In this issue, we turn toward an array of professional literature that helps us think about the connections between reading and writing instruction in our classrooms. We hear a lot about genre these days and our review of *Genre Connections: Lessons to Launch Literary and Nonfiction Texts* (McGregor, 2013) gives readers a glance at McGregor’s framework for engaging students in authentic ways with texts. We also review books that help us build thoughtful classrooms where reading and writing are taught as the inter-related processes that they are, and we review a new book on assessment that helps us see the stories and make meaning from the “data” we collect in our classrooms. We are reminded that we can keep learners at the center of our assessment practices. Finally, we consider professional literature that can help us explore recent events that have begun to shape our lives and impact the schools in which we work. Ultimately, we hope this professional literature highlights ways to create curriculum that is relevant, grounded in authentic dialogue and critical inquiry in order to transform our schools and communities.

**Genre Connections: Lessons to Launch Literary and Nonfiction Texts**


In her latest book, Tanny McGregor shares lessons that she has purposefully designed to increase student engagement with seven genres along the continuum between narration and exposition. Each lesson motivates students to explore a particular genre through active, collaborative learning opportunities as readers, writers, thinkers, speakers, and researchers.

In this companion to her earlier book, *Comprehension Connections: Bridges to Strategic Reading* (Heinemann, 2007), McGregor begins each launching sequence with a concrete experience. During this initial exposure to the genre, students are encouraged to make connections that will serve as anchors for future thinking. It is in this stage of the sequence that McGregor uses familiar, inexpensive objects to serve as metaphors for each genre. In the study of poetry, for example, she holds a glass jar before the students and asks, “How is poetry like a jar?” Students are encouraged to think deeply about this metaphor as they turn to their peers and explore the question. After discussion, students share their thoughts. In the study of informational text, students observe a seed packet, noticing and noting the many types of information presented in both words and images. Beginning with a familiar and concrete experience allows all readers to enter the genre as they make connections with implicit experiences from their daily lives.

After the initial concrete experience, students engage in what McGregor calls “uncovery”— a relaxed time for students to browse through selected texts, noticing and naming characteristics and features of the genre. Then it’s back to metaphorical thinking as students engage in sensory exercises of art and music that connect...
with each new genre of writing. McGregor states, “The arts inspire new thinking while providing simple, essential enjoyment” (p. 7). During a study of adventure and fantasy, for instance, students study Surrealism as they view the art of Dali, Magritte, and other Surrealists. When studying historical fiction and biography, students listen to musical versions of life stories through the songs of singer/songwriters such as Mary Chapin Carpenter and Don McLean.

After the sensory exercises, students again explore the characteristics of the genre by going deeper into texts. During a study of biography, this might mean engaging in an interactive teacher read-aloud with a book such as Eleanor, Quiet No More by Doreen Rappaport (Hyperion, 2009). When studying drama, it might mean participating in readers’ theater. Also during this stage, McGregor believes it is important for “students to consider the power of genres beyond the walls of the classroom” (p. 4) by providing them with quotes from authors, artists, musicians, and other great thinkers. She writes, “Using quotations is a great way to dwell, if only for a moment, in the deep thought of another” (p. 75).

As the launching sequence draws to a close, it is time for texts—the opportunity for students to read and explore the genre both collaboratively and independently. To help teachers plan instruction during this stage, McGregor provides a bibliography of instructional resources for each of the genre studies included in her book.

The power in this book lies in McGregor’s own caveats that bookend the text. She notes that any genre could be launched using her sequence, and teachers should not use the book as a script. She also notes how her launching sequence can be used across content areas to introduce conceptual knowledge. She encourages teachers to take the ideas in the book, “chew on them, and spit them back out as your own” (p. 109). Teachers who take her advice are sure to discover an increase in their students’ engagement, a product of providing them with greater motivation and more active learning opportunities. (JG)


Traditionally, in the ELA classroom, reading and writing have been treated as separate subjects taught in isolation of each other. In some classrooms today, this is still the case. But, over time, research has revealed that reading affects writing and writing affects reading. Teachers are coming to understand that teaching students the many connections between reading and writing has the potential to help them grow as readers, writers, and thinkers. In her latest book, Readers Writing: Strategy Lessons for Responding to Narrative and Informational Text, Elizabeth Hale addresses the reading—writing connection and offers teachers new ways of thinking about their classroom practice.

