ISSN 2577-0551

WOW STORIES

CONNECTIONS FROM THE CLASSROOM
VOLUME XII, ISSUE I

Spring 2025

Making Space for Literature Amidst Mandates

Worlds of WORDS

College of Education

wowlit.org

WOW Stories: Volume XII, Issue 1
Making Space for Literature Amidst Mandates
Spring 2025

Table of Contents

Contributors to this Issue:
Carolyn Cort, Boise State University, Boise, ID
Jacqueline Gale, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ
Mary Jade Haney, University of South Carolina Columbia, Columbia, SC
Dorea Kleker, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ
Rosalia Pacheco, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM
Kathy G. Short, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ
Narges Zandi, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ

Editor:
Yoo Kyung Sung, Lead editor
Julia López-Robertson, Co-editor

Production Editor:
Aika Adamson, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ

Introduction: Making Space for Literature Amidst Mandates

This issue of *WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom* presents a collection of articles centered on the theme "Making Space for Literature Amidst Mandates." Teacher educators, a classroom teacher, and a librarian from diverse school communities share their experiences of navigating institutional expectations while remaining committed to meaningful, literature-rich teaching practices.

Throughout these articles, we identify the complex power structures within which educators carry out their work; structures that often dictate what and how they are expected to teach. Yet, the authors in this issue demonstrate how teaching is an act of negotiation, resistance, and resilience. As Johnson and Freedman (2006) remind us, "When teachers decide to embrace a critical pedagogy, they are deciding to bring a questioning stance into their classroom" (p. 16). This issue underscores how critical pedagogical stances allow educators to prioritize student-centered learning, even within systems of constraint. The classrooms highlighted in this issue emerge as spaces of resilience, rooted in teachers' trust in their students, the insights and cultural knowledge students bring, and the shared validation among teachers through collaborative reflection.

Most importantly, these narratives illuminate the enduring power of children's literature as a medium for authentic engagement and resistance that uplifts communities rather than jeopardizes them.

In the first two vignettes, Rosalia Pacheco and Carolyn Cort showcase the powerful and resilient voices of preservice teachers shaped through university preparation programs. Rosalia's reflection draws on her identity as a Latina woman and storyteller, illustrating how her cultural background supports her efforts to engage students in culturally responsive literacy practices. Her preservice teachers demonstrate courage and agency as they incorporate their heritage languages in classroom practices despite curriculum mandates focused on the Science of Reading.

Carolyn Cort's article shares her experiences applying the Science of Reading while reframing Florida's Reading Initiative (FRI). She examines how she integrates key components—reading comprehension, language, knowledge, metacognition, and fluency—with children's literature in her comprehensive literacy course. Carolyn challenges the binary of science versus literature, instead inviting readers to envision a shared goal of developing skilled, engaged, and critical readers. Her article presents preservice teachers' reflections on the intersection of evidence-based reading instruction and literature-rich learning environments.

The third article by Jacqueline Gale focuses on her Title I high school classroom, where many of her students identify as Latinx or as refugees from Africa and the Middle East. Jacqueline's commitment to culturally sustaining pedagogy is exemplified in her decision to teach banned books like The Kite Runner. Her story speaks to the heart of this issue's theme—making space for literature even when it is contested and reflects the risks and rewards of honoring students' literary needs amidst mandates.

In the fourth article, Dorea Kleker, Narges Zandi, and Kathy Short highlight a teacher-led inquiry group at a bilingual school, which explores themes of immigration and refugee experiences. The group creates a courageous space where teachers learn from one another's rich responses to their inquiry questions, collectively challenging restrictive narratives.

Finally, this issue continues the WOW Visual Stories feature, launched last fall, with a new contribution from school librarian, Mary Jade Haney. Through her visual storytelling, Mary Jade shares dynamic examples of collaborative literacy initiatives including student-organized library events, writing workshops, and interdisciplinary summer camps. Her work highlights the essential role of librarians in promoting culturally relevant literacy and building bridges between schools, families, and communities.

Across all these contributions, a consistent theme that emerges is teacher educators, teachers, and librarians are creating space, despite mandates, for literature to thrive.

They recognize and nurture teachers' and students' cultural backgrounds and voices, positioning literature not as an add-on, but as an integral part of learning. As this issue reminds us, the work of teaching is never neutral (Freire, 2005). It may be influenced by constraints, but it is also shaped by courage. Literature remains a powerful tool for fostering critical engagement, building community, and envisioning more just educational spaces.

Reference

Freire, P. (2005). Pedagogy of the oppressed (30th Anniversary Edition). New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group

Johnson, H., & Freedman, L. (2005). *Developing critical awareness at the middle level: Using texts as tools for critique and pleasure.* International Reading Association.

Yoo Kyung Sung, Lead editor

Julia López-Robertson, Co-editor

Navigating Science of Reading Mandates Through a Culturally Responsive Lens

Rosalia Pacheco

As a classroom teacher and now a university literacy instructor, I have found myself juggling literacy initiatives and curriculum mandates. Most recently, the science of reading is a hot topic affecting school district and university reading curriculum. My background as a storyteller and Latina woman caused me to go about this process from a different perspective with an emphasis on infusing culturally responsive practices.

Background: Science of Reading in the Southwestern United States

Most recently, I went through the process of restructuring the reading courses I teach based on required curriculum mandates. Current literacy initiatives in the Southwestern United States are requiring the science of reading and structured literacy approaches in reading instruction. This made sense to me because of my background in special education; specifically, teaching reading skills explicitly using a more diagnostic approach. However, this worried me because I believe many of the instructional models are rooted in behaviorist perspectives rather than a social cultural viewpoint (Stahl, 1997).

In my view, specific strategies to support culturally and linguistically diverse students are often left out of currently used science of reading curriculum and professional development, for example, Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training developed by Louisa C. Moats and Carol A. Tolman. I also question the intention of curriculum mandates; for example, the possible use of literacy campaigns, a mass effort to reduce illiteracy, as a way of "centralizing authorities to establish a moral or political consensus" (Arnove & Graff, 1987, p. 2).

My Dilemma

In the Southwestern United States, teachers in districts are receiving professional development training statewide, for example LETRS training. I found some useful information in the LETRS training when I went through it myself. However, I also found there was very little reference to instruction for English learners. In addition, I felt some information that was presented was from a deficit perspective.

Therefore, I was left with the dilemma of restructuring literacy courses to align with the science of reading while building teaching models for supporting diverse learners. To do this, I first investigated available resources on the science of reading for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students. This area is emerging and there is much work to be done to identify best practices.

I found there have been discussions at the national level about concerns of the recent push toward the science of reading. The National Committee for Effective Literacy (NCEL) raised concerns on the appropriateness of these literacy practices for English learner/emergent bilingual students. In response to these concerns, The Reading League (TRL) and NCEL created a joint statement

regarding implementation for English learner/emergent bilingual students that tackled issues such as the importance of oral language and home language development for these learners. A couple of suggestions that were offered in that statement include (The Reading League Summit, 2023):

- Utilizing home language as an asset for literacy development of English
- Use of a variety of culturally and linguistically responsive materials for instruction

Following this research, I was intentional in incorporating the suggestions offered by TRL and NCEL. The following vignettes highlight ways in which I, along with teacher candidates, infused the science of reading curricular mandates into authentic language and literature literacy experiences for students in Southwest.

I teach three reading methods courses for pre-service teachers in the general education teacher preparation program. Because reading courses would be undergoing a teacher prep inspection by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the United States Teacher Preparation Inspection (TPI-US), I was required to update these courses to align with the science of reading and structured literacy tenants. Initially I studied data from other instructors who had taught the reading courses, collaborated with the elementary education program coordinator to get input from clinical supervisors, reviewed previous course syllabi, created aligned syllabi, and updated course texts and materials.

Integrating Culturally Responsive Practices

Because of the specific needs of students enrolled in public schools in the Southwest, I had to ensure that instruction in the courses included opportunities for instructors to clearly model considerations for cultural and linguistic diversity, for example with the use of culturally responsive practices. Culturally responsive practice includes a focus on the student throughout the learning process (e.g., using active methods or including oral language development activities), use of cultural competence (e.g., drawing on experiences, languages, funds of knowledge), and a critical consciousness (Gay, 2002; Grassi & Barker, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). For example, teacher candidates learned about interactive read alouds using culturally relevant texts (González, 1997; Pacheco, 2023) and researched resources for translating literature. However, research on pairing culturally responsive practices with the science of reading is still emerging, making the task more difficult.

I found that although many course texts such as *The Teaching Reading Sourcebook* (Honig et al., 2019) considered the difference between language structures and the relevance for teaching English, there was very little guidance for pre-service teachers to consider culturally responsive practice paired with the science of reading. Despite the lack of resources, I was able to integrate culturally responsive practices and considerations pre-service teachers could utilize and ponder. Additionally, I modeled the use of hands-on learning such as games like Telephone Pictionary in which students use diagrams to explain key vocabulary and movement like Total Physical Response to act out vocabulary and shape their bodies to represent word definitions.

Personal Experiences & Innovative Teaching Examples

My hope was to create a community of learning in the reading courses where instructional practices could be explored and evaluated with students in mind. Through this process, teacher candidates shared their own experiences of learning to read, as many are English learners themselves. For example, we discussed their memories of learning to read. One pre-service teacher said she did not learn to read until fourth grade because the texts she was reading were irrelevant to her culture. It wasn't until she was introduced to a book she found relatable that she grew as a reader. Other students discussed being reprimanded for speaking their home language at school. Some teacher candidates shared that they were identified or tested for having a specific learning disability. These discussions were very emotional for some and caused them to reflect on their own practices for teaching reading.

I also shared personal family experiences with reading. My mother did not speak in school until the fifth grade because Spanish was her first language. Teachers thought she could not read or speak. The reason she did not speak is because the administration warned my grandparents that my mother would have to be transferred to a different school if they heard her speaking Spanish.

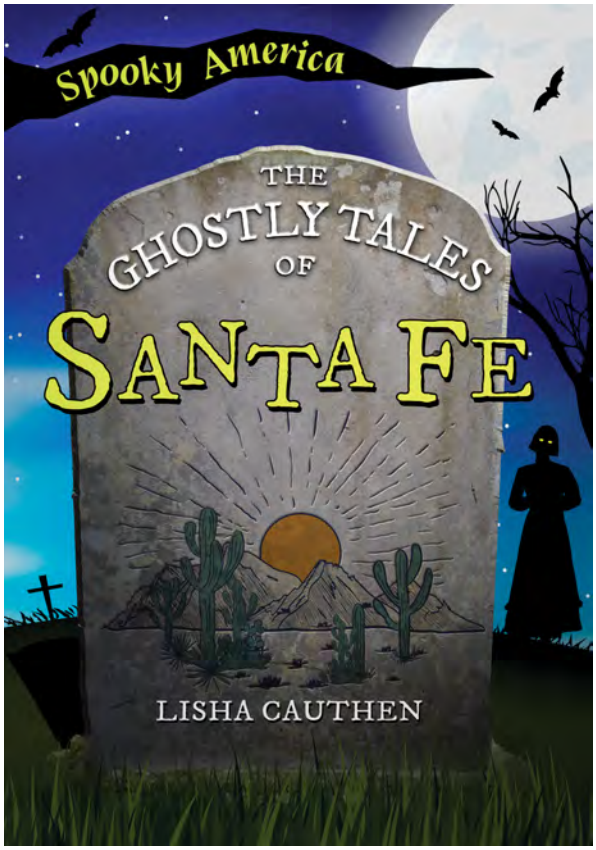
Valuing Educational Traditions

Based on personal stories, the teacher candidates and I reflected on ways to create a language rich classroom environment that supports multilingualism. In the reading courses I taught, I introduced storytelling paired with literature (de Aragón, 2015; Sauvageau, 1989). When teaching phonological awareness skills, such as rhyme recognition, vocabulary from the story can be used to provide practice of rhyme generation during the retelling. This provides opportunities for students to develop oral language skills during reading instruction which is integral for English learners. Storytelling is an ancient family literacy practice used in communities, specifically Indigenous and Latinx communities throughout the world. I remember my grandfather sitting me on his lap, telling stories, and singing songs in Spanish. These experiences have allowed me to think critically about the instruction I provide, especially reading instruction.

My Process

To model the use of storytelling for teacher candidates, I told a story from the book *Haunted Santa Fe* by Ray John de Aragón (2018). This book is a collection of folk stories with historical overviews in each

section. It also incorporates Spanish words and relevant topics known throughout Spanish speaking countries. There is a fourth grade reader version of the book available as well (Cauthen, 2023), which was developed from de Aragón's book. Using a book with text or words in the language(s) spoken by students makes the books linguistically relevant and meaningful to them, not to mention aligned to the recommendations from the TRL and NCEL statement. It is also a way to make connections between languages and language structures despite mandates of the science of reading instruction.

