



Reading list rewrite

THE PURSUIT OF EQUITY RESHAPES THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM

BY AIMEE VOLK

“I understand diverse books are important. But where do the classics fit into all of this?” asked a participant in a recent professional learning session I attended about making curriculum more culturally relevant. The presenter, literacy expert Donalyn Miller, responded, “Classics to whom? Who decides something is a classic?”

Fireworks began going off in my brain. Miller’s question prompted me, a district curriculum coordinator

supporting English teachers, to wonder: What is the purpose for requiring all students to read a specific text? Do the same texts need to be read in every classroom to ensure equity for all learners in a particular grade level or course? When does this help and when does it hinder equity?

Those are the kinds of questions my district, West Fargo (North Dakota) Public Schools, has been grappling with as we implement our secondary English language arts curriculum with the goals of purpose, equity, and relevance for all learners.

SURVEYING THE LAND:

Where do we begin?

Over the last several years, the West Fargo district came to realize its English language arts resources needed an overhaul. The books we were reading and the discussions we were having were not reflective of our student body.

Three years ago, the school district received a literacy grant to improve literacy instructional practices and diversify curriculum resources to better support our disadvantaged population of learners. The grant included funds for professional learning, classroom



resources, and a secondary curriculum coordinator position to support teachers in serving students equitably within the core English language arts courses at the secondary level.

We curated our own resources to be flexible and responsive to students' needs while ensuring rigor and development of critical thinking skills. We knew this would require a deep commitment to vetting and selecting the right texts and materials.

Our district is committed to implementing “guaranteed and viable curriculum” (Marzano, 2003). Guaranteed means students will engage in the same essential learning regardless of teacher or school. Viable means teacher teams have vetted the curriculum to ensure it covers essential learning outcomes within a specific time frame, such as a quarter.

We worked with teams of teachers to develop scope, sequence,

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and proficiency scale of the essential learning outcomes for each quarter, developed from North Dakota's state standards. This is what we refer to as our curriculum. It defines our purpose: what we want students to know and be able to do.

Together with teachers, we selected and aligned resources, including texts and other reading materials. This set of resources is akin to what many districts call curriculum. Teachers can then choose the resources that best match

their students' academic and social-emotional needs to ensure students reach proficiency within our agreed-upon essential (priority) standards.

This means that teachers make data-informed decisions about students' next steps in learning and incorporate a variety of evidence-based instructional strategies to help all students reach proficiency for each of the identified essential standards. Because our team has vetted the reading levels and content of these resources, teachers can be confident they are both rigorous and relevant.

PAVING THE WAY:

Building trust

As we developed the curriculum and resources, we leaned into some difficult, yet exciting, conversations. Dialogue with our community had revealed students historically had little choice in the texts they read and had

been disengaged from the required texts. We had also learned there were limited texts available for teachers.

As we tackled the need for a different approach, we began asking: What do we want students to know and be able to do? What evidence-based instructional strategies are we implementing? Why do we choose to use specific resources and not others?

These discussions were full of emotion. Some educators spoke passionately about including more relevant and diverse texts and offering more student choice. Others felt their current instructional practices and beliefs were being challenged.

These conversations helped me realize I needed to slow down and build trust. I engaged in my own professional learning about building trust, then infused nuggets of my learnings, wonderings, and questions into our team's dialogue as a way to gently encourage personal reflection. I knew I needed to embed Coyle's (2018) skills of building safety, sharing vulnerability, and establishing purpose.

One strategy I found helpful was to tap into teachers' own experiences of falling in love with reading. My goal was to build connections with teachers and get them into the mindset of how to reach their students and cultivate their love of reading. Turning again to literacy expert Donalyn Miller, I shared questions she often asks: Who are you as a reader? What is your reading life story?

Many English teachers said they were always readers. However, others said they had been nonreaders until a certain book or experience ignited their reading life. Yet others had never thought about who they were as a reader and were intrigued by this question. Educators began to reflect on how their reading life impacted their personal beliefs about reading, teaching reading, how they infuse reading and specific literature into their courses. Importantly, they began to think about how they work to cultivate students' reading lives.

Soon, our discussion paralleled

Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) explanation of reading as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. We acknowledged the importance of students seeing themselves in or identifying with a main character or experience (mirror). We wanted learners to get a glimpse into others' experiences and perspectives (windows). And we wanted students to walk through a sliding glass door while reading, as if to actually take part in the experience within a story.

PRODUCTIVE STRUGGLE

From there, we worked to develop common understandings of terms such as culture and diversity, drawing on the work of Boyko et al. (2016). Understanding the differences among these concepts helped establish consistency and lay the foundation for the next steps of our work.

Next, we focused on the components that needed to be present in the books we chose. We looked to the work of Muhammad (2020), whose framework recommends educators embed identity development, skill development, intellectual development, and criticality. Using that framework, we realized many of our courses focused more on skill development than the other components.

