



Literacy News

Association for Literacy Educators and Researchers



Letter from the Editors

Dear ALER Colleagues,

Welcome to the Fall 2026 issue of *Literacy News*. We know that many of you are carrying a lot right now, in your classrooms, your programs, and your communities. We hope this issue offers a moment to pause, be inspired, and remember the good work our community does every day.

Inside, literacy turns up in unexpected places. Follow preservice teachers into the grocery store, see how children's literature welcomes emergent bilingual students, and add three new reads to your stack from the Literacy Bookshelf. We hope you'll join us in St. Petersburg, Florida, November 5–7, for the 2026 ALER Conference, "Reimagining Literacies, Envisioning Futures: Working for Justice and Belonging." This year's featured speakers are Regie Gibson, Patricia Durham, and Haeny Yoon.

The conference will be held at the Hilton St. Petersburg Bayfront hotel. Come for the sessions, and stay for the conversations in the hallways and over dinner. That is where many of us find our collaborators, our encouragement, and our friends.

Finally, this newsletter belongs to you. We invite you to share a Pedagogy Corner, a book review, or a Research Spotlight in our Spring 2027 issue. The deadline is January 6, 2027, and details are on page 9. 🌍

With gratitude and hope,

Heather & Robbie

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Reading the Community: Multimodal Literacy Beyond the Classroom

by Jacqueline M. Cofield, Ed.D., Teachers College, Columbia University

After reading my teacher candidates' reflections on a grocery-store field inquiry, I called two supermarkets. The assignment had been an experiment. I wanted preservice teachers to consider a place most of us take for granted as a site of literacy and curriculum, and their reflections revealed possibilities I had not fully anticipated. They wrote about food and family memory, environmental print, language, culture, affordability, choice, and representation. I began wondering whether we could take the inquiry further. What if the preservice teachers could bring the questions emerging from their observations directly to the people who worked in these spaces?

So I called.

One manager seemed genuinely confused about why someone from a school of education would be calling a grocery store. Why were teachers studying this space? What did a supermarket have to do with literacy education? At another store, the response was more guarded. The manager seemed concerned that we might be journalists or conducting some kind of investigation. "We're not journalists," I explained. "We're teachers."

Neither conversation produced the exchange I had imagined. But their confusion clarified the problem.

Literacy education often assumes a limited set of locations where literacy takes shape (Bang-Jensen, 2023). We recognize literacy in classrooms, books, and designated cultural institutions while overlooking how people read and compose meaning through ordinary environments. Yet children spend much of their lives beyond classroom walls, continually making meaning through the places they inhabit. A grocery store's signs, languages, prices, packaging, product arrangements, sounds, and pathways all require interpretation and action. I wanted teacher candidates to encounter literacy in the daily: the seemingly mundane, the nonverbal, the felt, and the spatial.

The Grocery Store as Curriculum

I designed "Curriculum Encounters in Everyday Spaces: Grocery Store Field Inquiry" for a literacy methods course for preservice elementary teachers. The course enrolls both undergraduate and graduate teacher candidates. The assignment drew inspiration from Curriculum Encounters, a podcast produced by the Black Paint Curriculum Lab at Teachers College, Columbia University. Before visiting a store of their own choosing, students listened to an episode in which hosts Jackie Simmons and Sarah Gerth van den Berg explored a supermarket as a curriculum laboratory (Simmons & Gerth van den Berg, 2025).

The Field Inquiry

Students could visit a supermarket, bodega, food cooperative, corner store, or big-box food aisle.

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I asked them to move slowly and curiously—and to let their imaginary eight-year-old selves accompany them.

Students used a set of field prompts to guide their observations. They considered what their younger selves might reach for, which foods were present or absent from their childhood homes, and what memories or sensory experiences resurfaced. They also approached the store as literacy researchers, attending to signage, packaging, languages, categories, spatial organization, and whose cultural practices were visible or absent.

Documenting and Reflecting

They documented three to six visual texts and organized their reflections through Muhammad's (2020) four Historically Responsive Literacy pursuits: identity, skills, intellect, and criticality.

