

Leveraging Text Sets to Amplify Literacy, Social Justice, and Educational Equity

*Saber leer es saber andar, saber escribir es saber ascender.
(Knowing how to read is knowing how to walk, knowing how to
write is knowing how to soar.)*
— José Martí, 19th century Cuban poet



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For more than three decades—one decade internationally (Mexico, Taiwan, Spain, and Argentina) and two in California (and two brief stints in Texas)—I (Goldman) have dedicated my work and research to literacy instruction for diverse learners, including leading the program design, professional learning, and curriculum development for the San Diego County Office of Education's Writing Redesigned for Innovative Teaching and Equity (WRITE) Initiative, a National Academic Excellence Model and recent Multilingual California Alliance Project innovation. In my work with schools and districts, perhaps the question I receive most frequently from teachers who want to redesign their literacy instruction for equity is "Where do I start?" I typically respond with some version of this answer: Begin with the end in mind. What do you want your students to know and be able to do? How will you get them there? What kinds of texts do you want your students to produce in spoken and written forms? What kinds of experiences do you want to design for your students? In a 2021 Multilingual Educator article [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1w-fYguhyX_gUxC6dlp4aGcQxf1YC_YSF5/view], I describe an equity-centered approach to writing instruction to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners and provide a recipe to align a genre-focused instructional approach to six high-leverage research-based practices (Goldman, 2021). In the following article, Dr. Jag Lathan, educator and founder of

New Generation Equity, joins me to explore a critical component of an equity-centered approach to literacy instruction: text sets.

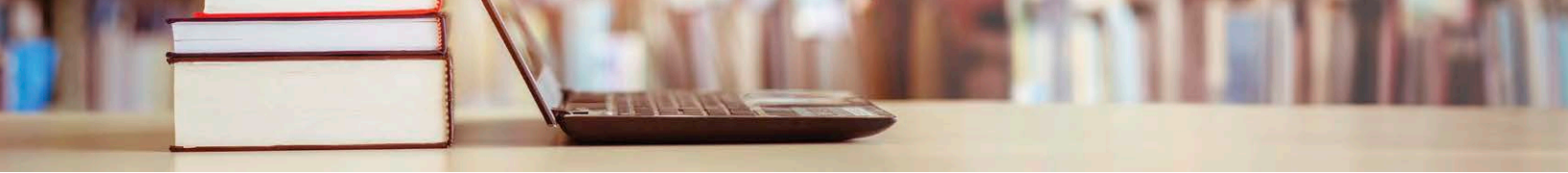
Creating Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Text Sets

To create compelling curricular connections, students need access to high-quality instructional materials that integrate real-world community challenges—texts worth reading, researching, writing, and speaking about. Text sets, a collection of resources about a given topic, can create these captivating connections. Typically, text sets include a range of media types, including books, stories, excerpts from books, articles, art, music, interviews, podcasts, infographics, political cartoons, speeches, and TED Talks. To begin, select an anchor text. Most often, this will be an expository or narrative text. Then, decide on a theme in the anchor text to explore through other texts. Text sets can also include categories (i.e., watch, read-aloud, create, listen, poetry, food, craft) to support specific genres, language functions, and critical thinking (i.e., compare/contrast, narrate, summarize, research). A few of our go-to places to build text sets include ADL Education, Facing History and Ourselves, Learning for Justice, museum websites, Newsela, News Literacy Project, TEDTalks, and Storyline Online.

In her 2020 book, *Cultivating Genius*, Gholdy Muhammad underscores the need to use at least three text sets to design lesson plans for social justice. She focuses

on four pursuits or areas of focus in lesson planning: (1) identity: helping youth to make sense of themselves and others; (2) skills: developing proficiencies across the academic disciplines; (3) intellectual: gaining knowledge and becoming smarter; and (4) criticality: learning and developing the ability to read texts, including print and social contexts, to understand power, equity, and anti-oppression (Muhammad, 2020). Importantly, in her 2023 book, *Unearthing Joy*, she adds a fifth pursuit: joy (Muhammad, 2023).

Text sets present a far-reaching opportunity to ensure accurate and positive portrayals of authors, characters, and topics. The striking lack of representation in children's literature has been well-documented (CCBC, 2023). Representation matters—and this begins by building student agency through interacting with thought-provoking TK-12 text sets. When educators center joy, they affirm their students' identities and experiences (Vasquez, 2014). To fully engage in this culturally and linguistically responsive design work, it is also beneficial to understand the significant role literacy has played in American history (Baker-Bell, 2020). For example abolitionists who sought to end slavery in the early 1800s spread their message largely through the written word (Coleman, 2020). In response, supporters of slavery in the antebellum South began tightening literacy laws in the early 1830s (encyclopediavirginia.org, 1831). Simultaneously, young Black communities



started what were called literary societies, where they discussed and debated their new learning to create a more just society. These 19th-century Black literary societies offer a blueprint for how to improve literacy instruction in California today: connect the curriculum to students' cultural and linguistic histories, lived experiences, and collective activism (Muhammad, 2020). Acknowledging how historical and current inequities and power dynamics have harmed communities across our nation informs how to select texts that support students to see their perspectives, their ways of being and themselves in the world.

