

REALISING THE RIGHT TO READ THROUGH EQUITABLE LITERACY ENVIRONMENTS



By HELEN ADAM

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She is the author of PETAA reference text *Transforming Practice: Transforming Lives Through Diverse Children's Literature*.

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The right to read: Teachers as agents of change

The right to read is fundamental to democratic participation, personal agency, and educational equity. Recognised internationally as a basic human right, literacy enables individuals to access information, express their views, and participate fully in society. Yet despite widespread acknowledgement of reading as essential to human development, success and wellbeing, persistent disparities in literacy outcomes reveal that this right remains to be fully realised for many children, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, Indigenous and culturally marginalised communities.

For the past two decades, educational discourse has increasingly focused on evidence-based approaches to reading instruction as the primary solution to literacy inequities. Landmark reports including the National Reading Panel in the United States (2000), the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy in Australia (2005),

and the Rose Review in the United Kingdom (2006), each identified what became known as the five pillars of reading, expanded by Konza (2014) to the Big Six of reading skills: oral language, phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Stemming from these inquiries and a growing body of cognitive science research, evidence-based practices increasingly emphasise systematic, explicit phonics instruction and other structured approaches as crucial for improving reading outcomes. These methods, often collectively termed evidence-based practice, explicit instruction or 'the science of reading', have gained significant policy traction, influencing curriculum frameworks, teacher education programmes, and classroom practices across English-speaking countries.

However, whilst high quality evidence-based instruction represents an essential component of effective literacy

education, it has demonstrated limitations in addressing the complex barriers preventing equitable outcomes. Educational disparities remain entrenched, with annual NAPLAN results consistently highlighting that the same groups of children—particularly those from Indigenous, culturally marginalised, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds—continue to experience lower achievement than their mostly white, middle-class peers and remain over-represented in intervention programmes whilst being under-represented in gifted and talented programmes (Torres, 2024; Cormier, 2024). Recent survey evidence collected by PETAA from 500 Australian teachers reveals that over 75% express high confidence in their reading instruction knowledge and skills (PETAA, 2024), suggesting that teacher capability is not the limiting factor. Rather, systemic barriers prevent even skilled educators from achieving equitable outcomes, revealing that instructional excellence alone cannot overcome inequities in access to books, reading opportunities, and authentic representation in education materials.

Teachers understand the broader challenge

Classroom experience reveals that children who lack access to books at home and school, who never see themselves reflected in the texts they encounter, or who have limited opportunities to engage with reading for pleasure may struggle to develop positive reading identities, regardless of the quality of their formal instruction. For many children from marginalised communities, evidence suggests that the issue extends beyond **how** they are taught to read, to whether they have meaningful opportunities to apply their developing skills with texts that connect to their lives and interests (Cremin & Scholes, 2024; Allington, 2014).

When educational approaches focus solely on instruction, they risk reflecting what can be termed

‘instructional determinism’—the assumption that improving teaching methods will automatically translate into equitable outcomes for all learners. Whilst quality instruction is undoubtedly crucial, this perspective can overlook the systemic barriers that research consistently documents: the profound impact of poverty on children’s educational opportunities (Hair et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2023), the role of representation in fostering reading engagement (Adam, 2021; Bishop, 1990; Boutte et al., 2008; Tschida et al., 2014), and the importance of creating learning environments where all children feel valued and included (Paris & Alim, 2017; Morrison et al., 2019; Short, 2012).

The concept of the ‘right to read’ demands a more comprehensive understanding that extends beyond technical skill development to encompass equitable access to literacy resources, meaningful reading experiences, and authentic representation. This expanded conception recognises that reading is not merely a cognitive process, but a social practice embedded within specific cultural, economic, and political contexts (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Street, 1984). Children’s success as readers depends not only on their ability to decode and comprehend text but also on their access to engaging materials, their sense of belonging within literacy communities, and their opportunities to see reading as personally meaningful and culturally relevant (Bishop, 1990; Boutte, 2023; Souto-Manning et al., 2018; Washington & Seidenberg, 2021).

