

## *READ: Accepting and Interacting with the Diverse Needs of Texas Literacy Learners*

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### **Abstract**

*R.E.A.D @TALE (Really Accept and Engage with Diversity) is a Special Interest Committee of the Texas Association for Literacy Education whose mission is to engage in understanding and supporting the needs of all students and teachers in Texas no matter their backgrounds. Beyond understanding the characteristics that make us unique, this committee was created to accept and affirm diversity and showcase it as a quality that makes us stronger. At TALE’s Annual Conference in Odessa, Texas a roundtable discussion served as a catalyst to determine the needs of teachers and students, as well as discuss issues that impact our students as it relates to inequalities and misrepresentation.*

***Keywords:*** *Diversity, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Representation, Literacy, Access, Equitable Learning*

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Texas is one of the largest states in the country—which is full of resources, and many move to or choose to live in Texas for the opportunities the state provides. In addition to its varied landscapes and climates, the population of its residents continue to grow increasingly diverse. The size of the state and the ever-changing demographics impacts and shapes the culture of the state's needs, and more importantly it impacts the future growth and the youth within the state. As it relates to schooling and education, the assessment system in Texas laid the groundwork for our current assessment systems in this country, and with such a diverse population the state’s public education system

has faced numerous challenges over time. From addressing a growing English Language Learner student population, to honoring and respecting the cultures of students’ families and backgrounds, whether in poverty or affluent, preparing educators to meet all of the learning needs of students in urban, suburban, and rural populations is a huge task.

Given the aforementioned complexities, one main struggle that Texas educators face is being sure that students have authentic and meaningful literacy learning experiences when they are in schools. The struggle between becoming fluent in reading and still maintaining a level of engagement with students in their literacy

journeys begins early. Mesimer and Heibert (2015) state that "...educational researchers urgently need to examine how students, especially those in high-poverty urban communities, are responding to the increase in text complexity, especially at third grade where policies are increasingly calling for actions such as retention" (p. 492). Although school districts align and design curriculum to maintain consistency in learning across the state, certain demographics and particular geographic regions often suffer as it relates to accessibility, misrepresentation, and equity of resources. Texas has nearly 1,000,000 (18 percent of the student population) English Learners (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), 58 percent of students represent disadvantaged backgrounds, and 69 percent are students of color. (Texas Education Agency, 2018). In a state that spans 268,597 square miles (Google), a one size fits all model cannot and will not meet the needs of students and the educators that serve them. The more socially and culturally relevant literacy teaching practices and resources that are made available, collaboration and creation of newer materials, and outreach efforts that are made—the better off students will be, and the schools and communities in which they reside will be able to thrive and flourish in the future.

### **Accessing and Utilizing Resources Created by Professional Organizations**

It is difficult to create a change if you do not know where to begin. Organizations such as the International Literacy Association (ILA) and state affiliates, such as Texas Association for Literacy Education (TALE), have teams dedicating time and resources to previewing and curating lists. A teacher or school does not have to start from scratch, but can utilize these lists to find the resources and materials that match their community's needs. In creating these lists, one of the goals identified by ILA is to "showcase a diversity of cultures, races, gender identities, and abilities, reflected through authors and

illustrators of K–6 literature" (International Literacy Association, n.d.).

Beyond curated lists, professional organizations create a sense of community beyond the classroom or school campus to assist teachers in their professional development. Local, state, national, and international organizations allow opportunities for collaboration that connects individuals with varied experiences and expertise to ultimately support students. Think of these as professional learning communities outside of school. For example, TALE's annual book clubs allow educators from all over to read a central text, such as *From Striving to Thriving* (Harvey & Ward, 2017), *Being the Change* (Ahmed, 2018), and *Every Child a Super Reader* (Allyn & Morrell, 2016), to discuss best practices, and to support each other in the implementation of these practices within individual classrooms and schools.

### **Considerations when Building a Culturally Responsive Classroom Library**

Having the support of professional organizations and a list of resources to start from is great, but there is still work teachers have to do to make their classroom an accepting and affirming space for all students. Once teachers have their support network in place, they can start building their classroom library and creating learning opportunities for critical, and sometimes difficult, conversations. Both of these practices will be on-going, so teachers should start with what feels comfortable. It is like getting in the pool; some people jump right in, while others slowly submerge themselves from the steps.

First, when building a classroom library, it is important to recognize that books are, as Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) stated, windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors for students. As quoted:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and

readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (p. ix)

This perspective is important as it helps the readers understand the power reading has in their lives. Reading allows them to see into new worlds, reflect on their own, and hopefully step out into new experiences.

A key consideration for teachers when building their classroom library is to listen to students and the questions they are asking. As Engel (2015) pointed out, “When children ask questions, we find out something about what interests them, what particular information they are seeking, and what it is that states their appetite” (p. 12). For example, if students are asking how religion shapes a person’s worldview, the teacher might collect books showcasing protagonists of multiple faiths. It is important to remember that asking questions is not solely the teacher’s responsibility. Students should be able to ask questions of themselves, each other, and the teacher, and subsequent space should be made for these questions.

