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Teachers of English®

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE APPROACHES TO THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE IN SECONDARY ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

A Policy Research Brief

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- Purpose: Why Should We Teach Literature?
- Practice: How Should We Teach Literature?
- Picks: What Literature Should We Teach?
- The Promise of Literature Teaching and Learning

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of rigorous and transformative literature instruction.

This brief is organized to address this full range of considerations, encompassing:

- Purpose: Why should we teach literature?
- Practice: How should we teach literature?
- Picks: What literature should we teach?

Our exploration of these questions is not neutral. The principles that we promote in this brief to guide the teaching of literature in the secondary English classroom are grounded in specific values that reflect how we interpret the

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- role of public
- education in
- U.S. society.
- We structure
- our discussion
- of purpose,
- practice,
- and picks of
- literature

instruction within what we consider to be the fundamental promise of literacy education—the cultivation of critical knowledge, skills, and dispositions that young people can leverage to design a more equitable, just, and empathetic democratic future.

Purpose: Why Should We Teach Literature?

“I don’t think teenagers reading literature need to see a world they know; I think they need to see a world they know isn’t bullshit.”
—John Green, 2008

The teaching of literature has historically been and is today a subject with multiple and often competing academic and personal purposes. For example, in terms of academic purposes, literature has been used to instill cultural and moral values (traditionally white, male, Eurocentric) to prepare students for college and/or career, to teach appreciation of great (i.e., canonical) works, to teach students to decode, to earn points in Lexile-based reading programs, and to pass high-stakes standardized tests.

Yet, at the same time, literature is taught for personal reasons: to engage students, to install a passion for reading, to foster lifelong learning, to encourage a love of language and the written word, and to read critically. Finally, we teach literature for social reasons because it is inclusive; it increases cultural capital; it humanizes; it affirms; it increases civic engagement.

Many of the historic academic purposes for reading are not flawed; they just often lead to students “learning about, rather than participating in” English classes (Applebee, 1996, p. 28). These purposes can position students at the margins, rather than in the center. They do not always offer a way in to texts that personal and social purposes encourage. To participate in, students need to encounter, understand, and engage in and with literature. This can seem difficult. As we write, Americans have “rarely been as polarized as we are today,” and the divide has been made worse by the pandemic. “Race, religion and ideology now align with partisan identity in ways that they often didn’t in eras when the two parties were relatively heterogenous coalitions”

(Dimock & Wike, 2020). Teachers are under attack, and moves to dismantle public education are sweeping. This moment can feel unprecedented (and it is), but it is important to remember that this grappling has been going on as long as we have been teaching literature.

This raises the question: Why should we teach literature? If, in the past, the purpose of teaching literature was to impart a set of privileged distinct voices, to enculturate and assimilate immigrants, in the present we need to (re) envision teaching literature in a nation where people often view themselves as having more than one identity to check off in a box (e.g., race, gender), want to contribute to democracy, desire tell their stories, and need to be heard. Essentially, we teach literature for two primary and interrelated reasons: fostering imagination and empathy (e.g., Alsup, 2016; Beers, 2016; Gillespie, 1994; Mirra, 2018).

First, we teach literature to nurture the imagination. When we read, “we read ourselves imaginatively into other lives and by this act expand the pages of our own” (Gillespie, 1994, p. 17). Literature, like life, presents students with various ethical systems, moral perspectives, and literal and figurative worlds that expand and deepen students’ awareness and imagination (Miller, 1968). Literature provides students with springboards for learning, drawing them into “compelling narrative worlds” (Mirra, 2018, p. 32) where they can read, write, and talk, entering into critical conversations about culture, the human condition, society, and their roles as citizens—adding their own

voices to the conversation and seeing themselves in connection with the world (e.g., Applebee, 1996; Appleman, 2009; Morrell, 2015).

