



Literacy as Inquiry

by MARIA NICHOLS

Developing passion for learning begins by nurturing children's curiosity.



LITERACY CHAMPION: MARIA NICHOLS

Maria Nichols' work as an education leader includes 33 years with the San Diego Unified School District, where she served as a Demonstration Teacher, Literacy Coach, and eventually as the Director of School Innovation. Her passion for transformational approaches to teaching and learning, powered by the constructive, dynamic nature of talk fuels

her writing, as well as her collaborations with educators, districts, and organizations across the U.S. and internationally.

One to Know: The Importance of Developing Learning With an Inquiry Stance

Children are naturally curious, filled with questions about their world and everything and everybody in it. This curiosity is a powerful driver of learning that, when encouraged and nurtured, develops into a passion for the pursuit of understanding.

Yet, as children progress through school, the number of questions they ask actually goes into decline (Berger, 2016). To engender passion for learning, we need to shift this trend by engaging children in a flow of meaning-making is designed to harness their curiosity and encourage their questions. Inquiry provides a ready approach for doing just that.

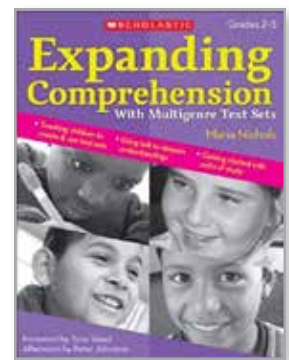
Inquiry learning engages learners through a questioning stance, centering their curiosity and eagerness to grapple with ideas, concepts, and issues they don't understand...yet. When we design literacy as inquiry, reading and writing are approached as an active pursuit of understanding. Texts—whether authored by others or by the children themselves—open windows into the world, extending their wondering, introducing new perspectives, and propelling children into deeper explorations.

What to Do: Create Inquiry Using Text Sets

Text sets are thoughtfully curated collections of texts—using the term “text” in its broadest sense—with potential to open dynamic, extended conversations about ideas, issues, or concepts. Text sets should be constructed with:

- a range of modes and media forms, including books with print and visual information in traditional or digital format; works of art or artistic performances; and spoken and musical audio files, as variations in mode and media allow for nuances in interpretations of ideas, issues, and concepts and provide varied access points for varied learners.
- a range of genre, as authors of various genres approach ideas, issues, and concepts differently, for different purposes.
- varied levels of challenge, enabling children to stair step into complexity.

Curating text sets as described in *Expanding Comprehension with Multigenre Text Sets* (Scholastic, 2009), requires a bit of preplanning, and using them productively requires responsiveness. Read aloud offers an excellent opportunity to introduce children to the curation of and thinking into text sets, with reading workshop as an opportunity for students to learn to create their own reading inquiries. Writing workshop works in tandem with the reading workshop as a ready place to deepen the exploration of ideas as well as prepare students to add their own voices to larger conversations. A progression of literacy that centers children’s curiosity generally flows as follows:



- **Launch the inquiry.** A thoughtful launch requires a compelling text, chosen to bubble open and/or feed into children’s noticings and questions. Launch texts should touch the heart as well as the mind, framing inquiries with the human condition.
- **Choose subsequent texts to add breadth and depth.** Subsequent texts are chosen based on children’s noticings and questions, with the intent of nudging thinking forward. However, the notion of “forward” is not meant to denote a linear trajectory in thinking. Rather, we want to opt for texts that create dynamic, complex thinking. Choices should interject new information, feelings, and perspectives; create some healthy uncertainty and shades of grey to develop flexible thinking; and continuously fuel children’s curiosity, all for the purpose of broadening and deepening understanding.
- **Write alongside the reading.** The composition process offers children added opportunity to explore their own thinking. As they draft across the inquiry, they uncover the ideas they want to send out into the world, honing in on their audience and purpose. The text set then serves as mentor texts as children make decisions about genre, mode, and media form.

More to Know and Do

- **Build a culture of talk.** If a text is a spark for a conversation, a text set lights a conversational fire. Teaching children to think and talk well (see the “Building Bigger Ideas Through Purposeful Talk” Toolkit by Maria Nichols) both inside a single text and among multiple texts is foundational to developing broad and deep understanding.
- **Plan purposeful revisits of texts.** Thinking nudged open by a text does not stop just because we reach “the end.” Compelling ideas linger. Too, complexity does not reveal itself in a single read. Revisiting text purposefully over several days teaches children to mine for deeper thinking. Returning to texts across an inquiry allows children to experience the shifts in understanding that occur as their thinking evolves.
- **Harness interdisciplinary connections.** Inquiries into compelling issues, ideas, and concepts naturally cross disciplinary boundaries. Learning can and should broaden to weave in science explorations, concepts of community and citizenship, mathematical problem solving, and deep dives into historic roots or patterns.

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