Daily 5) communicating with only some students. Alternatively, you could write to students every other week, breaking the class in half. Create a plan for how you will respond to the journals.
- 3) **Starting the Process** - Begin each journal with the same prompt, such as "What is something new you have tried?" See where your students take it. Don't forget to explain and model expectations (i.e., end the journal with a question). As much as possible, let the student guide the conversation. Prompt them to ask you a question at the end of their entry. They can either reciprocate the question you asked or can ask an entirely new question. If your students forget to ask a question, prompt them in your response to remember to ask a question the next time. It keeps the conversation flowing and also models effective conversation skills.
- 4) **Streamlining the Teacher Response Process** -
  - Try to find a time frame that is feasible and works for both you and your students. We have done weekly journals where we have the weekend to respond, but this does not work for everyone.
  - Consider staggering your responses, so you don't feel overwhelmed responding to twenty journals at once. We answer 5-7 journals in

one sitting, and then move on to another task. Then revisit 5-7 more journals following that task. It may take 2-3 days to respond to your whole class doing it this way.

- Sort the journals by how easy they are to respond to, and then respond to the easiest group first. Usually, these easy journals take far less time to complete.
  - Use a formula for responding to the journals to make them feasible to complete. This three-sentence response is the most efficient and effective way to respond. First, we answer their question. Then, we follow that up with a comment about their main focus of the journal. Lastly, we ask a question back. Often the question requests clarification on the main focus of the entry.
  - Create a list of grade-appropriate topics of student interest you may want to ask your students about (e.g., weekend activities, sports they play, activities they do outside of school, etc.) so that it is easy to introduce the next topic. Similarly, you can ask questions that connect content areas. For instance, following a science lesson on weather, you can incorporate a weather-related question by asking students about what they like to do during a rainy day.
- 5) Keeping Teacher Responses Simple - Acknowledge that you read students' entries. Journal responses could be as simple as "Agree" or "I would like to know more about this" to a "Thanks for sharing" and then adding a connection. However, keep in mind, you are building a relationship with this student, so in addition to agreeing, you may want to ask for more information or ask a follow-up question. Both of these would validate the student's entry.
  - 6) Have fun! When you read and respond, you don't have to correct grammar or look at a rubric, you can just communicate and cultivate a relationship. Find ways to incorporate what you know from the journals into conversations.

While the audience of this article is primarily elementary teachers, dialogue journaling could be possible

for other levels as well. In saying this, implementation in secondary settings may need to be adapted. We suggest middle school and high school teachers who teach multiple sections of the same class (high school English teachers, for instance), try it with one class first or switch classes every nine weeks. Alternatively, it may work better to focus on homeroom students to cultivate relationships with a smaller group of students.

### To Be Continued . . .

In an upcoming issue, we will examine additional practices using these reels (theories). As previously noted, we will offer an additional focal practice (readers' theatre). Finally, as we close out this series, our next article will summarize the research presented here and provide a few strategies for enacting this tool in your classroom lesson planning.

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# Awareness & Access Matter: Making Professional Associations Available to Support Literacy Teachers' Ongoing PL

by Kathleen S. Howe and Suzanne Tiemann

Historically, professional associations play an important role in literacy teachers' professional lives. Many different education associations exist, and they offer a wide range of resources, supports, and benefits to members, including the development of professional standards for the preparation and ongoing enhancement of the literacy teaching and learning of literacy professionals, for example, *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals, 2017 Edition* (International Literacy Association, 2018). Both authors are longtime members of various associations and value the myriad ways these groups support and enhance their professional work and enrich their lives. Despite positive individual experiences and research-supported benefits of involvement in associations (Nolker & Ramsey, 2020; Ramsey, 2022), membership numbers for education professional associations, including literacy-specific groups, have declined in recent years (Antonucci, 2022). This reality prompted the authors to better understand the reasons for the declines. First, they explored potential contributing factors by reading further on the topic, and then sought to learn more by conducting related survey research with K-12 literacy teachers and specialists in a midwestern state (Howe & Tiemann, 2023).

The purpose of this article is not to argue for or against specific literacy professional associations nor to prove if any of the potential factors noted within the article contribute to associations' membership declines. In addition, this article does not discuss the authors' research in its entirety (Howe & Tiemann, 2023). Rather, it seeks to introduce readers to two potential factors (diverse generational mix of teachers and technology) and important changes that have occurred to professional learning across time before adding and exploring others: two themes (awareness and access) that emerged from a section of the authors'



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survey research (Howe & Tiemann, 2023). Finally, the research-based findings and other information discussed serve as a springboard for suggesting ways that those who support literacy teachers/specialists' work (i.e., district/building literacy leaders, higher education literacy teacher educators, parents, and community groups) can help raise awareness and improve access to literacy professional associations for K-12 teachers. The authors hope this article prompts current and prospective members of professional groups to engage in their own reflection of associations' membership and benefits that result in ideas for supporting literacy teachers' professional learning needs and addressing factors that may contribute to membership declines.

As previously mentioned, various factors may contribute to membership declines in professional associations. In this article, the authors speculate about two potential factors. For example, today's teaching force in the United States and internationally consists of individuals working and learning side by side who come from several different generational cohorts (Lovely, 2012; Yaakob et al., 2020). Wiedmer (2015) notes

that this factor presents a challenge for professional associations in that they must figure out how to respect generational similarities and differences and address the individual needs and interests of their diverse membership. Failure to do so may contribute to associations' inability to recruit or retain members across different generational groups.

Another possible factor for associations' membership decline may be technology. More specifically, easy and often free access exists that enables a range of professional networking and training options via various technologies, including social media platforms. Not only does technology such as Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Facebook Groups, and more offer teachers choices to support their learning (Bean & Goatley, 2021; Dagen & Bean, 2020), but they may also contribute to declining association membership. Technology options disrupt the traditional pathway educators previously relied on to engage in professional networking and collaboration (i.e., professional associations). Existing availability and range of newer technology options may prompt educators to re-examine if or how association-sponsored resources and options, both free or for purchase and including similar technology-based networking channels, fit their existing individual learning preferences and needs.

In addition to both of the previously noted factors (diverse generational mix of teachers and technology) and before discussing further or introducing others, it is worth exploring key changes that have occurred across time to professional learning that may also impact association membership declines. The next section unpacks this important shift.

### **An Important Shift: Professional Development (PD) to Professional Learning (PL)**

A shift occurred over time, resulting in key changes to the concept that describes ongoing support for teachers within the field of education, including literacy education. This concept is known by several different names, beginning with "inservice" (1950s-1960s) to "staff development" (1970s-1980s) to "professional

development" (1990s-2000s) to "professional learning" (2000s-present) (Dagen & Bean, 2020, p. 414). Unpacking and understanding the changes highlights the possibility of their combined contribution to membership declines. The changes that resulted in the concept known as professional learning were set into motion by research. Research findings about adult learning, effective components of professional development, school change, and leadership drove the need for new terminology and a more appropriate model for teacher professional learning (Bean & Goatley, 2021).

According to Bean and Goatley (2021), the shift changed the common acceptance that professional development (PD) is something done to teachers to a recognition that PD instead needs to focus on ongoing teacher learning that results in student improvement (Learning Forward, 2011; Lieberman & Miller, 2008). In addition, the shift recognized the need for teacher agency and active involvement in their own PD based on individual student, classroom, and building needs (Hicks et al., 2018). Therefore, the terminology changed from professional *development* (PD) to professional *learning* (PL), a more accurate label for the concept and process of ongoing support for teacher growth (Learning Forward, 2011; Lieberman & Miller, 2014). Furthermore, new research called attention to out-of-step approaches to training teachers described as "sit and get," "one-size-fits-all," and "top-down," and prompted the need for a new model for PL (Bean & Goatley, 2021). A synthesis of the research resulted in the need for a PL model that is job-embedded, sustained over time, provides the opportunity for reflection, involves active learning, and provides support to practice new learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In addition, these changes impacted the preferred mode and method (i.e., approaches and activities) by which PL occurs.

A wide range of options exist. Dagen and Bean (2020) identify several different approaches (i.e., coaching, teacher research, walk-throughs, PLCs) literacy leaders may adopt within PL plans, of which membership and engagement within a literacy professional association are noted. In addition, book studies, reading journals,

and attending conferences, to name a few, are popular activities teachers may engage in to address professional learning needs. Furthermore, widely available and ever-changing digital options exist for literacy learning and engaging individually or collaboratively with other educators both synchronously and asynchronously. The internet and social media such as Twitter, FaceTime Live, TikTok, and more allow teachers to easily connect and engage with other educators (Bean & Goatley, 2021; Dagen & Bean, 2020).

As research and models for PL were evolving, so was the introduction of new technologies available and integrated into PL. Free and easily available social media options and other online and digital tools, including websites, blogs, and more, disrupted the traditional approach to accessing and collaborating with a network of professionals through association membership. The authors speculate that this disruption caused teachers to reevaluate the need to join associations, resulting in membership declines. Furthermore, the COVID Pandemic that began in 2020 forced a temporary halt to face-to-face meetings, conferences, and trainings but made it possible for geographically diverse groups of educators to come together with relative ease and often at no additional costs through the use of online video-conferencing technologies such as Zoom. Additionally, technology made it possible to rapidly share and discuss popular and scholarly articles and ideas across social media. The use of technology far outpaced the time it took for associations to publish and distribute peer-reviewed journals or for members to travel to gather at an annual conference. Also, the technology reduced or eliminated costs associated with both activities. Despite post-pandemic anecdotal reports by educators and association leaders of tech-burnout and other downsides to Zoom or online-only PL options (which also might contribute to membership declines), technology, in general, has disrupted traditional approaches to the delivery of PL.

In short, the availability of new and ever-changing technologies and countless approaches and activities for engaging in literacy professional learning makes for a crowded and more cost-efficient field of options from

which teachers can choose. No longer are professional associations the sole providers of many popular professional learning approaches and activities. Rather, teachers and associations need to reimagine how associations' resources and supports fit within a job-embedded model. Failure to do so by either party may contribute to membership declines.

Collaborating with peers inside and outside of school has many benefits, such as improved teacher confidence, pedagogy, student achievement, and school culture (Reeves et al., 2017). Despite research support for teachers engaging within professional networks such as those made possible through literacy professional associations, membership numbers declined across the timeline when the research and model for professional learning evolved. The generational mix of educators working side by side in schools also changed during this same timeline and may also have contributed to the decline in association memberships, which the next section explores.

### **Today's Teaching Force: Multiple Generational Groups**

As previously introduced, a potential factor contributing to the membership decline of professional associations is the generational mix of today's teaching force and the different cohorts' PL needs and preferences. Research indicates that generational differences exist in teachers' participation in and preferences for professional learning (Yaakob et al., 2020). Recent research found that teachers' knowledge, perceptions, and preferences for professional learning vary across different generations, thus supporting the need for differentiated PL versus one-size-fits-all (Yaakob et al., 2020). Professional associations face a challenge to respect their members' generational similarities and differences and meet their unique professional learning goals (Wiedmer, 2015).

Strauss and Howe (1992) introduced Generational Cohort Theory (GCT), which proposes that individuals born within the same generational cohorts (see Table 1) tend to share certain attitudes and values. Researchers across many fields have used GCT as a lens to consider

and explain differences between the values and attitudes for all aspects of different generational groups’ life, work, and health. New generation “cohorts” emerge every 18 to 24 years and are often characterized by the music, media, cultural moments, and norms they share

in common (Lovely, 2012). Others suggest taking GCT with Gessell’s Maturation Theory, which suggests that individuals’ values, beliefs, attitudes, and more change as they grow and mature (Nolker & Ramsey, 2020).

**Table 1**  
*Generational Cohorts*

<b>Generation</b>	<b>Birth years</b>	<b>Age range in 2023</b>	<b>Common characteristics/traits &amp; shared attitudes/values</b>
Baby boomers	1940-1959	64-83	Hard workers and committed, may not be comfortable with technology, may resist change, desire to mentor colleagues from younger generations, but also value working independently
Generation X	1960-1979	44-63	Independent, prefer email or voicemail, desire mentors from an older generation, pragmatic, direct, highly educated, prefer engaging and interesting work, value work-life balance
Generation Y (Millennials)	1980-1999	24-43	Tech savvy, highly connected via social media, multi-taskers, socially conscious, need structure, clear goals, and feedback, but embrace workplace flexibility and change
Generation Z	2000-2019	4-23	Tech savvy, prefer working with other GenZers, socially and environmentally aware, prefer customized learning, enjoy problem-solving and seek instant answers, often using digital tools

*Note.* Adapted from Lovely (2012), Nolker and Ramsey (2020), Trent (2019), and Wiedmer (2015).

Research conducted across the field of education can inform professional associations striving to understand and meet the collective and unique needs of their members of different generational groups. For example, Yaakob et al. (2020) found differences between the type of PL preferred by Boomers and Gen X teachers in Malaysian schools compared to their Gen Y colleagues. In addition, Boomer and Gen X teachers preferred participation in seminars, workshops, or other classes versus their Gen Y colleagues, who preferred learning through more informal activities (Yaakob et al., 2020). Furthermore, study findings indicated that Boomers did not prefer learning through online activities while Gen X teachers indicated less interest in research activities (Yaakob et al., 2020).

Another study involving association leaders of music education professional associations sought to understand perspectives and experiences to inform their group's relevance to a new generation (Gen Z) of members (Ramsey, 2022). Communication, engagement, and professionalism emerged as themes. Findings within each theme suggest that association leaders must go beyond generational stereotypes and generalizations to inform decisions and action steps designed to meet members' needs across multiple generations. For example, despite using a range of communication modes (face-to-face, social media, and digital) to share important information and invite participation in activities, both leaders and Gen Z members found the excess of methods to be overwhelming and resulted in messages getting ignored (Ramsey, 2022). One participant found it difficult to get a response from Gen Z members when sending a text and experienced more success in response and participation in activities when making a request or sharing information face-to-face.

Given that our K-12 schools consist of a teaching force comprising individuals from multiple generation groups, it is important to understand defining characteristics of different generations while recognizing individuals' uniquenesses and professional learning needs. Just as others have written about ways the different generations' characteristics translate to the business workforce (Wiedmer, 2015) or military battlefield (Trent,

2019), so must professional associations within the field of education understand the generational nuances of prospective and existing members. The authors wondered how professional associations fit within today's teachers' professional learning toolbox and what associations might need to know about potential generational differences to inform their membership services.

### **Awareness and Access**

Howe & Tiemann (2023) surveyed K-12 literacy teachers and specialists working in a midwestern state to understand the generational differences and preferences for literacy professional learning. In addition, the study sought to understand how professional associations can support literacy teachers' ongoing PL to meet their needs best and differentiate PL for a cross-generational group of literacy educators. As previously noted, participation within literacy professional associations is one of several vehicles for professional learning that provides members with a range of opportunities and resources to meet their individual needs for ongoing literacy teaching and learning growth, development, and reflection for literacy teaching. Popular choices of professional associations for literacy professionals to join include the International Literacy Association ([www.literacyworldwide.org](http://www.literacyworldwide.org)), Association of Literacy Educators ([www.aleronline.org](http://www.aleronline.org)), National Council of Teachers of English ([www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org)), and Literacy Research Association ([www.literacyresearchassociation.org](http://www.literacyresearchassociation.org)). Groups that gained popularity in light of recent dyslexia and science of reading policy state mandates include The Reading League ([www.thereadingleague.org](http://www.thereadingleague.org)) and International Dyslexia Association ([www.dyslexiaida.org](http://www.dyslexiaida.org)). Several of these associations also have local chapters and statewide affiliates. These associations offer a range of print, digital, online, and live access to resources, collaboration options, networking opportunities, and other benefits for members, including but not limited to journals, newsletters, social media channels and blogs, special interest groups, trainings, speaker series, conferences, book clubs, professional books, white papers and policy briefs, professional standards, awards, and job postings.

A different study investigated what motivates individual members to engage in professional associations,



not limited to education associations, and found that individuals' perceived support received from their professional associations motivated their engagement with the associations (Wang & Ki, 2018). In addition, Wang and Ki (2018) found that volunteer behaviors existed between junior and senior members as identified by their career status (i.e., entry-level, middle-level, senior level, or chief executive or owner/partner).