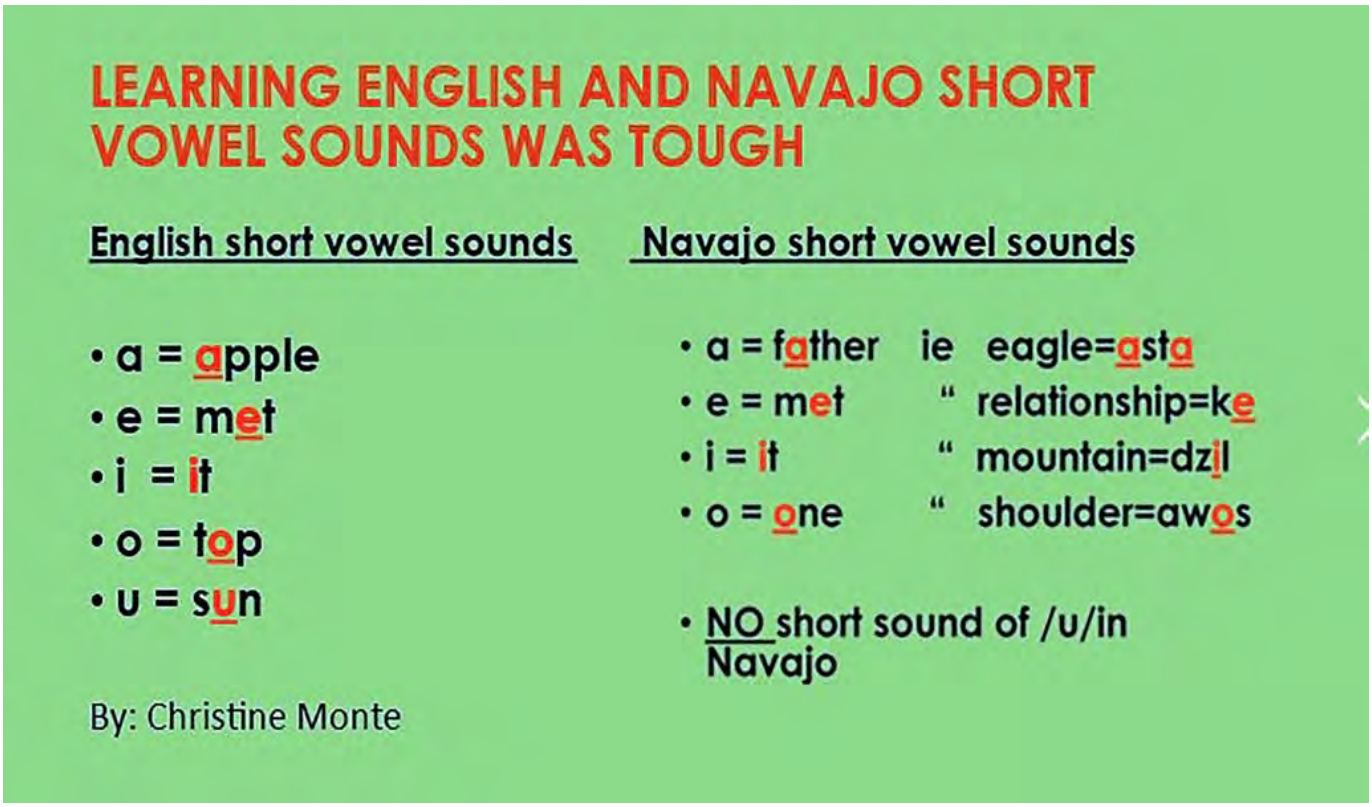


I began my teaching modeling with explicit instruction on how to identify rhyming words, followed by activities using examples and non-examples. Then, teacher candidates orally generated words that rhymed with the chosen vocabulary from the story. Next, I told the story again with students acting out the parts. During the story re-tell, the rest of the class used body motions to recognize rhyming words as well as generate rhyming words throughout the process. Finally, teacher candidates individually created rhyming words on a worksheet. Rhyming words did not have to be only in English. Following this model lesson, we discussed ways teacher candidates in reading courses could potentially implement the storytelling strategy or a modified version during their student teaching in their individual school placements.

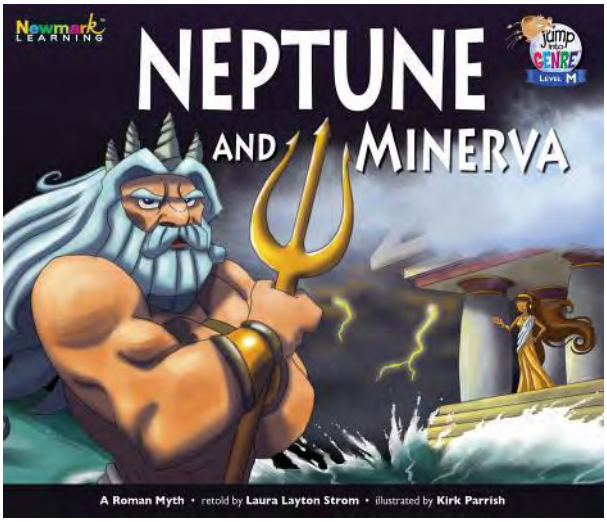
Christine's Vision

Christine expressed her desire to explore ways to incorporate the Diné language into science of reading instruction, especially because she is a fluent speaker of the language. She was placed in a third grade class in a community school for her student teaching practicum. All nineteen students in her class were Navajo and 85% spoke both Diné and English. Ten percent of the students understoond Diné but could not speak it, while five percent of the students did not understand or speak Diné.

When teaching reading, Christine found that many of the students struggled with phonological awareness foundational skills. Through assessment she found that most of the students particularly struggled with short and long vowel sounds. Also, because Christine is a fluent Navajo speaker, she recognized that she had to make language comparisons when providing vowel sound instruction. Christine made many language considerations for her lesson, for example, Navajo language uses tonal, rising and falling tones, whereas English does not. She had to demonstrate these differences and provide opportunities for students to practice. Students used mirrors when available to make connections with articulation. Additionally, Christine included the instruction that Diné has a four-vowel phonemic vowel system that includes /a, e, i, o/ as compared to /a, e, i, o, u/ in English. She also modeled the nasality, length, and tone as well as variations in Diné not present in English.



Christine carefully planned lessons to teach these skills and make language connections. She went through the process of modeling pronunciations utilizing the I Do, We Do, You Do instructional approach adopted by structured literacy. This approach is like the Gradual Release model that incorporates the process of I do, we do, they do, you do. Christine was also very careful to build on the strengths of the students so that she did not teach from a deficit perspective. She celebrated language variety and diversity in pronunciations. At the same time, she was building knowledge for spelling the words in English. Christine observed that students were making deep connections with language which contributed to their ability to decode and read words in English with this instruction, especially for the Diné speaking students.



Adrian's Creativity

Adrian was placed in a second grade classroom in an elementary school. Adrian is very artistic and creative in his teaching. He often initiated discussions in class about incorporating hands-on experiences and differentiation when teaching reading skills, especially to incorporate culturally responsive practices for Indigenous students. He planned a lesson based on the Common Core standard we were learning about during a comprehension unit in the reading course, recounting a short sequence of events. Adrian decided to include the hands-on task of following steps to make paper. The paper was used to create a book to recount the sequence

of events from the text *Neptune and Minerva* by Laura Layton Strom (2019). He also connected the content to legends and myths.

Adrian shared that through progress monitoring, he found that one student progressed tremendously with this lesson. He felt the student was engaged throughout and was able to connect to his own cultural experiences with legends and myths. Adrian expressed that he was able to tap into his personal creativity as an artist, which is very important to him as an educator. The freedom to be creative supported his sense of agency and reminded him of the joy of teaching.

Jeanette's Engagement

Jeanette speaks both English and Spanish fluently and was placed in a kindergarten dual language school. In her placement, 12 of the 20 students were identified as English learners whose primary home language is Spanish. She planned a lesson to teach letter-sound correspondences. In this lesson she wanted to ensure that students were engaged every step of the way. Jeanette included a great deal of visual supports, games, chants, hand movements, and charts she created to compare English and Spanish. She also created materials and charts to use during instruction.

Before and after instruction, Jeanette assessed student progress. She noticed that students made meaningful growth, especially one student who was provided one-on-one instruction as well. This student had been recently tested by a speech and language pathologist because of concerns of difficulty with communication. Jeanette was ecstatic that the student had progressed significantly with her instruction. She also shared that the experience was highly beneficial in nurturing multilingual practice in tandem with teaching foundational reading skills.

Final Reflections

Although there is much to be done to ensure that instruction based on the current science of reading mandate includes considerations for diverse learners, educators must explore ways to infuse cultural and linguistic responsiveness with explicit teaching of reading skills. It is important that policy makers and curriculum developers focus on these needs purposefully and not just as an afterthought. As a reading faculty in a elementary education teacher preparation program, my journey to better serve students in classrooms will continue.

References

Arnove, R. F., & Graff, H. J. (1987). *National literacy campaigns: Historical comparative perspectives.* Plenum Press.

Cauthen, L. (2023). *The ghostly tales of Santa Fe.* Arcadia Children's Books.

De Aragón, R. (2015). *La Llorona.* Event Horizon Press.

De Aragón, R. J. (2018). *Haunted Santa Fe.* History Press.

Gay, G. (2002). Culturally responsive teaching in special education for ethnically diverse students: Setting the stage. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 15*(6), 613-629.

González, L. M. (1997). *El romance de Don Gato.* Scholastic Inc.

Grassi, E., & Barker, H. B. (2010). *Culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional students: Strategies for teaching and assessment.* Sage Publishing.

Honig, B., Diamond, L., & Gutlohn, L. (2018). *The teaching reading sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Academic Therapy Publications.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*(3), 465–491.

Moats, C. M. & Tolman, C. A. (2019). *Language essentials for teachers of reading and spelling* (LETRS). Voyager Sopris Learning.

Pacheco, H. (2023). *Ernesto Joked.* Pajarito Chronicles.

U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2022). Digest state dashboard. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved November 29, 2024 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest-dashboard/state/new%20mexico#characteristicsofpublicschoolstudents%20cite%20apa

Sauvageau, J. (1989). *Stories that must not die.* Pan American Publishing Co. Inc.

Stahl, S. A., & Hayes, D. A. (1997). *Instructional models in reading.* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Strom, L. L. (2019). *Neptune and Minerva.* Newmark Learning.

The Reading League Summit (2023). *Understanding the difference: The science of reading and implementation for English Learners/Emergent Bilinguals.* Retrieved on November 29, 2024 from https://www.thereadingleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/TRLC-ELEB-Understanding-the-Difference-The-Science-of-Reading-and-Implementation.pdf

Dr. Rosalía Pacheco is a Literacy Lecturer III in the Department of Teacher Education, Educational Leadership & Policy (TEELP). She holds an MA and PhD in Special Education with an emphasis on access and inclusion for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse and students with and without disabilities. She is a licensed teacher and taught in NM schools for 11 years including teaching English Language Arts, is LETRS trained, and has experience with intervention in core instruction including reading.

ORCID: 0000-0002-2651-2587

Children's Literature and the Science of Reading: Essential Partners for Comprehension

Carolyn Cort

"Is that actually what the science says... that I should disassemble my classroom library? Scrap read-alouds and read-ins?!" The young teacher's frustration and distress following a Professional Learning Community (PLC) discussion about the Science of Reading was palpable, and it spilled out into a hallway conversation. Her takeaway from the meeting led by a district-level instructional coach was that phonics, phonemic awareness, and decodable books should be the primary focus of her literacy instruction. I knew that the science of reading research did not translate into restricting read-alouds – but somehow it had been misconstrued or perhaps misperceived into a mandative critique of this teacher's classroom practices. I listened to her frustrated questions, and empathized because it took me back to the early aughts, when the Reading First movement barreled into schools.

Part of the sweeping No Child Left Behind act, RF funded curriculum and phonics-focused professional development, and earnest reading coaches were tasked with wandering in and out of classrooms, ensuring fidelity to approved curricula which promised results through "scientifically-based reading instruction." It was 2002 and teachers like me were challenged not to spend time reading aloud and engaging in literature circles, suggesting these and other practices were responsible for U.S. children failing to make adequate yearly progress. Science, social studies, and art took a backseat to "double dips" of reading instruction time using decodable books and isolated skills practice. I remembered taking down my Graeme Base alphabet posters and replacing them with sound-spelling cards aligned to the new reading curriculum. As I listened to the frustrated young teacher before me, I started wondering... is this Science of Reading movement just history repeating itself? Are we in the midst of another swing of the pendulum? More importantly, how might we avoid reviving fruitless ideological debates, reorient this current moment, and coalesce around shared inquiry and purpose?

Recent experience gives me reasons to hope for more unified efforts going forward. The actual science of reading (that is, the body of research itself rather than the program) sheds light on the complexities of the reading process, and in doing so, highlights that engagement with rich literature and informational texts is a necessary, integral part of becoming a reader. I recently read evidence of this engagement happening in reflections written by the insightful teacher candidates with whom I work at a large urban university. Their writing revealed classroom practices of mentor teachers who are dedicated to embracing both evidence-aligned practices teaching the science-based components of reading and fostering literature rich classroom environments. This article presents an overview of the science of reading, its context in the national conversation, and insights from future teachers highlighting the good work of experienced educators enacting nuanced and comprehensive understandings about children learning to read.

The Science of Reading

Lately, it seems like the Science of Reading is everywhere. To be clear, scientific research about reading is not new, but the phrase itself has become ubiquitous and brand-like in literacy spaces

from curriculum to learning games to legislation. Fueled in part by recent media attention, the term's recent surge in usage has been influential in classrooms, school districts, and universities. The International Literacy Association (n.d.) defines it as "a corpus of objective investigation and an accumulation of reliable evidence about how humans learn to read and how reading should be taught." This body of research, and its recent spotlight, is providing shared language and foundational understandings with the potential to align the efforts of teachers, teacher educators, administrators, and other stakeholders around this critical work.

Among its noticeable influences, discussions about research on reading has given renewed attention to defining and ensuring that children are provided expert literacy instruction. Educator preparation programs (EPPs) are under increased scrutiny to provide evidence that they are preparing teacher candidates who are well-started and equipped to meet these expectations. EPPs are establishing and shoring up robust literacy coursework sequences and candidate expectations that align to the science of reading. Similarly, schools and districts are focusing professional development efforts on understanding the reading and writing process better so that they can be literacy experts ready to meet the needs of their students.

Additionally, increased awareness of the scientific research about reading is shining a spotlight on the critical role of phonics and phonemic awareness in learning to read. Educators have been reminded about explicit instruction of the linguistic features of written and spoken words, and the importance of doing so systematically, guided by data-informed decisions and responsive instructional planning. Additional layers of curriculum review have been enacted to ensure that instructional materials support strategies and content that align with the sciences of reading and learning.

However, the Science of Reading, when interpreted as a collective push towards teaching fundamentals, is not without criticism. Pearson and Tierney (2023) wrote an extensive critique of the movement, digging into some of the claims they attribute to Science of Reading advocates. Central to their critique is challenging the notion that key aspects of reading development and the associated pedagogy are settled science. They argue that literacy research must continue using more interactive and situated approaches. "There is a need to nurture a science of reading development that seeks evidence-based findings across at least three layers of diversity – diverse *learners* experiencing diverse *pedagogies* in diverse *settings*" (p. 17). Kim and Snow (2021) add important questions to the discussion about how the science is being translated into instructional practice. They point out that the Science of Reading need to be "complemented with equivalent attention to the 'science of teaching reading,'" including teacher knowledge and classroom practices (p. 5). These critiques highlight the ongoing need for careful consideration, future research, and nuanced application of science of reading principles in classroom practice.