Through nurturing the imagination, we help students develop empathy—a second reason why we teach literature. As

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English teacher Tim Gillespie wrote two decades ago,

If we keep following the track of our imaginative response, other arguments for literature emerge. As a reader, I read not only to find myself, I also read to lose myself. Swept along by the magic of narrative, I give myself over to other lives, landscapes, points of view. In this experience is the cultivation of a deeper form of imagination, the empathetic identification with other humans. (1994, p. 17)

Nearly a century ago, James Hosis presented this very idea arguing that English teachers should “quicken the spirit and kindle the mind and imagination” of students so that they “develop habits of weighing and judging human conduct with the hopes of leading them to higher living . . . [and] for use in their future private and public life” (1917, pp. 20, 26). Through the English class, teachers could foster the type of mindset students needed to improve their lives and the lives of others; in other words,

Hosic seemed to be suggesting building empathy.

However, what does it mean to be empathetic and use it in our lives? Empathy is commonly thought to mean to understand someone else’s feelings, to walk in their shoes (an idea often taught with works like *To Kill a Mockingbird*). Through literature, students not only question worlds in the texts they read but also the texts in their lives. As young adult author John Green claims, “reading across cultures is vital because reading critically is an act of empathy and not an act of identification” (Barkdoll & Scherff, 2008, p. 70).

Justifiably, it can be difficult to consider how to include empathy in literature instruction with constraints like standardized testing (including high-stakes exit exams), narrowed curriculum, lack of resources, and censorship of diverse texts and teaching methods (e.g., 1619 Project, Critical Race Theory, LGBTQ-affirming texts). However, at the same time, when these same social, political, and economic constraints negatively impact the lives of students and their families, this need to engage in creative dialogue—and develop empathy—is essential and happens through literature (Mirra, 2018). If our vision is to cultivate students’ imagination and empathy, that means a greater emphasis on a critical approach to teaching literature with titles that honor and empower.

Questions to Consider:

1. What explicit and implicit goals has your department/school/district articulated regarding the purpose of literature instruction?
2. What supports can you provide to students and teachers to embrace both academic and broader social purposes of literature instruction?

Practice: How Should We Teach Literature?

The varied—and often competing or contradictory—purposes for the teaching of literature invite certain pedagogical values and approaches. The practice of the teaching of literature, in other words, is not a neutral or passive endeavor devoid of valued-based commitments, and while perennial conversations about what should be taught for classroom study seem to capture national attention, scholarly voices have been researching and advocating for how texts are or should be taught for quite some time now. This research has shown that, in most cases, teachers’ pedagogical commitments do indeed influence their practice.

For example, in Applebee’s (1993) foundational study of English classrooms across the country, he found that most teachers of literature relied predominantly on one of two methods, or of some combination in between. When teachers strive for academic proficiency, they turn to practices associated with a New Critical, formalist, or a close reading approach. This practice has pervaded classrooms for nearly a century, as it is

closely connected with standardized testing movements that favor students' ability to analyze the inherent features of a text independent of the text's context. This method implies a kind of "top-down" approach, with authority or objective meaning derived from the text and passed down from text to teacher to student. Conversely, when teachers strive for student responsiveness—a more "bottom-up" approach—and a lifelong love of reading, they turn to practices associated with a Reader Response approach. Practices associated with this method favor students' interpretations of texts and the text-to-self, text-to-world,

A critical approach to literature instruction takes many forms, as it asks students to be active, critical consumers and producers of knowledge while asking teachers to model equity and justice in elevating student voices, ideas, and questions.

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Critical and Reader Response approaches to consider, more broadly, "how societal, cultural, and political influences shape texts and readers' responses to those texts" (Macaluso, 2015, p. 78). A critical approach to literature instruction takes many forms, as it asks students to be active, critical consumers and producers of knowledge while asking teachers to model equity and justice in elevating student voices, ideas, and questions.