Although this article does not address the entirety of the survey research and its findings conducted by Howe & Tiemann (2023), a section of it is especially germane to membership declines and offers valuable information to advise ways literacy professional associations can and do support K-12 literacy educators' ongoing professional learning. For example, *awareness* and *access* are two themes that emerged from the analysis of the open-response questions within the survey. Responses across several open-ended questions indicated that participants across all generational groups lacked general knowledge or specific information about existing literacy professional associations. Such responses were grouped together within the theme labeled *awareness*. Some participants stated they could not name any associations whose mission and membership focused on supporting literacy and literacy professionals. However, when asked about available resources or membership benefits, comments indicated those without specific knowledge of existing associations believed membership within literacy professional associations would be beneficial only if they and others were made aware of "what [associations] are and how they can help." In addition, other comments throughout the open-ended responses indicated that participants are interested and willing to learn more about association resources and member benefits.

A second theme was labeled *access*. Comments such as "money [is a factor] in utilizing literacy professional associations" or "joining or maintaining membership" speaks to a larger issue of *access*. In addition, comments that identified "time" as a barrier also fit within the *access* theme. For example, one respondent mentioned being on "overload," and another referenced experiencing constant change such that "every year seems to be a new thing thrown at us." These comments suggest that

lack of time and district or building PL focus contributes to pressures on teachers' energy and schedules, making it challenging to add one more thing to their PL toolboxes. Such comments were shared across all generations of participants. Therefore, not only is joining an association cost prohibitive but lack of time and energy is perceived as barriers by teachers that interfere with access to associations as viable options to support their ongoing literacy PL.

These findings suggest a need exists to build better awareness of who and what professional associations are and ways they can add value to educators' ongoing literacy professional learning. In addition, fully understanding all barriers that prevent access to professional associations is warranted. Some changes in professional learning may contribute to pressures on teachers' time or energy and aid membership declines. For example, the introduction of job-embedded literacy coaching or the prevalence of state literacy initiatives that mandate the use of commercial programs provide teachers with specific resources to use such as MAISA GELN ELTF's (2023) *Literacy Essentials* documents or require completion of trainings provided by for-profit companies (i.e., Lexia-Cambium Learning Group's LETRS/*Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling*). These options compete for teachers' limited time or energy to participate in (*access*) associations. Therefore, in order for membership numbers to thrive, associations and literacy leaders must focus on raising teachers' awareness and knowledge of associations, and demonstrate how membership and resources may be used in conjunction, not in competition, with teachers' time and energy already dedicated to implementing state initiatives or other PL changes such as job-embedded coaching. Additionally, associations and literacy leaders must show teachers how doing so adds important support or context to information shared as part of these or other PL changes.

### **What Can Literacy Professional Associations Do?**

Based on the above, what else do associations need to know or consider to create specific action items relative to raising awareness and creating access?

1. *Awareness* – Associations should directly target teachers as part of their marketing efforts. Often information is sent to district or building leaders and is not filtered down to classroom teachers. In addition, parents and community members should receive information about existing associations, especially since many associations produce or provide access to research and activities of significance to family and community literacy engagement. For the importance and power of associations partnering with parents to help circulate a particular literacy message or promote a specific literacy agenda, look no further than recent social and popular media efforts driven by parent advocacy groups that resulted in dyslexia legislation in almost every state. In addition, with so many association choices and limited time and money available to join them all, it makes sense for literacy professionals to collaborate across like-minded groups. Alternatively, build bridges if philosophical differences between groups exist. The field of literacy wins when we listen to one another and put more heads together. A great example of a recent collaboration is the decision of Drs. Rita Bean, Ginny Goatley, and Diane Kern from ILA to reach out to ALER's specialized literacy professional group to invite them to be part of ILA's efforts to replicate the 2015 national survey research on specialized literacy professionals. This research impacted ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals*, updated in 2018. Casting the net as wide as possible to involve more literacy professionals in this research makes for stronger findings that better inform the entire field. What other partnerships might exist across various literacy associations to include the voices of all literacy professionals, regardless of the association to which they belong?
2. *Access* – Associations can and should provide no-cost trial memberships to graduate students and classroom teachers so they may explore life as an association member before opting to pay to join. Many associations already offer a mix of free and members-only paid access to various resources such as journal articles, speaker series, and more. However, access to one or more resources is not the

same as the opportunity across an extended period to fully explore what an association offers, including the ability to meet and interact with existing members. When asked following the completion of a virtual field trip and discussion of two literacy associations a class explored, students of Kathleen Howe indicated they would all select the same association to join. Students' responses were surprising since the association they selected was not what they indicated they preferred during the class discussion. When pressed to explain why, students immediately indicated that their decision was based solely on the fact that they could receive a free 1-year membership, and as a result, they figured they had nothing to lose by giving it a try. The cost of joining associations is only one of several potential barriers to teacher access. Time and opportunities for active engagement within associations may also interfere with access. However, granting no-cost trial memberships is one step associations can take to address cost barriers.

### **Suggestions for Raising Awareness and Opening Access**

Various opportunities exist to raise awareness and improve access to literacy associations for key stakeholders who embrace associations' shared goal of ensuring K-12 teachers engage in ongoing professional learning that best equips them to help all learners achieve at high levels. For example, associations should partner with higher education institutions and K-12 school districts to ensure teachers and teacher candidates know about the wide range of literacy professional associations. Teachers must first be aware that associations exist and the many ways associations can support their ongoing learning before teachers are in a position to decide whether to join a group or determine their potential level of involvement. In addition, parents and parent or community groups can support access by partnering with associations and districts. Below is a list of ideas for various stakeholders to consider. It is not an exhaustive list. Rather, it is intended as a jumping-off point and hopefully will generate more ideas from current and prospective members of professional groups to positively impact teachers' awareness and access to associations.

1. *District, building, and literacy leaders and PL providers* – Districts et al. should explore ways to financially support teachers' access to association membership. For example, one state affiliate of the International Literacy Association (ILA) partnered with an urban public school district in the Midwest to offer 500 teachers a three-year membership to their state association and local chapter at a reduced cost. This partnership allowed teachers full access to a professional association. In addition, it opened the door for district PL providers to partner with the association on PL offerings related to their district interests and needs. Furthermore, districts et al. should consider providing more financial support for teachers to attend professional conferences that require regional or national travel. Not only did participants make this suggestion within the previously mentioned survey research (Howe & Tiemann, 2023), one respondent added a rationale. They noted the value of networking with teachers from across the country and learning about literacy through a wider lens than what their school or district provides as perceived benefits of attending conferences and belonging to literacy professional associations. Moreover, districts et al. should expand PL offerings beyond what companies provide to support commercial programs and include services and resources available through literacy professional associations. Often professional associations maintain a list of consultants affiliated with or vetted by the professional association who can customize PL for a school or district. Such services may include assistance with PL planning, literacy coaching, literacy standards alignment as part of curriculum development or lesson study, and more. In addition, many associations offer a range of resources and PL support that include online and onsite options for supporting the differentiated PL needs of a diverse and mixed-generational group of teachers. Lastly, many ideas exist for use in teacher preparation programs (see below #2), but easily can be included (or modified) for use as part of districts' new teachers' academies, mentoring programs, and literacy coaching.
2. *Teacher preparation programs* – Introduction to

professional associations should begin at the undergraduate level and be revisited and expanded upon throughout teachers' careers. Undergraduate programs should intentionally introduce teacher candidates to professional associations as an important option to consider adding to their PL toolbelts for ongoing literacy support and as a channel for getting involved and giving back to the larger literacy community. For example, university literacy teacher educators can work with their students to compile a list of existing professional associations. Lists should include a brief overview and contact information for each association so their students can easily explore further. Another suggestion is to assign students to use the list they compile to select an association or two of interest and then take a virtual field trip to learn more. Follow up by hosting a class discussion to allow students to compare and contrast what they learned and share which groups they are most interested in joining. Alternatively, literacy teacher educators may consider forming a local chapter on campus for an association to which they belong. McNair and Aker (2020) describe steps they used to launch a chapter at their university and include insights about their experience to help guide others interested in doing the same. Another idea is inviting association members to serve as guest speakers in university classes to share information about their experiences, membership opportunities, and benefits. Lastly, as part of the introduction to literacy associations, be sure to engage students in a critical evaluation of associations' missions and visions, including their standards, publications, or other sources of print or digital information through which associations circulate information about literacy and literacy teaching. Be sure teacher candidates learn how to become informed consumers of information specific to the various professional associations and other "literacy advocacy" groups active online and through social media. Hence, they know how to evaluate the difference between scholarly and popular works (i.e., peer-reviewed or not), determine the expertise of individuals espousing literacy information (i.e., researchers vs. social media "influencers,"

bloggers, and more), and understand what, if any, agenda is behind each group's efforts.

3. *Graduate programs* – Teachers enrolled in graduate programs should receive more than an overview of existing literacy associations, be granted access to opportunities that invite active involvement within association committees, and more. Graduate literacy teacher educators can assist by providing instruction and incorporating assignments that guide graduate students to engage in various scholarship opportunities available through professional associations. For example, graduate-level literacy teacher educators can assign students to investigate grant, conference, journal, or award opportunities within associations, then select one to pursue that is of interest to them or their classroom needs. For example, various associations or special interest groups within national or international associations offer grants for which classroom teachers and other literacy professionals may apply. In addition, associations often publish peer-reviewed journals such as *The Reading Teacher* and welcome submissions from practitioners. Furthermore, graduate instructors should strive to create opportunities for their students within professional associations. Graduate literacy teacher educators are likely already involved with a professional association. They can contact committee chairs or journal editors to suggest ways their graduate students can assist with committees, community outreach, or journal activities. One idea includes volunteering their graduate students to write and submit a steady stream of reviews for existing or recently published professional books, children's literature, or adolescent literature that include teaching tips or other ideas inspired by their use of any of these resources. Associations likely appreciate having submission choices available for consideration within their newsletters, social media posts, or journals. Another idea includes requiring a service component within a graduate course that may be fulfilled by volunteering at a local, regional, or national conference or assisting at a community literacy event sponsored by an association state affiliate, or local chapter. Lastly, graduate programs and literacy association

boards should collaborate to explore ways to develop a pipeline for the next generation of their association's leaders (i.e., establishing mentoring or shadowing experiences for graduate students with association board members, committee chairs, or serving as a committee member). Like the research involving music education association leaders (Ramsey, 2022), literacy associations should seek to understand how to maintain relevancy across generational groups, including the next generation of association leaders.

4. *Parents and parent or community groups* – Parents and community groups can show their appreciation for teachers by purchasing memberships to literacy associations for classroom teachers, ordering professional texts off teachers' wish lists, or contributing to a literacy conference "travel fund" to help underwrite the cost of teachers attending or presenting at a regional or national conference. In addition to providing financial support that helps teachers access resources and opportunities available through literacy associations, they can advocate for teachers' needs to district administrators and school boards at no cost. Learning directly from teachers working in their community about their PL beliefs, interests, ideas, needs, and more as they relate to utilizing literacy associations can provide parents and parent or community groups with the best information for which to advocate on teachers' behalf to district and building leaders.

Literacy professional associations can and do play an important role in supporting many literacy teachers' ongoing professional learning. Various factors may contribute to the decline of membership experienced by literacy and other education professional associations. However, literacy associations and other stakeholders can take steps to raise awareness and access for K-12 literacy teachers. These steps may ignite renewed interest in literacy professional associations. In addition, they may lead to more teachers across all generational groups actively engaging with associations to support and enhance their ongoing literacy teaching and learning efforts.

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# Prioritizing Social Emotional Learning with Interactive Read-Alouds

by Lindsay Stoetzel and Kelly Vigants

Social emotional learning (SEL) awareness has grown over the last decade, due in part to the ensuing chaos arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. According to recent survey results from McGraw-Hill (2021), 84% of educators reported a greater need for social emotional programming as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding corresponds with survey data on parent perspectives, reporting that 80% of parents indicated concern over their child’s mental health or social and emotional health and development since the pandemic began (Dorn et al., 2021). These results exacerbate the challenges of mental health issues already facing families. A report from 2016 documented that one in six U.S. children aged two–eight years had a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder (Cree et al., 2018). Perhaps even more troubling, another study found that behavior problems related to mental health issues were the highest among *children 6-11 years of age* (Ghandour et al., 2018).

In response to these documented needs, research has illustrated the positive impact of explicit SEL instruction on both academic (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012) and social outcomes (Durlak & Mahoney, 2019) beginning as early as preschool (McClelland et al., 2017). While these findings may substantiate the need to integrate SEL into educational settings, the question remains if teachers are equipped to provide it. A recent survey of educators conducted by EdWeek Research Center found that 83% of respondents believe SEL positively impacts students’ academic outcomes and ‘soft’ skills (Klein, 2022), a finding further substantiated by research (Jones et al., 2015). The Klein study (2022) also found that nearly two-thirds of respondents



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claimed “weaving SEL skills into academic subjects is challenging,” amplifying the impact of lagging professional development efforts addressing SEL integration (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Knowing that SEL skills *can* improve academic performance and prosocial outcomes (Black, 2021; Schonfeld et al., 2015), how does this impact the work of literacy educators?

In our work as teacher educators, we face this same challenge of SEL integration within education courses. While we have both made connections to SEL within coursework, we have recently questioned how to do so in more strategic ways. In this paper, we examine the convergence of research from the fields of literacy studies, early childhood education, and SEL to propose meaningful integration opportunities through the lens of one high-leverage practice familiar to most ELA classrooms: the interactive read aloud. First, we introduce SEL and its evolution across grade bands. Then, we highlight research-based recommendations for addressing SEL within the ELA classroom. Finally, we narrow the lens to the practice of interactive read alouds to illustrate how literacy educators might engage SEL goals alongside literacy goals in ways that are responsive to the students and curriculum in their classrooms.



## Developmental Implications for SEL

Addressing SEL in the classroom begins by unpacking what we mean by the phrase social emotional learning, as a multitude of definitions persist. We ground our work in the framework provided by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL promotes an integrated framework featuring five interconnected areas of SEL competence including: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2012). Throughout this paper, we reference the work of CASEL as a primary source for designing research-based strategies to integrate SEL within classroom instruction.

Within each of these five areas of SEL competence, educators must also be responsive to students' needs and developmental progressions, as the application of these skills varies greatly. Beginning with an early childhood lens focusing on the "whole child" (Melnick & Martinez, 2019), educators must be aware of young children's limited perspectives which make it challenging to think from another person's point of view. This characteristic of Piaget's preoperational stage of cognitive development describes the process of "internally represent[ing] the world through language and mental imagery" (Schull et al., 2021, p. 47). This egocentric approach can leave children unable to effectively process social emotional skills like empathy. Yet, Piaget refers to patterns of behavior that *can* be replicated and enhanced as schema (Woolfork & Perry, 2015). By replicating behaviors, such as characters' actions from a book, children can often generalize this schema to more personal scenarios that are already familiar to them (through what is called assimilation).

Around the age of seven, children progress to more concrete operations. At this stage, children are able to think more logically and engage in perspective taking (Schull et al., 2021). This can be an indicator for teachers that more implicit ways of communicating social emotional skills may be introduced. Then into early adolescence, students must draw upon SEL skills in more complex and nuanced social situations. In particular, negotiating peer groups and interpersonal

conflict resolution become important skill sets to foster students' critical thinking skills and social interactions (Schlund, n.d.). An emphasis on identity construction and increased independence within this life-stage of physical and emotional growth further reinforces the need for social emotional strategies and skills.

Developmentally, as children progress through these stages, we can see how individual SEL skills grow in complexity. The implications reinforce an increased availability to apply social emotional skills, especially as it relates to peer interaction. In order to support learners across these developmental progressions, the next section describes features of high-quality SEL instruction.

## Implementing SEL Instruction

CASEL's (2022b) analysis of SEL programs documents a variety of structures for SEL integration including free-standing lessons, organizational strategies, and teaching practices. Yet, research indicates SEL instruction is most impactful when integrated within academic subjects (Melnick & Martinez, 2019; Oberle et al., 2016). Recognizing how SEL goals are embedded within content area goals allows educators to strategically teach and reflect upon those skills in meaningful and connected ways. While SEL programming has been shown to be most effective when approached through district-wide implementation (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.), teachers may wonder what steps to take in their *own classrooms* either in support of or in lieu of larger organizational initiatives. In these cases, teacher groups may develop their own SEL curricula and lessons to intentionally integrate SEL goals within academic instruction (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015). These efforts should align with evidenced-based instructional practices that have been shown to support social emotional learning.