Application to Teaching

Finally, they proposed a literacy experience for elementary students. Possibilities included studying environmental print, mapping the store, examining multilingual signage, writing sensory descriptions, or investigating food access and inequality.

The teaching application mattered. Noticing had to precede design: before preservice teachers could create a literacy experience for children, I wanted them to attend closely to the literacy practices, meanings, and possibilities already present in the space.

Learning to See Otherwise

One teacher candidate reflected, "I never would have thought about my future students going to their nearest grocery store and seeing how literacy is present there." Another wrote, "Teaching literacy isn't limited to the classrooms but also can be done even in unsuspecting places like the grocery store. This shift will allow me to think more about the spaces I use to teach students literacy."

These reflections document more than the recognition of print outside school. Students began reconsidering where teaching could occur and which spaces could generate knowledge. Food became connected to family memory, language, movement, cultural history, affordability, choice, and belonging.

Greene's (1995) work helps me understand this pedagogical task as learning to see otherwise. She positions imagination as a means of disrupting the ordinary, the given, and the taken for granted. In this context, seeing otherwise does not mean searching every environment for materials to carry back into the classroom. It means questioning the institutional habits that determine which places, practices, and people educators recognize as sources of knowledge.

My follow-up calls to the supermarkets emerged from what I saw in those reflections. I had not anticipated the depth of the questions the assignment would generate. I contacted the stores to explore whether someone might speak with the class and respond to what had surfaced in the field. I wondered whether we could move from observing the grocery store as a curricular space toward engaging with the people who worked within it.



From Noticing to Engagement

Reading a community as text carries risks. Educators can project meaning onto a place, adopt a tourist gaze, or extract community knowledge without relationship or accountability. Our presence can also reproduce what Shirazi (2018) calls conditional hospitality: recognition and belonging governed by normative thresholds. Even as guests in community spaces, educators can position themselves as epistemic hosts, recognizing only the knowledge that fits an existing lesson. We may also reproduce policing epistemologies that determine whose language, experience, and knowledge count.

The assignment helped me distinguish between noticing and engagement. Teacher candidates did not need permission to pay attention to a public-facing space—to notice its signs, languages, organization, sensory environment, and cultural meanings. But deeper engagement is different.

Bringing elementary students into a store for a field experience, interviewing employees, or developing an ongoing school-store partnership requires communication, permission, and relationship. A love ethic changes the encounter. hooks (2000) defines love as a practice grounded in care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. Applied to community-based literacy education, a love ethic requires humility, reciprocity, and attention to agency. It asks educators to consider what remains invisible, who has the authority to interpret a place, and what responsibilities accompany our presence there.

Teacher candidates must ask more than “What can I teach here?” They must also ask: What is this place already teaching? Who produces that knowledge? What relationships would make our presence responsible?

The grocery-store inquiry did not simply move literacy instruction beyond classroom walls. It asked teacher candidates to reconsider knowledge and authority before converting observation into curriculum. If everyday spaces already shape how children read identity, culture, language, movement, and power, how might literacy educators encounter those spaces without diminishing what—and whom—they hold?

Try It: The Grocery Store as Curriculum

Listen. Begin with the grocery-store episode of Curriculum Encounters from the Black Paint Curriculum Lab at Teachers College, Columbia University: “Curriculum at the Grocery Store” (Season 2, Episode 2),

<https://www.tc.columbia.edu/digitalfutureinstitute/media/curriculum-encounters/season-2/episode-2/>

Visit. Ask students to independently visit a grocery store, bodega, food cooperative, corner store, or big-box food aisle. Invite them to move slowly and let their eight-year-old selves accompany them.

Notice. Provide field prompts that ask students to attend to memory and sensory experience as well as signage, packaging, languages, prices, categories, spatial organization, cultural representation, and what or whom may be absent.

Document and reflect. Ask students to collect three to six visual texts and analyze the experience through Muhammad’s (2020) four Historically Responsive Literacy pursuits: identity, skills, intellect, and criticality.