As an educational community, it is imperative that we ensure the science not be oversimplified, or interpreted improperly or too narrowly, as recent discussion of the media coverage suggests (Goodwin & Jiménez, 2021; Wexler, 2024). We've known for a long time that phonics and decoding comprise one constrained (albeit very important) set of skills within a network of interacting processes. However, to focus on this one component as a magic solution, is to ignore many others

and the complex interaction between reader, text, and task that leads to skilled reading comprehension. Interpretations of the science of reading that over-simplify or narrowly represent scientific research leads to misguided mandates and teachers who feel as my young teacher friend did: *the only thing we can teach now is phonics.*

The reading process is impossible to capture in a single theory, buzz-phrase, or packaged program. But now, more than ever, a solid framework that represents the interconnectedness of multiple components is needed to serve as an anchor for teaching, learning, and discussion. As a teacher educator, I use and rely on frameworks to guide learning and provide a touchpoint as teacher candidates' conceptual understandings develop. Working with these future teachers over the years has helped me think about content in new ways as they offer their fresh and unique perspectives. An example of this happened a few years ago, while teaching a Comprehensive Literacy course to elementary education majors. I was using the Five Pillars model (National Institute for Literacy, 2003); each of the parallel, upright pillars had a label: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. One student raised a tentative hand and asked, "Wouldn't four pillars holding up one comprehension roof make more sense?" I marveled at this wisdom and determined they were right. Because mastery of skills in each pillar on their own is incomplete and pointless – but reconceptualizing the first four pillars as existing in order to support the "comprehension roof" was a more accurate representation of the roles of each pillar in the reading process. I began the search for a more comprehensive and nuanced framework that might better hold the complexities surrounding the science of reading.

The Florida Reading Initiative (Lane & Hayes, 2015) developed such a framework designed to guide teacher knowledge development. With reading comprehension at its center, it includes four components and multiple subcomponents that influence and lead to skilled reading.

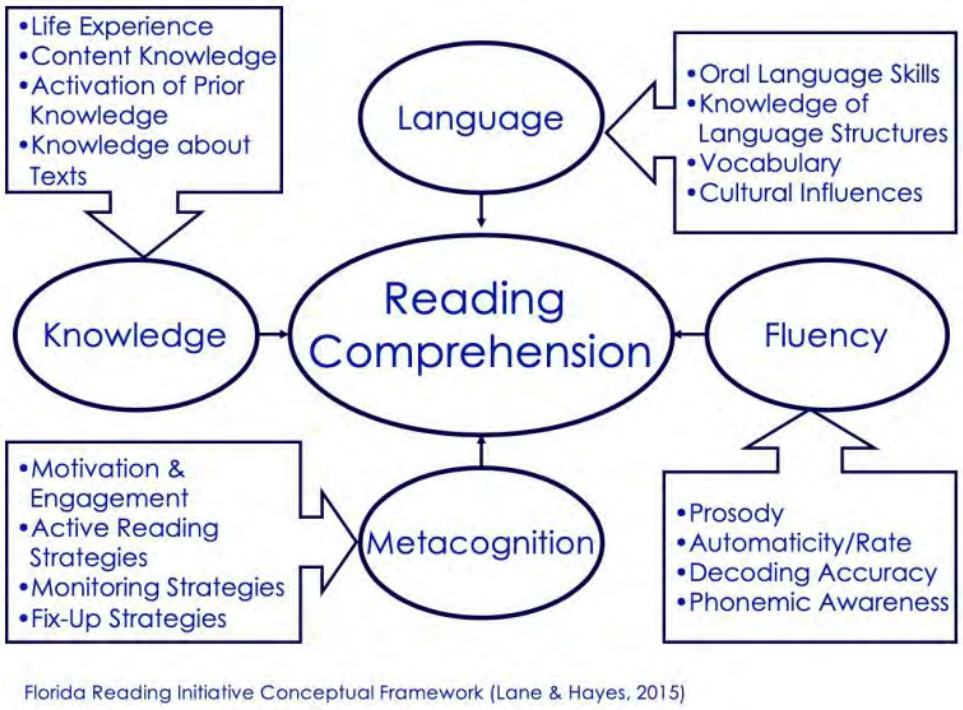


Figure 1. Florida reading initiative conceptual framework.

This framework broadly represents the science of reading by organizing components in a way that illustrates, "...the orchestration of a vast array of knowledge and skills that lead to a single, central purpose: to comprehend text" (Lane & Hayes, 2015). Because of this, I decided to use the FRI framework to structure the reflections assigned to my preservice teachers engaged in field experiences in local partner schools. I asked the students to observe literacy instruction through the lens of the four FRI components, watching specifically for ways that children engaged with text beyond decoding and the practice of constrained skills. I was curious to learn if literacy teaching routines would be formulaic or narrowly focused on single components, given the district's focus on science of reading professional development. But instead, what I learned from my students' reflections is that amidst a science of reading focus and rigorous standards, many teachers are still fostering authentic purposes and love for reading. Their reflections offered unique windows into classrooms where teachers are addressing the components of literacy on a daily basis through explicit, systematic instruction, AND using literature in thoughtful, intentional ways, to develop, integrate and apply those foundational skills aligned to the science of reading.

Component 1: Language

Comprehending text requires understanding language (NELP, 2008; Catts, Adlof, & Weismer, 2004). A child's understanding of language is influenced by many sociocultural factors including the number of words and language interactions they are exposed to. Additionally, the amount of text read to them has a tremendous impact on the development and understanding of oral language – which is known to be the foundation for all literacy (Logan, Justice Yumus, & Chaparro-Moreno, 2019). Essentially, the more words children know, the more easily they are able to read and learn more words. By engaging in language interactions and hearing more books read aloud, children are equipped to recognize patterns of syntax and pragmatics when they encounter them in texts.

Emilee, a junior in the Elementary Education program was assigned to a pre-k classroom for her field experience. She shares her experiences of observing and eventually leading read-alouds designed to build vocabulary and oral language. She describes it this way:

> Since they don't read independently yet, the teacher engages children by reading aloud and having students engage with different words (saying new words together as a class, predicting words, etc.). Children are building their vocabulary and knowledge about the world during these read alouds by learning about how to be a good friend, student, or peer. These are book and conversation themes that often come up in the Pre-K classroom. Students engage in rich oral language experiences around the things that are being read to them by the teacher pausing throughout books and asking students to share ideas.

Kilee shares similar observations from her first-grade field experience classroom:

> They all go to the carpet for read-aloud time. They have discussions throughout the story about what words mean, how characters resemble other students in the classroom, etc. One example of this was a book called *I Can Be President Too* that she read aloud just before election week. I think books like this help open up the discussion about topics students are unaware of or vocabulary that they are unfamiliar with. Many students in this specific classroom are ML students – there are 8 different languages besides English spoken in the classroom, so exposure to unfamiliar vocabulary is extremely beneficial.

Emilee and Kilee recognized the important language development that was happening during the read-alouds. They noticed the intentional pauses and in-text vocabulary instruction that build word knowledge and syntactical familiarity. Their mentor teachers used rich, timely literature to engage kids in these interactive read-aloud experience, laying the foundation for reading comprehension.

Component 2: Knowledge

Reading comprehension requires that a reader bring certain funds of knowledge to a text and then connect that knowledge to the author's ideas (Schwartz, 2024). Prior knowledge of the topics in the text, and prior knowledge and experience with the text's structure provides the reader with a foundation on which to build and organize new information. Additionally, a reader's knowledge provides a well of ideas with which to make inferences, or fill in the gaps with information that is not explicitly stated in a text. A child's funds of knowledge are built through specific linguistic experiences that are experienced firsthand or developed through a shared text with classmates or caregivers (NELP, 2008; Logan, et al., 2019). Like vocabulary, knowledge facilitates the acquisition of more knowledge – and without purposeful instruction, inequitable knowledge gaps may persist.

Sophia writes about her experience in a second grade classroom where reading for knowledge building about culture and genre was part of most writing projects:

> Whenever they start a new writing unit where they learn to write either a narrative piece or poem, etc. they are introduced to it through mentor texts that give students new perspectives on the world around them. One book they read for their narrative unit was *Nasreen's Secret School* which is about how girls in Afghanistan can't go to school, so the main character had to attend school in secret. They also read an informational text about how different countries gain access to books since they don't have libraries like we do here.

She recognizes her mentor teacher's use of literature to build knowledge, read other literature and then produce writing about a complex topic. This knowledge building also contributes to reading comprehension by building on funds of knowledge which enable inference and processing of increasingly complex texts.

Component 3: Metacognition

Research highlights the important connection between reading comprehension and metacognition (Soto et al., 2019; National Institute for Literacy, 2003). Defined as thinking about one's own thinking, the subcomponents of metacognition work together to facilitate strategic reading behaviors that result in comprehension. Monitoring and evaluating the construction of meaning as a reader moves through a text is a set of skills that might seem intuitive to some. However, a child's desire to "get through" a text may win out over the drive to engage in fix-up and repair strategies without proper motivation to gain meaning from that text. Furthermore, if a reader has not been taught the skills to do so, many metacognitive strategies are unavailable. Children are likely to engage in such self-regulation during reading when they have been presented with motivating reasons to engage with and construct meaning from texts.

Emily notices the following in her kindergarten field experience classroom:

> My mentor teacher creates a learning environment where every student feels involved and supported. She provides opportunities for the students to engage with both literature and informational texts, that are accessible yet challenging enough for the students. During read-alouds, she encourages metacognition by asking students questions like, "What do you think will happen next?" and "How do you know that?" She models thinking out loud, showing them how to fix-up misunderstandings through rereading or thinking about context.

In this example, Emily described her mentor teacher demonstrating and teaching metacognitive processes. The students are seeing firsthand how a reader uses the skills to construct meaning from relevant, engaging texts as they read.

Component 4: Fluency

Reading fluency is one of the greatest influences on understanding text (Kuhn, et al., 2010), and serves as a critical bridge between effortful decoding and comprehension (Rasinski, EEF, & Green, 2022). Fluency is comprised of three components: prosody, automaticity, and reading rate. Of the three, *prosody* correlates most strongly with comprehension (Kuhn, et al., 2010). *Automaticity*, at the word and connected text level, leads to prosody and reasonable rate.

Decoding accuracy precedes automaticity, and depends on a strong foundation of phonological awareness and the ability to segment and blend individual phonemes. As stated earlier, this recent science of reading moment has illuminated the importance of explicit, systematic instruction in phonics and phonological awareness, as well as deep teacher knowledge about the linguistic and orthographic structures of language.

It is within this skill area that decodable books are important because they provide critical practice opportunities to read connected text using word recognition skills that have been explicitly taught. For

beginning readers, these books will not have well-developed characters, or engaging, creative story lines. But they will build skills that are necessary for fluency, which is critical for reading comprehension. Additionally, these books build developing readers' confidence which can lead to self-efficacy and motivation as they grow into skilled readers.

And, in order to develop the other components, rich literature should be complementing decodable books as part of a wide reading diet throughout the school day.

Ella, whose experience in a second grade classroom offered a glimpse of a decoding and fluency routine that involved authentic sharing of stories with families, writes this:

> Every week the teacher provides them with short books in the take home folders with a story that they read in class and then take home to read[.] The story includes words they work on in class but also provides them with a story to spend time with. The stories are read multiple times throughout the week, by the teacher, chorally, and individually. They stop to ask questions and provide comments during and after they read, and I can see that this helps them to think about the story and what it means more deeply.

This student highlights a classroom routine that provides context and audience for beginning readers to practice reading independently. She noticed the intentionality of prompting dialogue about the story and the experience of reading it aloud for others. By encouraging fluent reading, and providing ample practice opportunity, this classroom routine also builds reading comprehension.

The Center of the Framework: Reading Comprehension

Ultimately, each of the 4 components are both influences on and requirements for reading comprehension. The International Literacy Association (ILA) defines reading comprehension as the active process of constructing meaning from text, involving both decoding words and understanding the language and ideas presented. Cartwright and Duke's research (2021) adds to this definition by classifying some of the subcomponents of the FRI model as bridging skills, which connect both decoding and understanding language. Intertwined with executive functioning and cognitive flexibility, these bridging skills serve to enhance readers' ability to make sense of texts of increasing complexity. Critical theorist Paulo Friere (1987) provides us with the ten-thousand foot view when he describes, "...reading the word and the world." By any definition, reading comprehension is complex work, and teaching it requires deep teacher knowledge about its contributing components and a toolbox of strategies that results in children becoming skilled readers. This simply *cannot* be accomplished without literature.

My teacher candidates provided evidence of the ways good teachers continue to achieve this, informed by new understandings gained in this science of reading era. It's heartening to hear that there are still spaces carved out in the course of a busy day for children to curl up with books simply for enjoyment. It's exciting to read about teachers who offer students opportunity to read books

about equity and human rights for the purpose of building knowledge and creating art from what they learn. I'm confident that through these experiences, teacher candidates are gaining conceptual understandings about the science of reading and also models of how skills are explicitly and systematically taught within the context of rich language experiences and interaction with literature. Indeed, any single component of the reading process is incomplete and decontextualized without the other. Rich texts are the contextualization of the components, and when used well can provide the safe, supportive spaces for children to build knowledge, practice skills, and grow as readers.

I had a chance to revisit the teacher whose PLC meeting had left her feeling professionally criticized and restricted. I shared the conceptual framework with her, and we discussed the complexity of the reading process, the various contributing components and subcomponents, and evidence-aligned instructional approaches that rely on engagement with rich texts and literature. We also talked about the explicit, systematic code-based instruction that was a regular part of every day in her classroom, and how it was a gateway to skilled, fluent reading. Her knowledge of the science was solid, and her toolbox of evidence-aligned strategies was full. This teacher did not need a mandate or a prescription, but rather a professional learning community that embraced science, an inquiry stance, and a focus on student learning. Like the descriptions written by teacher candidates, teachers are finding ways to translate the science of reading into classroom practices within unique contexts. Perhaps in time, with further open discussion, and a commitment to continue learning, we might just find that we don't have to resort to mandates in order to move towards our shared vision of developing skilled, engaged, and critical readers. We can instead, follow the science to children's literature.

References

Catts, H., Adlof, S., and Weismer, S. (2006). Language deficits in poor comprehenders: A case for the simple view of reading. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research, 49*, 278–293.

