My mother always said I was her most simple child. Not simple meaning, foolish or plain. Just simple. I was the easy-going kid, not too complex—uncomplicated. I was the type of child that would select the box of Duncan Hines cake mix over the experience of gathering all the needed ingredients and making a cake from scratch. I remember thinking as a kid, "Wow, someone figured out how to fit all that 'stuff' in a little box so that we wouldn't have to waste time at the Shop & Bag buying all the cake parts." I was truly in awe! I was always fascinated by those geniuses that figured out how to make the process easier, but still made sure the ending was great. I was the kid always looking for ways to make a situation less complex. And I grew up believing that was a good thing. My mother thought I was good at that; she would often say, "Melia, you are always using your smarts, figuring out how to do things well and with time to spare."

I came from humble beginnings. No, actually, I came from complex times. I was raised in a community where drugs were abundant and gangs were on the rise. We were poor. Money and space was always tight; but so was our family unit. We were a close-knit group. My childhood was filled with love. I loved my family and I loved learning. My mother made learning the priority in our home. She filled the house with books, encyclopedias, and all types of learning games. My sisters would tease me endlessly of my obsession with becoming a teacher. Every opportunity I had to emulate one of my Catholic school educators, I took it.
I guess it came as no surprise to my mother or my six sisters when I decided to pursue a degree in education. Or even when I decided to work in communities very similar to the North Philadelphia neighborhood in which we were raised. Honestly, I sometimes think I was born to do what I do. I was born to figure out how to utilize resources and make learning fun and meaningful for my students, in spite of what may be going on in their lives, in their communities. It is my job to make the outside world less complex and learning the priority. I wish the task were simple, but it is not. The reality is that I am expected to teach well. Perhaps more noteworthy is the fact that my students are often expected to learn well amidst very complex circumstances.

Nonetheless, I realize that the more I am able to understand my life experiences and past circumstances, the more competent I become in my role as educator. In an attempt to communicate learning best with my students, I take steps to learn about their cultural and individual life experiences well. I work to help my students realize their potential. I work to ensure that students achieve at a high level, develop a positive sense of self, and acquire a commitment to change the world for good. This, I believe, would be called culturally responsive literacy teaching. This is the teaching that connects with my students’ lives and makes learning a meaningful experience. At the same time, I also have to meet the standards that are established in the core curriculum for our district. So now I’m the one who has to figure out how to put all these “ingredients in the box.” In this chapter, I describe the ways I take the complexities that are handed to me—the standards and the core curriculum, my students’ different literacy needs, and the culturally diverse out-of-school lives they lead—and how I attend to these things in order to inspire and nurture my students’ literacy growth.

I serve a diverse population in a large urban school district. Many of our parents are members of the working-class community. Some of our parents hold jobs at the neighboring university and a few are small business owners. A majority of my students are African Americans but some are native Africans who have recently arrived from the continent of Africa, and approximately 5% of my students come from Southeast Asia, primarily from Cambodia.

Like many districts across the country ours is looking to ensure that every child is pulled forward and that no child be left behind. As a result, we adopted a standards-based curriculum to be used at every grade level for all major and tested subjects: math, reading, writing, and science. A planning and scheduling timeline is provided to approximate how much teaching and learning time should be allotted to individual lessons.
many administrators and teachers work endlessly to find ways to implement a clear understanding of what constitutes proficiency. Fortunately for my students and me, our school principal and I share a common belief that literacy is one of the most effective vehicles for change. To that end, he affords me the space to foster and nurture a community of learners.

BUILDING COMMUNITY AND CONNECTING WITH THE EXISTING CULTURE OF MY STUDENTS

Providing my students with an authentic literacy experience allows me the opportunity to better understand the culture of my students and their families, while teaching with and beyond the mandated curriculum. One of my favorite teaching experiences is based on the poem "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes. The primary goal of this week-long unit is to address the literacy standard of "identifying the author's purpose and type." "Mother to Son" has proven to be an ideal text for many reasons. It provides many windows or entry points into the mind of the author. It provides teachers an opportunity to scaffold learning effectively. In addition, most people can appreciate the relationship between a mother and her son.