Design. Have students use something they noticed during the inquiry to propose a literacy experience for elementary students. Ask them to consider what could happen through observation and what would require permission, communication, or partnership with the people responsible for the space. 🌍

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ALER 2026

November 5–7, 2026

“Reimagining Literacies, Envisioning Futures: Working for Justice and Belonging”

DIVISION DIALOGUE

Teacher Education & Professional Learning (TEPL)

by Shelly Landreth, Chair, Sul Ross State University & Angela Curfman, Chair-Elect, West Liberty University

The mission statement of the Teacher Education and Professional Learning Division states that the division *shall advance and support high quality pre-service and in-service preparatory programs and curricula for education professionals engaged in professional study in higher education, including meeting the needs of diverse learners using innovative techniques and strategies.*

Each year our division members are invited to submit roundtable proposals for the ALER conference. Like previous years, our members did not disappoint! We are excited to have over 20 different presentations that align with the mission of the division and represent all the amazing work happening across the many institutions represented in our division. We would love for you to join us on Saturday, November 7 from 1:35-3:05 p.m. for our TEPL Division Meeting. The roundtable presentations will follow the annual business meeting.

Finally, we are excited to welcome TEPL's new division chair-elect, Dr. Angela Curfman. Come by the TEPL session on Saturday afternoon to meet and congratulate Dr. Curfman on her new leadership role. 🌍



Regie Gibson
MA Poet Laureate

SPEAKERS

Patricia Durham
Laureate Winner

Haeny Yoon
Teachers College Columbia

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Utilizing Children's Literature to Support Literacy Needs of Emergent Bilingual Students

by Soumi Chakraborti, M.Ed., Katy ISD

Emergent bilingual students (EBs) bring a wealth of linguistic and cultural knowledge to the classroom but often encounter traditional literacy contexts that are not designed to leverage their multilingual resources (Lei et al., 2026). These challenges include limited access to culturally relevant texts, limited opportunities to capitalize on students' home languages, and instructional practices that prioritize monolingual approaches of literacy. When literacy instruction does not reflect students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, EB students may experience more challenges in connecting with texts and meaningfully engaging with literacy instruction. In response to these challenges, educators and researchers have emphasized the importance of instructional approaches that recognize and build upon students' linguistic and cultural assets. One such approach involves the intentional use of diverse children's literature that reflects students' identities, languages, and lived experiences. Children's literature can serve as a powerful tool in bridging linguistic diversity and supporting literacy development by validating students' multilingual identities and experiences to build literacy skills (Bishop, 1990; García & Kleifgen, 2018).

Bridging Linguistic Diversity to Support Literacy Development

In my instructional practice, I have implemented strategies for selecting and integrating children's literature to address the literacy needs of EBs. These strategies include selecting culturally relevant and diverse texts that reflect students' identities and experiences, encouraging students to make multilingual connections between English and their home languages, incorporating interactive read-alouds and guided discussions to support comprehension, and connecting literature to content-area learning to build both language and academic knowledge. These classroom experiences highlight the importance of intentional literature selection in fostering both literacy development and cultural appreciation among EBs.



To fully support EBs, I realized I needed to move beyond relying solely on traditional textbooks, which often did not provide the linguistic and cultural accessibility my students needed. Drawing inspiration from my own childhood experiences with the power of narrative, I began incorporating children's literature into our varied genre-based lessons. I intentionally selected texts that included rich illustrations, thoughtful craft or style moves, compelling narratives, language choices, and multiple themes that students could connect to such as friendship, courage, compassion, and family because these elements help build background knowledge and support comprehension. While some texts contained accessible language, I also included more complex texts during interactive read-alouds, knowing that students can comprehend and engage with challenging material when it is supported through meaningful class discussion, authentic analyses, visuals, and teacher scaffolding.

