



Literacy Lifting

by LAQUITA OUTLAW

You can never take away the imprint a book—especially the first hook book—has on the heart of a child. As literacy champions, we are charged with helping every child find his/her heart book. When it's found, it's magic!



LITERACY CHAMPION: LAQUITA OUTLAW, Ed.D.

Dr. LaQuita Outlaw is a middle school principal in New York. As an advocate for literacy instruction, she has presented at state and national conferences, written about literacy practices in several books and articles, and produced Podcasts with other literacy champions.

Named an Administrator of the Year by the Council of Administrators and Supervisors in 2021, Dr. Outlaw works closely with practitioners across the state and in her district to provide students with the best educational experience possible.

One to Know: Commit to Literacy Lifting

Books give you uninhibited access to worlds to which you never imagined being privy—a window into cultural practices you never expected to know, and a sense of the emotions others experience that may be new to you. Better understanding of others can begin with words that are thoughtfully woven together on the pages of a book. By making a conscious commitment to literacy lifting, you can learn more than you dreamed, and influence others in a way that uplifts their souls.

What to Do: Practice Literacy Lifting

Consciously committing to literacy lifting requires only two simple steps:

- Carry a book wherever you go.
- Alternate the main character of the book between the dominant culture and a character of another ethnicity or with a marginalized quality.

Carry a “Hook Book” Wherever You Go

It can't be that easy, right? It is! If you are a classroom teacher, cradle a hook book like *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, in the crux of your arm while standing at bus duty, or when you are monitoring the hallway from your door. Take it with you to the playground or sit the book down as you talk with your administrator. Not only will you get a comment or two from someone who has read the book, but you will find that you can:

- Sneak in some reading minutes if it's a book that you're actually reading (Confession: there are times when I'll carry a book around that I've already read simply to start up conversations!)
- Have conversations with people who you may not have thought would utter a sound.
- See children you already know in a different way. With this one technique, I have engaged more children than I could have ever imagined simply through the magic of conversations about the books they are reading.

As an administrator, I stand at my morning post with a book in hand. After each greeting, I witness curious eyes trying to get a peek at what I have in my hand. When I enter the cafeteria, children I have not previously spoken to gleefully share that they too have read the book I am holding. The entire cafeteria table wants to talk about what I think about the book—before I can even ask them what they are reading and what they think I should read next. The connections do not stop with the children. Staff members also begin talking with me about their favorite reads. As a result, we are now curating the books we are reading in a newsletter to share with our school community.

Alternate the Main Character

To best educate any child, you have to be able to see him/her as an individual. Gaining this level of understanding can take time and attention that can elude teachers more often than not. Books can provide an entry into the world of another individual and give a point of view not previously known. By reading books containing characters from backgrounds unlike our own, we acquire information that can help us see people as individuals.

One way to achieve this initial understanding is to seek out books that contain characters different from the book you just finished reading. For each book that I read with a Caucasian main character, I ensure that my next selection has a main character of a different ethnicity, gender, or diverse/marginalized quality. If you first read *The Selection* by Kiera Cass, then consider picking up *New Kid* by Jerry Craft. From there, grab Alan Gratz's *Refugee* before picking up *The Serpent's Secret* by Sayantani DasGupta; you get the point. This small change in your reading selection will open your eyes to new worlds. You will see that when you thought you were reading a lot of different books, you weren't reading with the level of diversity that would help you to better understand the children you serve (and gain a wider list of book recommendations for the student who says she doesn't like reading).

More to Know and Do: Share Out Book Suggestions

Post your reading selection on your door and create an email signature that gives those around you a window into your conscious commitment to literacy lifting. I place a *What I'm Reading* poster on my office door. On the back of the poster, I will write the date I started reading the book and when I finished. This notation helps keep me accountable to my reading. When I put up the next poster, I ensure that it represents a different ethnic or marginalized group. This helps my students see themselves in the books that I read, thereby opening another door that gives them permission to do the same.

As for my email signature, I unintentionally create my personal reading list by sharing what I just finished reading, what I'm reading now, as well as a book someone recommended before I ask the person seeing the email what he/she is reading. Many of the email responses I get back will share what the email recipient is reading and a book recommendation.

How to Reach LaQuita Outlaw

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