



Literacy is Liberation

by JULIA E. TORRES

For many of our students, the library is the only place on campus they feel truly free.



LITERACY CHAMPION: JULIA E. TORRES

Julia E. Torres is a veteran language arts teacher and librarian in Denver Public schools. She is a teacher/activist committed to education as a practice of freedom. Her practice is grounded in the work of empowering students to use Language Arts to fuel transformative resistance and social progress. Julia has been awarded the 2020 NCTE Colorado Affiliate Teacher of Excellence award chosen as a 2020 Library Journal Mover and Shaker, and serves educators as a member of the ALAN (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE) Board of Directors, Educolor Collective Steering Committee member, Book Love Foundation Board Member and Co-founder of #DisruptTexts. Through her work with The Educator Collaborative, and other organizations, Julia facilitates workshops and professional conversations about anti-bias/anti-racist education, social justice, and culturally sustaining pedagogies in Language Arts, as well as digital literacy and librarianship. Her work has been featured in several publications including NCTE's Council Chronicle, NPR, AlJazeera's The Stream, PBS Education, KQED's MindShift, NY Times. Follow Julia on Twitter @juliaerin80 or read more about her work on her blog juliaetorres.blog

One to Know: Reading for Empowerment and Empathy

Though our school systems were not created to ensure the success of all students equally, many literacy educators do still believe in and practice a pedagogy of empowerment. Resources have been poured into systemic structures that focus on proficiency levels and skills development for our youngest readers, often leaving middle and high-school readers to fend for themselves. One of the greatest causes of [reading trauma](#) is the mistaken belief held by many older students that they are not readers, because so much of the reading they do in middle and high school is assigned and not particularly enjoyable—and not reading they would do by choice, if they felt they had one. When young people do not self-identify as readers, one of the behaviors that accompanies a growing sense of disempowerment is lack of engagement in choice reading. This halts the development of a reading identity. Consequently, many school communities fail to focus on the development and maintenance of a whole-school reading culture. School librarians and programs [around the world](#) are diminishing, as a result. Furthermore, there are surely few who would say that our world

wouldn't benefit from an infusion of more empathy. Developing library collections that are inclusive and full of [#ownvoices](#) titles is [only the beginning](#).

What to Do

1. Reading for student empowerment and growing empathy requires attention to curating collections of [#ownvoices](#) titles.
2. Develop self-assessments that students can do on their own with questions such as, "How do I feel when I read?" "How many books have I recommended to others?" "When there is no reward attached, what do I choose to read?"
3. Model daily reading practice for and with students. Read for enjoyment, or relaxation. Read in community.
4. Use ILA's [Children's Rights to Read](#) and NCTE's [Position Statement on Independent Reading](#) to advocate for free and independent reading time for all students.
5. Use ALA's [Report Censorship Toolkit](#) to fight back against banning of books our students want to read.
6. Work in community with local elected officials and organizations like [Bookelicious](#) and its non-profit partner [Bring Me A Book](#) to provide free books to build student home library collections.

More to Know and Do

- Familiarize yourself with the signs of [reading trauma](#). Some of this can be a negativity bias that young people develop toward the act of reading when there is too much emphasis on reading outcomes, rather than process.
- Focus on empowerment and reading independence throughout the span of a young person's experience at home, school, and in the world, rather than predominantly during the primary years. Students should be able to identify the kinds of reading they like to do, independently identify reading material that appeals to them, and have a variety of ways to evaluate and share that material with peers and others in their community.
- Push back against systemic barriers that prevent young people from having equal access to books about and for them. Censorship, and [lack of diversity within the children's publishing industry](#) are two areas consumers and community members can influence simply by being more intentional about the titles they choose to purchase.

How to Reach Julia E. Torres

- Reach out to Julia through her website [juliaetorres.blog](#)
- Read more about her work on the following websites: KQED Mindshift, Edutopia, Disrupttexts.org, PBS LearningMedia
- Listen to recent podcasts with Julia at [The Mind Online](#), [Book Love Foundation Podcasts](#) and [NWP Radio](#)
- Julia is the co-author of a forthcoming title that will be published by ISTE (International Society for Technology in Education)
- Learn with Julia by contracting her services from [The Educator Collaborative](#)