For a lesson on identifying multiple themes in literature and co-constructing thematic statements, I selected two children's literature books: *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi and *Watercress* by Andrea Wang, and paired them with a short story "Fish Cheeks" by Amy Tan. The objective of this lesson was to analyze how themes of family, culture, and acceptance are presented and developed across diverse texts while students build comprehension skills. To encourage collaborative engagement with the text and support deeper comprehension and identity affirmation, I invited the students into an interactive read aloud session of Choi's *The Name Jar* and Wang's *Watercress* to engage in meaningful discussions, ask questions, and make connections between the text and their own experiences, thereby promoting critical thinking and metacognitive skills (Baker et al. 2020). EB students

continued on next page

benefit from these sessions as they are low pressure environments to develop comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, listening skills, questioning skills, and gain confidence.

After reading aloud the three selected texts, the class engaged in an exploration of questions related to differences, identity, and cultural assimilation. The process began with open-ended, text-dependent questions such as: What challenges do the characters face in the story? How do these characters respond to challenges and failures? What impact does society have? Students collaboratively brainstormed and identified common themes across the stories, creating a comprehensive list of potential thematic statements. A brief discussion followed, emphasizing that a single narrative can encompass multiple themes. Following these discussions, students worked collaboratively in small groups to identify recurring ideas across the texts and record them on chart paper.

This activity reflects collaborative literacy practices that promote deeper comprehension through social interaction (Langer, 2011). Groups then synthesized their ideas into broader thematic statements, which were shared during a whole-class discussion. As a class, we co-constructed an anchor chart, categorizing themes under larger conceptual categories such as belonging, identity negotiation, assimilation, and cultural pride. Student-generated thematic statements included "Being different can make people feel isolated, but it can also be a source of strength," and "People may feel pressure to change, but maintaining one's identity is important."

This process also reflects the Funds of Knowledge theory (Moll et al., 1992), as students drew upon their lived experiences and cultural backgrounds to interpret texts. By validating these experiences, the lesson fostered both academic engagement and identity development. Furthermore, the collaborative construction of themes aligns with critical literacy frameworks (Freire, 2000), encouraging students to examine issues of power, identity, and belonging within texts and society.

Conclusion

Incorporating children's literature into daily lessons enriches EBs' language acquisition, promotes cultural understanding, and enhances critical thinking, while simultaneously creating an engaging and inclusive learning environment (Bishop, 1990; García & Kleifgen, 2018). Teaching through these books has assisted me in seeking imaginative, innovative, and enjoyable methods to motivate and inspire my EB students. Every time I teach lessons that include children's literature, I witness heightened student engagement, deeper connections to the material, and a greater willingness to participate in discussions. Students demonstrate better comprehension skills as they relate to the characters and themes. They also exhibit noticeable growth in both linguistic skills and critical thinking as they analyze stories and share their interpretations. I see how such lessons create a sense of community, where students connect their personal experiences to the narratives and continue to enrich the learning environment with their diverse and unique perspectives. 🌍

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Watch the most recent
TEPL Fireside Chat

"Beyond the Page"

with Heather Pule and Roberta Raymond

Literacy Bookshelf



A Review: *Crafting Phenomenological Research* (3rd Ed.)

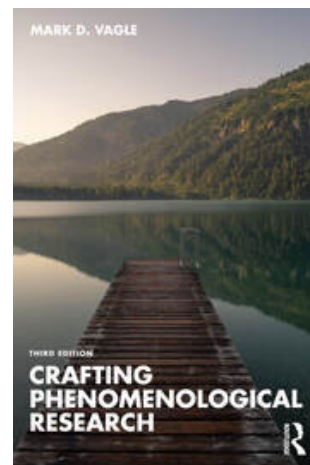
by Mark D. Vagle

review by Maggie Robertson, University of South Florida

If you are interested in dipping your toe, or possibly an entire foot, into phenomenological inquiry, *Crafting Phenomenological Research* is the text for you. Mark Vagle's ability to explain, question, position, historicize, and offer phenomenology as both method and way of being is perfect for both graduate students wondering what even is phenomenology and seasoned scholars wondering how they might re/think what phenomenology has the possibility to open up?