As Morrell has argued,

A critical English education is explicit about the role of language and literacy in conveying meaning and in promoting or disrupting existing power relations. It also seeks to develop in young women and men skills to deconstruct dominant texts carefully . . . while also instructing them in skills that allow them to create their own critical texts that can be used in the struggle for social justice. Further, critical English education encourages practitioners to draw upon the everyday language and literacy practices of adolescents to make connections with academic literacies and to work toward empowered identity development and social transformation. (2005)

In many cases, this critical approach has found particular traction with the teaching of the traditional canon in a variety of ways (Macaluso & Macaluso 2019; Borsheim-Black et al., 2014; Appleman 2009), including the popular #DisruptTexts movement (Ebarvia et al., 2019), in order to interrogate the inherent ideologies of texts.

More recently, this critical turn has proliferated into a multitude of purposes and practices connected to our current cultural moment and its related goals, values, and concerns. Put simply, these collective practices foster the development of young citizens with flourishing imaginations who exhibit empathy and commitments to equity and justice. Thus, teachers find themselves seeking and relying on the many different

practices that maintain this purpose while speaking into existence the identities of our students and addressing the concerns, issues, and injustices they face in our time. And they do this not only with traditional texts of the ELA classroom but through the means and modalities that index how our students live and thrive in the world. We detail some of these commitments below:

Practice/Lens	Foundational Thinkers	Theory into Practice Examples
<p><i>Anti-bias/Antiracist instruction</i></p> <p><i>Culturally relevant/sustaining literacy education</i></p> <p>To consider students' lives, stories, histories, and traditions as part of the classroom and the curriculum and practices that include their and a plurality of voices and ways of being, doing, and thinking.</p>	<p>Banks, 2008; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Chavez, 2021; Nieto, 1992</p> <p>Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007</p>	<p>"Teaching <i>Ghost Boys</i> to explore police brutality and racism affecting Black communities in the US" (Rubin, 2021)</p> <p>"Surfacing Queer Stories in the High School Canon" (Zaino, 2020)</p> <p>"We're Not Sick, We're Not Straight: Conversion Therapy and the Compulsory Body in YAL" Bittner, et al., 2021</p>
<p><i>Multiliteracies/Digital Literacies</i></p> <p>To consider multiple ways of knowing and representing knowledge and the practices that reflect our students' consumption and production of multi and digital media and texts as new communication technologies.</p>	<p>Street, 1993; New London Group, 1996; Alim, 2005; Winn, 2019</p>	<p>A multimodal "herstory" privileges students' imaginations as they read <i>Frankenstein</i> alongside a visual novel in verse (Sheahan & Nitz, 2021)</p> <p>Students create comic-style essays comparing and contrasting <i>Things Fall Apart</i> and <i>Black Panther</i> (Faughey, 2020)</p> <p>Using documentary-style films about important topics and issues facing the world today (McClanahan, 2020)</p>

Practice/Lens	Foundational Thinkers	Theory into Practice Examples
<p><i>Critical literacy (with canonical and more expansive texts)</i></p> <p>To consider issues connected to power and the practices that expose and interrupt power and oppression in word and world.</p>	<p>Morrell, 2005; Borsheim-Black et al., 2014</p>	<p>Analyzing <i>Othello</i> to question the literary canon (Beatty, 2021)</p> <p>Exploring disability stereotypes in canonical literature (Cormier, 2020)</p> <p>Addressing controversial topics in YA literature with middle schoolers using literary theories (Lightner, 2020)</p> <p>“Encountering ‘Elephants’ and Third Spaces in Difficult Texts” (Harris, 2021)</p>
<p><i>Literacy and popular culture</i></p> <p>To consider the educative potential of engaging, everyday texts relevant to students’ lives and the practices that equip them to use and remix them in a variety of ways.</p>	<p>Lyiscott, 2017; Goble & Goble, 2016</p>	<p>Using examples and conversations from contemporary pop culture (e.g., #MeToo, Taylor Swift, <i>Beauty and the Beast</i>) to analyze toxic masculinity in <i>The Great Gatsby</i> (Macaluso & Macaluso, 2021)</p>
<p><i>Civically engaged literacies</i></p> <p>To consider adolescent concerns, viewpoints, and activism and the practices that develop their leadership in and solutions to real problems.</p>	<p>Mirra et al., 2015; Petrone et al., 2014</p>	<p>Having students research their own views on curriculum and teaching practices (Thakurta et al., 2021)</p>