Duke, N.K., & Cartwright, K.B. (2021). The science of reading progresses: Communicating advances beyond the simple view of reading. *Reading Research Quarterly, 56*(S1), S25–S44. https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.411

Duke, N.K., Ward, A.E., & Pearson, P.D. (2021). The science of reading comprehension instruction. *Reading Teacher, 74*(6), 663–672. https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1993

Goodwin, A. P., & Jiménez, R. T. (2021). The science of reading: Supports, critiques, and questions. *Reading Research Quarterly, 56*(S1), S7–S16. https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.416

Kuhn, M. R., Schwanenflugel, P. J., Meisinger, E. B., Levy, B. A., & Rasinski, T. V. (2010). Aligning theory and assessment of reading fluency: automaticity, prosody, and definitions of fluency. *Reading Research Quarterly, 45*(2), 230–251. https://doi-org.libproxy.boisestate.edu/10.1598/RRQ.45.2.4

Lane, H. B., & Hayes, L. F. (2015). Keeping the big picture in mind: using a reading conceptual framework to guide teacher learning. *Journal of Reading Education, 40*(2), 19–26.

Logan, J. A. R., Justice, L. M., Yumuş, M., & Chaparro-Moreno, L. J. (2019). When children are not read to at home: the million word gap. *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics : JDBP, 40*(5), 383–386.

National Early Literacy Panel. (2008). *Developing early literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel.* National Center for Family Literacy. https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/NELP_Report.pdf

National Institute for Literacy. (2003). *Put reading first: The research building blocks for teaching children to read (K-3).* U.S. Department of Education.

Rasinski, T., EEF, & Green, S. (2022, March 23). *Why focus on reading fluency?* Education Endowment Foundation. Retrieved from https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/why-focus-on-reading-fluency

Schwartz, S. (2024). Reading comprehension hinges on building knowledge. *Education Week, 43*(14), 3–7.

Seidenberg, M. S., Cooper Borkenhagen, M., & Kearns, D. M. (2020). Lost in translation? Challenges in connecting reading science and educational practice. *Reading Research Quarterly, 55*, S119–S130. https://doi-org.libproxy.boisestate.edu/10.1002/rrq.341

Soto, C., Gutiérrez de Blume, A. P., Jacovina, M., McNamara, D., Benson, N., & Riffo, B. (2019). Reading comprehension and metacognition: The importance of inferential skills. *Cogent Education, 6*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2019.1565067

Tierney, R. J., & Pearson, P. D. (2024). *Fact-checking the Science of Reading: Opening up the conversation.* Literacy Research Commons. https://literacyresearchcommons.org/

Wexler, N. (2024, April 14). *Will the science of reading movement become a Frankenstein's monster?* Substack. https://nataliewexler.substack.com/p/will-the-science-of-reading-movement

Carolyn Cort is a Clinical Assistant Professor in the College of Education at Boise State University where she teaches undergrads and graduate students in literacy-focused courses. Her work at the university also focuses on supporting teacher candidates during clinical field experiences and fostering mutually beneficial community partnerships that enhance P-12 learning, especially in the area of early literacy. Carolyn is involved in state level initiatives focused on breaking down silos to promote knowledge sharing and idea building towards a shared vision of literacy for all kids.

ORCID: 0009-0004-3284-642X

Exploring Cultural Bridges: Teaching The Kite Runner in the AP Literature Classroom amidst the Discourse of Banned Books

Jacqueline Gale

Introduction

In a time of post-pandemic disengagement in the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom, there seems to be a growing trend in which teachers feel the need to use excerpts from novels rather than reading them entirely. Navigating the political landscape of book banning, opting to teach excerpts rather than full novels might seem like a more manageable choice, but what is the true cost? In this context, a selective approach to teaching literature not only limits students' exposure to diverse perspectives but also feeds into the broader politicization of banned books (Rodriguez, 2022). Currently, there is a dire lack of representation of LGBTQ+ and BIPOC populations in children's and YA literature. In fact, books that are most frequently banned include those that feature non-white and LGBTQ+ characters or touch on topics such as racism or even health and well-being (Meehan et al., 2024).

Especially for those of us who teach in Title I schools with minoritized populations, it is clear that book bans are dangerous to our students. If there is anything my sixteen years as a senior English teacher has taught me concerning the books I use in my classroom, it is that students don't want to read another book or play from the white canon. I teach at a Title I high school in southern Tucson with a majority Latine population. We also have a considerable number of refugee students from Africa and the Middle East. While I did not have any students from the Middle East in my class last year, I would have loved the opportunity to glean their insights and would fully embrace that opportunity if it came up in the future. Such voices can enrich our understanding of cultures and experiences we might otherwise be unfamiliar with.

While all books have the potential to teach valuable lessons, I have found that my students are far more engaged when they read books by authors from diverse backgrounds. Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are some of the texts that students particularly enjoy. But what I found they enjoy most is almost always Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner. The Kite Runner* is not only a personal favorite of mine, but I've found it frequently becomes a favorite of students as well. I remember using this book in my class over a decade ago in an on-level senior English class. I had one student who was difficult to motivate to do much of anything. When we started reading *The Kite Runner,* my biggest difficulty was that he didn't want to do classwork because he couldn't put the book down. It still has a similar impact today.

Whether it's *The Kite Runner* or any other piece of global literature, it can be helpful to use the Worlds of Words Evaluating Global Literature tool (https://wowlit.org/wp-content/media/cultural-authenticity-criteria.pdf) to consider key factors such as literary qualities, the origins of the book, and authorship. This tool also encourages reflection on believability, accuracy, and the authenticity of values portrayed in the text. By examining perspectives, power dynamics, audience, and the book's

relationship to others in its genre, we can ensure that the text avoids reinforcing stereotypes or othering. These considerations help promote more nuanced, respectful representations of diverse cultures. Analyzing a book's paratextual features—such as author interviews, historical and political context, and the cover of the book—to gauge an author's cultural connection to the story and intended audience, is a method by Durand et al. (2021) that I also find useful.

The Kite Runner stands up well to both of these tests. This aligns with the proposal by Bishop (2003) that cultural authenticity is defined by how well a book reflects the worldview of a specific cultural group, alongside the authenticating details of language and everyday life. Bishop emphasizes that while no single image can represent a cultural group's life, themes, textual features, and ideologies can help determine authenticity.

The Kite Runner can be a powerful tool for fostering empathy and cultural awareness in the ELA classroom. As one student told me, "...it gives us a different perspective. We're so used to the single story of The Middle East and *The Kite Runner* shows us there's actually a lot of good there." They tend to hate the main character Amir, early on in the story, and grow to love him by the end, realizing that he is a human who makes mistakes but grows from them. This book teaches that redemption is possible no matter what sins have been committed. The young adults I have the privilege of working with value this story although I sometimes hear statements like, "Man I hate this book- when is Amir going to get what he deserves?" Others, like a senior I had this past Spring, have said things like "his book was intense, but it teaches lessons I needed at this point in my life." Engaging with *The Kite Runner* is undeniably worth it.

While *The Kite Runner* is an incredible tool to foster empathy and cultural awareness in the ELA classroom, teachers should be mindful that it frequently appears on banned and challenged book lists. According to the American Library Association (ALA), it was ranked 50th among the 100 most frequently challenged books of the 2000s (American Library Association, 2013). Before teaching this or any challenged book, educators may benefit from exploring resources to help navigate potential challenges. In addition to ALA, resources like Unite Against Banned Books, which offers book summaries and tools to report censorship attempts (Unite Against Banned Books, 2024), and PEN America, which provides guidance for taking action against censorship and banned books (PEN America, 2024) can be helpful.

Obtaining Parent Permission

In light of recent Arizona legislation around the content of books teachers use in class, it is helpful to be aware of what state laws say and how to avoid breaking them before teaching this or any book. First, Arizona Statute 15-120.03 (2023) prohibits the use of any books or materials that can be deemed sexually explicit. An exception can be made if the materials have high educational value/literary merit, written parent consent is attained before using the material, and finally, alternate materials have to be made available to any students whose parents do not consent. Initially, when this law with vague wording went into effect I remember how quickly teachers mourned the books they could no longer teach at the recommendations of scared district officials. In hindsight, all we had to do was learn how we could continue to teach them.

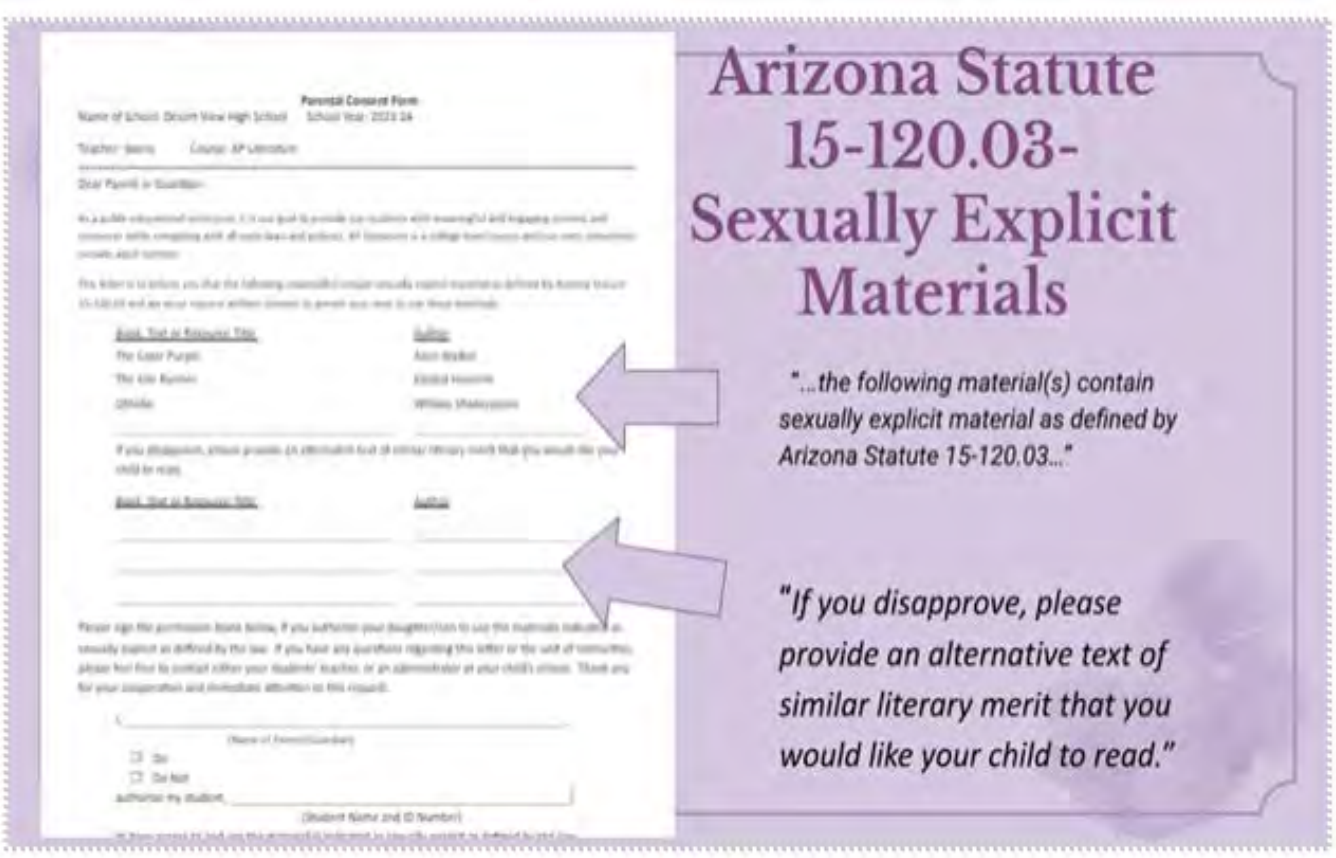


Figure 1. Arizona Statute 15-120.03

What I have learned to be the easiest method of obtaining permission to read anything that might be considered sexually explicit is to send home a parent permission slip at the beginning of the school year with all the books I plan to teach each semester. One way this is helpful is that I don't have to worry about obtaining permission multiple times. To keep things simple, I state "This letter is to inform you that the following material(s) contain sexually explicit material as defined by Arizona Statute 15-120.03 and we must request written consent to permit your student to use these materials." I then list the books we'll read and provide a space where a parent can write in an alternate title of similar literary merit if they disapprove. If a parent felt they were unable to do this, I provided some alternative titles.

Because I transparently discuss the book's contents with students, they know why these texts are challenged or banned and I ask them to first decide for themselves if they will be comfortable reading these texts before requesting parental permission. I don't want to jinx anything, but so far, I have yet to have a single student read an alternate text because I have consistently earned 100% approval from all parents and guardians. The one time I did receive a "no" for an answer a student reported back that his mom was concerned about him reading a scene that included sexual assault. I asked his mom if she would be willing to read the scene for herself and then decide if she wanted her son to sit it out or not. After she read it and he reported back to class he shared, in his words, "She read it and she was like 'yeah, whatever.'" And he turned in the form with her signature giving approval.

Engaging Students with *The Kite Runner*

After obtaining parental consent, I begin teaching *The Kite Runner* by providing essential background on Sunni and Shia Muslims, as well as the discrimination faced by the Hazara people at the hands of the dominant Pashtun ethnic group. To help students grasp the historical and theological distinctions, I use the Council on Foreign Relations' video *An Overview of the Sunni-Shia Divide* (2023), which explains that Shias believe in Ali and his descendants as part of a divine lineage, while Sunnis oppose political succession based solely on Mohammed's bloodline. This foundational understanding is critical, as the novel's ethnic and religious divide underpins much of the story's conflict. Specifically, the predominantly Sunni Pashtun community's oppression of the Shia Hazaras mirrors broader systemic inequalities.

To further explain these ethnic differences, teachers might find Bhushan's (2022) work on ethnic dehumanization in the novel particularly helpful for building their understanding of the religious and ethnic complexities portrayed in the text. Introducing students to Khaled Hosseini's official website (https://khaledhosseini.com/) (Hosseini, 2024) allows them to learn about the author's personal experiences in Afghanistan, which shaped the narrative. Given that American students may be unfamiliar with competitive kite running, I also share the Al Jazeera English video, *Viewfinder: The Real Kite Runners* (2007). This video not only introduces the sport but also provides a cultural context that students find engaging.

My students range from 16-18 years old, but one surprisingly small gift I offer that lights up their eyes and gives me a glimpse into the child within is giving them a handcrafted bookmark to use in their copy of the book (see Figure 2). I am surprised at how many of them are still using their bookmarks by the end of the story. I recommend other teachers try this as well or consider giving students the opportunity to create their own bookmarks before beginning the reading.

