

Building knowledge to nurture critical thinking and agency.

Effective literacy instruction builds students' reading/writing skills and knowledge, develops students' identity and agency, helps students understand the world around them, and creates independent critical readers.

Key Reading

Excerpt 1: *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* by Dr. Gholdy Mohammed, pg. 22

“Within literary societies, to be educated was to be literate. Literacy among Black people was not just tied to skills and proficiencies, which is a common notion of literacy today, but it was also defined as liberation and power. In this way, literacy was connected to acts of self-empowerment, self-determination, and self-liberation. It is important to note that these were the ambitions they cultivated for themselves rather than thinking that others would give them power or determine their life outcomes.

Literacy was the foundation of all learning. When Black people learned to read, write, and speak, they were able to accumulate knowledge in other areas and use these skills as tools to further shape, define, and navigate their lives. Literacy was not just for self-enjoyment or fulfillment, it was tied to action and efforts to shape the socio-political landscape of a country that was founded on oppression. An example of this was using acts of literacy to disrupt racism through their written and spoken words, including public addresses that fostered agitation to shake the wrongdoing placed upon their lives.” (Cultivating Genius, pg. 22)

Excerpt 2: [“Why Doesn’t Every Teacher Know the Research on Reading”](#) from EdWeek, Oct 2018

“Build students’ general content knowledge. Some of the most profoundly important, yet under-recognized, reading research shows that students’ reading comprehension depends heavily on their background knowledge about the world -- knowledge that comes largely from learning about science and social studies topics. When students know something about a topic, they are better able to read a text in which that topic is discussed, even when the sentence structure is complex or the words are unfamiliar. ...

The implications for literacy instruction are enormous because young children are receiving less time with science and social studies content in their school day. According

to a 2007 study, instructional time spent on these subjects dropped by an hour and half per week since the 1990s. The diminished attention to these knowledge-building topics creates less fertile ground for reading comprehension to flourish and is a significant culprit in our stagnant national reading outcomes. Given that time is a scarce commodity in most schools, the takeaway for school leaders is to incorporate rich content, organized around conceptually-related topics, into the reading curriculum so that students learn new information about the world while they develop as readers.”

Excerpt 3: “[High-Quality Curriculum as a Transformation Tool for Equity](#)” from ASCD, March 2021

“Curriculum is the heart of the solution to educational inequities because it is a container for so much that happens during each school day. The design of curriculum shapes pedagogy, and pedagogy affects how a student experiences school -- whether they believe it is engaging or boring, challenging or easy, and even if it feels fair and just. A high-quality curriculum includes lessons that empower students and develop their critical thinking and communication skills, which in turn creates a classroom culture that nurtures students’ leadership and agency and encourages critical analysis of the world. Such a curriculum gives us a way to put equity into action day in and day out. ...

Designing curriculum with integrated, equity-focused social-emotional learning (SEL)-versus a skills-based SEL “program” that is not explicitly focused on equity--builds on students’ existing assets, lifts voices, promotes empowerment, and nurtures a sense of belonging among students from historically marginalized groups. Further, it supports all students-- including those in dominant groups -- to analyze systems of oppression and understand avenues for their own civic action. ...

The benefit of a high-quality curriculum is in its curation of diverse texts and topics that affirm students’ varied identities and in its integration of equity-focused SEL into daily lessons, which can mitigate some of the unconscious bias that prevents teachers from fully embracing the genius in every child. In this way, curriculum can be its own form of professional learning for teachers as it walks them and their students deep into content and toward a greater sense of agency.

Take for example, three of the main pillars of any literacy curriculum: Texts, topics and tasks.

- **Texts** give students opportunities to learn social-emotional skills as they build knowledge of historical or contemporary events or analyze fictional characters’ actions and reactions throughout a story. Curriculum that offers students collaborative ways to reflect on what motivations drive events and characters, such as racism or homophobia, allows students to think about how a text may be affecting their peers and analyze the systems that are catalysts for events. In the process, they practice empathy, compassion, and critical thinking.
- **Tasks** throughout lessons and units can help students to practice essential social-emotional skills like collaboration, respect, and responsibility. Discussion protocols, for example, promote equity of voice and support students to listen to

one another with respect. Tasks also can encourage students to reflect on their own lives. For example, analyzing texts through the lens of how oppressive systems and structures affect the people in students' communities develops critical consciousness. Long-term, culminating tasks may bring in community members as experts or engage students to create projects for the community, such as writing and recording PSAs.

- **Topics** of any curriculum are the driving force behind the tasks and texts and present opportunities to not only build students' knowledge of a diverse world, but also to build their social-emotional skills, so that they feel the responsibility over their learning to understand how to take action on a topic. This is healing for students, and especially important for those who have experienced trauma. For example, the topic of the ratification of the 19th Amendment provides students with the opportunity to understand that period in history through the lens of the oppressive systems and structures for women and people of color, and to make connections to current events and persisting inequities.”

Related Teacher Tools

- [Providing Access to Complex Texts - How Texts are Selected](#)

Sources

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