While not exhaustive, this table represents the many and complex ways in which a critical approach to the teaching of literature manifests in ELA classrooms. While not entirely bottom up or top down, these approaches foreground students—those whom we teach—and the ways in which they live and participate in the world. Unable to be envisioned through a singular lens, these literature classrooms more authentically reflect idealized versions of the democratic societies we hope our students will continue to thrive in.

Questions to Consider

1. How does your department/school/district currently approach the teaching of literary texts? A formalist approach? Reader response? Critical analysis?
2. What supports do you need to foster student-centered and socially conscious pedagogies into literature instruction?

Picks: What Literature Should We Teach?

Our intention is not to provide a list of recommended K–12 literature, given the publication of new texts each year, the unique social, political, and cultural context of each classroom, lists of required texts by schools, districts, and other entities, and a myriad of variables that influence what, how, and why certain literature is selected and taught. Instead, we offer a historical perspective and suggest criteria to consider when selecting literature. Additionally, our intention is not to dismiss the canon; instead, we believe the most commonly

read literature in high school classrooms over the past several decades (Applebee, 1993) should be made accessible to all students to empower them to engage in conversations, both inside and outside of the classroom. Rather than eliminating the canon, we argue for supplementing and expanding the body of literature we teach. Regardless of the text, we should model and instruct students on how to read through a critical lens across a range of literary theories (e.g., postcolonial criticism, Black feminist criticism, Chicana feminist criticism), and provide texts in which all students see themselves and others in authentic, accurate, and humanizing ways (Thomas, 2016).

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The debate over which literature should be taught in high school and how it influences college enrollment was a topic of discussion as early as 1912 by James Felming Hosis, one of NCTE’s founders and the first executive director. Hosis addressed the college “Uniform Entrance Requirement,” which examined students’ knowledge of specific books they were expected to have read in their high school English classes. This requirement, dominated by East Coast educational forces, heavily influenced the curriculum of secondary English classes and in turn, testing. Subsequent NCTE leaders continued to oppose the “Uniform Book

List,” such as Dora V. Smith (1936 NCTE president) who argued that each pupil should be educated “in terms of his own uniqueness within the context of the group,” which could not be accomplished if “the aim is the reading of specific books by every member of the class, mastery of a set number of rules by all pupils, or attainment by everybody of specific standards in speech or writing during any given year of the school system” (Christenbury, 2010, p. 2). The debate over which literature to teach and test, which originated well over a century ago, continues today across classrooms, districts, and professional organizations.

As a children’s librarian at the Chicago Public Library for over 30 years, beginning in 1926, Charlemae Hill Rollins worked diligently to champion children’s literature that possessed literary merit and challenged racial and ethnic distortions of African Americans. She offered readers three questions to analyze texts: (1) Are the people portrayed in the book natural or real; or are they presented from a distorted point of view? (2) Does the book set up standards of superiority or feelings of inferiority in the minds of the children who read it? and (3) Is the book free from derisive names and epithets that would offend? (Chicago Public Library, 2020). Several organizations (e.g., Council on Interracial Books for Children [CIBC]) have drawn upon and elaborated on Rollins’ criteria to produce guidelines for educators, parents, and librarians, such as “10 Quick Ways to Analyze

Children’s Books for Racism and Sexism” (Racism and Sexism Resource Center for Educators, 1974). Similar to Rollins’ criteria, the CIBC encourages readers to examine elements such as the illustrations, storylines, relationships among people, and author’s perspective.