## Characteristics of High-Quality SEL Instruction

Ongoing research highlights how SEL is most impactful when implemented in an inclusive learning environment (Michigan Department of Education, 2017). An inclusive environment focuses on engagement of all children in the learning experience with a focus on

equity and culturally responsive instruction (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.). This approach centers classrooms on student identit(ies) and values their individual assets as vital to the learning environment. Furthermore, Yoder (2013) highlights ten instructional practices that teachers can leverage to promote SEL in their classrooms. Social practices include: student-centered discipline, teacher language, responsibility and choice, and warmth and support. Instructional practices include cooperative learning, classroom discussions, self-assessment and self-reflection, balanced instruction, academic press and expectations, and competence building. According to Durlak et al. (2011) effective SEL instruction is sequenced, has a clear focus, utilizes explicit instruction, and engages active learning.

Decades of research further reinforce the overlap between these design factors and literacy instructional practices. In an analysis of SEL and literacy, Fitzgerald (2020) identified four key elements of synergy: collaboration, expression, reflection, and ownership. For example, Guthrie et al. (2007) illustrate the relationship(s) between reading performance and motivation through the lens of collaborative structures; writing research emphasizes the importance of ownership in process and product as it relates to authenticity (MacArthur et al., 2016); reflection and metacognition play a vital role in fostering strategic comprehension skills (Soto et al., 2019); and the expression and analysis of divergent points of view are often fostered through transactional approaches to engaging with texts (Hodges et al., 2018).

When we consider the central role of literacy experiences, such as writing workshop, reader response, strategy instruction, and collaborative learning, it becomes very evident just how seamlessly SEL competencies undergird the ways in which many classrooms ‘do’ the work of literacy. This relationship is so synergistic that some researchers have argued that ELA standards, such as the Common Core (CCSS), cannot be fully accomplished without an intentional integration of SEL goals and competencies (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). So how might teachers design learning experiences that capitalize on SEL without diverting precious time and

resources away from already demanding schedules? In the next section, we offer one possibility by adapting the practice of interactive read alouds to more intentionally address SEL.

### **Interactive Read Alouds**

Interactive read alouds are one of the essential literacy practices highlighted within MAISA GELN ETLF’s (2016) recommendations for literacy instruction. Many reading teachers are familiar with this highly adaptable practice as it can be used to address a wide range of literacy goals including deepening comprehension processes, modeling fluent reading, building vocabulary knowledge, and strengthening literacy interpretation among others (Blewitt et al., 2009; Justice, 2002; Justice et al., 2008; Silverman, 2007; Wiseman, 2011; Zucker et al., 2010).

Yet, research indicates there are more and less effective ways to utilize this practice to support readers with traditional or digital read alouds in the classroom (Stoetzel & Shedrow, 2021). Recommendations for planning interactive read alouds often address the importance of text selection, pre-planned stopping points, and an emphasis on student interaction. Importantly, while teachers may target particular literacy skills or strategies during a read aloud, centering student engagement is always key (Burkins & Yaris, 2016). While the topic or theme of a text may be easily selected to match SEL goals, designing an intentional reading experience goes beyond text selection to account for how children are invited to engage before, during, and after reading. With the reading experience in mind, in the next section, we draw upon research recommendations to offer a planning and reflection tool designed to integrate SEL and literacy goals within interactive read alouds.

### **Instructional Recommendations**

In our current educational climate, educators are already operating at maximum capacity, so adding “new” requirements to instruction is not a sustainable (or popular) choice. Rather, the key to unlocking the potential of SEL goals is to recognize the opportunities already in play and to thoughtfully adapt decision-making in response. To do so, we offer the following

planning and reflection tool to guide teachers through the design process. While these recommendations would ideally stem from and reinforce a school-wide approach to implementing SEL, they might also serve as stepping stones for teachers or teams looking to integrate SEL into their classroom instruction in the absence of a more systemic approach.

The planning and reflection tool (see Table 1) includes

six steps for consideration: observing children, setting goals, identifying texts, guiding thinking and discussion, facilitating the experience, and reflecting on the experience. Importantly, these steps are not intended to be exhaustive; we encourage educators to adapt these suggestions for reflection based on the specific context(s) of their communities. In the following sections, we discuss each of the reflection steps and offer resources to further guide educator thinking.

**Table 1**

*Planning and Reflection Tool for Targeting SEL in Interactive Read Alouds*

Reflection Step	Resources
<b>Observing Children:</b> What are you noticing about children’s interactions within your classroom? Within relationships? What are some areas for enrichment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Tracking and Supporting Student Learning with Kidwatching</a> (ReadWriteThink, n.d.)</li> </ul>
<b>Setting Goals:</b> What social emotional learning goals seem relevant to the needs/interests of your students as a community? Or as individuals? What goals have you set with students?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Early Childhood to Grade 12 Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Competencies and Indicators</a> (MDE, 2017)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Connecting SEL with PBIS</a> (CASEL, 2018)</li> </ul>
<b>Identifying Texts:</b> What text(s) could serve as a vehicle to unpack those goals or address student questions/needs/wonderings? Are there connections to text(s) you are already reading?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">SELspace Read Alouds</a> (SELspace, n.d.)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Children’s Book List</a> (Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, n.d.)</li> </ul>
<b>Guiding Thinking &amp; Discussion:</b> Within the context of an interactive read aloud, would you position social emotional learning as more of a primary or secondary focus? Could this focus extend current discussions of text?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Planning an Interactive Read aloud with Children (PK-1)</a> (Regional Educational Laboratory at WestEd)</li> <li>• <a href="#">During Reading [Strategies]</a> (Children’s Literacy Initiative, 2016)</li> </ul>
<b>Facilitating the Experience:</b> What role might discussion norms play in fostering the SEL goals of the experience? How might these be explored before, during, and after reading the text?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Developing Students’ Discussion Skills</a> (Colorin Colorado, n.d.)</li> </ul>
<b>Reflecting on the Experience:</b> How can you connect this experience to other content/activities within the learning environment? How might you communicate/collaborate with parents regarding these ideas?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Parental Resilience</a> (CSSP, n.d.)</li> </ul>

### **Observing Children**

The child study movement that began in the early 20th century was the first organized method of child observation for the purpose of formal assessment (Wortham & Hardin, 2020). While the focus of anecdotal note-taking may vary, observational approaches, such as kidwatching, remain powerful methods for recording student behavior and interactions as they relate to SEL goals (Harrison, 2022). The conceptual framework of kidwatching can help educators to “attend to diverse forms of discourse and behavior, interpret and analyze what they see, and support students’ language and literacy development” (Harrison, 2022, p. 20) in fluid and approachable ways. In addition to these more informal approaches, various and widely available screening tools address the SEL capacity of young children, such as the Early Screen Project (ESP), Assessment of Practices in Early Elementary Classrooms (APEEC), and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Both formal and informal assessment methods serve an important role in planning for SEL instruction.

### **Setting Goals**

Based on ongoing observation of children’s engagement across the learning environment, educators can begin to narrow the scope of SEL goals based on relevance to students as a community. Resources like the Michigan Department of Education’s SEL Competencies and Indicators (2017) can be a helpful starting point by providing age-appropriate benchmarks and strategies. This tool is especially helpful for providing specific language teachers can use to describe goals for themselves—and for their students. In addition, collaborative goal setting with students offers a vital opportunity for building classroom community and responding to the needs and questions of students as individuals. SEL goals inherently extend beyond the classroom walls and reverberate in the ways that students engage their identities and experience their worlds. Building from children’s funds of knowledge as a starting point for setting SEL goals can also undergird the establishment of safe learning environments (CASEL, 2018) that will likely also resonate with school-wide initiatives such as positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS).

### **Identifying Texts**

With the increased emphasis on SEL, countless book lists offer educator resources to align books to SEL goals (for an excellent example see SELSpace, 2023). As the same text can be used to address SEL goals in explicit or implicit ways, text selection is highly dependent on the goals of the reading experience. The inclusion of diverse representations and voices within text selection is also a key factor in fostering engagement within culturally responsive instruction (Garces-Bacsal, 2022) while also directly connecting to a multitude of SEL competencies. Importantly, many texts simultaneously address multiple dimensions of SEL competencies, as they represent overlapping and reinforcing facets. Furthermore, picture books can scaffold concepts in older grades—even when the reading level may be easier.

However, educators need not use an emotion-titled text to address SEL as a primary goal. As Doyle & Bramwell (2006) illustrate in their work, teachers can center emotion vocabulary in any range of texts to explicitly foster social emotional goals, as “emotion vocabulary can be developed through the use of dialogic reading with carefully chosen books with social-emotional themes” (p. 558). For example, pre-teaching key vocabulary concepts related to emotions can then be applied to the text during reading. This work clearly reinforces comprehension skills related to character and plot which allows teachers to simultaneously support literacy goals.

Another approach to text selection is using text sets. Generally speaking, a text set is a collection of texts gathered by the teacher to guide inquiry into a given topic (Hartman & Allison, 1996). While some text sets are provided to students for more self-directed exploration, interactive read alouds present an opportunity to more strategically scaffold textual experiences with SEL goals. The reading experiences may also include a combination of whole class, small group, and individual reading practices to engage with a variety of texts centered on the same SEL goal. Table 2 illustrates three potential ways of pairing texts by centering discussion on one SEL competency. The first read aloud experience provides explicit focus on SEL skill(s) *before* applying those same skill(s) to a second text where the reader

**Table 2**  
*Sample Text Sets Aligned to SEL Competencies*

Grades	SEL Competency (CASEL, 2022a)	Explicit SEL Goal	Implicit SEL Goal
PK-2	<b>Social awareness:</b> showing understanding and empathy for others	<i>Be Kind</i> by Pat Zietlow Miller	<i>Those Shoes</i> by Maribeth Boelts
3-5	<b>Self-management:</b> managing emotions and behaviors to achieve one's goals	<i>Worry Moves On</i> by Liz Haske	<i>Ghost</i> by Jason Reynolds
6-8	<b>Self-awareness:</b> recognizing one's emotions and values as well as one's strengths and challenges	<i>The Name Jar</i> by Yangsook Choi	<i>Amina's Voice</i> by Hena Kahn

has to work a little harder to unpack the complexities of how SEL impacts the character(s), plot, and theme(s) of the text. With chapter books, these read alouds can take place either as whole texts read over time or even as brief segments of text without needing to read the full book in its entirety.

The use of text sets can deepen engagement and foster comprehension for readers (Lupo et al., 2018). Pairing texts allows teachers to begin by introducing thematic elements, building shared language, and frontloading personal reflection through more concrete depictions of SEL skills. For example, one SEL goal for self-awareness in the 6-8 classroom is the target skill of recognizing one's emotions and values as well as one's strengths and challenges. This SEL goal is especially aligned with the identity work students are experiencing in middle school, which could be explored through the text set of *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi and *Amina's Voice* by Hena Khan. By beginning with *The Name Jar*, teachers might provide an explicit example of a young girl wrestling with her identity by contemplating whether or not she should Americanize her Korean name, which ultimately she decides against. This frontloading then provides fertile ground to dig deeper into dimensions of SEL that lie below the surface in ways that will continue to ebb and flow throughout more nuanced representations in *Amina's Voice*. Here, the main character experiences similar questions and challenges to

her identities, through which her internal reflections and actions are impacted by the characters surrounding her. Understanding the larger social contexts of identity adds far greater complexity to examining social-emotional elements in *Amina's Voice* as compared to *The Name Jar*, but this distinction is what offers the layered discussions that might take place by pairing books and reading experiences with SEL text sets.

### Guiding Thinking & Discussion

As potential goals are identified, a follow-up consideration for planning an interactive read aloud is whether the SEL goal should take a primary or secondary focus in relation to literacy goal(s). With a primary SEL focus, the reading experience would be designed around discussing the *content*, *ideas*, and *themes* from the text whereas literacy skills would be used to foster that discussion (i.e., describing character traits or character analysis). Key to this approach would be the role of making text-to-self and text-to-world connections as children reflect on their own experiences in relation to the central ideas. Alternatively, as a secondary goal, the reading experience might focus on modeling specific literacy strategies or skills through which engagement with the SEL focus would emerge (i.e., modeling how to identify character traits, which in the selected story are strategically connected to the SEL focus). These perspectives are both flexible and complementary, suggesting that teachers need not find time for a separate

set of SEL reading experiences but might reconsider the ways in which current texts may be used to support SEL goals in more and less explicit ways.

Importantly, an explicit focus may be necessary to introduce a topic or SEL goal initially, especially in regard to grade level, whereas continued readings may offer more implicit elaborations or connections to those goals. Due to their developmental stage, children under the age of seven will likely benefit from a more explicit approach to SEL goals. For example, within a preschool read aloud, instead of prompting a four-year-old child to decipher the feelings of a character in a book, the teacher might begin by asking the child, “How would that make you feel?” This allows discussion to begin with the child’s point of view which the teacher can then connect to expressing how the character may be feeling. Better yet, we can read books that describe in text what it *feels* like to be sad using as many of our senses as possible through the characters’ experiences. For example, the identification of strong feelings in a book, such as *When I Feel Angry* by Dr. Sharie Coombes, gives children examples of how their bodies may change and feel when they are experiencing the emotion of anger. This type of book is designed to be short in length and direct in language which can be helpful with younger children. There is also benefit in role playing out the stories after they are read to reinforce the messages, practice self-care strategies, or clarify questions. Through the use of explicit social emotional read alouds, children may be able to replicate the strategies given in a book to solve problems or even mend relationships.

For primary and elementary-aged readers, these emotion-focused books often offer solutions on how to calm a body down and can be used by teachers to help children practice these strategies, reinforcing the primary SEL focus. Examples for elementary readers include *Anxious Ninja*, *Be Kind*, or *When Worry Takes Hold*. These texts often prioritize a character’s emotional state, describe feelings using emotion vocabulary, and even offer actionable strategies for children to navigate similar emotions on their own. One example is from *When Worry Takes Hold* by Liz Haske. The ending

page includes a four-step illustration depicting “How to Breathe Like Maya,” the main character from the book. Step one advises readers: “Put your hands on your belly and hold your back straight. Take a deep breath in through your nose.” The steps continue to guide the reader to replace worry with courage just as the main character learns throughout the story. As students engage with these texts during a read aloud, they build explicit knowledge and skills for managing SEL goals while simultaneously developing vocabulary or comprehension goals that reinforce the focus of the text.

Alternatively, as a secondary goal, SEL can also be more subtly integrated into a read aloud. In this approach, SEL goals are unlikely to be directly named in the title of the book or even within the questioning prompts. Rather, SEL goals are more likely to appear within students’ application of textual evidence as justifications for “why” or “how” the plot unfolded. Emotional states, character decisions, and the impact of character choices can all be examined through careful questioning to foster SEL. While this focus may seem less overt, it is hard to imagine any textual conflict that does not somehow address a core element of SEL. The key is to make those connections explicit within discussion so that students attend to those elements of the text and can comprehend their impact on character and plot development.

Importantly, the teacher’s intentional use of questioning during and after the read aloud can draw attention to the SEL elements even as students discuss the plot elements more broadly. As an example for first graders, consider the book *Jabari Jumps* by Gaia Cornwall. This text explores a young boy’s experience of overcoming his fear of jumping off a diving board. Even though Jabari, the main character, never explicitly names the feeling of fear or anxiety, readers should be able to infer that he feels nervous. On one page he lets a line of children move in front of him to climb the ladder to the diving board; on another page, when he has finally made his way to the diving board ladder, he climbs back down to make sure he first completes his stretches. These delay tactics help to illustrate how behaviors are driven by emotions— that Jabari is avoiding climbing

the diving board because it makes him feel nervous or scared. Helping readers to connect character emotions to plot development reinforces both comprehension *and* SEL goals. Furthermore, teachers can use intentional discussion prompts to guide children to make those inferences, define the emotions in relation to behaviors, and even connect them to their own life experiences. This last layer allows students to make connections that seamlessly foster self-awareness and social awareness as they recognize the relationships between their own feelings and those of others.