The text is organized into three parts, helping readers 1) follow the historical and philosophical lineages of phenomenology, 2) explore research approaches to phenomenology, and finally, what I would consider his bread and butter, 3) become familiar with Vagle's own approach to phenomenology, post-intentional phenomenology. This is perhaps Vagle's most important contribution through this third edition of the text. Vagle spends Part III offering an entanglement of poststructural theory and phenomenology, drawing primarily from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of lines of flight and multiplicities. Additionally, Vagle offers the "Post-Intentional Triangle" as a path towards re/working phenomenology by thinking with theory, provoking what might be phenomenological material and post-reflexing, rather than traditional phenomenological bracketing.

Throughout the text, Vagle positions phenomenology as a craft, helping readers to understand that this way of knowing is something that must live within you, as phenomenology is a slow dwelling into the questions you seek to answer. 🌍



A Review: *All the Blues in the Sky*

by: Renée Watson

review by Bethanie Pletcher, Ed.D., Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi

In my quest to keep up with award-winning books for children and to prepare for my children's literature course this fall, I read the 2026 Newbery Award winner, *All the Blues in the Sky* by Renée Watson.

Written in first-person narrative prose, we hear from 13-year-old Sage, who has recently lost her best friend in a tragic accident and blames herself for what happened. In her grief support group, Sage connects with other young people who have experienced the unexpected loss of someone they love. Yet Sage struggles to empathize with group members who had the opportunity to say "goodbye" to their loved ones before they died.

Watson's masterful writing does not diminish the pain of losing someone. Instead, it helps young readers understand that it is okay to experience complicated emotions—and, as Sage comes to realize, that they are not alone in feeling them. With the support of family and friends, Sage learns that she will always carry the memory of her friend and what happened to her, even as she finds a way to move forward.

Books for young readers that address death and grief are not easy to read, and they are certainly not easy to write. Renée Watson navigates this difficult subject, delivering a moving and age-appropriate book for upper elementary and middle school readers. It is a powerful story of grief, guilt, and healing—and one that was most deserving of a Newbery Medal. 🌍



Literacy Bookshelf



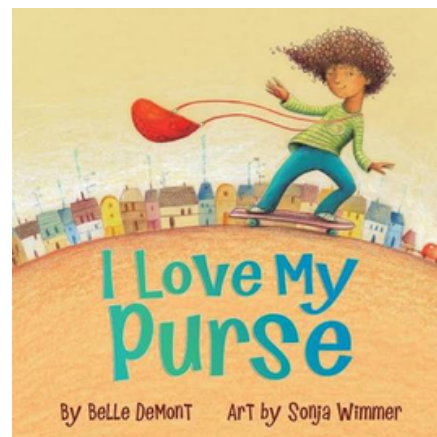
A Review: *I Love My Purse*

by: Belle DeMont

art by: Sonja Wimmer

review by Soumi Chakraborti, M.Ed.,
Katy, ISD

The main character, Charlie, in *I Love My Purse* is tired of wearing his bright red purse only in front of his mirror, so he decides to wear it to school. Because Charlie is a boy, his father, friends, and even the crossing guard question his "strange choice." Charlie meets every puzzled glance and skeptical question with the same simple response: "But, I love my purse."



His unwavering self-assurance becomes the heart of the story, demonstrating that children need not abandon things that bring them joy to conform to social expectations. Charlie's self-confidence is contagious. He stands firmly behind his choice which ultimately encourages those around him to embrace their own individuality and pursue the things that bring them joy regardless of societal norms and expectations. He doesn't argue with his critics, conform to others' gender norms, or try to justify his choice. His quiet yet unwavering refrain "But, I love my purse" empowers others to express themselves freely and celebrate what makes them unique.

DeMont's engaging storyline introduces the complex issue of gender stereotypes through an accessible and child-centered narrative that encourages thoughtful discussion without being didactic. Wimmer's vibrant, expressive artwork enhances the emotional depth of the story, allowing young readers to empathize with Charlie while appreciating the joy he finds in simply being himself. 🌍

ENJOYING THIS EDITION? SUBMIT TO LITERACY NEWS!