When we begin this unit, the students are told, "This week we will spend a little bit of every day unpacking the poem, 'Mother to Son' by Langston Hughes. The learning experience challenge is to be able to identify the author's purpose for writing and to support your response with examples from the text." We begin the whole group lesson by honing in on the second line of the poem, "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair." Students are asked to take a minute to jot down all the words that come to mind when they think of the characteristics of a crystal stair. After 1 minute I chart the responses of the students: "shiny," "fancy," "smooth," and "beautiful." I recognize my students' contributions with a response: "Wow, how about that? This author sends home a strong statement as early as the second line of this poem." I then prompt them to further consider Hughes' words: "What is the mother saying to her son?"

Students concede that life for the mother has been "hard," "rough," and "not easy at all." It has had "tacks in it, Ouch!" But all the time she never gave up. At this point, I invite students to think about Hughes' writing style: "Langston Hughes really knows how to use figurative language to make writing more beautiful and interesting. And you guys really did a great job unpacking that poem so far. How about we go a bit deeper and allow this piece to inspire. Let us start with preparing to write a strong metaphorical statement."
I then ask students to relate Hughes’ poem to themselves and invite them to jot down characteristics of their lives. In most instances I would model for students what the process of brainstorming for this writing experience would look and feel like for me. What type of life did I have at the age of 10? What words would I use to describe my background? I write, “definitely not expensive, but not all the way rough.” For homework they are required to brainstorm further with family members and to think of an object that may embody similar characteristics. My students think deeply about how to best connect an object to their life story, really wanting the metaphorical statement to be a true depiction of their lives.

One tenacious student, Keith, wrote of his life in the future, comparing it to a sleek racing car, expensive, fast, and always starting up on time. My always-pleasant-and-serious student, Amayah, wrote of her amusement park life. She wrote of emotional rollercoaster rides, and the butterflies that fluttered in her tummy as she hoped and prayed her best prayers that her father would become more involved in her life. But mostly she wrote of a fun life, filled with great surprises. She wrote of the sweet cotton candy life her beautiful and hard-working mother provided. Amayah’s closing stanza read: “Not all amusement park trips are perfect, but most are fun and all of them are worth remembering. My life is an amusement park, mostly fun but not always perfect.” Another student borrowed Hughes’ style and wrote the following poem:

**Win or Lose**

Life for me is a game of basketball
Sometimes I win and sometimes I lose
Dribble fast, Dribble slow
My mom and I are always on the go
Rebounds, fouls, and 52 fake outs
Money comes and goes
But I don’t pout and shout about
Because in the end I have to choose
I plan to not give up every time I lose
Practice hard, work it out
Sometime I win and sometime I lose
Life for me is a game of basketball

We completed this learning experience 3 days later than planned because the students were so engaged in it. The time spent on this learn-
ing experience was "academically purposeful" for several reasons. Many of the students met the desired goal of identifying the author’s purpose and type. Not only were many of them able to identify the purpose and type of writing, (as a result of this and similar types of learning experiences) they learned to write with a purpose and audience in mind. My students were beginning to better understand how to utilize language to make their own writing more beautiful and interesting. They were beginning to see themselves as writers and skillful readers. Equally as important, our classroom community was growing closer and stronger.

Just about everything that happens in our class is deliberate and comprehensive. It’s important to me that my students see themselves as a positive part of the larger society. The works of authors like Langston Hughes often serve as a dual resource. First, I work to select literature that affords my students the opportunity to see a manifestation of their life experiences, which is a key principle in culturally responsive teaching. The work of the noted educator Lisa Delpit reminds me to utilize familiar metaphors and experiences from the world of my students. As a result, my students are motivated to listen more closely and learn more deeply because they feel personally connected to the learning experience. Second, I look for ways to cover content more deeply. Typically, I look to utilize a variety of texts as models of writings to help students “write like readers” and, ultimately, “read like writers.”