As teachers reflect on which approach best suits their needs, they can also pre-plan stopping points to pause and discuss during reading, followed by post-discussion prompts after reading. Additional considerations for SEL stopping points include:

- Identify emotion vocabulary terms to define/discuss that are central to the SEL focus and represented within the text.
- Identify ideas that may be challenging for students to understand or to talk about. How can you be attentive to student differences and needs to foster inclusion within this discussion?
- Identify both literal and inferential opportunities for readers to examine the impact of the SEL focus on characters' thoughts, feelings, and actions.

### **Facilitating the Experience**

By drawing on multiple student reactions to and interpretations of text, the interactive read aloud serves as a form of classroom discussion embedded within the flow of the reading activity as conversations emerge before, during, and after reading the text. Therefore, participation norms play an important role in facilitating interactive read alouds—which provide one of the first opportunities to leverage SEL within the use of this practice. In order to foster participation, research reinforces that teachers must clearly explain and model norms and routines for engaging in classroom discussions (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015; Yoder, 2013). Doing so clearly reinforces dimensions of SEL including self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2022a). Tasks as

simple as turn-taking offer a prime example of learning to maintain self-control and respecting the rights and actions of others. Additional examples of SEL skills embedded within classroom expectations include following directions, maintaining appropriate distance from others during reading time, and managing emotions during conflict.

Developing classroom norms for collaboration and cooperation can be achieved in many ways such as reinforcement during learning lessons, role-playing, and allowing students to introduce the concepts to each other using creative methods such as storytelling or creating videos of expected behaviors (Thousand et al., 1994). One example of a classroom strategy would be the use of a “peace table” that children retreat to during times of conflict with their peers. These areas can be designated by a semi-private space equipped with simple guidelines for problem-solving or strategy reminders, tools to equip with turn-taking (the child that holds the special object is the only one that speaks, then passes that object to initiate turn-taking), and can include picture prompts or text that may help a child to describe their emotions.

### **Reflecting on the Experience**

Following interactive read alouds, teachers might reflect on how the students' conversations and wonderings connect to other experiences throughout the learning environment. In particular, this is a powerful opportunity to integrate expressive dimensions of literacy processes such as writing and visually representing. Additionally, educators should consider how these conversations might extend beyond the classroom walls to prioritize the role of family in respectful, reciprocal relationships (Wortham & Hardin, 2020). When educators are proactive in reaching families and providing them with feedback from a strengths-based approach, we are likely to see more engagement. Families may not have had life experiences that have promoted discussing emotions and sharing feelings in a safe space. Educators can assist families in promoting this in the home environment in many ways, including sharing discussion points from classroom read alouds, giving books lists promoting prosocial behaviors, and sending

information on social emotional skill-building at home (Center for Study of Social Policy, 2022). When we focus on ways to support our families, we inevitably increase resilience and other social emotional skills as partners with families.

### Conclusion

The increasing awareness of the need to integrate SEL skills within academic settings will likely continue as we emerge from the pandemic era. While a holistic approach to SEL is necessary to achieve sustainable impact, these recommendations provide insight into the ways in which SEL *can* be embedded within core literacy practices in meaningful ways. And while only a small stepping stone, it may be one of the first and easiest to implement as educators continue to respond to and grow within the ever-changing role of our work.

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# Building a Beloved Community of Literacy in Professional Spaces

by Elizabeth Petroelje Stolle and Jennifer L. Vanderground

## Beloved Community

The *Beloved Community*, first coined by philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce, was popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as he envisioned a world where everyone would strive to benefit the common good, thus sharing the “wealth of the earth.” A beloved community cares for people and is absent of poverty, hunger, hate, and prejudice. A beloved community is a safe and humanizing space. Embracing this concept as we consider the common good of schools, teachers, and students, we see connections between a beloved community and our human need for safe communities and space to grow into the premier versions of ourselves. We desire this in our personal lives, as well as in our profession as educators. In fact, research affirms that activity in groups (i.e., churches, clubs, hobby groups) is directly linked to our well-being (e.g., Li, 2007; Huxhold et al., 2013), specifically the personal ties that group activity generates (e.g., Lim & Putnam, 2010).

The COVID-19 pandemic changed our understanding of the world as we previously knew it, impacting social relationships and creating feelings of isolation and loneliness (Smith & Lim, 2020). Teachers are not immune to these impacts, and stress levels have exacerbated symptoms of anxiety, depression, and feelings of being overwhelmed (Besser et al., 2022; Ng’Eno, 2007). Long-term consequences can lead to exhaustion and less confidence/self-efficacy around teachers doing their job adequately (Burić & Kim, 2020). In the midst of these emotions and realities, we offer windows into ways we can support, empower, and grow literacy teachers as learners, thinkers, and professionals. That is, we, two literacy teacher educators, share our story



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of synthesizing research-based learnings, leaning into the voices of teachers, and hypothesizing best practices as we created a *beloved community* for both ourselves and the teachers with whom we work. In this, we drew upon the research of Seashore et al. (2003) around teacher professional development:

We signify our interest not only in discrete acts of teacher sharing, but in the establishment of a school-wide culture that makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing, and focused on critically examining practice to improve student outcomes. ... The hypothesis is that what teachers do together outside of the classroom can be as important as what they do inside in affecting school restructuring, teachers’ professional development, and student learning. (p. 3)

We have experienced the power and intimacy of a beloved community within a professional space that has grown us as individuals and educators. Thus, we offer our experiences in hopes of equipping other educators to build capacity for this type of cultural establishment the beloved community necessitates. We have found a beloved community through engagement in two different professional development models:

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and Learning Labs (LLs). Both models offer space within the literacy profession, including all levels and roles of educators, to embark on a meaningful learning experience that opens space for the creation of a beloved community that seeks to share the “wealth of the earth.” However, for a beloved community to form, a specific mindset must be cultivated.

### **Cultivating a Mindset**

Bringing people together can offer various dynamics, personalities, and experiences. Creating a beloved community takes intentionality and knowledge—it takes a growth mindset. Mindset theory suggests that how people view themselves impacts their lived experiences. Additionally, the theory describes core assumptions about the malleability of personal qualities, such as intelligence or personality (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). To unpack these concepts around mindset, we offer two scenarios in which individuals have come together to plan an event. In the first scenario, someone walks into the room already knowing what is going to happen and how it is going to happen; the details are determined. This individual’s posture and demeanor might exude confidence or represent an inflated ego. They may ignore feedback or feel threatened by other ideas. Ultimately, based on their mindset, little discussion and collaboration are likely to take place. In the second scenario, someone walks into the room with curiosity and uncertainty as to how the event might be planned and organized. That is, they do not know what is going to happen and how it is going to happen; the details have yet to be determined. This individual’s posture and demeanor are relaxed and inquisitive. They welcome feedback, alternate ideas, and new approaches. Ultimately, based on their mindset, rich discussion and collaboration can potentially take place.

#### ***Knowing/Fixed Mindset***

The first scenario exemplifies a fixed mindset, or a belief that intelligence, talent, and other qualities are innate and unchangeable (Dweck, 2006). Individuals with a fixed mindset often demonstrate a defensive attachment to one perspective. Adam Grant, professor and author of the text *Think Again* (2021), explains that often we

find it more comfortable and reassuring to hold on to what we already believe and know to be true, rather than confronting uncertainty or being open to doubt. However, being open to others’ perspectives does not mean we change each time we hear one different than our own. Rather, we have room to listen and permission to stop holding our practices tightly, as if they are part of our identity.

Additionally, individuals with a fixed mindset often see fewer ideas, choices, and paths to accomplish goals. While many of us feel constrained by standards, mandated assessments and district requirements, for good reason, we still need to approach situations with the same flexible mindset. In other words, often we cannot change our circumstances; however, we can moderate our mindset and approach. In this, Grant (2021) explores the difficulty in doing this, as often individuals not only find it difficult to reconsider alternate beliefs or ideas, but they have an initial resistance to even considering the possibility of rethinking their established viewpoints. However, if we withhold change, or a willingness to rethink, in ourselves and others, intentionally or unintentionally, by holding firm to our knowing mindset, we do not create an environment for growth.

#### ***Unknowing/Growth Mindset***

The second scenario exemplifies a growth mindset, or a belief that people can develop their abilities and intelligence through hard work and dedication (Dweck, 2006). A person with this mindset might be described as someone who listens and is collaborative. There is no shame in not knowing or making adjustments. In fact, it is viewed as growth when we enter situations without the answer and seek a depth of understanding. And when we go in without knowing, it allows others to do the same.

Growth mindset thinking increases avenues for choice, change and mental flexibility. Without the feelings of anxiousness and defensiveness, we are mentally released to explore options. In the beginning, this will take a conscious decision (i.e., intentionality). However, in time, a growth mindset can develop and grow within any of us, as we embrace rethinking ideas and multiple viewpoints.

In this, we open space to receive further knowledge, experiences and ideas that build on our previous knowledge, experiences, and ideas. Our schemas broaden and deepen as we continuously improve and refine.

### ***Growth Mindset Continuum***

In life, and specifically in the world of schools and classrooms, our mindset is usually not all one or all another; individuals don't neatly categorize into fixed or growth. Rather, most people describe their capacity to develop these abilities/mindsets as falling somewhere along a continuum (Anderson, 2019). However, cultivating mindsets, or shifting the dynamics of the continuum, isn't easy.

For us, as literacy teacher educators, we note how our own mindsets continually shift based on contributing factors, such as stress, personal interests, and environmental influences. When we personally reflect on our own state/mindset, noting points where we have fallen into a fixed pattern of thinking, we identify ways we can foster an adjustment. That is, increases in growth mindset have been significantly associated with self-regulation strategies (Zhang & Zhang, 2021). To progress closer towards a growth mindset, individuals can incorporate strategies such as goal setting, perseverance techniques, and reflection on learning from mistakes. These might be individually developed or could be incorporated into a collaborative learning space, as discussed later.

In addition, building a motivated, engaged culture can support a willingness to make adjustments in our mindset, moving along the continuum. In schools, specifically, when teachers experience strong self-efficacy and an increased sense of responsibility, they can more readily take up a growth mindset, which can contribute to lower burnout rates and higher job satisfaction (Zheng et al., 2023). Offering teachers agency over aspects of their professional development can project the perception that teachers are valued and trusted. From this space, teachers' work can take on personal investment, thus encouraging movement on the mindset continuum and development of beloved communities.

### **Choosing a Professional Development Frame**

As literacy teacher educators, we have built a beloved community through two professional development frames: Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and Learning Labs (LLs). We have found these models embrace the mantra of benefitting the common good, specifically when participants enter with an unknowing/growth mindset. Below we share how these two frames offered space for us, and others, to engage in meaningful and relevant learning.

#### ***Professional Learning Communities as Beloved Communities***

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have become almost ubiquitous in schools as groups of teachers, often organized around grade-level teams, meet monthly to work through curriculum needs, discuss assessment data, and/or collaborate on best practices with the goal of improving student learning. DuFour et al. (2016) define a PLC as a group of educators committed to working collaboratively in collective inquiry and action research to improve student learning outcomes. According to Wan (2020), "the emergence of PLCs in the educational context has widely been recognized as a significant development toward improving the quality of learning and teaching through the promotion of shared values and expectations among teachers to support student learning" (p. 695). This support is specifically found because PLCs focus not only on individual teachers' professional learning, but also on professional learning within a community context, thus actualizing the notion of collective learning (Louis et al., 1996; Talbert et al., 1993). However, for PLCs to be effective, teachers must feel safe, with established respect and trust (Prenger et al., 2021). Teachers also need a shared vision (De Neve & Devos, 2017).

As literacy faculty at a large university, we decided to create our own PLC to grow ourselves as literacy teacher educators. Specifically, we focused on ways we could cultivate culturally and historically responsive literacy practices in both our practice and the practice of the teachers within our program. To do this, we committed to meeting together as

a beloved community; we agreed to: come to each meeting with an unknowing mindset, deepen trust and vulnerability, and abide by our shared group norms (see Figure 1). The articulated commitments, structures, and protocols offered a framework for our beloved community to grow. With that, the two norms we found most supportive included presuming positive intentions of each group member and allowing everyone an opportunity to contribute, as they invited us to move into more vulnerable spaces without fear.

During our PLC meetings, we collaborated around a predetermined line of inquiry centered on a shared text as a form of professional growth—cultivating culturally and historically responsive literacy practices. In preparation for each meeting, as group members, we spent time pre-reading content that had been selected based on the topic. While reading, we noted ideas that resonated, caused us to pause, brought to mind questions, and/or prompted us to engage in further dialogue. Thus, each participant came to the small group discussions with growth mindsets, ready to learn and grow with others.

Our experiences within the PLC formed us into a beloved community; that is, we experienced our PLC as a safe and humanizing space. Not only did we develop a deep connection surrounding our line of inquiry, growing our practice as literacy teacher educators, but we also grew and connected personally. As we regularly

met, we established trust, listening to each other both on a professional level as well as a personal level. Sadly, one of our meetings took place the morning after the school shooting on the campus of Michigan State University. We chose to still come together, with most of our conversation centered around our emotions and plans to support students and ourselves. These experiences and conversations bonded us as a beloved community, while also helping us to think differently about our instruction, practice, and interactions with students. By the end of our time together, our level of connection and vulnerability was deeper than any of us had anticipated. In this way, we lived out what Seashore et al. (2003) noted, that what we do together outside of the classroom can have a meaningful impact on what we do inside the classroom. Thus, our PLC took on the characteristics of a beloved community where individuals with diverse backgrounds came together in a relationship of love, mutual respect, care, and intentional growth.

***Building Your Own PLC***

We created a beloved community with our colleagues through PLC’s at our institution. However, as noted previously, PLCs can be used across and/or within all grade levels. To use PLCs as a form of professional development to support and extend student learning, and as a mechanism to create beloved communities, we suggest the following steps: (1) Determine the purpose of your PLC, (2) Recruit individuals into the group, (3) Acquire materials and set a schedule, and (4) Establish protocols for meaningful dialogue.

**Figure 1**  
*Shared Group Norms*

<b>Norms for Productive, Civil Discourse</b>
1. Assume positive intention
2. Listen to hear
3. Use ‘I’ statements/speak from your own experience
4. Move up/down
5. Grow the conversation
6. Commit to the group and the purpose

**Determine Purpose.** PLCs can center around a variety of topics, but it is important to determine the group's purpose first. In our example, we collectively decided our purpose as we chose to read a shared text together. However, some PLCs are more top-down driven as administrators dictate lines of inquiry, micro-manage, and assign groups/times. Often, in K-12 schools, teachers are given the focus, such as increasing student comprehension of non-fiction text passages. Although choice and autonomy are preferred, as we know personal investment can impact teachers' mindset, a beloved community can still be established with a directed purpose, especially with the implementation of self-regulating strategies (Zhang & Zhang, 2021).

**Recruit Participants.** Drawing individuals into a group can be challenging, as often we feel stretched by all of our responsibilities. However, participating can be life-giving and cup-filling. If engagement is a requirement, there might be some resistance, thus requiring

intentionality to ensure the time spent together embodies the characteristics of the beloved community. This development of a beloved community may take time for groups that are mandated to meet, specifically if there are individuals who need to cultivate and develop a growth mindset. However, making sure conversations benefit participants' interests and offer specific support toward meeting group goals through the use of self-regulating strategies can help participants move beyond the identified barriers and/or frustrations (Zhang & Zhang, 2021). Offering participation through an invitation, whether written or face-to-face, can be the first step in drawing people to the group. For our literacy faculty, we used email to invite faculty into the PLC (see Figure 2). We also offer another invitation (see Figure 3) used to invite teachers into a PLC around building respectful relationships with students. Both invitations help to set purpose, as well as introduce group norms.

**Figure 2**

*PLC Invitation to Literacy Faculty*

I am writing to invite you all into a PLC titled *Unpacking Learning Around Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*. In this PLC, we will read the text *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* by Gholdy Muhammad. In reading, we will explore the question: As literacy educators, how might we embrace and cultivate culturally & historically responsive literacy practices in our field? My hope is that our conversations will allow us to meet together as a beloved community, with an unknowing mindset, while deepening trust & vulnerability.

Thus, I invite you to join the conversation! We will meet the following dates/times this winter in the library. While reading, please note ideas that resonate with you, cause you to pause/ponder, bring to mind questions, prompt you to want to engage in further dialogue, etc.

