



Cultivating Empathy and Building Community

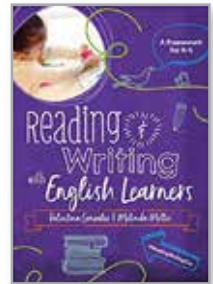
by VALENTINA GONZALEZ

One of the best ways to cultivate empathy in children and build a strong sense of community within classrooms is through reading aloud to them from rich literature and holding meaningful discussions as a class.



LITERACY CHAMPION: VALENTINA GONZALEZ

Valentina Gonzalez is a long-time advocate for multilingual children. Her journey as an immigrant and multilingual student fuels her passion and drive to support, sustain, and highlight multilingualism. Valentina is the co-author of the new book, *Reading & Writing with English Learners: A Framework for K-5*, which embraces children's language and literacy assets and the love of reading and writing. Valentina currently spends her time traveling to schools and collaborating with educators over the best practices for teaching multilingual learners.



One to Know: Cultivating Empathy Through Authentic Reading Opportunities

The world could use a strong dose of empathy. Though empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, is not typically seen in state standards and curriculum, it is an important aspect of children's social emotional wellbeing. The great news is that empathy can be cultivated, nurtured, and developed. We can create classrooms that bond children through intentionally crafted reading opportunities that allow children to take the perspective of others.

The books that teachers select for reading aloud to children, reading together as a class, and through independent reading opportunities, can offer children rich empathy exercises. In fact, [studies](#) on the impact of reading show that reading can increase empathy. In addition, children with more empathy bully less, help others more, and have healthier relationships. Gathering children to share a book together provides them with an opportunity to see inside the experiences of another. It may be a story that can open brave conversation about languages,

disabilities, cultures, places around the globe. Books can serve as a valuable source for conversations that build and nurture empathy in children.

Books have a way of bringing children together and helping them feel less alone. In essence, they have the power to build community. Researcher and author, Dr. Brené Brown says that “We are all hardwired for connection and without it there is suffering.” It’s important that children see themselves outside of themselves. Children that feel they belong, are seen, validated, and honored in our classrooms and campuses do better in school.

Empathy supplies the power to stand up for those that are marginalized, stigmatized, and bullied. It reduces prejudice, racism, suspension, and increases helpfulness, happiness, belongingness, cooperation, and more.

What to Do: Engage Children in Empathy

Know the children in front of you. We know that building relationships is the foundation to supporting children as learners. Teachers that know children’s hobbies, passions, goals, cultures, traditions, lived experiences, etc. can better connect with them and have a greater chance at supporting their literacy and language needs.

Provide children with a rich selection of books they will find engaging, based on your discoveries while getting to know them. Books about multilingualism, diversity, disabilities, race, etc. are not limited to certain children, but are valuable for all. Books that encourage children to step into the shoes of another cultivate empathy.

Weave empathy work into every day reading opportunities. Empathy is not a unit of study or a separate lesson. Empathy is everyday work. Empathy can be woven in as an integral fiber of daily reading opportunities.

Choose books that allow children to see new perspectives. Use these books for read alouds and shared readings. As you read, model empathy with words, tone of voice, and body language.

Facilitate discussions that engage children in the act of stepping into another’s shoes.

Throughout reading aloud and shared reading, stop and have children talk with peers:

I am like...

One connection I have with...

This part reminds me of the time I...

Provide a variety of books for children to self-select and read on their own or with a partner.

More to Know and Do

For more on how to support multilingual children during read-alouds, shared reading, and independent reading, see www.readingwritingELs.com.

Valentina Gonzalez is available to work with educators and schools to enhance and support literacy and language instruction for multilingual children. In addition, her book, *Reading & Writing with English Learners: A Framework for K-5*, is available on [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com) or at [Seidlitz Education](http://SeidlitzEducation.com). For more information, please visit www.readingwritingELs.com.

For even more information

Valentina Gonzalez has a large Twitter following [@ValentinaESL](https://twitter.com/ValentinaESL). She also shares resources, articles, and ideas on her [website for teachers of multilingual students](http://www.readingwritingELs.com). Readers can find out more information about her book, *Reading & Writing with English Learners* here.