In 1965, Nancy Larrick, former president of the International Reading Association, wrote “The All-White World of Children’s Literature for the Saturday Review” to discuss how “6,340,000 nonwhite children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them” (p. 62). She focused primarily on the damage to African American children but asserted the impact it had on 39,600,000 white children is “even worse” when the white child learns of his superiority rather than developing humility to work toward world cooperation and to address racism. Larrick offered examples of literature that perpetuated stereotypes, emphasized the miniscule number of books that featured authentic depictions of African Americans, and concluded by stating, “White supremacy in children’s literature will be abolished when authors, editors, publishers, and booksellers decide that they need not submit to bigots” (p. 85).

Twenty-five years later, Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, a leading scholar of children’s literature, offered the metaphor of literature as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors as a powerful argument to provide students with multicultural texts. Building on the multicultural education

movement, founded and promoted by scholars such as James Banks, Christine Sleeter, Carl Grant, Geneva Gay, and Sonia Nieto, multicultural literature is an essential component of cultural pluralism and for meeting the main goal of multicultural education—to reduce racial and ethnic prejudice (Banks, 1994). Bishop contends that, “Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books” (1990, p. 1). Of equal importance is ensuring that children from dominant social groups who are overrepresented in literature see books as windows. Bishop cautions that when children only see reflections of themselves in literature, they may grow up with “an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world—a dangerous ethnocentrism.”

Larrick and Bishop asserted that making multicultural literature that ceases to perpetuate stereotypes and caricatures available to children is not just the responsibility of teachers and parents. Publishers hold a tremendous amount of power in determining which authors are published, who has the moral authority to tell stories, and how books are produced and distributed to the public. Since 1985, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center

(CCBC) has been tracking and counting children’s books “By Black Authors and Illustrators Published in the United States.” In 1994 they broadened their statistics to include books “By and/or About Black, Indigenous and People of Color Received by the CCBC.” In 2018, they added Asian, Latinx, Pacific Islander, and Arab to more accurately reflect the diversity of authors and texts published each year. While the only comparison we can make between 1985 and 2020 is the percentage of books by Black authors and illustrators, 0.007% versus 0.07% respectively, we have seen significant increases in the number of books by and about authors and illustrators of diverse backgrounds¹. These trends are significant when considering NCTE’s *Resolution on the Need for Diverse Children’s and Young Adult Books* (2015), which resolved to:

- Advocate for more children’s and young adult books from publishers and booksellers that reflect the culturally diverse lives and experiences present in the United States, and
- Highlight and support authors, illustrators, publishers, and booksellers whose work represents multiple perspectives and cultural diversity in the lives of all children.

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas cites Larrick, Bishop, the CCBC, and NCTE’s 2015

¹ Data on books by and about Black, Indigenous, and People of Color published for children and teens compiled by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison. <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/books-by-about-poc-fnn/>

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Resolution in her 2016 article, “Stories Still Matter: Rethinking the Role of Children’s Literature Today.” Thomas acknowledges the persistent “gaps” in K–12 education—including racial and ethnic achievement gaps in literacy and educational

While the persistent absence of diverse representation is extremely problematic, equally harmful are inauthentic depictions of people of color that reinforce negative stereotypes and caricatures, thereby further marginalizing minoritized groups.

- attainment as
- well as “empathy,
- opportunities,
- resources, and
- technology” (Irvine,
- 2003; Ladson-
- Billings, 2006;
- Milner, 2013, as
- cited in Thomas
- 2016). However,
- she discusses a
- more troubling and
- pressing gap—the
- “imagination gap”—
- caused in part “by
- the lack of diversity

in childhood and teen life depicted in children’s books and media” (p. 112). This gap, or lack of access, affects the development of children’s imaginations. She also emphasizes the critical point that while the persistent absence of diverse representation is extremely problematic, equally harmful are inauthentic depictions of people of color that reinforce negative stereotypes and caricatures, thereby further marginalizing minoritized groups.