Literacy News will include three categories for submission:

- Pedagogy Corner: Share the amazing work happening inside your classes. Consider sharing an effective instructional strategy, grounded in research, that you have used with preservice teachers, K-12 students, literacy professionals, or graduate students. You may consider including student work and/or pictures to complement the content (authorizations will be needed). Suggested Word Count: 700-900
- Literacy Bookshelf: Highlight a book you have read, love, and want to share with your professional community. We are accepting book reviews for a professional text, children's book, middle grade book, or young adult book that you have read. Suggested Word Count: 100-200 (Please submit only one review.)
- Research Spotlight: Share recent research or a recent publication with ALER members. Write a piece about how you came to this research and why it is important to literacy education and provide link if published. Suggested Word Count: 500-600

Email your Microsoft Word submission along with author information to alerliteracynews@uhcl.edu. Include the type of submission in the subject line. Deadline: January 6, 2027



Member Spotlight: Bethanie Pletcher, Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi

Tell us a little about yourself.

I grew up in inner-city Houston and attended Houston public schools. I had a wonderfully unconventional childhood, thanks in large part to my mother, who worked at a popular rock radio station in Houston during the 1980s. My formative years were spent attending concerts and hanging out backstage, working up the nerve to introduce myself to rock legends. (Hello, Stevie Nicks and Tom Petty!)

I began my undergraduate studies in elementary education at the University of Houston after spending one rather rough semester at TCU on a voice scholarship. I went on to teach in public schools for 12 years, beginning in Austin ISD, where I also earned my master's degree from UT Austin. Over the course of my teaching career, I worked in three other states as a classroom teacher, Title I reading teacher, Reading Recovery teacher (and PROUD of it!), and literacy coach. I returned to the University of Houston in 2011 to pursue my doctorate.

I am currently a Professor of Literacy Education at Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi, where I have been since 2014. My family consists of my husband, dog, and cat. Outside of work, I collect vintage sewing machines and enjoy sewing vintage clothing.

When did you become a member of ALER?

What do you enjoy about the ALER community and the conference?

Dan Pearce, my chair and mentor at TAMU-CC during my first few years there, encouraged me to attend the ALER conference. I fell in love with ALER at my very first conference in 2014 because of its welcoming atmosphere, wonderful people, and strong sense of collegiality. Over the years, I have found many friends and valued working partnerships through ALER, and I am confident that will continue for years to come. I currently

serve as an ALER board member and previously served as an editor for ALER's journal, *Literacy Research and Instruction* (LRI), for seven years.



What research are you currently working on?

For the past year, I have been collaborating with other ALER members on studies focused on decodable texts. Our work has included analyzing the content and characteristics of decodable texts, developing evaluation guides to help teachers take a closer look at the texts they use, and observing teachers and children as they engage with decodable texts in elementary classrooms.

Do you have any recent publications that you would like to share with the ALER community?

One publication that I am particularly proud of examines the use of interactive writing and authentic writing experiences to build children's foundational literacy concepts:

[Pletcher, B. C., Williams, C., & Shaikh, R. \(2025\). Interactive writing in a first-grade classroom as a venue for teaching early concepts of print and expanding oral language in the *Early Childhood Education Journal*.](#)

I am also excited that Marilyn Nicol and I have an edited book, *Advancing Elementary Writing Instruction Aligned with the Science of Reading*, forthcoming from Bloomsbury in early 2027.

Any words of wisdom for early career faculty?

My advice to early-career faculty is simple: Attend the ALER conference every year and get involved in whatever ways you can. Find new friends during sessions and invite them to lunch or dinner. And, of course, never miss the hotel bar, where many friendships—and more than a few working partnerships—are born! Don't be shy. Introduce yourself, strike up conversations, and talk to as many people as you can. You never know where those connections will lead.

What brings you literacy joy?