We set out to change that. We explored types of reading and the purposes of each. We examined how to support learners in building self-efficacy, agency, and identity through various text types.

We also explored strategies about how we, as educators, can shift from the holder of knowledge to a facilitator of learning to ensure learners not only show proficiency in essential skills, but as Muhammad (2020) emphasizes, know who they are, who others say they are, and whom they desire to be; use mental capacities to better understand and critique the world; and work toward justice and social transformation.

We provided multiple opportunities for students to develop this knowledge

by using different types of texts for different purposes. It is our goal that, with all of these access points to books, students will be able to create reading connections and increase their literacy skills while coming to know the joy of reading. The tiers of books are as follows:

- An **anchor text** is a core text that teachers and students refer to throughout the year. It should help students learn and develop critical thinking, discussion, and reflection skills, and should build shared experiences among the classroom community.
- A **mentor text** is similar but focused on teaching about the author's craft. To choose an anchor or mentor text, we work to find texts that are engaging, diverse, relevant, and offer diverse perspectives, but all students in a class read the same one.
- **Book club books** allow students to practice and apply the skills that were taught with the anchor text. Here we offer students more choice in the texts, which represent different perspectives, experiences, reading levels, and formats. They are selected to be grade appropriate for both reading level and social and emotional development.
- **Classroom library books** have even more diverse topics, experiences, perspectives, and reading levels. Classroom libraries increase student accesses to texts, develop the joy of reading, and create a classroom culture of reading.
- **The media center** offers students an even a wider range of topics, reading levels, perspectives, and experiences. Here, students have the opportunity to learn more about self-selected topics, other's experiences, and themselves.

While we do our best to offer

students windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors with authentic, relevant texts, not all stakeholders agree on what is appropriate for each grade level.

I encourage teacher teams to partner with media specialists, who are excellent resources for finding relevant and rigorous texts.

I also recommend that, when teachers choose a book or other resource (such as video or image), they provide a rationale for that choice. That is useful for multiple reasons: It can be used to address a question or concern in the future, provide helpful information for new staff, and help us ensure that we are choosing texts that are both relevant and rigorous.

PATCHING THE POTHOLES

Teachers have been passionate about this work and eager to incorporate more relevant and diverse texts to add to our district resources. Still, there has been much debate about the importance of whole class reading, teaching the classics, and how to ensure that our texts are complex enough.

As we have implemented more current and relevant texts for our students, we have also received concerns from parents about topics addressed in some texts. I have been asked: “Is this a social studies class or an English class?” “What standards are you teaching?” “Why are you teaching politics?”

As we continue our work, we must continue to address these issues and educate all stakeholders about why and how we are changing our more traditional instructional model to include more diverse and responsive resources. We also need to help prepare teachers to talk with parents about these topics and have other difficult but important conversations. This is important, yet sensitive, work.

When I receive a concern from a stakeholder, I often explain that English language arts teachers support learners to build reading and writing skills, gain knowledge from various content, and develop critical understandings of themselves, their community, and

the world (adapted from Muhammad, 2020).

Then, I cite specific state standards for skills such as analyzing multiple sources, author’s point of view and purpose; author’s interpretations, biases, diverse perspectives; credibility; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

I have found that it is also important to reaffirm to stakeholders that teachers present information from various sources to ensure multiple perspectives are heard and remind them that teachers do not share their own personal beliefs. Finally, I offer to provide an alternative text choice, if that is the parent’s wish.

PAVING THE WAY:

Celebrating milestones

As we began implementing more relevant, diverse texts and giving teachers and students choice in their reading, teachers began reaching out to me to share the impact of these culturally relevant texts in English courses. Here are some of their comments.

From a high school English teacher: “The kids are *loving* [the new books]. I have received such good feedback from the kids about how relatable the characters are, the setting is actually in our time period, that the books read like a movie. Many kids are saying, ‘I’m actually reading it because I want to!’ One student said this was the first time reading a book that represented her culture.”

From an 8th grade English teacher: “A few weeks ago, a student told me he didn’t read and had never enjoyed a book. I told him my goal this year was to find him a book he would enjoy. I handed him *Hey, Kiddo*, one of the new books you worked hard to add to our classroom library collection. Today, he finished it and said he really enjoyed it. He said it was the first book he actually finished reading since around the 3rd grade! I was beyond excited and started cheering!”

From a 6th grade English teacher: “When I was working with a student today ... he told me that this is the first time he ever finished reading a book for school. Then he asked me what we were reading next in literature circles! Thank you for supporting all of our work with books — we are making a difference for our students!”

We have only scratched the surface of embedding relevant, diverse books into our courses, and it is already evident that students are more engaged in reading and are developing self-efficacy and agency, all of which positively impact student achievement and social and emotional learning. But the work is not done. Next, following the work of Muhammad (2020), we plan to dig deeper into the work of improving all students’ literacy skills through developing identity, critical skills, intellectual development, and criticality.

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