Hale supports the use of reader’s notebooks, which provide opportunities for students to respond to their reading through writing. She argues that students oftentimes do not know how to respond to texts in writing outside of summarizing. As a result, in her book, she offers a wide variety of strategy lessons that encourage critical thinking and responding through questioning, connecting, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating. Hale assures us that her strategy lessons are both easy to teach and easy for students of many different ability levels to understand. According to Hale, “Strategy lessons are less about teaching students about comprehension strategies and more about teaching students specific ways to verbalize thinking in the context of writing” (p. 3).

There are nine chapters in the book, and each chapter stands alone. As a result, teachers can choose a chapter based on immediate needs. For example, chapter 3 focuses on strategy lessons for
narrative texts, while chapter 5 focuses on strategy lessons for nonfiction texts. Every strategy lesson follows a format that has 5 parts: Name It, Why Do It?, Model It, Try It, Share It.

Hale offers tips on how to help students organize the reader’s notebook, emphasizing that having students personalize their notebooks is important at all grade levels. The idea is that a predictable structure supports learning that is steeped in best practice thinking. She argues that the structure of the reader’s notebook helps students with organization in both their writing and thinking. Hale makes it clear that students need time to process what they are learning—by talking, collaborating, and trying out each strategy in their reader’s notebooks. Having students take ownership of their learning and giving them time to engage in that learning are important tenets in Hale’s book.

Teachers will also be interested in the chapters on scaffolding students into independent thinking, conferencing with reader’s notebooks, assessment, and comprehending nonfiction text. Every chapter includes students’ writing samples to show the critical nature of their reading responses as well as their thinking and writing. There are also charts throughout the book with scripts that exemplify how to conduct each strategy lesson. Of course, the scripts are provided as a guide or scaffold rather than a panacea. Readers will also appreciate the useful appendices that include tables demonstrating the alignment between the strategy lessons and the Common Core State Standards. Additional appendices include lists of book suggestions for both narrative and nonfiction lessons.

Hale has written a valuable resource for teachers by making a case for connecting reading and writing in the classroom through strategy lessons—lessons that have the potential to encourage all learners to engage in reading and writing in both critical and creative ways. Students’ literacy development is dependent on them understanding this strong interconnection between reading and writing. (VAO)

Assessment in Perspective: Focusing on the Reader behind the Numbers

In their first book, Landrigan and Mulligan invite readers to join them on their journey in understanding the intersection of assessment and daily instructional practice. They begin by stating, “Assessment is more than a published test or tool that is administered formally. Assessment is also the data we collect authentically, every day” (p. 2). They remind teachers never to forget “that behind every number is a reader and that we, as teachers, have the power to use assessment to make a difference for each one of them” (p. 3). They also stress how imperative it is for teachers to learn ways to collect, triangulate, and analyze different types of data: diagnostic, formative, and summative; informal and formal; qualitative and quantitative. Such data makes it possible for us to understand readers and find their stories.

The authors have divided their journey into six chapters. Each chapter has a different focus on assessment, quotes from outstanding authors and researchers, and readers’ stories illustrating thinking and understanding of authentic assessment and instructional practice in elementary classrooms. They willingly share things they know—beliefs grounded in seminal theoretical research. For example, when they state their first belief that assessment is more than a number, they reference Marie Clay’s idea of systematic observation and Peter Johnston’s work on the language that teachers use in conversation with students. They write, “Assessment should not be about defining a reader but about piecing together information to help us design classroom experiences so we can observe our readers learning and understand what each one needs” (p. 9). Their second belief, that assessment and instruction are inseparable, is based on the work of Carol Ann Tomlinson, who helped teachers
think about differentiated instruction, and Pearson and Gallagher, who developed the gradual release of responsibility model of instruction. Their third belief, guided by the research of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, states that instruction can meet high standards and still be developmentally appropriate. They write, “The development theory of learning guides our beliefs and our understanding of how children learn” (p. 11).

The authors skillfully give teachers a foundation for understanding how assessment measures are designed by considering the purpose, type, and method of the assessment. In Chapter 3, “Assessment Literacy,” they include a list of some frequently used elementary reading assessments and indicate how each is designed, as well as the areas of reading measured by each assessment. All teachers of elementary students can grow in their assessment literacy by using this book as a reference to better understand assessment tools, what they measure, and how they can use the data to support their young readers.

Because Landrigan and Mulligan are teachers themselves, they have put the needs of their fellow teachers at the forefront of their thinking and writing. Chapters 4–6, along with the appendix, include classroom examples of structures and displays for triangulating data. They also provide examples and photographs from their own classrooms in order to deepen teachers’ understandings of the practical application of their research within assessment and instructional practice. They intentionally include the student’s role in assessment as they write, “When we are explicit with our students about the purpose behind our teaching and give them a window into our thinking about how it will support their reading development, it helps set them up for learning” (p. 101).