I try to engage in something each week that brings me literacy joy. I read fiction every night before bed—which is also why I stay up far too late. Spending time in first-grade classrooms during writing workshop makes me incredibly happy. I love watching children become excited about creating their stories and then sharing those stories with me and their classmates. I mean, a dinosaur who eats hamburgers?! What better way to spend part of my week? 🌍

Research Spotlight

Crystal D. Cook, Ed.D., The University of Memphis

Publication

Cook, C. (2024). Literacy Practices in the Homes of English Learners. *TNTESOL Journal*, 9(1), 22-31.

What if, instead of urging families of English Learners (ELs) to increase literacy activities at home, we first examined how literacy is already integrated into their home routines? While promoting more literacy engagement is beneficial, it's essential to recognize that some of these activities might already be happening. While teachers should encourage home literacy, we must avoid assuming that such practices are absent from students' home lives.

Summary

My recent publication, *Literacy Practices in the Homes of English Learners*, based on my original dissertation, explores this question by examining how ELs and their families engage in literacy practices beyond school walls.

Using a qualitative phenomenological design, I examined the lived experiences of three families with 4th and 5th grade ELs attending an urban elementary school in West Tennessee.

Data were collected through interviews, photo elicitation, and a researcher's journal. Families photographed literacy artifacts and activities that represented literacy in their homes, providing opportunities to discuss not only what families were doing but also what those practices meant to them.

The main sources of literacy for participating families were reading and discussing the Bible, as well as completing homework together. Families also described reading together, discussing texts, completing school-related activities, and using everyday interactions as opportunities for literacy and language development. Importantly, these practices did not occur exclusively in English. Spanish was the primary language of communication within the participating families' homes, while English and Spanish were used in different ways in the homes to support children's literacy and language development.

Three broader findings stood out from this study. First, family, literacy practices, and culture were deeply interconnected. Second, mothers intentionally worked to establish a strong language foundation that would support their children's future success. Third, families held strong values and were committed to children's educational development.

These findings encourage all educators to broaden their understanding of family literacy and family engagement, and this raises an important question: How can we work together with families to appreciate and build upon their existing literacy knowledge and practices, rather than simply expecting them to adopt school-based literacy approaches? Recognizing these practices can help educators identify students' funds of knowledge and create stronger connections between home and school (Gonzalez, Andrade, Civil, & Moll, 2001).

What Brought Me to This Work

The study emerged from a recognition of the need to appreciate the diverse literacy experiences that take place in students' homes. When teachers understand the literacy experiences students bring, classroom instruction can build on existing knowledge rather than treating students and families as if literacy begins when they enter the school building. Ultimately, students benefit when we move beyond asking if families are involved and begin asking how families are already cultivating literacy, language, culture, and learning in their everyday lives. By asking rather than assuming, we create greater possibilities for meaningful family-school partnerships and classrooms that honor the knowledge, languages, cultures, and experiences students bring. 🌍



CHECK OUT LRI

Volume 65, 2026 Issue 4

“This issue foregrounds literacy learning and teaching in elementary school contexts, examining how students, teachers, and preservice teachers engage with texts, identities, languages, and instructional tools.”

Research Spotlight

Hiawatha D. Smith, Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-River Falls

Publication

Smith, H. (2025). Where is the diversity? An analysis of diversity in 21st-century libraries. *Dragon Lode*, 44(1), 26-37.

Summary

This research addresses a critical gap in classroom library scholarship by centering teacher voices and agency. While previous studies have documented the lack of diversity in classroom libraries through external audits, this work empowered teachers to examine their own collections, reflect on their findings, and take concrete steps to improve representation. The study followed 15 K-8 teachers as they completed diversity audits of their classroom libraries using the Classroom Library Questionnaire (Lee & Low Books, 2017). Beyond identifying which diverse books were present, the study examined how teachers made sense of their findings and what actions they prioritized to address gaps.

The findings revealed four key themes in how teachers interpret their audit results: many classroom libraries are unintentionally created through donations and inherited books from previous teachers; teachers often have limited knowledge of what is actually on their shelves; the concept of relevance matters because teachers want books that reflect students' contemporary lived experiences, not just historical narratives; and institutional context shapes what diverse identities can be included.