FINDING TOUCHSTONE TEXTS

Helping students “write like readers” and “read like writers” involves the selection of mentor or touchstone texts. Before I search for these, however, I make certain what my academic goals will be. In the beginning of the school year I review what has to be accomplished according to the various frameworks and standards. Then I look at what I can do to meet those goals in ways that will best reach a majority of students—in ways that will help them connect to the work and retain new understandings. It’s important to me that they learn how to apply their knowledge to different situations in the world, not just to be able to answer questions on the state assessment. One of the noted differences between those students who are successful and those who are not is their ability to apply what they’ve learned in different situations and contexts. So, as I look to best utilize my resources and ensure that my students achieve at a high level, develop a positive sense of self, and acquire a commitment to change the world for good, I turn to a good book.
The novelist E. L. Doctorow says, “Any book you pick up, if it’s good, is a printed circuit for your own life to flow through so when you read a book, you are engaged in the events of the mind of the writer. You are bringing your own creative faculties into sync. You’re imagining the words, the sounds of words, and you are thinking of the various characters in terms of people you’ve known, not in terms of the writer’s experience, but your own” [quoted in Harvey & Goudvis, 2000, p. 5]. In some classrooms, these purposefully selected books are referred to as mentor or touchstone texts. In my classroom we refer to the authors of our book studies as the “experts we can’t afford to pay to visit our classrooms.” So we work to squeeze everything we can out of a “good book” to help us become better readers, writers, and ultimately great learners. And we borrow from the minds of many different authors, across various genres, however, many of the touchstone texts I have used more frequently are written by the following authors: Eve Bunting, Faith Ringgold, Lucille Clifton, Sandra Cisneros, Walter Dean Myers, and Patricia Polacco. These authors provide windows of opportunity for my students to connect, and grow deeply and widely.

For example, I like to use the book Thank You Mr. Falker by Patricia Polacco at the start of a new school year. In the story, Polacco honors a 5th-grade teacher who took the time to notice her as a learner and to identify her as a student with several reading disabilities that impeded her ability to thrive as a reader for many years. I use the story, Thank You Mr. Falker, to help frame the work of our classroom community and to share my expectations for teaching and learning. After reading the book aloud, I share with my students that much like the character Mr. Falker, I will use various ways to notice and support the needs of all students in our learning community.

I say to my students, “My hope is that you will allow the story of the young and resilient Patricia Polacco and the knowledge of the great writer she became to encourage you to work hard and never give up. We will not give up, in spite of anything that has happened in your past or is happening now. Together we will make this 5th-grade year, a year to celebrate.” Usually I end the discussion by humbly stating, “One day I hope one of you will write a book in my honor, entitled Thank You Mrs. Brown.”

**SATISFYING THE STANDARDS**

In my 5th-grade classroom, I am responsible for ensuring that my students master grade-level standards in literacy. At times the structure and the accompanying demands of the core curriculum may feel insurmountable.
We understand that particular content and strategies need to be covered at predetermined times and my colleagues and I are expected to adhere to the core curriculum with fidelity. I often find myself at a crossroads, searching for ways to meet the demands of the timelines and the needs of my students. I often find myself negotiating the turn: Should I slow down to ensure that more of my students acquire an adequate amount of understanding? Or do I continue driving forward, confident that the scheduling timeline will provide another opportunity to build understanding for those who did not get it the first time around? Mostly, I find myself cautiously driving in both lanes, in search of ways to ensure that most of my students reach the desired destination and with hope for time to spare to support those who did not.