Introduction & Chapter 1 Tuesday, January 17, 3:45-4:45 pm

Chapters 2 & 3 Tuesday, January 31, 3:45-4:45 pm

Chapters 4 Tuesday, February 14, 3:45-4:45 pm

Chapters 5 & 6 Tuesday, February 28, 3:45-4:45 pm

Chapter 7 Tuesday, March 14, 3:45-4:45 pm

Chapter 8 Tuesday, March 28, 3:45-4:45 pm

**Figure 3**

*PLC Invitation to Classroom Teachers*

As a district, one of our key focuses is building respectful relationships with our students. Thus, we will begin a Building Respectful Relationships PLC in which we will read and discuss the text *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World* by Django Paris & H. Samy Alim. In addition, we will work through the learning module centered on this high-leverage teaching practice in [The TeachingWorks Online Library](#).

In this PLC, we hope to gain a collective understanding as well as attributes we want to hold in the area of relationship building. Our discussions will lead to shared knowledge as well as personalize ways we can apply these concepts into our own teaching.

If you have not yet created an account on the [TeachingWorks Resource Library](#), please do so before Tuesday's meeting. Plan to read Chapter 1 of *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*. We will explore the site and look at activity options available for Building Respectful Relationships as we center our discussion around our understanding of the included practices. This should synthesize well with our understandings derived from Chapter 1, and how we might begin implementing the practice.

I am looking forward to our time collaborating together across the district in the coming weeks. We will meet every other Tuesday via Zoom; our first meeting is on Tuesday, January 17, 3:45-4:45 pm. When reading in preparation, note ideas that resonate with you, cause you to pause/ponder, bring to mind questions, prompt you to want to engage in further dialogue, etc. At the end of our first meeting, we will determine our pre-reading to complete before the next meeting in two weeks.

Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions or need for clarification.

**Acquire Materials and Set Schedule.** For our PLC, we valued the power of real-time, face-to-face dialogue, as we felt that being together physically might help us act and feel more like a beloved community. Thus, we determined our schedule based on all participants' availability and met in person on campus every other week for one hour. Sharing the reading and meeting schedule upfront was important, specifically as it related to our shared norm around commitment to the group and the purpose of the PLC. However, PLCs can meet virtually as well (see Figure 3).

Depending on geography and availability, virtual meetings can make real-time dialogue a reality. Often, this is the area groups can have the most agency around. If participation and the line of inquiry were predetermined, meeting modes and times can offer opportunities to make autonomous choices, including the addition of personal material choices. Exploring, leading, and embedding personal interests in the PLC can evoke increased engagement, motivation, and a growth mindset, which all can lead to the creation of a beloved community.

**Establish Norms.** At our first meeting, we offered a list of group norms we could use while engaged in productive, civil discourse. In this offering, participants were asked to describe, clarify, revise, and question these norms in hopes of establishing a shared collection of group norms for this particular PLC. Our PLC agreed upon our Group Norms (see Figure 1), which helped us move quickly into deep conversations centered around the text and our experiences as literacy teacher educators, truly experiencing the beloved community where we felt safe, valued, and humanized.

As noted previously, our mindsets can shift and move along the continuum. With that, part of the time spent establishing the norms could include opportunities for participants to reflect on their starting mindsets and their ability to employ self-regulation strategies. Thus, while discussing the norms, drawing participants into the purposes and implementation of the norms can create cohesion and buy-in within the group (Zhang & Zhang, 2021). Suggested ways to engage in this dialogue include the following questions: What goals does our group have? How can we support each other in accomplishing these? What can we do when we encounter barriers to our goals to allow us to persevere? How can we reflect on our mistakes to promote learning? In addressing these questions, the group can begin to set the stage for a beloved community to form.

### ***Learning Labs as a Beloved Community***

While we, as faculty, were able to experience a beloved community together through our PLC, we longed for the teachers with whom we work to experience a beloved community both with us and with each other. Thus, within our graduate program, we have come to see our use of Learning Labs (LLs) as a frame for building a beloved community among teachers. According to Sweeney (2011), learning labs were first introduced in the early 1990s and designed to offer teachers opportunities to observe and reflect on effective instruction. That is, LLs are guided classroom visits led by classroom teachers, acting as hosts, and facilitated by instructional coaches. In this, LLs: (1) emphasize teacher observations and conversations around student learning; (2) move educators toward shared understandings of best practice; and (3) prompt teachers to identify, articulate and address specific student learning needs. LLs can offer safe spaces for teachers to engage in observations and rich conversations around student learning, acting as an effective tool for professional development and creating a culture of collaborative learning (Hamilton et al., 2019). Through participation in LLs, teachers reflect on their own instruction, which often leads to the implementation of changes in their instructional practices, while also altering beliefs about their own and students' roles, responsibilities, and capabilities (Brancard & Quinnwilliams, 2012).

**Figure 4**

*Key Roles in LLs* (Hamilton et al., 2019, p. 46)

<b>Who Participates in an LL?</b>
<p><b>3 Key Roles:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Facilitator:</b> Typically, an instructional coach, but could be a classroom teacher, who introduces group norms, keeps discussion on task, and provides summary of conversation.</li><li>• <b>Host:</b> Classroom teachers seeking to grow their practice and student learning. They provide a lesson plan, invite peers into their teaching space, and share observations, including what they noticed and what they would like to focus on.</li><li>• <b>Peers:</b> Educators seeking to grow through observation, discussion, and reflection. They connect around the host's specific goals/questions and share noticings, questions, and observations to prompt the host's thinking, reflection, and assessment (ideally, 4-7 total).</li></ul>



Although we have been using LLs for over 10 years with teachers enrolled in our graduate literacy program, the past few years have taught us that learning labs can counter the feelings of isolation and aloneness teachers often experience (Sweeney, 2011). Thus, additionally, we see LLs as an avenue for establishing a beloved community where teachers feel safe, valued, and empowered. LLs are conversations between educational professionals that are collaborative and focused on evidence of student learning. These are not “fix-it,” “strategy sharing,” or “master teaching” sessions, but rather spaces to embrace a growth mindset, allowing educators to focus and reflect on specific areas of instruction and student learning. Participants include a host, peers, and facilitator (see Figure 4).

When engaging in LLs with practicing teachers, we start with the facilitator reviewing the shared group norms (see Figure 5), which reminds us to come to the experience with a growth mindset, open to new ideas and learning. Then, following a protocol that guides and supports our conversations centered on student learning (see Figure 6), the host teacher shares instructional practices through both a written lesson plan and a real-time or video-recorded observation. The host also sets the focus for the LL, highlighting specific areas or moments in the instruction they would like to explore further. Then, discussion ensues as peers interact with the host and each other by asking questions, offering noticings, and encouraging reflection. We specifically draw on the work of Toll (2006) to frame questions

**Figure 5**  
*LL Norms for Collaboration*

<b>Norms for Collaboration?</b>
<b>Promote a spirit of inquiry and curiosity.</b> <i>Seek first to understand before advocating ideas.</i>
<b>Pause.</b> <i>Pause before responding and/or asking a question to allow for think time.</i>
<b>Paraphrase.</b> <i>Restate ideas to help all members hear and understand what is being presented.</i>
<b>Probe for specificity.</b> <i>Ask questions to increase clarity and self-reflection.</i>
<b>Pay attention to self &amp; others.</b> <i>Watch body language and check perceptions.</i>
<b>Presume positive intentions.</b> <i>Choose to believe that the host, their students, and your peers are doing the best they can within the circumstances they have been given.</i>

**Figure 6**  
*LL Protocol*

<b>What Happens in a LL? (35-45 minutes)</b>
<b>FACILITATOR</b> - Review Norms (1-2 minutes)
<b>HOST</b> – Initial briefing (5 minutes)
<b>PEERS</b> – Pre-Conversation Noticings (3-4 minutes)
<b>HOST</b> – Name Goals for LL (1-2 minutes)
<b>PEERS &amp; HOST</b> – Discussion (15-20 minutes)
<b>FACILITATOR</b> – Summary (2-3 minutes)
<b>HOST</b> – Ideas for Moving Forward (3-4 minutes)
<b>PEERS</b> – Post-Conversation Noticings/Takeaways (3-4 minutes)

that are learner-oriented, focused on evidence, and judgment-free, such as “Could you tell me more?” or “I noticed . . . Can you share your thoughts behind that decision?” After discussion, the facilitator summarizes key conversation points and asks the host to share next steps to support student learning. The LL concludes with each peer sharing one to two learning takeaways.

Teachers report that LLs encourage implementation of current best practices of instruction while also enhancing collegiality (Patterson & Tolnay, 2015). With that, LLs are viewed as valuable because of the opportunities teachers have to engage in thoughtful planning and reflection, which can be both motivating and empowering. In our experience, engaging in this work offered teachers the opportunity to participate in a beloved community. One 1st grade teacher shared,

The probing questions highlighted the knowledge, skills, and experiences I already brought to the lesson, helping me clarify my thinking or remember successful strategies used in past lessons. This empowered me to realize that I was already doing great things in my classroom and that I have the tools to problem-solve issues that will arise during instruction. The learning labs were so affirming, allowing me to feel supported and empowered within a community of professionals.

A 4th grade teacher explained,

Participating in the learning labs has been such a powerful learning experience for me and has strengthened my confidence to try new writing strategies during small group instruction. Learning labs encouraged me to think about other problems of practice that I want to explore, research, and try in my classroom. Participating enabled me to feel more comfortable recording myself teaching and helped me to be more vulnerable and allow others into my learning environment. I learned so much about myself through this process, as I was learning in a safe and inspiring space.

These teachers’ testimonies demonstrate the power of the beloved community established and rooted in the professional development model of LLs. When teachers come together with a growth mindset, focused on student learning and free of judgment, growth,

connection, and empowerment spring forth both personally and professionally.

### ***Building Your Own LLs***

We created a beloved community with and for practicing teachers through the use of LLs embedded in a graduate literacy instruction practicum. However, LLs can be used as a form of professional development to support and extend student learning, and as a mechanism to create beloved communities, across and/or within all grade levels. To do that, we suggest the following steps: (1) Find a facilitator who is equipped to guide the learning labs, (2) Recruit individuals into the endeavor, (3) Acquire materials and set a schedule, and (4) Agree to group norms and protocols.

**Find a Facilitator.** A facilitator is a person that makes an action or process flow with ease. Thus, within LLs, facilitators focus on adult learning (i.e., host, peers) and how it impacts student learning (Sweeney, 2007). To do this work, facilitators must take the stance that they are not experts, but rather co-learners that understand the roles of an effective facilitator (e.g., coordinator, documenter, meeting designer, facilitator) and the parameters/protocols of the LLs. LL facilitators should be prepared to provide resources, teach and guide the process, and support LL hosts and peers.

**Recruit Participants.** Research indicates LLs positively impact teacher beliefs and instructional practices (Brancard & Quinnwilliams, 2012) while also facilitating the transfer of best practices from theory to practice and meeting both individual teacher and school-wide needs (Patterson & Tolnay, 2015). Along with research, teacher testimonies are often a powerful way to draw teachers into the work of LLs. In our work over the years, teachers have expressed feelings of anxiety and insecurity when thinking about others observing their teaching. However, year after year, teachers share that progressing past these feelings and engaging in the work of LLs benefited them and moved them to a space of growth. For example, one 5th grade teacher shared,

Our district recently sent out an email about participating and/or hosting LLs, and I agreed to participate. In the past, this was definitely something

I shied away from. However, after taking this course, I learned so much through this experience; it was impactful on my instruction and student learning.

We suggest sharing teachers' stories when asking teachers to participate in an LL endeavor.

**Acquire Materials and Set Schedule.** LLs can be conducted face-to-face or completely online using video-recorded lessons, digital documents, and synchronous online meetings. Regardless of the mode, the constructed schedule must offer participants opportunities to adequately prepare for LL sessions (i.e., preview materials and video-recorded observations), fully engage in the LL protocol (see Figure 6), and reflect thoughtfully on the learning.

**Establish Norms and Protocols.** At the first meeting, the facilitator should share the group norms that will be used within the LL. As a group, participants should describe, clarify, and agree upon these norms (see Figure 5). Additionally, the facilitator should explain the LL protocol (see Figure 6) to establish a predictable framework that guides the experience and interactions. Both the norms and the protocols help to alleviate some of the anxiety teachers will feel and ultimately assist in cultivating growth mindsets and establishing a beloved community. One 10th grade teacher shared, "The LLs supported my sense of efficacy around instruction. The protocol ensured a positive experience when I was the host teacher because my peers focused on naming components of the lesson and probing my thinking. I never was put in a position where I felt evaluated or critiqued."

## Conclusions

The importance of teachers actively engaging in professional development experiences that foster the creation of a beloved community is more pertinent now than ever before. The educational landscape continues to evolve, with diverse classrooms reflecting a rich tapestry of cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives. However, within those rich and beautiful spaces, teachers are experiencing heightened feelings of isolation, loneliness, and anxiety. As this paper highlights, professional

development opportunities such as PLCs and LLs can encourage the development of beloved communities when individuals engage in these experiences with unknowing/growth mindsets. Professional development opportunities like these not only benefit students through improved instruction but also empower educators to grow professionally and personally together. The transformative potential of these experiences extends beyond the classroom, shaping our society by fostering understanding, respect, and unity among individuals, concepts that underpin a *beloved community*.

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# Literacy Across the Disciplines: A Way to Re-Engage Secondary Students

by Jenelle Williams

The kids are not “all right,” especially in middle- and high-school classes. Many people blame the COVID-19 pandemic for this reality, yet it is entirely possible that the pandemic simply brought to light something that had been true for quite a while. Secondary students, including those who can be considered high achieving, find their classes to be uninteresting and disconnected from their daily lives, as evidenced in Michigan Profile for Healthy Youth (MiPHY) results. Educators who shadow high school students find their days to be full of *doing*—completing assignments, taking notes, and listening to lectures. This is not the kind of *doing* that students (or adults) find inherently motivating. Instead, most students want to be able to see how their learning is meaningful and connected to the broader world.

News stories and anecdotal evidence also demonstrate the results of secondary students feeling disconnected from school—decreased attendance, increased behavior issues, and lack of engagement in learning. Schools have responded by ramping up mental health support and purchasing resources to build students’ Social and Emotional Health. What more can be done?

## Disciplinary Literacy as One Solution (But First, a Word of Caution)

Disciplinary literacy, a framework for instruction and assessment primarily intended for middle- and high-school settings, shows considerable promise in addressing the crisis of student engagement as it centers students’ interests and identities through a focus on meaningful issues and the literacies that will allow students to demonstrate agency on such issues. A foundational element of disciplinary literacy is problem-based learning, an instructional approach with a wide research base. Problem-based approaches are advantageous not only for student engagement, but also for long-term retention of knowledge (Mergendoller



Jenelle Williams

et al., 2006). However, the word “literacy” comes with decades of educational baggage, so it is important to identify potential mishaps that could hinder effective implementation. In this article, we will explore both mishaps to avoid while taking up disciplinary literacy approaches and evidence-based practices that educators can adopt in order to increase student engagement and proficiency.

### ***Mishap #1: Claiming that All Teachers Are “Teachers of Reading”***

Efforts to emphasize literacy in all disciplines, especially at the secondary level, are not new. It has been common over the years for educators to be told that “all teachers are teachers of reading.” While this may be true on the surface, digging a bit deeper shows the problematic nature of this statement. First, secondary teacher preparation programs offer far more content-focused courses than disciplinary literacy courses. Even for teachers seeking secondary English certification, coursework in the teaching of reading or writing are limited. One does not magically become a teacher of reading (or writing) without adequate instruction and practice in this area. So, if our newly minted educators are not receiving necessary support during their preparation programs, when will this learning occur? Certainly not during the limited professional

learning dates provided as part of a teacher contract. Instead, position all educators as teachers of disciplinary reading.

Teachers in all academic disciplines at the secondary level can be considered disciplinary experts, with extensive expertise navigating the multiple texts found within their content. Science educators can maneuver scientific journals, research results, and data tables with ease. Similarly, history educators have well-developed skills in considering the differences between primary and secondary accounts of an event. The specialized reading skills across academic disciplines vary—all are necessary for students to experience, and none by themselves are sufficient. By positioning secondary educators as experts in *disciplinary* reading practices, leaders can bring necessary urgency to the conversation.