Teachers identified three primary action steps based on their findings: being intentional about book selection and budget allocation; promoting diverse texts through thoughtful display and advocacy; and engaging with networks of educators, authors, and literacy advocates to discover new titles. Several teachers had already begun implementing changes by the study's end, securing diverse texts and reorganizing their libraries to make representation more visible.

This work provides practical guidance for both classroom teachers and professional development facilitators. It demonstrates that with appropriate support (including access to audit tools, time for reflection, school funding for new books, and professional learning networks), teachers can transform inherited collections into rich, representative spaces where all students find mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990).

What Brought Me to This Work

My commitment to diverse classroom libraries stems from three key observations. First, I noticed classroom libraries that lack visible representation of diverse identities. Second, I worked with preservice and practicing teachers who inherited their classroom collections without critically examining their content. Third, as a national book award committee member, I read many diverse books and see the ways that diverse voices can be represented within classroom libraries. Too often, teachers accepted what was on their shelves simply because books were convenient and instruction was prioritized, never pausing to ask: Whose stories are told? Whose voices are missing? What messages does this collection send to students about whose experiences matter?

In my graduate courses on children's and adolescent literature, I witnessed the transformative power of diversity audits. Teachers who completed audits did not just identify gaps; they became advocates for change within their schools and districts. They started following diverse authors on social media, advocating for budget allocations, and displaying diverse books prominently. This shift from passive inheritance to active curation inspired me to continue this work.

This research validates what prior studies have already found: classroom libraries need attention to diverse identities. More importantly, it provides a roadmap for meaningful change, demonstrating that teacher-led audits can catalyze transformation in these critical literacy spaces. 🌍

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Research Spotlight

Vicki S. Collet, Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-River Falls

Brooke Ward, University of Wisconsin-River Falls

Publication

Collet, V. S., and B. Ward. 2026. Authors as Mentors: Grammar as Tools, Not Rules. *The Reading Teacher* 80, no. 1: e70060. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.70060>

Summary

The recent *Reading Teacher* publication of "Authors as Mentors: Grammar as Tools, Not Rules," by ALER member Vicki S. Collet and graduate student Brooke Ward offers a process for using mentor texts as a pathway for teaching grammar and usage, highlighting authors as authentic mentors (Collet & Ward, 2026). Using a contextualized approach to grammar instruction, with published authors as mentors, contrasts starkly to frequently-used but ineffective methods using worksheets and isolated grammar instruction. With the contextualized approach, we propose that students turn to authors as mentors for using grammar as intentional tools, not rules. The article includes both primary grade and middle-school examples of this contextualized approach which we hope will be helpful to ALER members.

As you consider the approaches described in this article, consider how you, and the teachers you work with, might make more space for students to consider grammar as a tool in their own writing. This article describes a process that includes identifying potential mentors (usually published authors) and exploring their texts, reading and responding first to the text's content before describing a grammar focus. Together, teacher and students find examples of the grammar aspect within the mentor text. Importantly, students then discuss the author's purpose in using this grammar aspect and then explore using it in their own writing. As you talk with students about authors' choices, ask questions like, "Why do you think the author chose that word?" "Why might the author have included a short sentence there?" Draw attention to authors' intentionality.

Through repeatedly revisiting an author's work, "those authors and their work become more than just good examples; they are elevated to the status of true mentors" (Zuidema, 2012, p. 65). Positioning published authors as mentors for students' writing provides authentic models for students to construct knowledge about grammar within meaningful contexts.

Who are your writing mentors? How do you use their texts? How will you share those processes with other writers? "Authors as Mentors: Grammar as Tools, Not Rules" provides options for you to consider.

What Brought Us To This Work

The research supporting this article was prompted when Ward, as a graduate student, became aware of her second-grade students' readiness to better understand English grammar. Recognizing the benefits of using grammar knowledge for authentic purposes, Ward and Collet explored the literature surrounding use of mentor texts to teach grammar; while advice was prolific in professional literature, supporting research was lacking, prompting the original study (Ward et al., 2022). Subsequently, their method was standardized and utilized across multiple grade levels. 🌍

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