Figure 2. Student bookmarks

Classroom Discussions and Activities

We start by reading aloud collectively in class. Students enjoy moving around the room, with each person reading at least one paragraph but having the option to read more if they wish. They are always pulled in when they hear the line right in the beginning, "There's a way to be good again" (Hosseini, 2003, p.2). I vary our reading routines to maintain this initial engagement, especially during more intense chapters. For scenes that might be uncomfortable, silent reading works well—it's also rewarding to hear their audible gasps or see their reactions as they read. Other times, students enjoy reading aloud in small groups, which fosters collaboration and discussion. For group work, I enjoy utilizing reading protocols such as Colorín Colorado's Collaborative Reading Protocol (Colorín Colorado, 2023). Before beginning a challenging chapter, I always provide a content warning and invite any students who feel uncomfortable to sit out. While no one has made this request yet, I believe it's essential to offer this option. Changing the environment can also enhance the reading experience. On pleasant days, I might take the class outside or to the library, where students make themselves comfortable, listen to calming music, and immerse themselves in the story. I've found that mixing up the methods and settings for reading the book keeps students engaged and helps them stay invested as we work through the entire book together.

To support students' engagement with *The Kite Runner*, I strive to create varied reading environments and approaches that keep them comfortable and open to its challenging material. When we encounter difficult scenes—such as Amir witnessing the violent assault of Hassan by Assef and failing to intervene—it becomes crucial to foster opportunities for deeper reflection and discussion. This pivotal moment in the text is ideal for a Socratic seminar, where students can engage in meaningful dialogue with one another.

Scott Filkins' strategy guide on Socratic seminars offers practical methods for facilitating student-centered discussions that promote critical thinking and deeper understanding (Filkins, n.d.). Before the seminar, I review the concept of literal, interpretive, and universal questions with students. They then write their own level two (interpretive) and level three (universal) questions about the chapter. A useful resource for this process is the document *Levels of Questions: Literal, Interpretive, Universal* (Bowman at Brooks, n.d.), which provides clear definitions and examples of these question types. After writing their questions, students add them to a shared Google doc and vote on their top picks by placing an "x" after the five questions they most want to explore. I give them time to explore these questions and ask them to find helpful quotes in the text to inform their responses so they are adequately prepared for the seminar. I find that this preparation helps them to feel informed and less nervous to share in a group discussion.

Most importantly of all, the Socratic seminar allows them to ask and make sense of the issues that come up for them at this point in the story and it creates a safe place to share feelings they have about it. While some students ask questions like, "Why does Baba favor Hassan over his own son?", others want to know "How could Hassan be so loyal to Amir even after Amir betrays him?", or "What other examples of betrayal have we come across in literature before?" Students do not need me to provide them with discussion—they know what they want to explore and it is simply my responsibility to create the space for it.

Additionally, I use reading guides to help ensure students understand key events and details of the text and are keeping up with the pacing. One I have found helpful is the Penguin Random House Education teacher's guide for *The Kite Runner*, which includes helpful vocabulary, relevant themes, questions for students, and more. Because I teach this book in AP Literature currently (but it works well with on-level classes too), I also give students a periodic AP Literature Open Response essay prompt for test preparation. In AP Literature, students are expected to do the equivalent of running a marathon in writing three essays in 120 minutes when they take the AP exam. One of these essays, the "Free Response" provides a prompt to which they are to respond using a work of literary merit of their choice (not surprisingly, many students chose *The Kite Runner*). College Board provides a valuable resource for AP exam preparation, including past exam questions for analysis that date back to 1999 (College Board, 2024). Between Socratic seminars, study guide questions, and discussions on themes that come up in *The Kite Runner,* students develop a well-rounded understanding of the book.

While I aimed to help students develop a well-rounded understanding of *The Kite Runner,* I also wanted to offer them a creative outlet for personal expression. To achieve this, I introduced a new method of reflection I learned in a class at the University of Arizona around the Embodied Reflexive Response (Cueto, 2024). This method utilizes a three-column chart where the first column is used for key quotes in the text, the center column is used for embodied responses to the text (paying attention to physical and emotional responses to the text while reading), and the final column is used for either an essay about the book that includes insights gained on censorship or an artistic response that includes an artist's statement. This final column is used for their final project and is not to be completed until we finish reading the book.

Significant Quotes	Personal Responses	Reflections on Banned Books
Read the selected banned book and take notes on your initial thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Select several quotes that caught your attention as you read and that were personally meaningful.	Focus on embodying the themes, emotions, and experiences conveyed in the text. Describe your experiences, physical and emotional responses, and any new perspectives gained about yourself through this process.	Based on your embodied reflexive practice, write a reflection identifying and articulating at least three new insights or perspectives that you have gained about the banned book or the concept of censorship. Or, Choose to create a creative response to the banned book. This could be in the form of artwork, a short story, a poem, or any other creative medium that captures the essence of the book or your experience with it. Provide a brief artist's statement (300-500 words) explaining how your creative response was influenced by the banned book and what message or emotion you aim to convey.

Note: Table adapted from Cueto (2024)

Table 1. Embodied Reflexive Practice: *The Kite Runner*

Through first engaging in this type of reflection as a student myself, I realized the effectiveness of multimodal options to engage in deep critical thinking as demonstrated by myself and my classmates, and couldn't wait to bring this practice to my classroom. What students did with the opportunity to engage in creative reflection went beyond anything I could have imagined, highlighting how multimodal options foster students' critical reading and thinking skills. As noted by Coppola (2020). "The only true requirements for redefining writing to include multimodal forms of composition are desire, imagination, and—most importantly—a willingness to take a healthy risk" (p. 70). Students were definitely excited to take it.

Reader response theory, which emphasizes the unique experiences, perspectives, and interpretations that students bring to a text, aligns well with multimodal reflection. By valuing students' engagement with texts, reader response theory encourages an active dialogue between reader and text, fostering deeper connections and critical insights (Woodruff & Wilson, 2013). *Doing Critical Literacy* by Hilary Janks and colleagues (2014) is a valuable resource for integrating critical literacy into classroom practice, as it emphasizes the interplay between language, power, and identity. It provides practical strategies for guiding students to move beyond personal interpretation and examine the broader social and cultural contexts that shape texts and their meanings.

Student Embodied Reflexive Responses

Once it was time for students to complete their Embodied Reflexive Response Journals, they had time to reflect on their entries and decide on a creative, multimodal project to demonstrate their deeper learning while reading The Kite Runner. They presented these projects to their classmates. Below are pictures of some student responses, along with their explanations of them (pseudonyms have been assigned to protect their identities).

Amy's project is a painting of water ripples, symbolizing the transformation of Amir from a timid boy to a courageous man in The Kite Runner. She believes that everyone inherently possesses goodness but sometimes needs time for clarity and reflection, akin to waiting for water to settle. The middle of the ripples represents Amir's actions throughout the story, while the outer ripples symbolize his confrontation with his past. Amy sees Amir's journey as analogous to the calming of water after disturbance, suggesting that redemption is possible despite past mistakes.

Figure 3. Amy's Project.

Alexa aimed to convey her emotions of sadness and hope through an art piece, symbolized by a growing plant. Additionally, she incorporated a message about perception, illustrated by a boy painting over an ugly picture and tearing a cover back to reveal truth. The inclusion of buttons from *Coraline*, one of her favorite movies, served as a personal reference to choices and consequences.

Figure 4. Alexa's Project.

Franky, intrigued by the discrimination Amir and his father faced upon moving to the United States, was interested in comparing the Afghani experience of immigration to those of Mexican Americans. He conducted research amongst his peers about their experiences with discrimination based on race and ethnicity, interviewed a teacher who had personal experience with the unfair demands of applying for citizenship, recorded and transcribed it, and then proceeded to check out a camera from the photography teacher to take his own pictures to create a magazine.

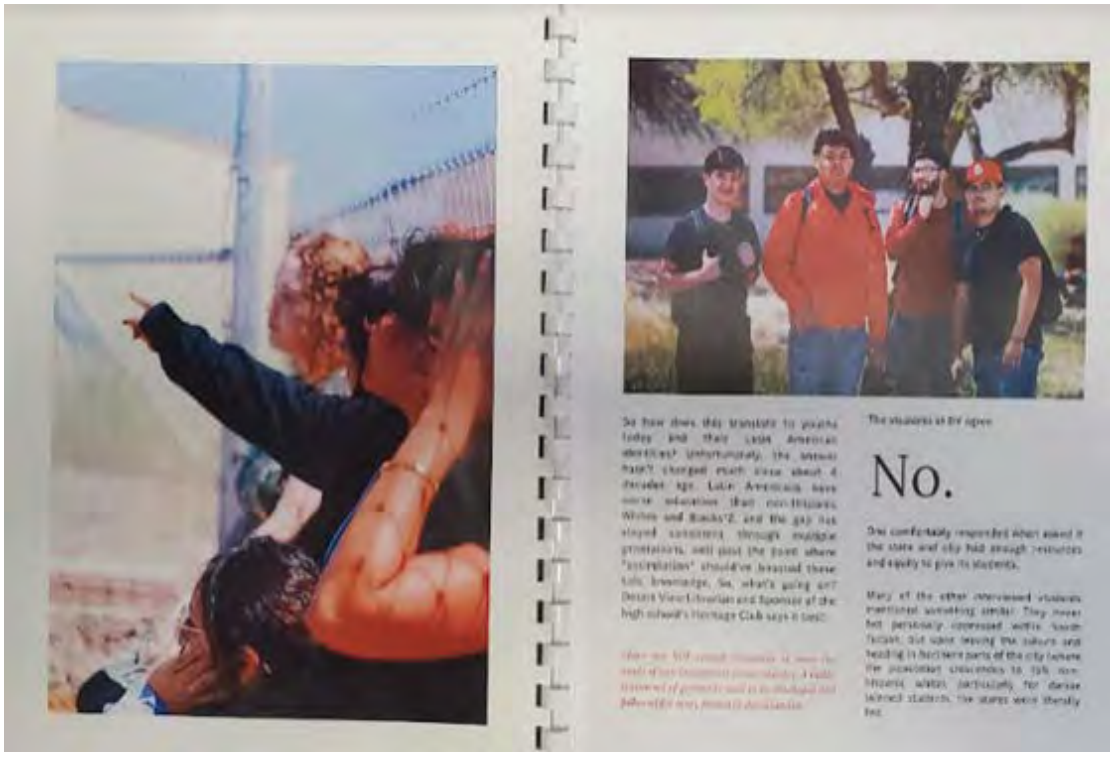


Figure 5. Franky's Project.

Julie created a poster to reflect Amir's development over the course of the book when she realized during the reading that Amir's character went through the five stages of guilt. She gave a presentation in which she explained what he was going through at each stage and ended with a positive note about his brighter future ahead.

Elias created a playlist for Amir's journey throughout the book. He created a slideshow with several slides and engaged in literary analysis of both The Kite Runner and song lyrics. Many of the songs on his playlist were new songs to him that he found through his research. He provided a rationale for each, a link to the music video, and the lyrics that stood out to him in each song.

Figure 6. Julie's Project.

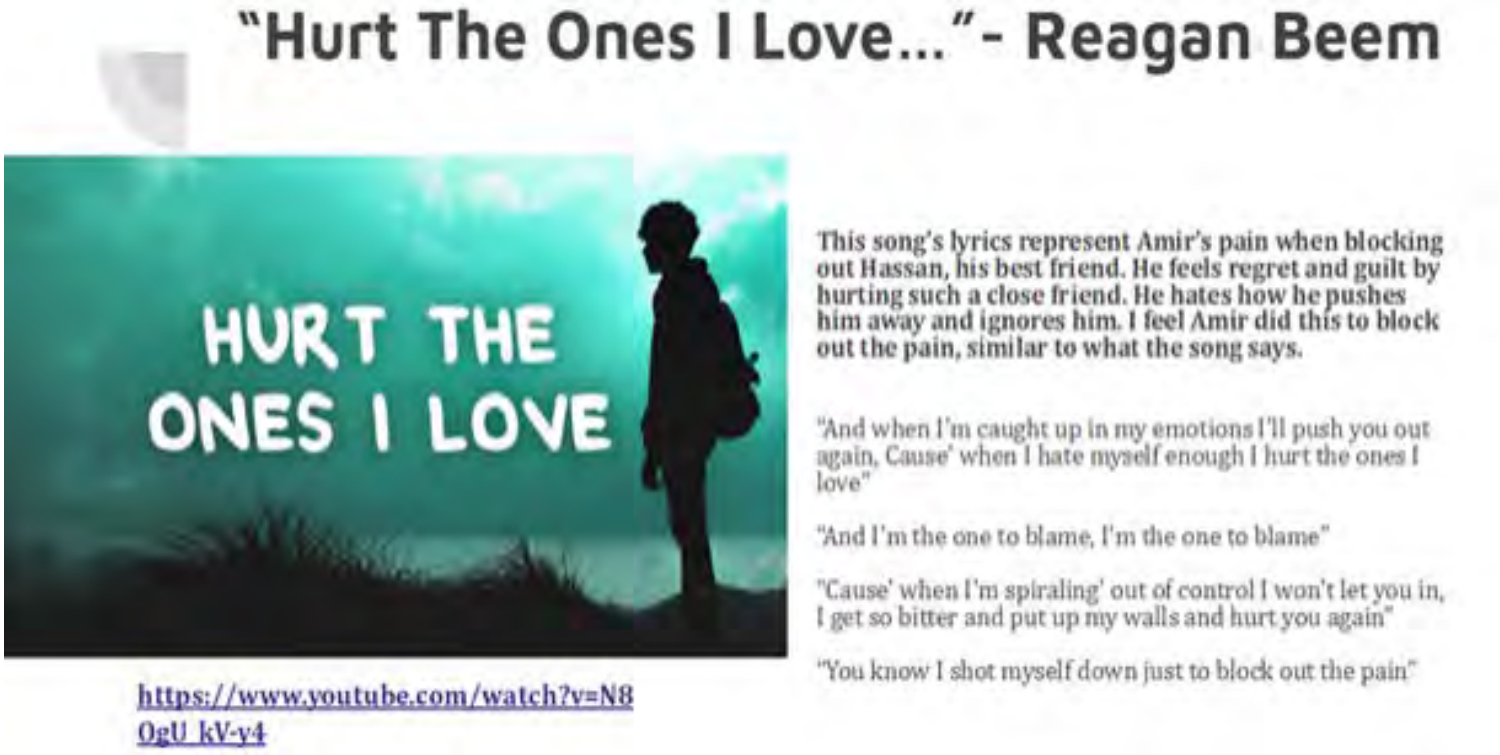


Figure 7. Elias's Project.