When it comes to understanding other people, their experiences, or complex topics, students can utilize the books in the classroom library as central texts. According to Larry Swartz (2019), teachers want to foster a safe environment where students can engage in these difficult topics, then they must allow the space to “confront hesitations or perhaps insecurities by hearing what the students have to say about the topic” (p.10). Through the combined acts of asking probing questions while pushing the students to talk through their sometimes culturally

misinformed views and listening to what they are saying, we can begin to foster more complete understandings as the central text acts as a bridge which fosters self-awareness, connection, and empathy.

### **Reaching Out and Taking Action**

Now, more than ever, educators need ways to help learning communities embrace diversity. One way is to share a variety of texts which both represent identities similar and disparate to one’s students and community. Taking action involves the providing of outreach opportunities. Some ways that outreach can be provided is by doing the following:

- Providing opportunities for educators, parents, and administrators to collaborate (on support for students, resources for students and parents, celebrating contributions of populations, etc.)
- Formally evaluating texts (for including diverse perspectives) within upcoming units and in district and/or state curriculum
- Facilitating campus planning teams that offer book club style planning and gathering online, or face to face that discuss that cultural significance of texts

Educators are called to foster culturally responsive techniques such as these previously listed and to “interrupt instructional practices that produce dependent learners” (Hammond, 2015, p. 154). Spreading examples of how to interact with students, parents, and colleagues by providing models of interaction, resources and media, and assessing the academic and socioemotional needs of individual communities around the state are necessary.

### **The Future of R.E.A.D@TALE**

This special interest committee seeks to fill a void in Texas literacy education, by engaging and embracing the vast diversity within our

state-wide learning community. The work that needs to be done moving forward is amplified in the mission and objectives of R.E.A.D@ TALE (see Figure 1 and Figure 2) which not only calls

for the support of students, but the support of teachers and the learning communities in which they serve and impact.

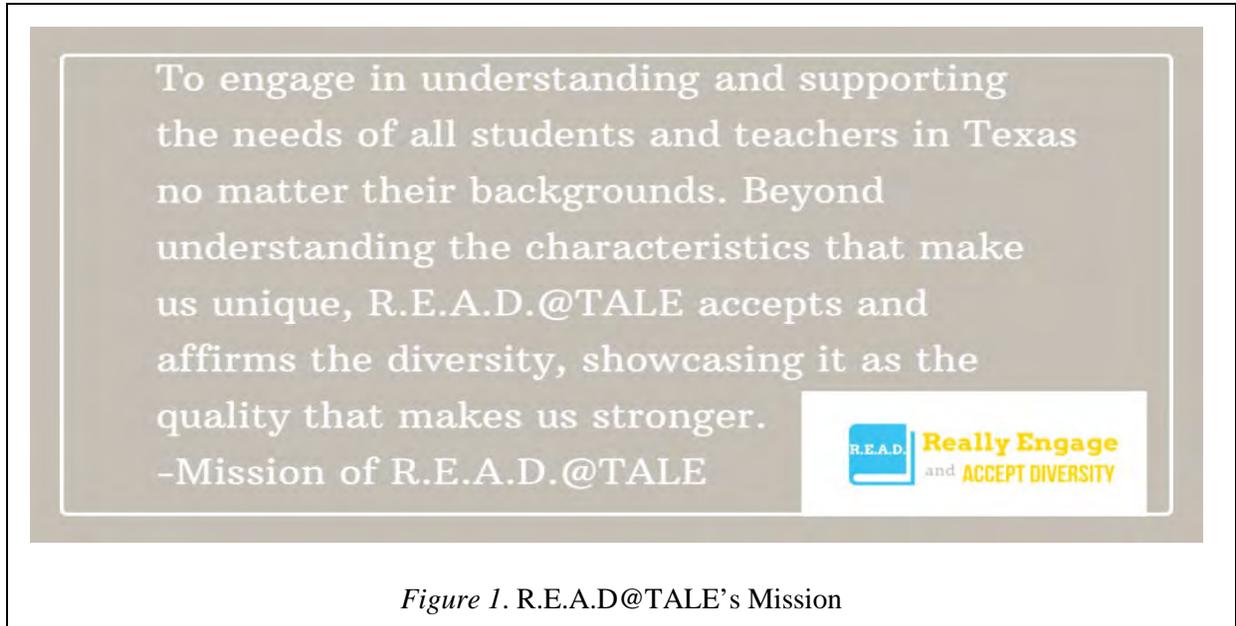


Figure 1. R.E.A.D@TALE's Mission



Figure 2. R.E.A.D@TALE's Objectives

In a state that is so widely spread out with vast land and populations, the people and ideas are just as eclectic. The state of Texas has numerous organizations with focuses on diversity, however, R.E.A.D. @ TALE will work to fill the void of advocates for fair and equitable literacy practices, resources, and representation. With the knowledge base, experience, and

compassion of educators involved, the ultimate goal of this special interest committee is to be a group that promotes ways to utilize literacy as a representation of life experiences, and to respect, honor, and support the character, cultures, families, perspectives, and changes that students bring to Texas classrooms in order to shape a more inclusive future.

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