



National Council of
Teachers of English

Preparing Teachers with Knowledge of Children's and Young Adult Literature

This statement, formerly known as Preparing Teachers with Knowledge of Children's and Adolescent Literature, was updated in July 2018 with the new title, Preparing Teachers with Knowledge of Children's and Young Adult Literature.

Originally created by NCTE Children's Literature Assembly (CLA), 2004, revised July 2018

OVERVIEW

Purpose: Given increased calls for diversity in the English language arts curriculum and growing awareness of the need for young people to see themselves in the books they read, NCTE has commissioned an updated statement on preparing teachers with knowledge of children's and young adult literature.

Key Message: Research shows that when students are given the chance to read books that respect the questions, challenges, and emotions of childhood and adolescence, they read with greater interest and investment (Buehler, 2016; Mueller, 2001). Research also shows that teachers who are readers themselves do a better job of engaging their students in reading (Morrison, Jacobs, & Swinyard, 1999). Thus, teacher educators must support preservice teachers as they build rich and deep knowledge of children's and young adult literature over the course of their certification programs. Then teachers must invest in their own continued growth, learning, and development as children's and young adult literature advocates throughout their professional lives.

Context: A committee of English educators has updated NCTE's 2004 statement Preparing Teachers with Knowledge of Children's and Adolescent Literature by calling teachers at all stages of their careers to cultivate knowledge of books for young people, be readers of these books themselves, affirm diversity in book selection, and teach children's and young adult literature in ways that honor the books' literary quality as well as their potential to spark personal and social transformation.

STATEMENT

Evidence indicates that teachers' knowledge of children's and young adult literature is inconsistent and uneven from community to community, school to school, and classroom to classroom. Preservice teachers do not read any more than the general population (McKool & Gespass, 2009). Many of today's teachers have never taken a class in children's and young adult literature, and some states have eliminated the requirement for a dedicated course in children's and/or young adult literature for teaching certification. A growing number of schools no longer employ a librarian, who may be the only professional in the building who has formal training in children's and young adult literature, collection development, and matching young readers with books. Without librarians, the burden for reading advisory and material selection falls to classroom teachers, who often lack the training needed to perform these tasks.

Therefore, teacher education programs have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to

- *introduce* preservice teachers to books for children and teens;
- *develop* preservice teachers' understanding of the inherent value of these books for both general reading and classroom use;
- *raise* preservice teachers' awareness of the power of these books to affirm lived experience, create empathy, catalyze conversations, and respect the questions, challenges, and emotions of childhood and adolescence;
- *call* preservice teachers to embrace the roles of reading advocate and book matchmaker alongside their work as implementers of curriculum;
- *inspire* preservice teachers to commit to reading these books throughout their professional lives;
- *cultivate* in preservice teachers a commitment to teaching these books in ways that honor their literary quality as well as their potential to spark personal and social transformation;
- *build* preservice teachers' capacity for continued growth, learning, and development as advocates of children's and young adult literature.

As an organization, NCTE compels teachers at all stages of their careers to invest in books for young people—as readers of those books and as advocates for their worth in the classroom.

Recommendations

NCTE recommends that teacher educators and teachers commit to the following four principles in the service of increasing their ability to teach and advocate for children's and young adult literature.

1. Know the literature.

Preservice teachers should cultivate book knowledge throughout various methods courses and across their entire teacher preparation program, regardless of state certification requirements.

They should develop broad and sustained knowledge of quality books in the fields of children's and young adult literature, including fiction, nonfiction, and multimodal texts.

At the same time, they should build knowledge of resources—including review journals, websites and blogs, social media discussions, book awards, and author appearances at local libraries and bookstores—that can provide them with information about quality new books and their potential for classroom use and reading advisory.

They should also invest in relationships with librarians and organizations such as NCTE and ALAN (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE) that can help them build capacity to discuss and recommend books, evaluate literature, remain current, and discover new ways to teach children's and young adult literature effectively.

2. Be readers.

Teachers who are engaged readers do a better job of engaging students as readers. According to Morrison, Jacobs, and Swinyard (1999), "perhaps the most influential teacher behavior to influence students' literacy development is personal reading, both in and out of school" (p. 81). Teachers should commit to leading literate lives and becoming connected to reading communities—whether in person or through social media—that support them as readers and literacy professionals. Teachers should understand the value of different modes and platforms for reading (Garcia & O'Donnell-Allen, 2015) and build their capacity to read with a critical, discerning eye (Newkirk, 2011).

