

# LITERACY AND THE WHOLE CHILD

## Our unique position to support whole child practices in the classroom

By **Autumn M. Dodge** & **Stefanie B. Copp**

**W**hole child pedagogy centers on the belief that children should not be conceptualized as a disparate collection of cognitive, physical, and socioemotional parts, but instead should be viewed as dynamic individuals whose multiple attributes are interwoven and unique, and, together, make vital contributions to the learning enterprise and classroom community.

Each child's thoughts, feelings, academic strengths, interests, motivations, physical and mental abilities, cultures, languages, and family and community practices comprise who they are. When educators view, engage with, and teach their students through this holistic lens, the classroom becomes a space that reflects care, safety, and support.

Teachers who embrace whole child pedagogy listen to their students because they know each one brings the collective elements of their identity to every interaction and learning experience. Teachers understand the kinds of tasks that will challenge and motivate each child and, importantly, how to make learning accessible to each child.

Clearly, then, a whole child pedagogical orientation reflects the need

for differentiation beyond academic ability. Although instructional decisions, assessments, texts, and other learning modalities cannot be completely tailored for each child every single day, a whole child approach allows teachers to critically evaluate texts and instruction and consider how they interact with and support their students. Such considerations result in education that proactively works toward equity for *all* children.

### The literacy educator's role

Literacy educators are in a unique position to implement whole child pedagogy in their interactions with students and as they collaborate with other teachers to improve literacy instruction.

In fact, the International Literacy Association's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* reflects an increased focus on

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advocating for equity for diverse learners. Standard 4, Diversity and Equity, in particular, reflects the ways literacy educators are positioned to put students' diverse identities and literacy practices front and center.

The ideas shared here are supported by Standard 4 and are evident among all literacy educators who embrace a whole child approach.

### Affirming their identities

Literacy/reading specialists and classroom teachers can support students' reading motivation, attitude, and enjoyment by providing access to texts that reflect the diversity in their classrooms.

Sometimes teachers feel locked into primarily considering reading levels when choosing books for students. This can make it difficult to consider other characteristics of books that might connect to the multiple and intersecting diverse aspects of a child's identity. Helping students and/or teachers choose such books is a responsibility of literacy educators dedicated to whole child pedagogy.

In helping students choose texts, it's important that the books students have access to reflect their cultural backgrounds. For example, if a child asks themselves, "Do I see kids like me in the books?" the answer should be "yes."

Books should reflect aspects of students' diverse identities, from cultural identities to biodemographic identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or nationality, or even their gamer status or Instagram profile.

By allowing students to read more widely, they can be exposed to a wider array of texts and can see their own diversity (and the diversity of others) in what they read. Although reading specialists and classroom teachers are typically in the position of remediating reading instruction, they can still find ways to integrate texts where students can see themselves and experience new perspectives.

Literacy coaches should also be knowledgeable about and prepared to

give classroom teachers advice about whole child pedagogy and to recommend books that reflect the identity and experiences of students in their class. Literacy coaches can also work with classroom teachers to brainstorm and implement literacy practices that are tailored to the diverse identity of each child. Information about a child's family and community, language and cultural background, and availability of and types of texts in their home is vital information that can be leveraged to meet the literacy needs of the whole child.

When a teacher knows the funds of knowledge (skills and knowledge based on cultural, family, and community histories and experiences) of the students in their class, the literacy coach can work with the teacher to implement literacy instruction that draws on what each student brings to the table. With this sort of reconnaissance knowledge about students' whole lives and rich literacy practices, literacy educators can forge school-home bridges to enhance students' overall literacy skills. Parent letters or more broad inquiries and interaction with family and community involvement can help develop these connections and provide literacy educators and teachers with an understanding of the funds of knowledge and literacy practices a child brings to the classroom.

Literacy coaches can also provide insights to teachers about the ways language, culture, and identity are interwoven for their students for whom English is an additional language. The practice of translanguaging is an example of how multiple aspects of a student's identity influence

their engagement with the world.

Through translanguaging, a student's communication and ways of being are comprised of simultaneous use of both their first language and English.

Students' dialects and language use are rooted in culture and identity, and often students' liminal identities are comprised of multiple languages and dialects. Literacy educators are primed to understand the ways students' use of language may be seen by other teachers as not meeting "Standard English" norms or as being incorrect. They can use this knowledge to help teachers view their students' multiple languages and cultures as assets.

### Connecting with students

Through these practices, literacy educators can foster affirming classroom environments in which literacy instruction acknowledges all types of diversity. In particular, reading/literacy specialists and literacy coaches are well situated to inquire about, listen to, and respond to distinct student needs and to support teachers' implementation of strategies that build on students' funds of knowledge and their choices for curricular and pedagogical resources to address individual students' identities.

In all, literacy educators are poised to offer insights into whole child instruction and a more nuanced and purposeful understanding of literacy across the curriculum. Literacy educators can be advocates not only of these intuitive strategies for connecting with students but also of promoting the equity in understanding and respecting the diversity in *all* students. ■

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