Students learn in different ways and are motivated in different ways. More often than not, I find that curriculum materials are not frequently adapted to meet the varying needs of our students. Often, I find ways to effectively modify instruction to best meet the needs of all students. "Figurative-language week" is one example of how I work to meet the diverse needs of my students while ensuring they master grade-level content and skills in a timely fashion. During figurative-language week I work to address a number of core standards. However, the primary goal of this week is to address the following literacy standard: Evaluate how the author uses literary devices to convey meaning (Figurative Language: personification, simile, metaphor, hyperbole). During figurative-language week, we work to study intensely the work of one author. Several pieces of text by the selected author are identified as touchstone texts to accompany the learning experiences. And I work, using literature, to connect what students know well already to what I want them to know and understand more deeply.

In this example, I used the work of Lucille Clifton to help students better understand how the author uses simile to convey meaning. We study the poem "My Mama Moved Among the Days" by Lucille Clifton; we begin the learning experience using the technique of Readers Theater. I begin by saying to my students, "What I believe is that we really know how to identify simile in poetry. However, what we should be able to do, by the end of 5th grade, is to explain how an author uses this literary device to convey meaning." I instruct all my students to stand up and prepare to bring to life the lines of Clifton’s poem. We start with the first line, "My Mama moved among the days." Okay! I say to my students, "Let’s see you begin to move among the days like the ‘Mama’ Lucille Clifton writes about in the poem." Students follow my lead and begin to walk around the room at varying speeds, some briskly, others very slowly. All of them, happily,
laughing and giggling. I say to the students, “I see some of you are zooming through the days of the week, others are taking their time getting through Monday, Tuesday . . . Okay, freeze. I have a question.” Was that first line an example of the author using simile? The students respond almost in unison, “No.” I praise them, “Smart cookies you are!” I ask them to close their eyes as they listen closely to the second line of the poem, because it may help them imitate Mama’s movement the second time around. I read the next line, “like a dream walker in a field.” I begin to ask probing questions. “Can you see Mama walking in the field like a dream walker?” Some of the students respond, “Yes!” Then I ask, “Do you see her walking fast?” My students respond, “No!” I ask, “How is she walking through the days?” And my students begin to respond. “Slowly!” some shout out. One student says, “She was walking blindly, with her eyes closed shut.” Another student states, “Because she is asleep. She is probably dreaming.” I ask the question, “Is the author using simile now?” The students respond in unison, “Yes!” “How do we know?” I ask. Someone says, “She uses the words like or as to compare.”

I affirm their responses: “Great, but I knew you guys had it, and you’re getting close to meeting our focused goal. Let’s see if you will work to imitate Mama differently now. This time listen as I read the entire first stanza.” I read aloud the first stanza and my students begin to travel around the room in a daze, eyes half shut, and very much in the fashion of a “dream walker.” The learning experience continues until the very end of the poem. And we unpack the experience in a grand conversation (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Students note that one way for a reader to evaluate how an author uses figurative language to convey meaning is to “try to see the words in your mind.” Yes, I affirm my students thinking, it helps to just close your eyes and bring the words to life. Mandated curriculum or not, adapting materials and method to the individual needs of our students is essential to meeting academic success in a high-level learning community.

Also similar to many districts, teachers are required to put into practice frequent assessments regulated by a district-wide schedule. Frequent assessment requires mastery of content and skills not always familiar to students. While many students demonstrate mastery of standards frequently, too many students continue to fall short of the desired goal—and for various reasons. It is no secret that past professional practices have fallen short in assisting students in meeting grade-level standards, and now these students and teachers are playing catch-up. My students come from varying social economic situations and cultural backgrounds; they learn differently and at varying rates. In my classroom alone, at least 13 of the 33 students in my 5th-grade class are reading and writing two grade levels below where
they should; this is close to one-third of my student population. In addition, approximately 20% of my students are nonnative English speakers. By the end of the 5th-grade year the state will expect all of these students to show proficiency on its grade-level assessment. For those students, I have to figure out how to best utilize time and the available resources to pull them up to grade level while pulling them forward, in hopes of leaving NO child behind. Sometimes the structure and ideas of the core curriculum serve me well in that regard, but always the needs of my students motivate me to use my professional knowledge and to craft ways to respond to their diverse learning needs.

