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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



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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.