We have offered a brief history on the debate around which literature is taught, the need to teach an array of multicultural literature across K–12 education, and resources from leading scholars and organizations to help educators analyze

and select texts. Fortunately, educators and literacy scholars have collaborated to produce invaluable resources, such as NCTE’s Build Your Stack®, to help teachers deepen their knowledge of books and expand their libraries.

Another prominent organization, We Need Diverse Books, describes itself as a “grassroots organization of children’s book lovers” and advocates for changes in the publishing industry to honor Bishop’s call to offer literature that acts as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors.

Recently, Toliver (2021) extended Bishop’s metaphor to include telescopes, to “amplify the unseen by magnifying things that are too far away for us to see on our own” (p. 29). She offers this additional metaphor to reiterate the importance of children seeing themselves in books and to reflect on images that are “distorted, laughable and stereotypical” (p. 29). Toliver concludes by stating it is our duty, responsibility, and obligation as educators to provide readers, particularly youth of color, with multiple windows, mirrors, and telescopes. We agree that by supplementing the existing, traditional canon with literature that celebrates the vast and diverse lived experiences of all students, we invite all students to participate in English to become empathetic, empowered, civically minded, and imaginative world changers.

Questions to Consider

1. What range of identities, experiences, and voices are present in the literary texts that your department/school/district introduces to students?

2. What supports would assist you in constructing text sets that represent the full diversity of human experience?

The Promise of Literature Teaching and Learning

“Books are a form of political action. Books are knowledge. Books are reflection. Books change your mind.” —Toni Morrison

If we believe that the practice of literature instruction should involve students, texts, and the society in which they live, . . . we must foreground cultural relevance and intercultural exchange in the text choices we make.

- The previous
- sections of this
- brief represent
- building blocks
- aimed at helping
- English language
- arts educators
- articulate a nuanced
- philosophy about
- the teaching
- of literature in
- the secondary
- classroom that
- reaches beyond the
- narrowly academic

toward expansive personal, social, and transformative civic potential. If we believe that the purpose of literature instruction should involve cultivating the imagination and empathizing with fellow human beings, we must work toward goals that no standardized test can capture. If we believe that the practice of literature instruction should involve authentic dialogue between students, texts, and the society in which they live, we must teach in ways that privilege youth voice, critique, and critical social awareness. And if we believe that the literary picks that we introduce to students should honor and amplify the

varied voices of the world around us, we must foreground cultural relevance and intercultural exchange in the text choices we make.

These commitments speak to what we put forth as the overarching promise of literature instruction—inspiring and supporting youth to build a more inclusive, equitable, and joyous future than the present they are inheriting. As discussed above, literary texts (and indeed, English language arts classrooms) do not exist in a social vacuum—they are “situated” products of the world that intrinsically transmit cultural and political messages. In turn, the act of reading, analyzing, and responding to these texts must be viewed as reading, analyzing, and responding to this world. Thus, reading, analyzing, and responding to literature

When young people are invited to enter into conversations with the figured worlds of creative fiction, they are learning how to hone their civic voices and engage with broader society around them.

become a praxis of social dreaming in a flawed society—what Toni Morrison (1992) describes as “an unprecedented opportunity to comprehend the resilience and gravity, the inadequacy and the force of the imaginative act” (p. xiii).

When young people are invited to enter into conversations with the figured worlds of creative fiction, they are learning how to hone their civic voices and engage with broader society around them. Maxine Greene (2000) reminds

us that reading allows young people to “discover ordinarily unseen and unknown dimensions of their own experiences” and that, as a result, “not only may there be a pull toward new relationships, toward community, but such readers may be moved also to new modes of self-definition, new beginnings arising from an emerging awareness of both difference and possibility” (p. 42). Greene sees these new beginnings as social as well as personal, suggesting possibilities

for changing the world and ourselves. She explains that classroom dialogue about texts releases the “social imagination,” which she defines as “the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, in our schools” (p. 5).

We see this as a fitting mandate and call to action for the teaching of literature—support our students to invent what should be and what might be.

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