### ***Mishap #2: Overemphasizing Shared Strategies***

Another common mishap with emphasizing literacy in all disciplines is overemphasizing shared strategies and underemphasizing the shift toward student-centered learning. School leaders often lean toward quick wins; they learn about reading and writing strategies and encourage educators to use them regularly. They purchase programs and professional learning that package reading and writing strategies as if they are something new. As an example, many districts purchased AVID packages during the pandemic with ESSER funds. The professional learning and resources shared by AVID are research-based...but they are not new. For example, Socratic Seminars are often referred to in educational settings as an “AVID strategy,” when in fact, we know that the Socratic method was developed by the Greek philosopher Socrates. Aside from concerns about original authorship of particular strategies, we must also consider how we situate the strategies within meaningful purposes for using those strategies. Without deeper learning about the purpose of selecting strategies, teachers may view disciplinary literacy as simply assigning more reading and writing within instruction—what appears to be random acts of reading and writing. When this occurs, we see students using Cornell notes in multiple classes without a specific disciplinary purpose.

If secondary educators are simply adding in a reading strategy that is disconnected from the *specialized* ways of reading in a particular discipline, we might argue that those educators are engaging in content-area literacy, which, according to Timothy Shanahan, is “necessary but not sufficient” (2012). Instead, the primary focus should be on the specific ways that each discipline engages in reading.

Moving from content-area to disciplinary literacy approaches also requires that we reframe what is considered to be text. If text is defined as anything with encoded information that can be consumed by an individual, then text is indeed present in every secondary classroom. In Visual Arts courses, text may include a painting or a sculpture. In Physical Education courses, text might include diagrams of a football play or a recording of a particular athletic skill. Math courses are rich with texts such as charts, graphs, and mathematical formulas. In Science, student-created models of phenomena are powerful texts. Across all disciplines, a wide array of multi-modal texts can not only play an important role in instruction but can also better mirror the types of texts students spend most of their time reading. Instead, situate disciplinary texts within authentic, meaningful reasons to read.

Other than being assigned to do so, what might be some authentic, meaningful reasons for students to engage in disciplinary text? The *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom* (MAISA GELN DLTF, 2023) provide a helpful place to begin. In Essential Practice 1, the teacher is called to “develop and implement interactive problem-based units of instruction that frame authentic problems to help establish purpose for students to read, write, and communicate beyond being assigned or expected to do so (e.g., for their enjoyment/interest, to ask and answer abstract and authentic questions about their community and individual lives, to address needs in their community and beyond, and to communicate with a specific audience).” If a school leader were to conduct informal observations in all courses, to what extent might such problem-based approaches be



present? Student engagement data suggests that these approaches are not as common as they need to be. Table 1 below provides various disciplinary examples of shifting instruction from topic (i.e., poetry) to conceptual problem frame (How can poetry help us raise awareness of social justice issues?). An English Language Arts unit framed as a question invites students to use historical accounts, audio recordings from slam poetry sessions, and poetry collections, among other texts, to answer the question. Variety is also available in terms of the time periods and poets that students might investigate, and these choices can stem from students' interests and backgrounds. A culminating performance assessment could ask students to select a personally relevant social justice issue and perform or publish an original poem for an authentic audience. While shifting from topic to conceptual problem frame may seem like a small shift, it produces ripple effects that can provide positive results in the classroom.

### ***Mishap #3: Treating Culturally Sustaining Approaches as Separate Efforts***

As leaders consider areas for improvement and therefore professional learning for educators, they can often think of these areas of work in silos. This can result in

surface-level understanding and missed opportunities to find connections across areas of focus.

Instead, focus on intersections between culturally sustaining practices and disciplinary literacy.

In order for educators to center meaningful reasons to engage in disciplinary literacy to investigate authentic problems, they must first understand their students' identities. This calls for an integration of culturally sustaining AND disciplinary literacy approaches. In *Culturally Sustaining Literacy Pedagogies: Honoring Students' Heritages, Literacies, and Languages*, authors Britnie Kane and Rachelle Savitz describe three practices for culturally sustaining disciplinary literacy instruction:

1. Have students investigate and study the disciplinary excellence of disciplinary practitioners of historically and contemporarily marginalized communities.
2. Make students' individual, linguistic, and cultural ways of being substantive, necessary aspects of the curriculum from which disciplinary ideas are constructed.
3. [Guide students in] analyzing, critiquing, and problem-solving their environment and real-world problems. (2022)

**Table 1**  
*Shifting from Topic to Conceptual Problem Frame*

<b>Content Area</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Conceptual Problem Frame</b>
ELA	Poetry	How can poetry help us raise awareness of social justice issues?
Math	Linear Equations	How can mathematical models help us plan a successful business?
Physical Science	Newton's Laws	Why do some things break when they fall or collide, and how can we protect them?
US History	The Great Depression and the New Deal	What is the role of government in both social and economic life, and how does this change in times of crisis?
Health	Nutrition	Can food be unhealthy? How can we make good decisions about what to eat?
Spanish	Introductions	What should I do when I meet someone new?

These suggested practices not only help educators “connect the dots” between culturally sustaining and disciplinary literacy approaches, but also help students develop criticality as they examine current and historical ways of communicating within the disciplines—moving beyond apprenticeship into disciplines and into challenging the status quo.

***Mishap #4: Ignoring Systemic Supports to Sustain the Work***

These suggested shifts are incredibly expansive and affect every element of secondary schooling. Neglecting the shifts the educational system needs to make is another common mishap in implementing disciplinary literacy. Simply providing teachers with a smorgasbord of reading and writing strategies will not increase student engagement or proficiency.

Instead, collaborate with teachers to create a responsive plan for implementation.

In order to sustain change, we must deal with the system. This requires that leaders pay heed to the drivers of change: leadership, competency, and organization. First, leaders should work with a leadership team, which should include teachers representing multiple academic disciplines and roles, to articulate intended outcomes for multiple years of implementation.

These outcomes should be in alignment with the district’s strategic plan and the school’s continuous improvement goals, and leaders should be able to articulate these connections, along with their commitments to supporting teachers throughout the process.

Resource: [Sample 5 Year Implementation Plan](#)

One such commitment leaders need to make as part of their multi-year plan is ongoing opportunities for teachers to learn, do, and reflect. As noted in the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Policy Research Brief entitled “[Literacies of Disciplines](#)” (2011), “[i]mplementing literacies of disciplines will require significant attention to professional development for teachers.” According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), effective professional development components include the following characteristics:

- focused on content

- involve active and collaborative learning
- use models of effective practice
- include coaching and expert support
- provide opportunities for feedback and reflection, and be of sustained duration.

As challenging as it may be, it is vitally important that administrators learn alongside teachers. While not every leader can become an expert in every academic discipline, they can learn enough to ask thoughtful questions that inform their observations in teachers’ classrooms.

As important as professional learning may be, teachers need access to high-quality instructional materials that align to disciplinary literacy and support the shift to student-centered learning. Without this, it is challenging for teachers to connect professional learning experiences to classroom practice. Responding to decreased student engagement, especially at the secondary level, will take time, planning, professional learning, and high-quality resources. It will require an understanding that culturally sustaining practices are integrally connected to the aims of disciplinary literacy. Educators and leaders are called upon to avoid the common mishaps when implementing disciplinary literacy, and leaders are encouraged to attend to necessary systemic elements. If we understand that this work requires a new approach and a long-term commitment, we just may find that in a few years, we will be in a much better place.

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# L is for Liberation and P is for Prism: Children’s Books for The Next Generation of Co-Conspirators and Community Changemakers

by Dr. Leah van Belle

“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.”

—Audre Lorde

The 2023-24 themes of *Michigan Reading Journal* are: Literacy as Community; Literacy as Agency; Literacy as Liberation; and Literacy as Joy. These themes call us to speak, not remain silent. This issue’s reviews share books that reflect an understanding that even young children have a growing sense of justice and can begin to explore what it means that different groups of people experience different identities, communities, barriers, and opportunities. Even young children can begin to consider ways of being part of collective efforts for a more equitable community and society. Justice and liberation are things that children can understand because they impact children’s daily lives, regardless of whether they have learned to notice and name them yet. And the reality is that families who are the global majority, i.e., Black and Brown, are more likely than white families to have explicit conversations with their children about the intersection of identity with equity and justice (Tatum, 2017 & 2008). The question is not whether children have the capacity to grapple with the core ideas of social justice, but how we, as adults, support them in navigating sense-making in these hugely important topics and in growing their sense of action in ways that align with their own beliefs and identities. Children’s books can play key roles in all of this.

Books are sources of so many things for young readers—joy, imagination, identity work, feeling connected with others, and learning about their own and others’ worlds. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990 and [here](#)) calls for



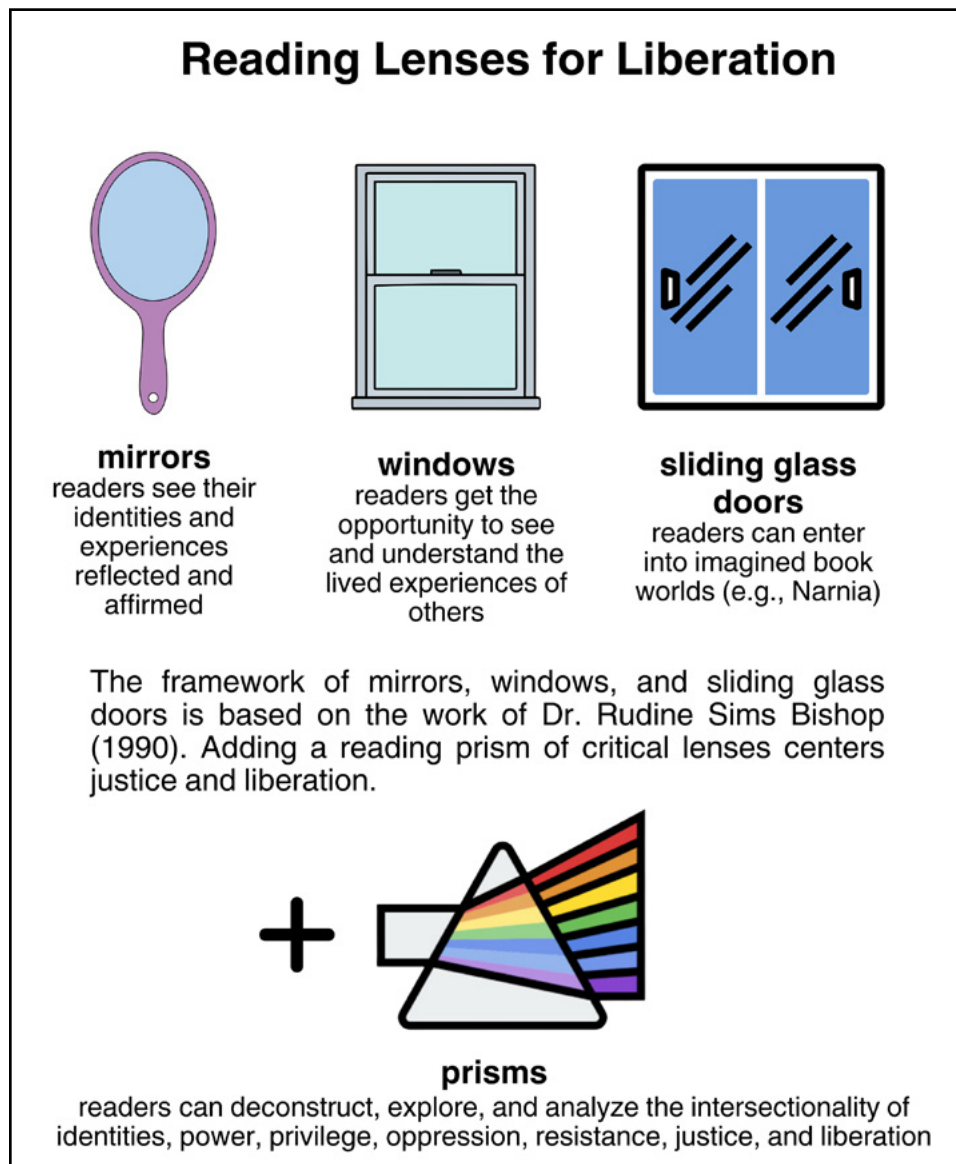
**Dr. Leah van Belle**

us to consider books as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors that allow readers to better see and understand themselves and others, and to step into magical worlds of imagination. When we apply her framework to books that center justice and liberation, this means that children can explore their own identities and experiences in relation to power, privilege, oppression, resistance, and liberation. While this may sound like heady work for children, the books reviewed in this issue present engaging and meaningful contexts for this. These are beautifully written and illustrated texts that share diverse experiences in ways that are developmentally appropriate and work for readers on multiple levels of meaning. Some are recent publications and others are classics-- all can serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. But is that enough? What might it mean if we also consider books as prisms?

While mirrors reflect what is in front of them and windows and sliding glass doors serve as transparent lenses to what is beyond, a prism does something truly magical. Yes, magical, even though my science education colleagues might cringe at me describing it so. A triangular prism, with its precise angles and composition of multiple plane faces, can separate the light that surrounds us into a spectrum separated by colors. Teaching light waves as a classroom teacher brings moments of delight when children observe that white

light contains every color of the rainbow and more. Something that was taken for granted or as invisible is actually resplendent with tones and hues that had been unobserved. A prism helps viewers separate colors to observe them better, analyze them, and understand their relationship with light. So, too in books, we can read with a prism—that is critical lenses to deconstruct, explore, and analyze the intersectionality of identities, power, privilege, oppression, resistance, and liberation. Holding a reading prism to a text allows readers to better understand the ways that we are immersed in and surrounded by these things in daily life. We are

bathed in them just as we are bathed in the light that surrounds us. We create them, just as we reflect and absorb different rays of light. The books in this issue’s column can stand alone as wonderful stories, poems, concept books, and informational texts, but they can also be used as prisms that children can use to grow their understanding of the world around them and what that means for them as individuals and part of a local and global community. They are books that can inspire the next generation of co-conspirators (Love, 2020) and changemakers. They are books that are sure to bring #BookJoy.



# Reviews of Books Centering Justice + Liberation

by Beth Spinner, Leah van Belle, and Rachel Cwiek



**Dr. Beth Spinner**

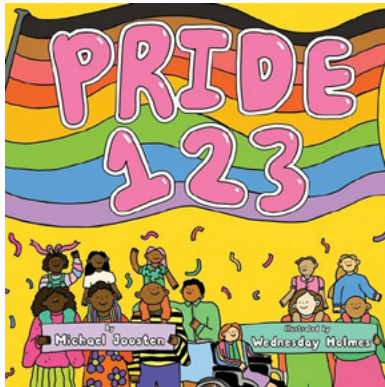


**Dr. Leah van Belle**

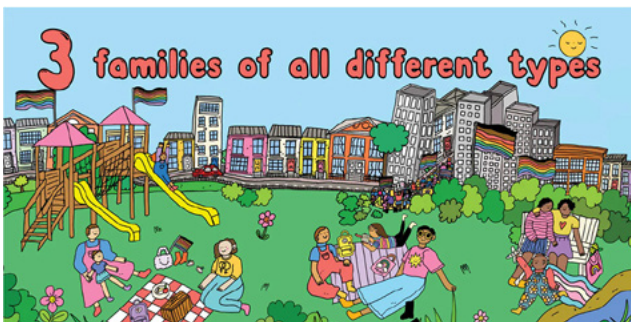


**Rachel Cwiek**

*Pride 123* by Michael Joosten; illus. by Wednesday Holmes. (2020) Little Simon / Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 20 pp. Board Book ISBN: 9781534464995, \$7.99.



“1 parade in the month of June” sets the scene for a playful celebration of Pride Month as little ones are invited to count everything from DJs spinning tunes to “9 united people standing side by side.” A simple concept book with line drawings that seem to dance across the brightly hued pages, it celebrates all kinds of families coming together in community to dance, picnic in the park, and enjoy the parade. Intersectional identities are centered with Philadelphia’s People of Color Inclusive Flag featured throughout and individuals using wheelchairs and canes for mobility. The book provides a straightforward celebration of Pride in a way that will engage young children in counting, exploring the lively illustrations, and seeing that love is the great unifier. Joosten also authored the board books *My Two Moms and Me* (Doubleday, 2019) and *My Two Dads and Me* (Doubleday, 2019). To learn more about Pride Month, visit Human Rights Campaign’s [website](#) for annual celebration information. You can learn more about Pride flags [here](#). -lvb



**Tags:** infants, preK, concept book, counting, identity, family, community, LGBTQIA2S+, justice + liberation

***Together We March: 25 Protest Moments That Marched Into History*** by Leah Henderson; illus. by Tyler Feder. (2021) Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 64 pp. Hardcover ISBN: 9781534442702, \$18.99.