An excerpt from Samantha's essay response provides her thoughts on censorship and book banning. In it, she delves into the reasons why this book is needed in the classroom, making connections to oppression and discrimination that exist in her own communities today. Also... she's the same student I referenced earlier, who claimed she hated the story.

Significant Quotes	Personal Responses	Reflections on Banned Books
"I played in the same yard, Sohrab. I lived in the same house. But the grass is dead and a stranger's jeep is parked in the driveway of our house, pissing oil all over the asphalt. Our old life is gone, Sohrab, and everyone in it is either dead or dying. It's just you and me now. Just you and me." "Amir jan, I am ashamed of the lies we told you all those..."	This quote gives a somber feeling due to it talking about the reality of the book so far everyone we have met has mostly died up to this point. This quote made me happy since Rahim Khan is the only figure in Amir's life to say	Books should never be banned from people's views. In The Kite Runner, the images of betrayal, self-harm, and terror are used to tell people the reality of the world. The book soon introduces the betrayal and assault of Hassan and it describes his assault. It is one of the main parts of why the book is banned but this scene is what starts the main story. This scene also aids in setting the tone of the rest of the book. This book brings forward deep emotions and feelings based on this first event. The reality of assault and victim blaming is discussed in this book and it gives a reality of the world as shaming and outcasting victims still exists. Banning this book

Table 2. Samantha's Project.

These projects demonstrate the power of choice in final projects, allowing students to draw on their funds of knowledge—the lived experiences, cultural practices, and personal interests they bring to the classroom—to reflect on and process new learning (Moll, Amanti, & Gonzalez, 2005). By engaging with *The Kite Runner* through creative and analytical responses, students found meaningful ways to demonstrate their knowledge. Alexa's art piece, Franky's investigative magazine, Amaris' poster analysis, Elias' playlist, and Sam's essay are all testaments to how reader response theory and critical

literacy can empower students. These approaches encourage students not only to engage deeply with the text but also to connect its themes to their lives and communities, fostering critical thinking and empathy.

Conclusion

It may not be "easy" to teach banned books in the classroom, but I believe students' work speaks for itself. Not only do students have the opportunity to engage in rich conversations about delicate yet important issues, but they actually look forward to reading and learning what comes next. Students particularly enjoyed having new insights about the Middle East and also felt some appreciation for the safety they have in the United States upon learning about the Taliban. Despite Amir's experience of leaving his home country for safety, the memories of the childhood he depicted gave students an alternate lens they were grateful for, one of a positive image. The only "extra" work teaching *The Kite Runner* or any banned book really creates for me is in getting parent permission and being committed to creating a safe space to address serious feelings that come up around delicate issues, many of which are relatable. Students, I anticipate, will remember *The Kite Runner,* and the lessons it offers for a lifetime.

Resource Ideas

Something I want to do when I teach this book again is explicitly teach reader response theory. As Appleman (2023) shares, "I simply didn't want to encourage my students to respond to literature within a classroom context that was never articulated; I wanted to teach them about the theory of reader response and then encourage them to respond to literary texts with those responses enriched by their metacognitive awareness of that theory" (p.35). By making reader response theory a central part of the curriculum, I hope to deepen students' engagement with texts and encourage critical thinking through both personal reflection and theoretical understanding.

In addition, when I teach this unit again, I would like to offer more multimodal texts that support students' learning about Afghanistan, the Taliban, and the broader socio-political context in which The Kite Runner is set. For example, short documentary videos, interviews with people from Afghanistan, and supplementary YA novels could help students engage with the text from multiple angles, enriching their reading experience. In the table below (Table III) I have created a table of books that could be helpful for students wanting to expand their understanding of the Middle East. I have elected to include relevant paratextual features, again, drawing on the methodology proposed by Durand et al (2021).

Cover	Title	Publishing information	Author Experience	Overview
	A Thousand Splendid Suns	Riverhead Books, 2007	Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-born American author and physician whose work is informed by his emigration experience.	Hosseini's follow-up to *The Kite Runner* is set in Afghanistan and focuses on two women whose lives become intertwined by the tumultuous events of Afghanistan's history. (Hosseini, 2024).
	The Secret Sky	Philomel Books, 2014	Atia Abawi draws on her extensive experience as a foreign news correspondent stationed in Kabul for nearly five years, and her Afghan heritage, to authentically depict her stories set in Afghanistan.	Abawi's story, set in Afghanistan, tells the love story of an impossible relationship between a young Hazara girl and a Pashtun boy. It focuses on the navigation of learning to fight their families, cultures, and the Taliban together (Abawi, 2023).
	My City Was a Sparkling Jewel	Greencard Voices, 2023	Editors Tea Rozman, Zahra Lotfi, and Jeannine Erickson, compiled first-hand stories from teenagers who were forced to flee Afghanistan in 2021.	This book is comprised of 19 displacement stories from recently settled Afghan youth in Minnesota. The stories were gathered through essays and oral storytelling in multiple languages. (Goodreads, 2024).
	Americanized: Rebel Without a Green Card	Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2018	Iranian-born Sara Saedi's YA memoir details her experiences as a young teenager in the US grappling with an undocumented immigrant status.	Saedi's memoir chronicles the struggles of a teenager navigating the greencard process, dealing with her parent's divorce, and typical teenage drama at school. (Saedi 2024).

Table 3. Books to Expand Understanding of the Middle East.

Finally, at the end of the AP class, I would love to have students reflect on which book they learned to appreciate the most and why. This reflection could serve as evidence of their learning journey and how their understanding of complex issues, such as identity, power, and conflict, has evolved. A self-evaluation tool might also be a useful addition to this process. In this self-evaluation, students could reflect on their growth as critical readers and thinkers, as well as how their responses to literature have changed over the course of the school year.

I understand and appreciate that teaching a banned book might intimidate some teachers, especially if they are new to the field or work in a state with strict laws. In sharing my story of teaching *The Kite Runner* with colleagues at my school, I have been able to alleviate some concerns by sharing resources, and I have also been able to reassure them that it's worth the effort it takes to teach them. The levels of critical thinking and engagement demonstrated by students' projects easily exemplify this. One teacher shared his apprehension of teaching *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* with me. While he had heard nothing but positive praise for it and was excited to teach it he decided to avoid it altogether. Upon sharing this article with him, he realized that it would have been less work to obtain parent permission than it was for him to teach a text even he and his students loathed reading. I am grateful for his feedback, as he has inspired me to share these findings and practices with other fellow educators, and I hope anyone reading this article might feel empowered to teach the books our students need.

References

Abawi, A. (2023). *About Atia Abawi.* Retrieved November 27, 2024, from https://www.atiaabawi.com/bio

Adichie, C. N. (2009, July). *The danger of a single story* [Video]. TED. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg

Al Jazeera English. (2011, January 15). *Viewfinder: The real kite runners* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5S47aSlezs

Appleman, D. (2023). *Critical encounters in secondary English: Teaching literary theory to adolescents* (4th ed.). Teachers College Press.

American Library Association. (2013). *Frequently challenged books of the 21st century.* ALA. https://www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/decade2009

Arizona State Legislature. (2023). *Title 15 §120.03.* https://www.azleg.gov/viewdocument/?docName=https://www.azleg.gov/ars/15/00120-03.htm

Bhushan, V. (2022). Ethnic dehumanization in Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner. *The Creative Launcher, 7*(6), 84–92. https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2022.7.6.09

Bishop, R. S. (2003). Reframing the debate about cultural authenticity. In D. L. Fox & K. G. Short (Eds.), Stories matter: The complexity of cultural authenticity in children's literature (pp. 25–40). National Council of Teachers of English.

Bowman at Brooks. (n.d.). *Levels of questions: Literal, interpretive, universal.* https://bowmanatbrooks.weebly.com/uploads/8/3/8/3/8383240/levelsofquestions.doc_-_literal_-_interpretive_-_universal.pdf

Colorín Colorado. (2023). *Collaborative reading protocol.* Retrieved November 25, 2024, from: https://www.colorincolorado.org/teaching-ells/ell-classroom-strategy-library/collaborative-reading-protocol#:~:text=Students%20work%20in%20pairs%20or,a%20comment%20about%20that%20passage

Coppola, S. (2020). *Writing, Redefined: Broadening Our Ideas of What It Means to Compose. Routledge.*

College Board. (2024). AP English Literature and Composition past exam questions. AP Central.

Council on Foreign Relations. (2023, April 27). The Sunni-Shia divide. https://www.cfr.org/article/sunni-shia-divide#:~:text=Shias%2C%20a%20term%20that% 20stems,succession%20based%20on%20Mohammed's%20bloodline

Cueto, D. W. (2024, January 16). Banned Books and the Politicization of Schools and Libraries Syllabus. Tucson; University of Arizona.

Durand, E. S., Glenn, W. J., Moore, D., Groenke, S. L., & Scaramuzzo, P. (2021). Shaping immigration narratives in young adult literature: Authors and paratextual features of USBBY Outstanding International Books, 2006–2019. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 64*(6), 665–674. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.1149

Filkins, S. (n.d.). Socratic seminars. ReadWriteThink. Retrieved November 15, 2024, from https://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/socratic-seminars

Goodreads. (2024). *My city was a sparkling jewel* by Maya Khosla. Retrieved November 27, 2024, from https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/126132470-my-city-was-a-sparkling-jewel

Hosseini, K. (2024). Official website of Khaled Hosseini. https://khaledhosseini.com/

Janks, H., Dixon, K., Ferreira, A., Granville, S., & Newfield, D. (2014). *Doing critical literacy: Texts and activities for students and teachers*. Routledge.

Meehan, K., Magnusson, T., Baêta, S., & Friedman, J. (2024). *School book bans: The mounting pressure to censor.* PEN America. Retrieved May 10, 2024, from https://pen.org/report/book-bans-pressure-to-censor/

Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., & Gonzalez, N. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households and classrooms.* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Penguin Random House Education. (n.d.). *The Kite Runner* teaching guide. Penguin Random House. Retrieved November 27, 2024, from https://images.penguinrandomhouse.com/promo_image/9781594631931_8190.pdf

Rodríguez, R. J. (2022, October 21). *Even banned books open minds.* National Council of Teachers of English. https://ncte.org/blog/2022/10/even-banned-books-open-minds/

Saedi, S. (2024). *Sara Saedi: Author, screenwriter, TV writer.* Retrieved November 27, 2024, from https://sarasaediwriter.com/

Unite Against Book Bans. (n.d.). Unite Against Book Bans. American Library Association. https://uniteagainstbookbans.org/

Woodruff, A. H., & Griffin, R. A. (2017). Reader response in secondary settings: Increasing comprehension through meaningful interactions with literary texts. *Texas Journal of Literacy Education, 5*(2), [108-116].

Jacqueline Gale is a high school English teacher, PhD student, and advocate for educational equity. A proud first-generation college graduate from South Tucson, she now teaches at her alma mater, Desert View High School, and is pursuing a PhD in Teaching, Learning, and Sociocultural Studies at the University of Arizona.

ORCID: 0009-0006-6187-7910

Creating Spaces for Voice, Choice and Resistance

Dorea Kleker, Narges Zandi, and Kathy G. Short

Our teacher inquiry group at a bilingual school focused on picturebooks about the experiences of immigrants and refugees. We spent November and December browsing and sharing picturebooks every two weeks. In January, teachers started using their selected books in classrooms and we met to share students' responses. Our initial plan was to spend 30 minutes sharing, 30 minutes trying out webbing as a response strategy, and 30 minutes planning with grade-level partners on which books and dialogue strategies to use next. An hour later, teachers were still sharing student work and we quickly revised our plan to briefly share several examples of webbing and then move to partner planning.

For the next meeting, we proposed sharing in small groups to provide time for other engagements. Teachers quickly protested, "We never get a chance to share with each other and we want to hear everyone." We adjusted our plan for the remaining meetings to spend most of the time on sharing student responses and then briefly introducing a dialogue strategy and ending with partner planning. We initially felt guilty that we were not offering new ideas but recognized that sharing and learning from each other was their priority and so needed to be ours as well.

As the group facilitators, we were intrigued with why the group evolved in such an interesting manner, recognizing that teachers used the inquiry group as a space for connection and innovation in their teaching, despite the many district-imposed mandates. Teachers were required to complete Science of Reading training, spend time on benchmark testing to prepare for the annual state tests and attend regular district in-services on data interpretation. The inquiry group became a space to resist these mandates and focus on what they considered most important—children's voices.

After closely examining our notes from the inquiry group sessions, we identified key characteristics of the space that was created, viewing that space as a community of practice. In this article, we first introduce the school context and then look closely at the ways the inquiry group created a space for children's voices and deep exploration of literature.

School Context of the Teacher Inquiry Group

As one of the oldest schools in Tucson, Guerreo was established in 1901, becoming a two-way dual language (Spanish/English) magnet elementary school in 1981. Located in a historic barrio, teachers have a longstanding commitment to social justice and advocacy. With 300 students, the school has multi-generational ties to the neighborhood and greater Latinx community.

Teachers take great pride in their school community. The school garden, murals, folklorico group, and mariachi program provide opportunities to learn academic content and language within meaningful cultural contexts. In addition to collaborative grade level planning, teachers participate in district in-services, which they report are primarily focused on learning new instructional programs and analyzing data from benchmark tests.

Kathy visited Guerrero and introduced the inquiry group as a place where teachers could browse and discuss picturebooks on immigrant and refugee experiences, learn about ways to engage students with these books, and share and learn from one another. Additionally, each participant was offered ten picturebooks of their choice to add to their classrooms, funded through a grant. Ultimately, eleven teachers across the grade levels chose to participate, including the librarian and art teacher. The group met biweekly after school for 90 minutes in the school library during 2023-2024.

Kathy, Dorea, and Narges served as facilitators, planning the sessions and gathering books and materials. Kathy and Dorea were university faculty and Narges, a graduate student who had recently arrived from Iran and so connected with faculty over her challenges as a new immigrant. Dorea had a history with the school as both a parent and student teaching supervisor.

In the fall semester, we structured initial sessions around larger conceptual frames related to immigrants and refugees and encouraged personal connections to these ideas, followed by time to browse tables full of books. As facilitators, we did not position ourselves as experts nor this inquiry group as a time to learn information. Instead, we encouraged deep, thoughtful engagements with picturebooks.