Cultivating Collaborative Literacy Learning

Another significant aspect of selecting (and co-selecting) powerful texts for (and with) students to engage with is nurturing a classroom climate where a range of voices engage in meaningful speaking and writing: journals, presentations, debates, portfolios, and projects. Decades of research and best practice indicate that teachers who intentionally create collaborative literacy opportunities improve outcomes for their students (Elabdali, 2021). Designing instruction for equity conversations requires empathy—listening, connecting, and building relationships—and a desire to know, value, and affirm our students—who they are, where they are from, and what is important to them. Multilingual learners are not a monolith. They come from culturally rich homes and communities and a variety of ethnicities.

When teachers cultivate students' abilities to recognize, understand, and address injustices, students begin to see themselves as community change agents—and the texts they read and wrestle with are critical. This social justice instructional lens also includes empowering students as authors of their own lives. For example, students learn about the world around them through community-based literacy projects. For multidialectal and multilingual learners, developing student authors also includes leveraging text sets for cross-linguistic connections. For example, this might include dedicated instructional time to intentionally analyze texts in two languages side-by-side to notice specific ways the languages are similar and different (i.e., cognates/false cognates).

To leverage riveting text sets for collaborative literacy instruction, educators need to understand the established body of literacy research and best practices that support diverse learners. This research base should not be limited to a narrow binary. The research is clear: a lack of adequate phonics instruction is a social justice issue (Goldenberg, 2020). Additionally, educators need to amplify literacy instruction to include best practices for diverse students (The Council of Great City Schools, 2023). Notably, most research highlighted in research of the science of reading has been conducted on White, monolingual students (Milner, 2020). Ethnically and linguistically diverse learners have experienced significant inequities in accessing evidence-based reading instruction (Milner, 2020). For this reason, an equity-conscious approach grounded in multilingual/dialectal pedagogies for diverse learners, whose pathways to literacy may vary, is paramount.

Developing Equity-Conscious Leaders

To create the conditions for excellent, culturally responsive, and affirming literacy practices in schools and districts, TK-12 students need equity-conscious leaders. Equity-conscious leaders inspire passion, purpose, and action in people to actively disrupt systemic inequities (New Generation Equity, 2023). Here are some specific action items that equity-conscious leaders focus on to support high-quality instructional materials—including dynamic text sets—that integrate real-world community issues:

- Create and sustain a climate of rigor and joy-filled learning for adults and students.
- Understand that literacy is a fundamental right for all students and is taught across all subject areas.
- Create space for staff to interrogate their beliefs about literacy. (i.e., Reframe “I teach X and not reading” to “I teach students to think critically about X through literacy.”)
- Understand what high-quality literacy instruction looks and sounds like in order to recognize it, evaluate its effectiveness, and provide ongoing support to staff.
- Study and integrate learning on Targeted Universalism (i.e., specifical-

ly focus on ethnic and linguistically diverse students and students with disabilities as “focal students” to ensure significant progress is made in their literacy learning).

- Put structures in place for teachers and staff to design robust literacy instruction (i.e., grade-level collaboration, cross-subject area collaboration, vertical articulation, and full or half-day design sessions).
- Ensure structured time (i.e., grade-level collaboration, professional learning series) for teachers and staff to consistently engage in cycles of inquiry or improvement cycles to review data and make adjustments to literacy instruction as needed).
- Co-create the standards-aligned metrics with staff.
- Use qualitative and quantitative data frequently to monitor student progress in reading, writing, and speaking across all subject areas.
- Provide relevant feedback to individual teachers, grade/subject matter teams, and the entire school (i.e., share noticeable gains and areas of improvement).
- Work with staff to create the criteria for high-quality text sets (i.e., ensuring texts are culturally affirming, connected to student interests, rigorous, and vocabulary rich).
- Create space for teachers and staff to engage in vertical articulation to ensure literacy instruction is developing across grades and subject areas.
- Engage in frequent classroom walkthroughs to observe literacy instruction across subject areas and observe students in action (i.e., use a co-created walkthrough protocol/tool to ensure staff knows what is being observed and the expectation is clear about what the administrator is looking for).
- Engage families in understanding the focus on literacy and provide tangible resources and tips for at-home support and learning (i.e., family literacy nights, student-led conferences).
- Celebrate student success! 🌸

Notes are available in the appendix of the online version: https://www.gocabe.org/index.php/multilingualeducator_publication/