“There’s something about a march that is very powerful. It’s a powerful weapon, a powerful organizing tool, and it has powerful influence on those who participate... You have a definite starting place and definite goal. You’re moving, making progress every step... you get a lot of courage.... The march picks up its own cadence, its own spirit, its own history.” -Cesar Chavez

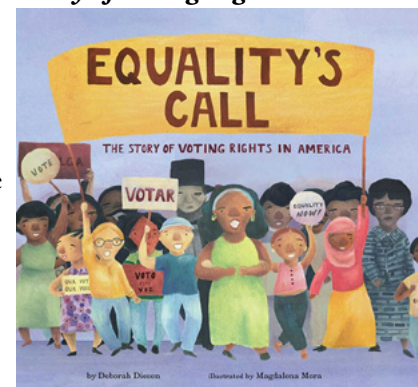
In the late 18th century children as young as five years old were working 14-hour workdays under life-threatening conditions in textile mills in the U.S. The 1903 March of the Mill Children shed light on the dangers and cruelty of child labor in the United States and

played a key role in the creation of the National Child Labor Committee and child labor laws. Henderson and Feder bring this youth march and other historical and modern ones to life with concise descriptions of the *why* and *how* of each social justice demonstration, and simple illustrations and maps. The book includes international protests, such as the Salt March that Gandhi led as part of India’s fight for liberation from British colonialism and the Cape Town Peace March led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. A double-page spread in the end matter presents a visual timeline of marches, followed by a brief bibliography related to each march and suggested books about activism and youth voice. This is one of those interesting books that is a great fit for so many grade levels. It will introduce elementary students to collective activism for social change and important historic protests, including the Delano to Sacramento March of 1966 when migrant farm workers in California demanded living wages, healthcare, safer work conditions, and more basic from farm growers. It will also help middle and high school students see the arc of Black and African American civil rights justice from the Silent Protest March of 1917 to Black Lives Matter protests beginning in 2020. Indigenous, immigrant, and disability rights are all brought to life in this book and the stories of the passionate collective action of those who marched. Tyler also illustrated the dynamic *Unladylike: A Field Guide to Smashing the Patriarchy and Claiming Your Space* (10-Speed Press, 2018). -lwb

**Tags:** upper elementary, middle school, high school, informational: history, collective action, justice + liberation



***Equality's Call: The Story of Voting Rights in America*** by Deborah Diesen; illus. by Magdalena Mora. (2020) Beach Lane Books, 48 pp. Hardcover ISBN: 9781534439580, \$17.99.



## Must Read Texts



Michigan author Deborah Diesen knows that children are smart. I'm convinced of this because in *Equality's Call* she does beautifully what almost all books for children on the topic of voting rights don't get right: she frames these rights in terms of intersectional identities—land ownership, race, literacy level, gender, and more. When writing about white women gaining the right to vote, she doesn't shy away from the fact that their suffragist movement did not welcome Black and Brown women:

“[N]othing could muffle  
Equality's call:  
A right isn't a right  
Till it's granted to all.

Suffragists didn't  
Give up on the fight,  
And the Nineteenth Amendment  
Gave women the right.

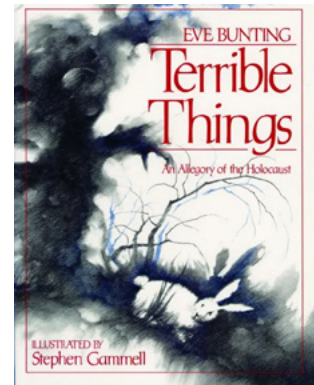
But voters of color  
Still met with oppression  
Their voting was hindered  
By brutal suppression.”

She ends by framing democracy as a dream that “must constantly be tended” through collective action, voting, and justice. End matter includes a deeper dive into voting-related amendments and legislation, as well as a who's who of voting rights activists. Diesen's website includes classroom teaching resources about voting rights (<https://deborahdiesen.com/voting>) and resources to fight bans on book, curriculum, and teaching about social justice: “Teachers are trained in

teaching methods. They know how to support student growth and learning even when teaching challenging topics. Teaching is their career and their passion. Trust them to teach, and let them!” (<https://deborahdiesen.com/bans>) MRJ could not agree more. -lwb

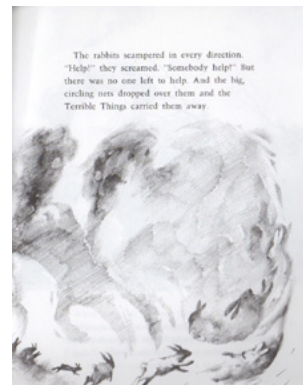
**Tags:** lower elementary, upper elementary, informational: history, collective action, justice + liberation

***Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust***  
by Eve Bunting; illus. by Stephen Gammell. (1996)  
Jewish Publication Society,  
32 pp. Hardcover ISBN:  
9780827603257, \$19.95.



With the almost staggering number of new books being published each year, most children's picture books don't remain in print past their first print run, so when a children's book remains in publication for more than 25 years, there is clearly something deeply compelling about it. Eve Bunting wrote more than 250 books for little humans and, I would argue, the adults who read to and with them. In *Terrible Things* Bunting's haunting text and Gammell's eerily evocative line drawings present an allegorical retelling of the Holocaust. As the terrifying, yet vaguely named and illustrated, *Terrible Things* come for animals of the forest, none of the forest dwellers speak out about the injustice and the disappearance of each kind of animal—birds, squirrels, frogs, rabbits—all are disappeared

as a group. In the end, when the *Terrible Things* come for the last surviving animals, there are no other creatures left to speak up and save them. Their silence in the face of injustice and annihilation made each of the animals complicit





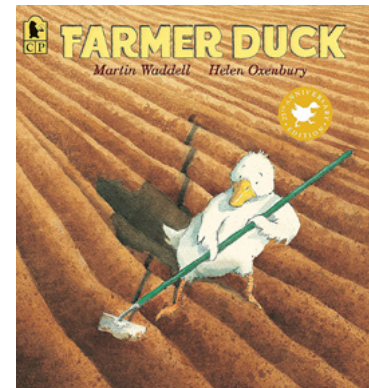
in erasing their forest kinfolk. It's deeply painful how relevant to the world this book about fear of speaking out, fear of resisting injustice is in 2024. *Terrible Things* calls children and adults alike to not only bear witness, but to take action in the face of hate and destruction. It makes accessible to even young children the idea of collective responsibility and evokes the quote by Martin Niemöller, that is engraved in the wall of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (<https://www.ushmm.org>) as the last words for visitors to read in the exhibit space:

“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.  
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.  
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

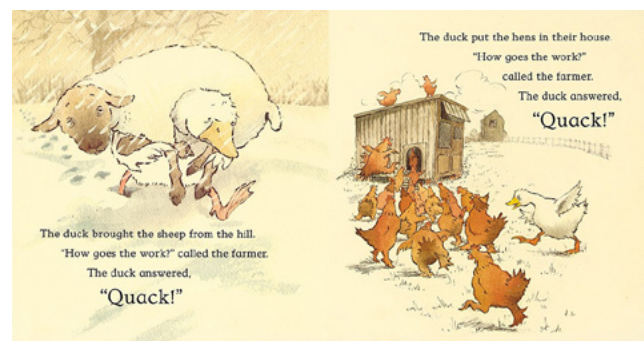
NOTE: Many of Bunting’s books explore the realities of how inequities and injustice impact those who have been marginalized, such as families experiencing homelessness, searching for work as day laborers, or navigating elementary school as an English learner who is new to school in the U.S. Bunting, who was born and raised in Northern Ireland and later became an American citizen, was a female, multilingual immigrant from a country that was war-torn its fight for liberation from British colonialism. Bunting’s identities no doubt shaped her world view, but it’s important to note that she, as a white woman, wrote many books about and from the perspectives of people of color—something that would likely present as much more problematic to publishers and readers of today than when her books were originally published. *-lwb*

**Tags:** lower elementary, upper elementary, middle school, religious freedom, justice + liberation

*Farmer Duck* by Martin Waddell; illus. by Helen Oxenbury. (2020) Candlewick Press, 40 pp. Kindle e-Book ASIN: B08LKLGP42, \$8.99.



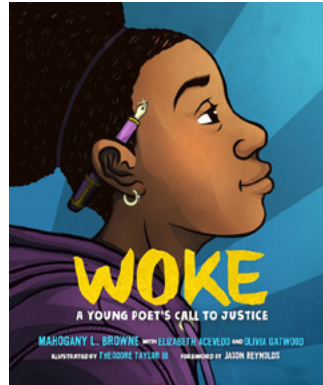
When is a book about animals on a farm just a book about farm life? I’m not certain of the full answer to that, but I do know that *this book*, originally published in 1991, is not just animals and bucolic farm life. Poor Duck, he works from before sunup to after sundown always shouldering the labors of farm life—gathering the sheep, collecting the hens’ eggs, milking the cows, doing laundry, cooking—it never seems to end. And to make it ever more miserable, the farmer lounges about in bed all day eating fancy chocolates and bellowing out the window, “How goes the work?” Exhausted duck cannot continue and falls into a heap. The fellow arm animals are having none of it and, perhaps as a precursor to *Click, Clack, Moo* (Cronin, 2000), they overturn the farmer, literally and figuratively, running him off so that they can work the farm as their own collective. These charmingly written and adorably illustrated creatures have, in essence, mobilized a barnyard proletariat revolution. While the Marxist allusions may make adult readers chuckle, young readers and listeners will delight in the story’s clear arc of justice. They will understand the power of friends coming together to push back at someone who is doing harm. There’s something for everyone in this classic tale of liberation for the young. *-lwb*



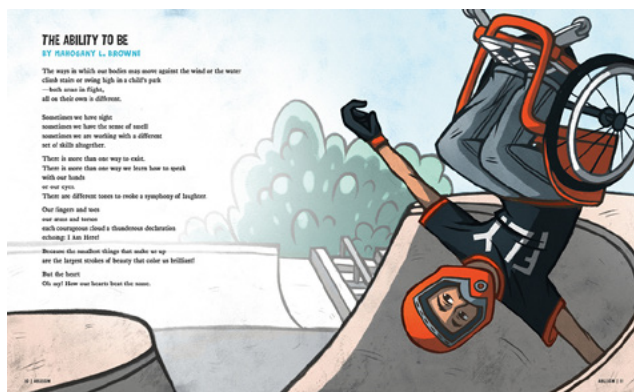
**Tags:** preK, lower elementary, e-book, collective action, justice + liberation

## Must Read Texts

***Woke: A Young Poet's Call to Justice*** by Mahogany L. Browne, Elizabeth Acevedo, & Olivia Gatwood; forward by Jason Reynolds; illus. by Theodore Taylor, III. (2020) Macmillan Publishers, 56 pp. Hardcover ISBN: 9781250311207, \$19.99.



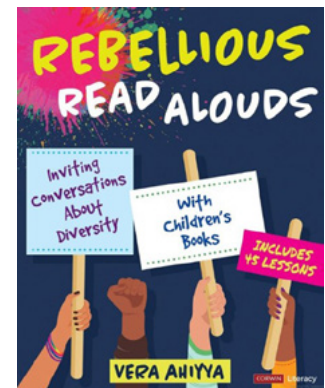
Poetry has long been part of efforts for social change. For instance, Langston Hughes and other poets of the Harlem Renaissance played key roles in calling society to consider injustices and act collectively for liberation. The way their poetry spoke to readers and engaged their hearts and souls was something that sometimes data, numbers, reports, or news headlines could not do alone. *Woke* continues in this tradition of using the power of poetry to connect deeply and directly with readers. The collective, written by women of color, includes diverse topics relevant to justice and community—activism, allyship, ableism, racism, gender, immigration, body positivity, intersectionality of identities, and more. Taylor’s emotive illustrations amplify the power of the call to action across topics. *Woke* doesn’t shy away from critical issues in social justice, yet it also explores them in ways that make them accessible and relatable to young readers. A core thread of the poems is the sense that “Our poetry is our greatest voice” and that there is great joy to be found in acts of resistance— from being an ally, to volunteering, to protesting, to using privilege to dismantle oppression. -lwb



**Tags:** upper elementary, middle school, high school, poetry, identity, collective action, justice + liberation

### ***Rebellious Read Alouds***

by Vera Ahiiya. (2022)  
Corwin Press, 192  
pp. Paperback ISBN:  
9781071844144, \$30.95.



Written as a professional book for elementary teachers, *Rebellious Read Alouds* features information about the importance of having diverse books in elementary classrooms as well as the need to have thoughtful discussions with children about topics that are usually avoided in school. She provides research to support that children are not only ready, but also need to learn about and talk about important topics. After explaining this information, the book then provides 45 lessons featuring books by authors and illustrators of diverse identities. Ahiiya created a framework for the lessons that include starting small to talk about the story, being consistent to help students make connections, and keeping constant to help students act based on what they’ve learned. This framework is applied to all the lessons in the book in the form of questions that can be posed to students.

In a world where teachers are constantly stretched thin and pressed for time, Ahiiya’s *Rebellious Read Alouds* provides carefully thought-out book suggestions and

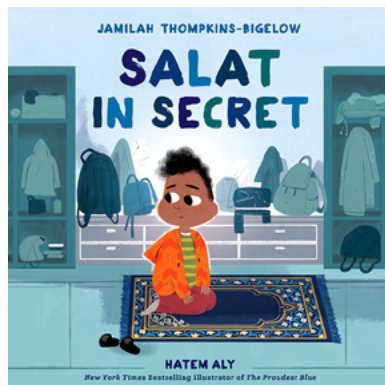
lesson ideas to foster thoughtful discussions about important topics in elementary classrooms. One of the best features of these lessons is that they include questions that can be asked to help students make connections, think critically, and take action. Teachers can use these lessons to get ideas for books and how to incorporate them into their own classrooms. Each lesson ends with the prompts:

“Because I read this book I now know \_\_\_\_\_;  
Because I read this book I now wonder \_\_\_\_\_;  
Because I read this book I now understand \_\_\_\_\_.”

These prompts are helpful for teachers, too, as they seek to learn more about perspectives other than their own and how they can welcome these perspectives into their classrooms to help create an inclusive classroom community. The sidebars provide additional research and resources that teachers can use to help them learn more about this process. -bs

**Tags:** teaching for justice, professional book, justice + liberation

*Salat in Secret* by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow; illus. by Hatem Aly. (2023) Random House, 40 pp. Hardcover ISBN: 9781984848093, \$18.99.



When Muhammad turns seven, he is given his very own salat rug, which means he is now old enough to pray five times a day, as Muslims are called to do. Muhammad knows this will sometimes take courage, especially at school. He witnesses his father praying in public, often with odd looks from strangers, but Muhammad is confident he can do it, too. When he arrives at school, he cannot seem to work up the confidence to ask his teacher for a quiet place. He, very quickly, prays in the classroom coat closet. That evening, his father again prays in public since he is working during the evening prayer time. An

angry stranger looks on, police officers question him, but he never wavers in his prayer. After witnessing this, Muhammad finally has the courage to ask his teacher for a quiet place to pray salat in school.

This book beautifully examines the struggle that Muhammad, and many children like him, often face daily. Having faced challenges or embarrassments of their own before, primary readers will absolutely empathize with this main character. I am proud to have middle school students who pray salat in my library, knowing that it is a safe place for them. Surely, they had thoughts like Muhammad did, but they, too, found their courage.

This book would make a powerful selection for all children, opening their eyes to others who are either similar to or very different from who they are, and that is never a bad thing. -rc



**Tags:** lower elementary, realistic fiction, identity, religious freedom, justice + liberation

*Teaching for Black Lives.* Eds. Dyan Watson, Jesse Hagopian, & Wayne Au. (2018) Rethinking Schools, 382 pp. Paperback ISBN: 9780942961041, \$29.95.