**ASSESSMENTS THAT INFORM INSTRUCTION: TARGETING INFERENTIAL READING**

To ensure quality education for all, assessment of learning is essential. However, there should be a balance between standardized tests and various purposeful classroom assessments. Assessment results should literally drive instruction, and they should always be continuous and meaningful. Also, assessments should build confidence, not a sense of hopelessness.

The assessments I use help me understand what my students are learning, how they are learning, and they help me to think of ways to teach differently—to teach better. Students often need different approaches to the curriculum they are responsible for learning. A bridging of the curriculum with assessments is often required. To that end, continual and purposeful talk about assessment is a daily ritual of my classroom practice. Making sure students understand what they will be assessed on and why is key to moving forward.

One example of using assessment to inform instruction is in the area of teaching inferential thinking. Research shows that many of our students have difficulties with the level of inferential thinking that is required to access the implicit meanings embedded in written text, including many of the passages that appear on state assessments. The breakdown of inferential thinking comes, most often, from two things: lack of adequate background knowledge and overlooking clues implied by the author. As a result, I look for ways to help my students recognize when they are engaged in inferential thinking.

In the following lesson, adapted from the book *Strategies at Work* (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000), I describe how I use writing and a great book to help build on my students' strengths and to work to take them further:

I begin by saying "Good morning, friends. Today I would like to start this morning's learning experience with a read-aloud. Grab your reading re-
They respond with an enthusiastic yes!

I continue, "Good! So, I know I will not get to read the entire book today, but I will read the book in its entirety by the end of tomorrow because I really want you to learn about this great American hero. Okay. Expect me to pause every now to ask a question and to give you time to respond in your journal. Don’t worry about feeling rushed; I have the questions written on the chart paper. I planned to have us practice only three times today. So do your best, I know what you are capable of. Does that seem fair?"

Again, they respond, Yes! Great!

I return to the lesson: "Now remember this assessment is about you showing how much you are learning, and no matter where you are, my job is to help you connect new learning to your existing knowledge to take you to the next level of understanding. Okay, are you ready to open your journals and show us what you got?"

They shout yes!

"Great. Today’s story is entitled Teammates, by Peter Golenbock. It is a story about the challenging life of Jackie Robinson and how he was able to break into an all-White major league. It is about the racial inequalities he faced, but this story is also very much about the strong friendship he formed with fellow teammate Pee Wee Reese. In your journals I would like for you to create a T-chart. In one column I want you to write down all you know about racial inequalities, the feelings associated with those times, even the two words separately—what ever comes to mind. So let’s engage in a quick write for the next 3 minutes. Don’t worry about spelling, just record your thoughts on paper."

My students and I brainstorm for 3 minutes, writing down all that we can think of about racial inequalities; we follow up doing much of the same for the topic of friendship. Once the quick write is completed, we..."
compare notes. On the large T-chart I created I begin to record some of the thoughts of the class. Under the theme of racial inequality, I record the following thoughts: sadness, anger, unfair, separate, and segregation. Under the theme of friendship, I recorded the following related words: forever, happy, good, respect, love.

I say to my students: “Great, we are halfway there. We are working to use what we know to build stronger background knowledge, and we are working to make sure we catch the author’s clues. This is what good readers do when they work to figure out the deep meaning of a story.”

I begin to read the story *Teammates*. I stop midway through the story and ask my students to answer the following three questions in their journals:

Why do you think the author names the book *Teammates*?
Why do you think Branch Rickey, the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, was looking for someone who possessed self-control?
How do you think the author feels about racial inequality?

I collect the journals and use them to inform my teaching over the next few days. Their written responses to these questions help me to determine how well they are reading between the lines to figure out the implied meaning of text. Lessons like these help my students master the skills and strategies that will afford them the chance to access implicit meanings to text, not only on the state assessment, but also across the curriculum, and ultimately for the rest of their lives.