Ultimately, the message that the authors want teachers to take away from their book is how assessment, when used to understand instead of evaluate, is the tool for incorporating students’ stories. Thus, assessment empowers teachers to know how to teach their students and motivate them to keep trying and growing as readers. (JG)

_**Rac(e)ing to Class: Confronting Poverty and Race in Schools and Classrooms**_


On June 17, 2015, a self-proclaimed white supremacist entered the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and killed nine parishioners during Bible study. Nine people who welcomed this young man into their church, who prayed with him, were left to die. What followed were not riots—though it certainly would have made sense; instead, people came together to demand that the Confederate flag come down from the South Carolina State House and across the country. Political leaders, authors, community activists, and educators reminded us that removing the flag, while an important move, was not enough if we didn’t also seek to dismantle the racist structures and agendas that permeate our society. They called on Americans to begin talking openly about race, privilege, and opportunity—topics often considered taboo.

Richard Milner’s new book, _Rac(e)ing to Class: Confronting Poverty and Race in Schools and Classrooms_, opens this conversation without hesitation or side-stepping. Milner tells readers that too often our conversations about race are superficial:

> It is difficult to have substantive conversations about race regarding individual students and their parents and families without thinking deeply about the broader collective, societal systems that directly impact the individual. For instance, how many educators understand the links between race, student assignment policy, and property taxes, and education? (p. 10)

teachers have in shaping educational opportunities for students. He articulates that while many teachers can close their doors and teach, there is a need for schools and school districts to address race and poverty at the macro-level in order to make systemic changes. Milner thoroughly reviews the literature on race, poverty, and achievement, and paints a compelling picture of the dire educational and life circumstances faced by students of color living in poverty.

Milner does not point fingers in this book. Instead, he makes explicit and achievable recommendations to school districts, teachers, and teacher educators to examine, study, understand, and unpack systemic inequities and classroom practices that fail to provide students with learning opportunities, and to teacher education programs that do not address race and poverty in comprehensive ways. Milner continually acknowledges the complexity that surrounds proposed reform efforts, and he urges readers to act, and to act now. For example, he recognizes that school districts are often restricted in the changes they can make because of limited resources, but he criticizes the fact that too often districts are accustomed to small changes over time; as a result, “These leaders are thus complicit in maintaining the status quo that directly affects their students” (p. 33).

The case studies Milner presents in Chapter 3 will resonate with anyone who works in high-needs, underserved schools where students are more “school-dependent” than the white, wealthier children attending suburban, well-resourced schools. Some of these case studies were painful to read. Many of us may have seen ourselves reflected in these settings as students of color were disciplined more than white students, as we misunderstood a behavior, or as we refused to see our own role in escalating a situation. These case studies provide powerful vignettes for district- or schoolwide professional development study groups where participants can unpack the scenarios with various lenses, including race, culture, and privilege, and examine the discourse used to talk about students.

Milner shows us the need to create systems that support students and teachers, where schools are places where everyone (including teachers) are socially and emotionally supported so that authentic learning and academic success can happen. He discusses the urgent need to make curriculum relevant to students’ lives, and illustrates how teachers often fail to see the curricular potential that lies in issues such as crime and violence that many students experience. Milner invites readers to consider the curriculum that may evolve from these issues.

As a result of reading this book and Milner’s curricular invitation, I began to consider the shootings in Charleston from this perspective. How might teachers unpack the symbolic nature of flags and symbols in general, and the Confederate flag in particular? I wondered how many teachers could talk about the historic significance of the church in Charleston and how Denmark Vesey, who led a slave revolt, and other African Americans founded it because of the racial inequities they had experienced in the predominantly white church. Would educators look at racial demographics and housing patterns in their own cities? I wondered how preschool teachers in Charleston would talk about the shootings when school began, and how educators across the country would begin to see the curriculum that emerges when we make learning relevant to students’ lives.

Rac(e)ing to Class is replete with Milner’s own stories as a son, teacher, father, student, and professor. He shows readers how his life experiences, like all of our experiences, shape our identities and how we teach. He demonstrates the importance of unpacking our racial identities in order to understand how these identities shape our moment-to-moment interactions with students, our curriculum, and the learning opportunities we provide or deny students of color. Race to read this book! We need it, and our students need us to read it. We need it to help us disrupt systemic inequities, racist policies, and biased practices that prevent our schools from becoming places where every student learns, where the learning that happens
transforms us into communities in which citizens engage in dialogue, critically analyze, and work to create a world where “no child [has] to suffer from the lack of resources necessary to function in and out of school” (p. 185). (TTL)

References

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