We first explored the conceptual frame of "journey" as movement along a pathway. Teachers created maps in their journals documenting their life journeys (e.g. physical, psychological, social, culture, cognitive, spiritual, political, etc.) and considered which were chosen versus forced. We also discussed the concept of hybridity, using their journey maps to consider intersections between their multiple identities. We provided critiques of western humanitarianism in refugee picturebooks (Vassiloudi, 2019) as a frame for reading the books and considered how readers could move from pity to empathy. Following a discussion of borders and walls as lines that both define and divide us, the journey maps provided a way to discuss the borders and walls in our lives and their influence on our journeys.

The books we browsed were arranged into thematic text sets. This chart provides examples of some of the picturebooks in each set. A full list of picturebooks and novels around these themes is updated annually on the Worlds of Words website. (https://wowlit.org/links/booklists/refugee-experience-in-literature/)

Text Set Themes	Examples of Book Titles
Displacement due to Violence and War	*The Capybaras,* Alredo Soderguit *A Journey Toward Hope*, Victor Hinjosa & Susan Guevara *My Name is Bana,* Bana Alabed & Nez Riaz *Seven Pablos,* Jorge Luján & Chiara Carrer *Still Dreaming/Seguimos soñando,* Claudia Martinez, M. Mora Tomorrow, Nadine Kaadan
Journeys of Hardship, Loss and Hope	*Finding Papa,* Angela Pham Kraus & Thi Bui *Idriss and His Marble,* Rene Gouichoux & Zau *Migrants,* Issa Watanabe *Room on Our Rock*, Kate Temple, Joi Temple, T. Baynton *To the Other Side*, Erika Meza *Two White Rabbits,* Jairo Buitrago & Rafael Yockteng
Life in Refugee Camps and Detention Centers	*Hear My Voice/Escucha mi voz*, Warren Binford, et al. *Lubna and Pebble*, Wendy Meddour & Daniel Egneús *The Notebook Keeper*, Stephen Briseno & Magdalena Mora *These Olive Trees*, Aya Ghanameh *Until Someone Listens,* Estela Juarez & Teresa Martinez *Wherever I Go,* Mary Wagley Copp & Munir Mohammed
Displacement and Belonging in a New Place	*The Carpet: An Afghan Family Story,* Dezh Azdad & Nan Cao *The Day Saida Arrived,* Susan Gomez Redondo & S. Wimmer *Gibberish,* Young Vo *Mina Belongs Here,* Sandra Niebuhr-Siebert & Lars Baus *The Rock in My Throat,* Kao Kalia Yang & Jiemei Lin *My Strange Shrinking Parents,* Zona Sworder
Home as Two Places in the Heart	*Home is in Between,* Mitali Perkins & Lavanya Naidu *The Home We Make,* Maham Khwaja & Daby Z. Faidhi *Homeland: Dreams of Palestine,* Hannah Mourshabeck *I am Both: A Vietnamese Refugee Story,* Karisa Greene *The Lotus Seed,* Sherry Garland & Tatsuro Kiuchi *My Two Border Towns,* David Bowles & Erika Meza

Immigration and Refugees Across Time and Place in Nonfiction	*Border Crossing,* Sneed Collard & Howard Gray *Finding Home*, Jen Sookfong Lee & Drew Shannon *I is for Immigrants,* Selina Aiko *A Place Called America,* Jennifer Thermes *Their Great Gift,* John Coy & Wing Young Huie *What is a Refugee?* Elise Gravel
The Significance of Names	*Alma and How She Got Her Name*, Juana Martinez-Neal *The Boy Who Tried to Shrink His Name,* S. Parappukkaran *My Name,* Supriya Kelkar & Sandhya Prabhat *My Name is Saajin Singh,* Kuljinder Kaur Brar & S. Kaur *Say My Name,* Joanna Ho & Khao Le *Thao,* Thao Lam
Walls and Borders	*Every Little Letter,* Deborah Underwood & Joy Ruiz Free, Barroux *The Line in the Sand,* Thao Lam *Little Mouse and the Red Wall,* Britta Teckentrup *The Wall: A Timeless Tale,* Giancarlo Macri & Carolina Zalotti *The Wall in the Middle of the Book,* Jon Agee

Table 1. Picturebook text sets on refugee and immigrant experiences.

As teachers browsed text sets, they took notes on graffiti boards, booklists and journals. Immediately following browsing, teachers met in small groups to share a favorite book, why they selected it, and any observations. Our last session in the fall was a time to reflect on what we collectively noticed about these books. Teachers also selected ten books they wanted for their classrooms, using grant funds.

Beginning in January, each session started with teachers sharing experiences from their classrooms around a selected picturebook. We then introduced a dialogue strategy (https://coe.arizona.edu/resources-professor-kathy-short), such as Webbing, Consensus Boards, Save the Last Word for Me, and Sketch to Stretch (Short & Harste, 1996). Additionally, teachers worked with a partner to plan the books and strategies they wanted to use the subsequent week. In our final session in late April, we reflected on our personal learning journeys in journals, discussed why this set of picturebooks was so significant to them as teachers, and why they gave such importance to time for sharing with each other.

Guerrero Teacher Inquiry Group as a Community of Practice

We quickly realized that while the group already had a strong identity as Guerrero teachers, the inquiry group provided a space for enacting a community of practice within their school setting (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Communities of practice are formed by people who share a concern or passion for

something they do, engage in a process of collective learning, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. A community of practice is not merely a group of teachers from the same school. Instead, a shared domain of interest supports building relationships over time and through sustained interaction. Participants learn from each other, resulting in shared practices and resources, such as experiences, stories, tools, and strategies to address recurring problems.

Initially, this space built on a shared interest in exploring these books and topics with children and a desire to learn how to more effectively engage in these interactions. As the weeks progressed, we saw numerous ways teachers were deeply invested in and committed to the group. They consistently showed up after long days of teaching, shared student work, engaged in joint activities and discussions, brainstormed and planned future work, and developed shared practices for a growing number of resources—books, dialogue strategies, personal stories and creative ways to tie these experiences into standards and mandated curriculum.

Most notable was the insistence of teachers on learning from all group members. They were not content with partner or small group sharing and were adamant that they hear from everyone. They valued their collective competence, a result of sustained interactions and careful listening to the stories of teachers' and students' lives and their classroom practices. They were invested in these stories and eager to build a shared understanding of the content and their school community. At the same time, the school was under pressure from the district to implement Science of Reading and to raise test scores so finding time in their classrooms required valuing children's voices and making a commitment to connect children with these books.

As we examined our field notes, we focused on describing the kind of space created at Guerrero within their community of practice. The following sections describe the characteristics of this space in providing a place for literature despite district pressures.

Space for Sharing and Celebrating

The space created through the inquiry group was a space for sharing and celebrating teachers' personal stories and experiences, children's voices, and teaching practices with picturebooks. Teachers chose to stand in front of the group and use the document camera to share student writing and drawing, always celebrating each other's sharing by clapping.

The inquiry group was a space where teachers—many of whom were immigrants—could share personal stories about the challenges and injustices of living in the U.S. and experiences traveling back and forth across the U.S./Mexico border, experiences that connected them to the books and characters, no matter the cultural or geographical context. For example, *Thao* (Lam, 2021), a book about a Vietnamese child whose name is mispronounced, led to teachers sharing their experiences with people mispronouncing their names. A book about the Berlin Wall in Germany brought connections to our border wall. Sometimes, a book created a strong visceral response, such as when Yvette shared that she couldn't even pick up the book about la migra.

In addition to personal connections and stories, teachers shared responses from students, rarely able to limit themselves to only a few. Sometimes other teachers added interpretations as they knew these

students from previous years or knew their families. They noted their discussions opened spaces for children to share and connect with books through personal response.

The value of learning about each other, students, and teaching practices became the central defining feature of the group. Stephanie stated that the meetings provided time to get to know colleagues and students, so it was meaningful to share in the whole group, rather than small groups. She did not like to miss sessions even though she was often exhausted by the end of the day. Sharing details of their teaching practices offered new ideas for using picturebooks with students. Teachers often commented on the "creativity and knowledge" present within the group. This collaborative exchange not only fostered creativity but also strengthened teachers' sense of professional community, helping them to enrich their approaches to picturebooks.

Space for Learning through Inquiry

Inquiry is a stance that we bring when we collaborate with others to connect to and reach beyond our current understandings to explore tensions we find significant (Short, 2009). Inquiry thus combines uncertainty and invitation. A feeling of uncertainty encourages us to wonder and to question as we move beyond current understandings to pursue new possibilities. Invitation provides the courage we need to pursue those uncertainties and tensions and to take a risk by thinking with others about possibilities. We need the support of a community to inquire, especially as teachers in a time of mandates and constant test pressure.

We identified three characteristics of our community of practice as a space of inquiry. One was that our meetings were a space to explore, linger, and dig deeply into books. Another is that there were many options to make choices, rather than a singular path. Finally, the space encouraged risk taking.

In our meetings, we had time to explore, linger, and sit with books, a rarity in the frantic pace of daily school life. In our first four meetings, we spent most of our time surrounded by books. We provided a chart of the text sets with book covers and short annotations and a column to take notes about anything teachers wanted to remember about a book. They could stay with one text set and look deeply or rotate around the 3-4 tables loaded with books. The last 15 minutes of each session were spent sharing books in pairs or trios.

This time to read and share books that touched their hearts and minds was valued. Many talked about the lack of time to engage with books in their professional development sessions. The opportunity to be a reader and to think deeply about their reading was absent and they had not realized how much this absence affected their thinking about the need to deeply engage children in conversations around books.

In the fourth meeting, we put out the books teachers indicated they were most interested in so they could make decisions about which 10 books each wanted to order. They revisited these books in the spring meetings because each brought several of their selected books to share student work around a book and to plan with a teaching partner for their next engagements. Having the opportunity to think about a book with their teaching partner before reading aloud to students provided time to consider how

to invite more depth to student responses just as they were finding for themselves in revisiting a book several times.

This constant revisiting deepened their insights and appreciation of the books. Often when a teacher shared student work around a book, another teacher immediately asked to borrow that book because it wasn't in their text set but they saw potential with students. When Mercedes and Alma shared the confusions of second graders with *My Strange Shrinking Parents* (Sworder, 2023), Tessa asked to borrow the book, curious about how fifth-grade students would respond to this conceptually difficult book.

Another important characteristic of the teacher inquiry group was that teachers made choices to determine the direction of their work with students. District in-services consisted of information on best practices around math or reading. Within our group, teachers agonized over which 10 books they wanted for their classrooms. We browsed 165 books, so they had many options. Some selected fun picturebooks about walls, such as *The Wall in the Middle of the Book* (Agee, 2018) and *Little Mouse and the Red Wall* (Teckentrup, 2018), while others focused on books about the U.S./Mexico border, such as *Border Crossings* (Collard, 2023) and *Until Someone Listens* (Juarez, 2022).

Teachers also selected the dialogue or instructional strategies they wanted to use. We briefly introduced different dialogue strategies as invitations they could use, adapt, or ignore. Many explored graffiti boards, finding students responded well to the openness of drawing and writing their thinking anywhere on the board. Sarahi encouraged second graders to find different ways to map the journey of *The Wall in the Middle of the Book* (Agee, 2018), with children coming up with a trail, bubble map, web, and sequence boxes. Julian developed a class chart to record the comments of first graders as they discussed a book, capturing and honoring their thinking. Dulce and Tessa adapted Save the Last Word for Me to encourage fifth-grade responses.

At each meeting, teachers decided on the book they wanted to use next and the strategies to invite dialogue. These decisions were made with teaching partners and were influenced by sharing from other teachers that excited them about a book or dialogue strategy. When Julian shared the responses of first graders to *Room on Our Rock* (Temple, 2019), their excitement about the book changing meaning when read backwards led others to ask to borrow the book.

One of the most powerful ways in which the group was a space for inquiry was in supporting risk taking. Teachers marveled at the books, asking, "Why don't we know about these books?" Some were already in the school library, but they had not looked at them closely. The books were also not the safe happy stories from the reading program or district in-services. Teachers commented that they would have been afraid to use these books with students except for the support of the group. Knowing that other teachers were using these picturebooks in their school gave them "courage" to do so in their classrooms. They gained strength through community.

Teachers also gained courage as they saw how engaged students became in responding to books and the depth of their personal responses and wonderings. Instead of answering comprehension questions from the reading program, students shared personal stories from their lives and asked hard questions

about the policies that led so many families to suffer. When Sonia shared *Until Someone Listens* (Juarez, 2022) with second graders, they were upset that the mother had to leave the family and go to another country and wondered why "the man" (border police) separated the family, recognizing this policy as causing harm to a family. In discussing *These Olive Trees* (Ghanameh, 2023) about a refugee camp in Palestine, Tessa commented how fifth graders connected the book to detention camps in Mexico as a way to understand a Palestinian family's struggle. One child pointed out, "The camp is what they know. The older generation suffers more because they know what they had before and what they have lost. For older family members, there is more loss and pain."

Another example of risk taking came as Alma and Mercedes shared their collaborative work with second graders around a visual narrative, *Migrants* (Watanabe, 2020), that uses only images to convey the story of a group of animals who are searching for a place of safety and food. Death in the form of a skeleton accompanies these animals as does a blue ibis as a symbol of hope. There are several pages where an animal has died, for example in crossing a dangerous river. They shared student responses, including children who were so upset about the book that they created alternate endings. Their question was whether they made a mistake using this book. One child shared, "This will stay in my mind when I go to sleep." It's always easier to share successes rather than an experience that did not go as planned. In this case, we talked about sharing difficult books, not as a mistake, but as an opportunity to think deeply and experience tension that is not resolved with a happy ending.

The group supported risk taking in that teachers could adjust books or strategies "in the moment" of teaching, to use a different dialogue strategy if another was not working. Since this work was our inquiry together, not mandated curriculum, there was also space to wonder about unexpected student responses as occurred with *Migrants* (Watanabe, 2020). When second graders found *Until Someone Listens* (Juarez, 2022) confusing, not understanding deportation policies that separate a mother from her family, Alma asked if this was a weakness in the text or illustrations of the book. We talked about the issue instead being children's lack of experience and information on deportation, not as a problem with the book separate from readers, and that sometimes we need to provide information about their questions.