I believe this work has been instrumental in raising my students’ literacy performance. In the 2 years that I have implemented culturally responsive teaching techniques, my students’ literacy achievement has increased substantially. The percentage of students in the “proficient” category of performance on state literacy tests has increased (from 16.4% to 32%) and the percentage of students in the advanced category also increased, by almost 4% (from 3.6% to 7%). Additionally, the students in the “below basic” category decreased by 25% (from 57.4% to 32%). This performance is consistent with more informal measurements of literacy growth. Last year, all of my students made between one and two grade levels of growth in reading, based on their performance on the Qualitative Reading Inventory (Leslie & Caldwell, 2005). Targeting instruction to my students’ literacy abilities and cultural lives was key to making these gains.
CONCLUSION

I have described my ways of making standards, assessment, instruction, and culture fit together. The core curriculum provides a blueprint for what is to be taught. I must build upon this blueprint by observing my students and listening to them. I need to use this information to make the core curriculum relevant to my students’ literacy needs and cultural lives. A central idea in my teaching is that it is important that students see a manifestation of their life experiences in the classroom. One of my Writing Project colleagues reminds me to provide “mirror” and “window” learning experiences for my students. Using the “mirror” metaphor, students frequently need to see a reflection of themselves in things that are great. In addition, we have to expose them to “windows” of opportunity to gain knowledge of the unfamiliar. We have to do both things simultaneously, so that students are invested in learning and are able to make critical connections and contributions to the larger society.

MAKE THIS HAPPEN IN YOUR CLASSROOM

- Be clear about what you expect students to know, understand, and be able to do as a result of the learning experiences you create. Work to satisfy the standards, but remember to push students to become critical readers, thinkers, and problem solvers.
- Be committed to students’ learning. Build a classroom community that is conducive to high-level teaching and learning. Students learn at high levels in any educational setting that is committed to meeting their needs.
- Utilize your students’ culture as an important source of their education. Culture is a means to improve the students’ education—especially those students whose cultures and backgrounds have been omitted in schools. Every student has experiences, knowledge, opinions, or emotions to draw upon. It serves our purpose well to remember that our responsibility is to make sure that students are given the opportunity to utilize their prior knowledge and experiences to better understand and connect new knowledge.
- Emphasize meaning. Learning has to be meaningful and it has to make sense if we expect students to be motivated to learn at high levels, whether the subject be literacy, math, or science.
- Identify touchtone texts to be used for multiple purposes. Select literature that connects students’ lives and experiences to the reading and writing curriculum.
• Establish a language-rich classroom. Engage students through dialogue and plan for purposeful talk. This ensures that student talk occurs often and that all students are included in the conversation. Provide opportunities to include students’ views, judgments, and rationales using text evidence and other substantive support. Remember, sometimes we have to build in various ways to hear student voices. I often provide an opportunity for students to write before sharing. If my students are provided the opportunity to see their thoughts on paper they are more comfortable sharing with the entire group. For those students who prefer not to share, I am able to hear their voices through their writing.

• Listen carefully to assess levels of students’ understanding and assist students’ learning throughout the conversation by questioning, restating, praising, and encouraging.

• Recognize students’ strengths and talents. Contrary to the adage, “sticks and stones may break your bones, but names will never hurt you,” words are powerful; they can beat our students down as fast as they can build them up. Throughout the learning day I make a conscious effort to utilize language to empower my students.

• Lastly, establish an ideology for learning and life. Work to learn, respect, and believe in the people you serve in order to serve them well. Students are not only a part of our culture, they are a part of our future and we are a part of theirs. I share the following words with my school community: “Watch your thoughts, for they become words. Watch your words, for they become actions. Watch your actions, for they become habits. Watch your habits, for they become character. Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.”

REFERENCES