3. Affirm diversity and exercise critical literacy.

In alignment with NCTE's Resolution on the Need for Diverse Children's and Young Adult Books (2015), NCTE challenges teachers and teacher educators to assume a transformative activist stance (Stetsenko, 2016) that supports a future of equality for all youth by engaging students with diverse books, which offer readers what scholar Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) calls windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. It is essential that youth have access to books in which they can see themselves and engage with the lives of others (see, for example, platforms created by the current and former National Ambassadors for Young People's Literature, including Jacqueline Woodson, Gene Luen Yang, and Walter Dean Myers). NCTE believes that books help readers transform their lives and expand their visions of the world.

Nevertheless, there is a dearth of diverse books for youth in the United States as seen in yearly statistics about trends in multicultural children's book publishing prepared by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The #WeNeedDiverseBooks and #ReadInColor social media campaigns have illuminated the paucity of diverse books in the marketplace. Although the CCBC recently observed that children's picture books feature an increased number of characters with "brown skin . . . of unspecified race or ethnicity, with no visible culturally specific markers in either the

story or the art," the CCBC questions whether books with racially ambiguous characters provide actual windows, mirrors, and sliding doors for today's readers (Horning, Lindgren, Schliesman, & Tyner, 2018, n.p.). NCTE joins the CCBC in urging educators to not only advocate for more authentically diverse children's and young adult books from US publishers, but also to support authors, illustrators, publishers, and booksellers whose work represents multiple perspectives and cultural diversity in the lives of all children.

In addition to being advocates and supporters of diverse literature for youth, educators who assume a transformative activist stance must build their capacities for discernment and critical evaluation so they are prepared to choose children's and YA books wisely and strategically from the books available to them. Simply because a book features diverse characters does not mean that the book endorses equality and/or cultural understanding (Apol, Sakuma, Reynolds, & Rop, 2003; Dávila, 2012). For example, some popular works of contemporary, "multicultural" realistic fiction privilege the assumption that all residents of the United States should embrace dominant mainstream culture [e.g., *My Name is Yoon* (Recorvitis, 2003); *One Green Apple* (Bunting, 2006)]. Some of these books reinforce assimilation social narratives (Yoon, Simpson, & Haag, 2010) and/or endorse monocultural language and identity (Ghiso & Campano, 2013). Educators and students should collectively cultivate critical literacy practices to critique the social narratives that are endorsed by the books they select (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2012; Morrell, 2007) and talk back to the literature (Enciso, 1997).

Educators who affirm diversity and exercise critical literacy as part of a transformative activist stance recognize that they are always learning and expanding their capacities for transformation. They are open to guiding difficult discussions about inequality with students and are willing to tolerate the possibilities of "wobbling" while they explore uncharted territories with students (e.g., Fecho, 2005; Garcia & O'Donnell-Allen, 2015). They recognize that children's books are political (Nodelman, 2008; Stephens, 1992) and are the artifacts of the authors', illustrators', and/or publishers' views of the world (Willis & Harris, 2003) and/or US history (Thomas, Reese, & Horning, 2016). Moreover, these educators follow national conversations via media and blogs about diverse books, especially related to issues of power and representation (e.g., *Reading While White*; *American Indians in Children's Books*).

4. Use appropriate pedagogy.

Teaching children's and young adult literature is about more than getting students to fall in love with reading. Preservice teachers also need to learn appropriate and effective strategies for helping students find books that will engage them as readers and as participants in critical, significant conversations about their lives (NCTE, 2006; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). This requires a deep knowledge of excellent books and the willingness to carefully curate a classroom library that provides appropriate choices for all students (Crisp, Knezek, Quinn, Bingham, Girardeau, & Starks, 2016; NCTE, 2017). Preservice teachers also need to know evidence-based strategies for supporting student knowledge of literary crafting—that is, how

authors develop characters, construct plots, and employ other literary elements to create an exemplary work. Examining literary craft does not mean that the focus is on dissecting a book's structure or meaning. Rather, teachers should be skilled at helping students develop a common language for determining what makes a book excellent literature. Finally, teachers need to know how to advocate for the freedom and autonomy to create classrooms that support research-based pedagogical strategies for teaching children's and young adult literature (Mathis et al., 2014; NCTE Children's Literature Assembly, 2004).

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