Teachers felt free to innovate and play with their teaching, change course while teaching, or question their decisions based on student responses. The monitoring and testing that occurs with mandated programs often signals that teachers need to follow the exact program, which, in turn, shuts down inquiry and professional learning.

Space of Exploration for Own Teaching Contexts

During the group meetings, teachers explored how they might create new spaces in their teaching contexts. These new spaces included conceptual frames, integration of these books into their mandated reading and social-emotional programs, the use of dialogue strategies with books in their social studies program, and the addition of time for book discussions.

One new space that teachers considered was how to use a conceptual frame to deepen student thinking. We introduced the conceptual frame of journeys as movement along a pathway in our first sessions of

the inquiry group and then returned to that frame in January to consider their work with children. A conceptual frame provides a way for students to make connections from their lives before moving into a specific focus, like immigration, and to develop a conceptual understanding within which to consider their reading (Short, 2009).

Thinking conceptually, rather than topically, was new but teachers enjoyed thinking about journeys with their students. Some asked students to draw life journey maps, others used *The Pink Refrigerator* (Egan, 2007), *Each Kindness* (Woodson, 2012), or *Penguin* (Dunbar, 2007) to have students draw the journey map of a character, and several used their social studies focus on Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks to map journeys. Many worked with children on mapping, creatively exploring many ways to map a journey, using *My Map Book* (Fanelli, 2019) to give students ideas about mapping their emotions, hearts, day, or bedrooms. Tessa had fifth graders create maps from the class novel, *Holes* (Sachar, 2000) and their future journeys to middle school, a journey of concern to students. Dulce asked fifth graders to create maps on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s journey. Their small group maps explored a range of creative formats, including a data chart, Splash Mountain ride, roller coaster, and jet pack.

Our teacher inquiry group also encouraged teachers to think about ways to change existing instructional spaces in their classrooms. They talked about the possibilities of integrating these picturebooks into the mandated curriculum, ensuring that they met educational standards while addressing important social issues like immigration and forced journeys. Yvette, Alma, Sarahí, and Sonia used picturebooks to encourage kindergarten and second-grade students to retell stories using sequence boxes of first, middle and end, a skill they were accountable for in the reading program, giving them more space to use these picturebooks in their literacy block.

Teachers also incorporated dialogue strategies to respond to books that were already part of their social studies curriculum, such as books about Martin Luther King, Jr. and Civil Rights. They used strategies, such as graffiti boards and sketch to stretch to prompt students to engage in deeper discussions, ask questions, and connect the books to their lives, promoting a more interactive and reflective learning experience.

Another existing instructional space was Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), a school goal. Teachers realized children could learn emotional intelligence, empathy and other SEL skills through responding to these books. *Border Crossing* (Collard, 2023) invited discussions around feelings of sadness and confusion about why such barriers exist, and how they affect animals, families and communities. *The Lotus Seed* (Garland, 1993) connected students to themes of life, hope, and resilience through images and words that resonated emotionally, such as comparing their own challenges to the symbol of the lotus seed as enduring hardships.

Many teachers created new spaces for sharing books to invite deeply meaningful discussions for students, considering opportunities to hear children's voices and experiences, rather than to teach skills. They wanted to encourage students to express themselves and consider their own experiences and perspectives. Sarahi commented, "Kids need to be aware of the world around them. We don't live in a bubble. They need to be more open-minded, not having preconceived ideas. We can make our fears so big, we don't explore the lives of others."

Lastly, the group was a space where teachers worked together to choose a picturebook to share with students and exchange ideas on how they each used the books differently. They shared strategies and supported one another in integrating the books into their classrooms.

Space of Resistance and Advocacy

With a strong school history of resistance and advocacy—for students, the school, the neighborhood and the broader community—the inquiry group became an additional space for teachers to consider and enact these same practices for themselves and students. Teachers resisted by becoming problem-posers, shifting perspectives on the books they valued sharing in classrooms, and changing the structures of our inquiry group sessions.

In the current context of excessive testing and ever changing one-size-fits-all curriculum, professional development time in school was typically spent on analyzing test data and attempting to solve the problem of low scores or insufficient academic growth based on numbers rather than teacher input. Freire (1970) argued that these contexts limit teachers to problem-solving issues the district has identified instead of problem posing and identifying what they see as problems within their classrooms. Freire believed that learning is controlled by whomever is the problem-poser and so the district retains control over teachers through taking the role of problem-poser. The inquiry group was a space for teachers to be problem-posers and take back some control of their learning and classrooms. Over our time together, we witnessed their resistance to the mandated curriculum and the structures we planned as facilitators, while also advocating for the value of children's stories and thinking as important sources of data.

During our initial sessions browsing a wide variety of books, teachers were often surprised and delighted in the themes and stories in these new titles. Stephanie commented, "these are not the books typically used in professional development sessions with boring and nonsensical lines of text focused on phonics and learning to read but books to teach about life." Even with an active school library filled with high-quality texts, many teachers did not know which books were in the library nor frequently used them in their own classrooms. Teachers had many connections to the books from their lives. As Latinx teachers living in the Sonoran Desert, the U.S./Mexico borderland and cultures are familiar and personal; however, even books set in this familiar context offer new perspectives on family separation, la migra, and border crossings. Teachers used this space to not just look at text features or consider these texts for reading instruction, but to share experiences and tap into the emotional impact of a book. Through time to read deeply and broadly, teachers recognized the knowledge they gained of borders throughout the world, not just the one in their backyard. Teachers were frustrated that books like these were not in their curriculum once they became aware of what engaging in "difficult" topics in books might look, sound and feel like. They took on a stance of resistance as they committed to using these books in their classrooms.

When the spring semester began and teachers started using these books in classrooms, they were eager to share student responses and to hear from colleagues about their experiences. They vehemently rejected our suggestion to share in small groups; instead, moving their chairs into a large circle and insisting they hear from everyone. Even when we attempted to integrate prompts for sharing (e.g.

something that surprised you and something you're left wondering about) to limit the time, teachers instead continued to share lengthy descriptions of what they did and how children responded, often in Spanish, a language in which we had varying degrees of fluency. In these moments, it was clear that teachers had claimed this space as their own and that their collective knowledge of students and families allowed for additional insights and context to be shared and celebrated.

In our final session, we asked teachers to reflect on their personal learning journeys and to discuss why these picturebooks and engagements were significant to them and why they gave such importance to taking time to share with each other. Tessa commented, "We usually share testing data in meetings, but this feels important and makes a difference." Others chimed in with, "See what we can do when we're not focused on test prep?" Through collective spaces of sharing the many ways students of all ages engaged with these books and issues, teachers became increasingly adamant that the books absolutely belonged in classrooms. They believed that the issues in these books created awareness of the world and of one's own privilege, provided an opportunity to develop empathy, challenged preconceptions, encouraged critical thinking, and, thus, created the potential to change the world.

Teachers recognized that the space they collectively created to share and support one another needed to be extended to students as a space to hear many points of view and to normalize these experiences and topics. Alma shared, "There can be discomfort when thinking about something people are going through, but it is important to have a place to share, especially in the classroom where we feel safe." Dulce pointed out that when we don't talk about these topics with students, we "inadvertently show that only certain experiences are valid." In reflecting on what he learned by creating space for his young students' poignant insights about these books in a time of political division and racism, Julian proclaimed, "If we read these books 50 years ago, we wouldn't be here. There is danger in not sharing the truths."

Final Reflections

In planning for the inquiry group, we developed what we considered an open agenda to negotiate with teachers about what this space would look like. We knew the school to be a strong community of innovative and thoughtful teachers and thought they would be interested in these books because of the school's history. We did not expect the existence of books on these topics to be a surprise. We underestimated the ways in which mandates were affecting teachers, limiting the space to share books and listen to children's voices. The inquiry group became a space for teachers to reclaim ownership of their teaching, to collectively make decisions about using books they knew were relevant to students, and to value students' stories and personal responses to literature. The inquiry group was also a space for us to reconsider the many possibilities for professional learning contexts and our roles in that learning.

Authors' Note

The inquiry study group was supported by funding from the Center for Educational Resources in Culture, Language and Literacy at the University of Arizona, a Title VI-funded Language Resource Center supported by the U.S. Department of Education.

References

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Seabury Press.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge University Press.

Short, K.G. (2009). Curriculum as inquiry. In S. Carber & S. Davidson, ed, *International perspectives on inquiry learning* (p. 11-26). John Catt Pub.

Short, K.G. & Harste, J., with Burke, C. (1996). *Creating classrooms for authors and inquirers*. Heinemann.

Vassiloudi,V. (2019). International and local relief organizations and the promotion of children's and young adult refugee narratives. *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature, 5* (2) 35-49.

Children's Literature Citations

Agee, J. (2018). *The wall in the middle of the book.* Dial.

Collard, S. (2023). *Border crossings*. Illus. H. Gray. Charlesbridge.

Dunbar, P. (2007). *Penguin*. Walker.

Egan, T. (2007). *The pink refrigerator.* HMH.

Fanelli, S. (2019). *My map book*. HarperCollins

Garland, S. (1997). *The lotus seed.* Ill. T. Kiuchi. Clarion.

Ghanameh, A. (2023). *These olive trees*. Viking.

Juarez, E. (2022). *Until someone listens.* Illus. T. Martinez. Roaring Brook.

Lam, T. (2021) *Thao: A Picture Book.* Owlkids.

Sachar, L. (2000). *Holes.* Yearling.

Sworder, Z. (2023). *My strange shrinking parents*. Thames & Hudson.

Teckentrup, B. (2018). *Little mouse and the red wall.* Orchard.

Temple, K. & J. (2019). *Room on our rock*. Illus. T. I. Baynton. Kane/Miller/EDC.

Watanabe, I. (2020). *Migrants.* Gecko Press.

Woodson, J. (2012). *Each kindness.* Illus. E.B. Lewis. Nancy Paulsen Books.

Dorea Kleker is a teacher educator working with learners of all ages in a wide variety of formal and informal contexts.

ORCID: 0000-0002-4551-2945

Kathy G. Short is a Regents Professor in the College of Education at the University of Arizona and is Director of the Worlds of Words Center of Global Literacies and Literatures.

ORCID: 0000-0002-9431-366X

Narges Zandi is a second-year doctoral student in Teaching, Learning, and Sociocultural Studies at the University of Arizona.

ORCID: 0009-0003-6092-5558

School Librarians Collaborating with Students, Parents, Families, and Community Members: A Never-Ending Joyful Journey

Mary Jade Haney

I'm an elementary school librarian, but I've worn many hats throughout my journey in education—classroom teacher, visual arts teacher, reading teacher, interventionist, literacy coach, professional developer, curriculum writer, and teacher educator. I bring all of these experiences with me into the library every day. My goal is to weave the real, literate lives of students, families, and community members into the required curriculum in ways that spark joy and make learning meaningful for everyone.

As a school librarian, I believe that collaboration—with students, educators, parents, families, and community members—creates joyful and meaningful learning experiences. By working together, we learn from one another and help to build inclusive, engaging spaces for learning. This partnership is essential in supporting culturally relevant literacy, connecting learning from home to school to the wider community. It's a continuous journey of growth and shared understanding.

In these photos I provide a snapshot of some of our collaborations in school, at the local library, and during the summer.

Photo 1. Librarian Cadets.

The Librarian Cadets are a group of fifth-grade students who promote literacy by organizing library events for early childhood students. They work together to plan and lead activities such as reading stories to younger students, all while honoring the legacy of Augusta Baker—an exceptional storyteller and librarian. This program fosters student leadership and strengthens the school community through collaboration with the school librarian.

As Cadets, students created events like Reading Is Life Storytime, where they read to younger students in small groups. They also participated as guest performers during Black History Month, both at school and in the community. This year, the Librarian Cadets made a significant impact on the library's programming.

Photo 2. Literacy Live 365: Young Writing Workshop.

The Young Writers Workshop has extended beyond the school walls through a collaboration with the public library. In this project, first graders begin by writing an acrostic poem using their names. From the words in their poems, they create affirmations that reflect who they are. After completing their acrostic poem and affirmations, each student chooses one affirmation to turn into a sentence, which they then illustrate. They also create a cover, title page, and dedication page for their personal book.

Once finished, students share their books with family and friends. These affirmations become something they can return to anytime they want to celebrate themselves. By reading their books aloud, they also build confidence and fluency. Our young writers are truly amazing!

Photo 3. Camp Discovery STEAM Academy (Interdisciplinary Summer Camp) Beloved Educators.

We began our journey in 2012 with a group of dedicated certified and classified educators, united by a shared passion for learning. Using our own experiences, creativity, and personal resources, we came together to design a summer learning experience for teachers, students, and parents—rooted in love and community.

Camp Discovery STEAM Academy was created to provide professional development for educators while immersing students in rich literacy experiences, supporting families, and building a strong community of learners. Guided by the African proverb, “It takes a whole village to raise a child,” our camp reflects the power of collective growth.

The camp begins with one week of professional development for educators. For the following two weeks, educators collaborate with students, parents, and community members in hands-on, interdisciplinary learning. The experience culminates in Parent, Family, and Community Day—a celebration that showcases eight days of learning, literacy, and leadership.

Camp Discovery is more than a camp—it's a space that centers social justice, celebrates diversity, and nurtures the whole child through collaboration and care.

Photo 4. Camp Discovery STEAM Academy Parent, Family, Community Day.

Parent, Family, and Community Day is the grand finale of our learning journey at Camp Discovery STEAM Academy. On this special day, families and community members come together to celebrate students' growth and achievements. Students lead the way, sharing their work through student-led conferences and presenting projects displayed on the learning exhibition wall.

The day includes catered food, opportunities for families to connect, and a celebration of both students and educators. Students are recognized with certificates, and teachers are honored for their dedication. The joy and pride are evident in every child—it's a powerful and uplifting experience that reflects the heart of Camp Discovery.

Mary Jade Haney, MLIS, NBCT (Renewed) completed her fifth year of serving as an elementary school librarian informed by multiples roles as an educator. Currently, she is a doctoral candidate (University of South Carolina – Columbia) in the College of Education (Teaching & Learning). She brings a variety of experiences to inform librarianship in an elementary school setting from serving in multiple roles as an educator (i.e., classroom teacher, visual arts teacher, reading teacher, reading interventionist, literacy coach, teacher educator professional developer, and curriculum writer) with a focus on sociocultural theory and culturally relevant pedagogy.

ORCID: 0009-0000-0760-2520