Rethinking Schools (RS) was created in 1986 by a group of public school educators and community activists from Milwaukee who saw their local school curriculum as “dumbed-down and dominated by corporate-produced textbooks. Inappropriate standardized testing was rampant. Racial bias infected every level of schooling.” (<https://rethinkingschools.org>) For decades Rethinking Schools’ quarterly journal and book publications have

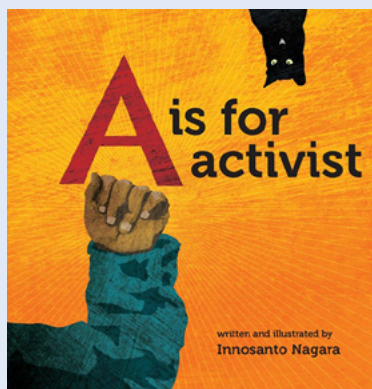
## Must Read Texts

served as powerful resources for educators seeking to grow their knowledge and tools for justice-centered teaching and learning. One community of practice for this is the Zinn Education Project's (<https://www.zinnedproject.org>) Teaching for Black Lives Study Group, which provides a context for group members to use *Teaching for Black Lives* as a launching point for inquiry into curriculum, instruction, assessment, and educator activism for justice. Michigan Reading Association was selected as one of the 2023-24 school year study groups.

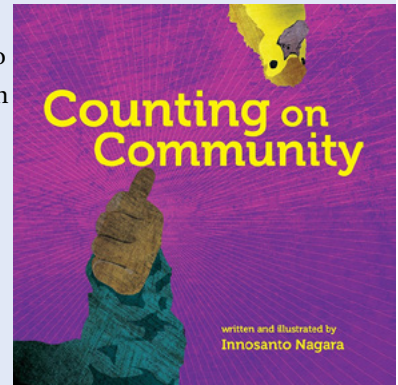
*Teaching for Black Lives* is an edited volume of essays, interviews, poetry, artwork, and reflections on teaching that call for “building the school-to-justice pipeline.” There is something for every area of teaching here, grouped in deeply compelling sections: 1. Making Black Lives Matter in Our Schools; 2. Enslavement, Civil Rights, and Black Liberation; 3. Gentrification, Displacement, and Anti-Blackness; 4. Discipline, the Schools-to-Prison Pipeline, and Mass Incarceration; and 5. Teaching Blackness, Loving Blackness, and Exploring Identity. Section 3 includes “Lead Poisoning: Bringing Social Justice to Chemistry”—an exploration of using critical content literacy to teach the Flint Water Crisis through the lenses of education, health, and environmental justice. The book is a call to learn together, to act together, to affect change together. A must-read for every literacy educator! -lwb

**Tags:** teaching for justice, professional book, justice + liberation

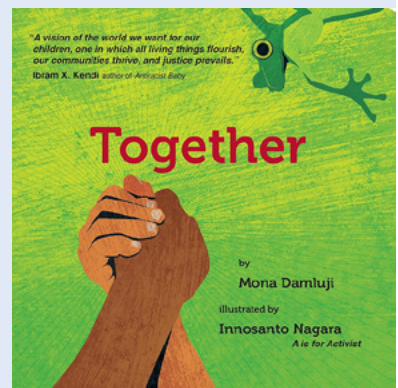
*A is for Activist* by Innosanto Nagara. (2013) Seven Stories Press, 32 pp. Board Book ISBN: 9781609805395, \$11.95.



*Counting on Community* by Innosanto Nagara. (2015) Seven Stories Press, 24 pp. Board Book ISBN: 9781609806323, \$11.95.



*Together* by Mona Damluji; illus. by Innosanto Nagara. (2024) Seven Stories Press, 48 pp. Board Book ISBN: 9781644212691, \$19.95.



Innosanto Nagara brings his passion for creating playful children's books about social justice to another instant classic—*Together*, a collaboration with poet and social activist Mona Damluji. While *A is for Activist* presents justice and liberation in an alphabet concept book and *Counting on Community* calls little humans to joyful collective action through counting, *Together* moves away from the concept book structure. Nagara's lushly colored prints extend the gentle free verse poem that Damluji crafted to juxtapose the power of the individual with the even greater power of individuals working together toward the same goal.

“One of us can love with all our heart  
And when we love together  
we build community

One of us can speak up for justice  
And when we speak up together  
we create a world of possibility”

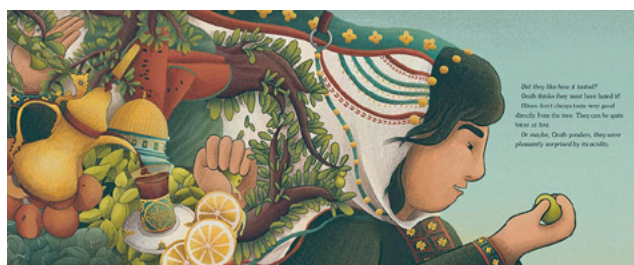
I suppose here is where I should share that I have given *A is for Activist* and *Counting on Community* as gifts at baby showers and little humans’ birthdays more times than I can count. Clearly future gifts will have to now be expanded to this trio of books! -lwb

**Tags:** preK, lower elementary, concept book, alphabet, counting, community, collective action, justice + liberation

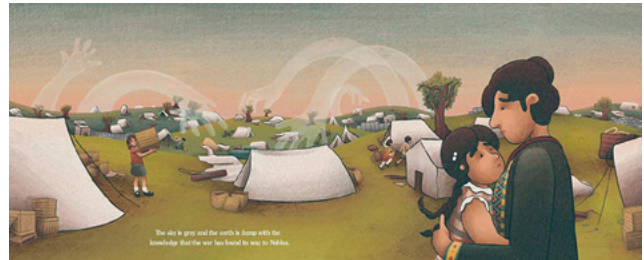
*These Olive Trees* by Aya Ghanameh. (2023) Viking Books for Young Readers, 30 pp. Hardcover ISBN: 9780593525180, \$18.99.



In her first published book for children, Aya Ghanameh brings to life the deep connection between a Palestinian family living in a refugee camp in 1967. Oraib, a young Palestinian girl, learns from her mother the significance of the olive trees to her family, her culture, and life before the war. When Oraib and her family must flee the camp and relocate yet again to seek safety, she makes a promise to herself and her family’s legacy that



she will remember and take with her always the connection to the olive trees. She is hopeful and looking to the future, despite the dark reality of the camp. Ghanameh’s delicate paintings are beautifully paired with the story, evoking the sadness and loss, but also hope. -lwb



**Tags:** lower elementary, historical fiction, religious freedom, justice + liberation

*Hear My Voice / Escucha mi voz: The Testimonies of Children Detained at the Southern Border of the United States (Spanish and English Edition)* Children’s stories compiled by Warren Binford. (2021) Workman Publishing Company, 96 pp. Hardcover ISBN: 9781523513482, \$19.95.



Warren Binford interviewed 61 children ages 5-17 who were detained at the U.S.–Mexico border and shares their stories in their own words and from their sworn testimonies. These children migrated from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Ecuador, and Mexico—each a unique individual with unique experiences, yet also united by the experience of enduring life as a child in a detention center. Their stories need to be heard and in their own words. While the topic of the book is an intense one, it presents an opportunity for upper elementary, middle school, and even high school students to connect first person narratives with content area learning in social studies, history, and civics. It presents an opportunity for rich exploration of human rights and connects to the [United Nations’ Convention on](#)

## Must Read Texts

[the Rights of the Child](#), which was adopted by UN General Assembly resolution in 1989. In *Escucha Mi Voz* each child's story is illustrated by a Latinx artist, including winners of the [Caldecott Medal](#) and [Pura Belpré Award](#). The book includes suggestions for discussion questions, resources to learn more, and possible ways to engage in related activism. The book is Spanish on one side and can be flipped over for the English version. -lvb

**Tags:** upper elementary, middle school, high school, biography, justice + liberation

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## Author Biographies

**Dr. Beth Spinner (bs)** is an Assistant Professor of Education at Alma College. She teaches literacy education courses for elementary and secondary preservice teachers. Prior to obtaining her PhD at Western Michigan University, she taught middle and high school English. She serves as a college section co-chair for the Michigan Council of Teachers of English (MCTE). Beth enjoys getting book recommendations from her two daughters and reading by the campfire when they go camping all summer.

**Rachel Cwiek (rc)** is a Teacher-Librarian for Dearborn Public Schools, serving students from Kindergarten through eighth grade. She is in her 17th year as an educator. She obtained her BA in Early Childhood Education from the University of Michigan-Dearborn, her MAT in Literacy Education from Madonna University, and her Media Specialist endorsement from Wayne State University. A self-proclaimed “book nerd,” books were her passion from an early age. A proud member of MRA, MASL, and other committees, she strives to extend her teaching and learning beyond the classroom. Her Book Joy comes in pairing a student with a book they come to love just as much as she does! In her valuable spare time, she enjoys gardening, quilting, and annoying her cat, Katniss.

**Dr. Leah van Belle (lvb)** serves as the Executive Director of 313Reads. A proud Detroitter and first-generation high school and college graduate, she serves as the Immediate Past President of MRA and on the state's Early Literacy Task Force. Across all her work in education— as a classroom teacher, literacy coach, director of clinical practice in urban teacher education, and graduate director of literacy programs— sharing books with little humans and their teachers remains one of her greatest joys. Most importantly, she is the mama of a neurodiverse little human who is teaching her to build with LEGO. Family read aloud is the best part of their day.

## Join the #BookJoy Crew!

Is #BookJoy something you can't get enough of? Is a trip to the library or bookstore one of your favorite things in life? Is read aloud one of the things you love most about being a literacy educator, librarian, or literacy champion? If you answered YES to any of these questions, then *MRJ* needs your expertise to help get great books into the hands, minds, and hearts of readers of all ages—join us! Email [leah@313reads.org](mailto:leah@313reads.org) to learn more!

# SHARE YOUR BOOK JOY

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# Michigan Reading Journal

## General Call for Manuscripts & Graphics

The *Michigan Reading Journal* is the peer-reviewed journal of the Michigan Reading Association, which is composed of and serves more than 3,000 classroom teachers, literacy specialists, educational leaders, teacher educators, and university faculty.

The journal publishes manuscripts on diverse topics related to literacy, including reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, visually representing, technology, and literature for children and young adults. Submissions are invited in any of the categories below, though we are particularly interested in manuscripts that connect literacy and social justice or address new literacies (e.g., technology, graphic novels, podcasts, etc.).

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### 2023-2024 Journal Themes

The editorial team has named four themes of empowerment to carry across all issues of the 2023-24 academic year: literacy as community, agency, liberation, and joy.

- *Literacy as Community*: In what ways are you building community in your literacy context? What approaches have been successful at bringing students and educators together despite the challenges of the past several years? What new fields of research elevate the need for community as part of literacy education?
- *Literacy as Agency*: Agency implies a sense of direction and control over one's life and actions. In what ways are educators intentionally building upon students' sense of agency in literacy classrooms and settings? What barriers might exist in developing educator agency, and how are we working to address those barriers?
- *Literacy as Liberation*: We lift critical literacy as central to the work of education for equity and liberation in a diverse, democratic society. In what ways can we use literacy to dismantle oppression? How are you amplifying students' and literacy educators' voices despite outside pressures?
- *Literacy as Joy*: "Joy is an act of resistance," Michigan poet and educator Toi Dericotte reminds us. In what ways are you prioritizing joy in your school settings? For yourself as an educator? How can a commitment to joy sustain us during contentious times?

### Bridging Research and Practice Articles

Articles submitted in this category present original descriptions of research-based instruction that improves the literacy learning of students ranging from birth to college age. Articles describing research-based practices in literacy teacher education will also be considered. Manuscripts in this category must include 5-10 practical steps to guide readers in applying the research to their practice. Manuscript submissions should include APA formatted references to the relevant research literature and should not exceed 5,000 words (including tables, figures and appendices; excluding reference list) in 12-point font and left-aligned. Any charts or graphics must be of high-quality and in black and white. These manuscripts undergo blind review by members of the journal's editorial review board.

### Voices from the Region

Articles submitted in this category will showcase evidence-based literacy practices being implemented throughout the state and region in such varied spaces as classrooms, districts, libraries, after school programs, online schools, homes, daycares, preschools, ISDs/RESAs. We are specifically interested in submissions from practitioners who can share tips and ideas about what is working in their context, why they are engaging in these ideas, and how others could do this, too. Our goal is to hear from a range of practitioners in and around the state who are interested in literacy. Manuscripts in this category should begin with an introduction to the authors and the context of their work. Please also include APA formatted references to the relevant research literature, if appropriate to the piece. Manuscript submissions should be between 750 and 2500 words (including tables, figures and appendices; excluding reference list), double-spaced, and in 12-point font and left-aligned. Any charts or graphics must be of high-quality and in black and white. These manuscripts undergo blind review by members of the journal's editorial review board.



### **Visual Artifacts and Graphics**

Submissions in this category share visual artifacts of literacy teaching practices through photos of teachers and students engaging in literacy, literacy projects, literacy centers, and artifacts of student learning. Each image should be clear, in focus, of a high resolution/quality, and sent as a full-size jpeg or tiff file attachment, accompanied by a brief, 50-100 word description. Documents must be scanned, not photographed; the latter will not be of high enough quality for publication. By submitting an item in this category, the individual indicates that he/she has obtained consent from the district, school, teacher, parent, and child to use the image for publication. The journal's editorial team reviews submissions in this category.

### **Critical Issues**

Articles submitted in this category highlight current issues of access, equity, power, and justice in literacy education and offer *MRJ* readers practical ways to navigate them. Manuscripts in this category should provide a description of the issue as well as guidance on making informed decisions to help teachers and students reach their full potential; submissions should be between 1000 and 5000 words (including tables, figures and appendices; excluding reference list).

### **Letters to the Editors**

We invite and encourage your letters in response to what you have read in the Michigan Reading Journal. Did research presented help you better understand teaching and learning? Were you inspired to try a new teaching strategy? Are you still puzzling over a topic recently featured? Is there something you haven't seen in the journal that you want us to address? Let us hear from you, please. Letters may be edited, with author's permission, for publication.

### **Reviews of Professional Books**

We invite and encourage nominations of professional books to review for our Professional Books of Interest column. Please send book titles, author names, and year of publication to us via e-mail with a brief 1-2 sentence description of what the book is about and why it should be reviewed in *MRJ*. If approved, we will work with you to create a review of the text, up to 1200 words in length.

### **Reviews of Children's and Young Adult Books**

Have a great book that you and your students love? We invite teachers of students of all ages to write and submit book reviews of children's and young adult books of any genre that have been published in the last year. Book reviews can be up to 1200 words in length, and we recommend the "Writing a Book Review" resource on the [Purdue Online Writing Lab's website](#) for a list of questions and considerations that would be useful in crafting your review.

### **Manuscript Review Process**

Below are the questions that the journal's Editorial Review Board members use when reviewing submitted research manuscripts and practitioner pieces focused on sharing teaching practices. The questions are intended to guide reviewers and help them shape their written summaries of feedback and recommendations regarding publication. The answers are forwarded to authors, along with the publication decision. The editorial team will provide feedback on spelling, grammar, mechanics, APA format, etc, so reviewers should focus their review and feedback on the more global guiding questions below. The guiding questions can also serve to help authors shape their manuscripts in order to meet standard for publication in *MRJ*.

### **Reviewers' Guiding Questions**

- Does the article address an important or compelling topic for reading practitioners in Michigan? Why or why not?
- Does the manuscript contain an appropriate blend of theory, research and practice? Are there ways to improve this balance?
- Does the article offer practical implications or suggestions, based-in-research, that reading practitioners can implement? Are there additional implications that would improve the manuscript?
- Does the manuscript include enough information on how-to practical steps for classroom or practitioner implementation (i.e., What can teachers do on Monday morning?)?
- Will the article appeal to *MRJ*'s diverse audience? What can be improved?
- What are the revisions that you would recommend to improve this manuscript for our practitioner audience?

Submissions may address other literacy-related topics of interest to the Michigan Reading Journal readership, as outlined in this CFP. We are now accepting submissions via our online journal system, coordinated with Scholarworks at GVSU. Please visit <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/> and click on "Submit Article" in the left-hand navigation menu.

For consideration in our three issues each year, we accept manuscripts on the following deadlines:

- For fall publication, we accept manuscripts through July 15<sup>th</sup> of each year.
- For winter publication, we accept manuscripts through October 15<sup>th</sup> of each year.
- For spring publication, we accept manuscripts through February 15<sup>th</sup> of each year.