Therefore, whilst evidence-based instruction provides an essential foundation, realising the right to read for all children requires teachers to address three interconnected dimensions: quality instruction that is both technically sound and culturally responsive; equitable opportunity to access books and engage in meaningful reading experiences; and authentic representation that validates children’s identities whilst expanding their horizons.

The model for equitable literacy learning environments: A framework for teacher action



Note: Several items in the Quality Instruction dimension are adapted from Freebody & Luke 1990.

Figure 1 The Model for Equitable Literacy Learning environments (MELLE) from *Creating Equitable Literacy Learning Environments: a Transformative Model. Edition 1* by Helen Adam ©Routledge. Reproduced by permission of Taylor and Francis Group.

Teachers need practical frameworks to navigate the complex task of creating equitable literacy environments within existing system constraints. From my research over many years, I have developed a Model for Equitable Literacy Learning Environments (MELLE) (see Figure 1) which provides such a framework, comprising three core dimensions that teachers can influence regardless of policy restrictions or resource limitations.

Quality Instruction encompasses both evidence-based practices and culturally responsive approaches that recognise and build upon children's linguistic and cultural resources (Souto-Manning et al., 2018; Washington & Seidenberg, 2021). This dimension acknowledges that effective instruction must be both technically sound and responsive to diverse learners' needs.

Opportunity addresses children's access to books, time for reading, and meaningful literacy experiences. This dimension recognises that even excellent instruction cannot compensate for lack of access to engaging reading materials and opportunities to apply developing skills (Bus et al., 2024; Merke et al., 2024).

Representation focuses on ensuring that all children see themselves and diverse others authentically portrayed in the texts they encounter. This dimension acknowledges that what children read profoundly impacts their engagement with literacy and their sense of belonging in educational settings (Crisp et al., 2016; Boutte et al., 2008).

These three dimensions operate within broader environmental factors of culture, community, context, and curriculum. **Culture** encompasses the institutional values and practices that either support or constrain inclusive literacy education (Morrison et al., 2019). **Community** refers to the partnerships between schools, families, and local organisations that extend literacy learning beyond classroom walls (Moll et al., 1992; Grieshaber et al., 2012). **Context** includes the specific conditions—geographical, socioeconomic, and demographic—that shape how literacy instruction is delivered and received. **Curriculum** involves both official frameworks and enacted practices that determine what is taught, how it is assessed, and which resources are used.

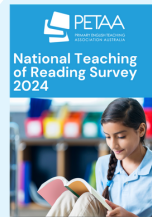
Whilst teachers cannot control all these factors, they can create classroom microclimates that support equitable literacy development even within constraining systems.

Understanding the challenge

Seventeen percent of children in Australia live in poverty (Poverty & Inequality, 2024), with similar rates in other developed nations. Economic disadvantage creates cascading effects on children's wellbeing through interconnected challenges including inadequate nutrition, housing instability, and reduced access to healthcare services. Research demonstrates that children experiencing these conditions face heightened exposure to chronic stress, which often disrupts normal neurodevelopmental processes and compromises brain regions critical for learning, emotional regulation, and cognitive control (Blair & Raver, 2016; Noble et al., 2015).

Further, research reveals that children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds face multiple barriers to accessing books and reading opportunities.

In addition, while all children experience family and cultural literacy practices at home, many students arrive at school having had significantly different literacy experiences than those prioritised in the Australian curriculum and often experienced by their more advantaged peers. Rather than viewing these differences through deficit lenses that focus on what children supposedly lack, research demonstrates the importance of recognising the rich linguistic and cultural resources that **all** children bring to their literacy learning (González et al., 2005; Heath, 1983; Grieshaber, et al., 2012; Moll, 1992; Morrison et al., 2019). When educators approach diversity as an asset rather than a problem to be solved, they create more inclusive learning environments that support all children's development (Morrison et al., 2019; Washington and Seidenberg, 2021).



The findings of PETAA's 2024 Teaching of Reading Survey reflect this complexity, with educators consistently identifying the wide range of student needs within single classrooms as their greatest instructional challenge (PETAA, 2024).

The MELLE framework positions this diversity not as a problem to be managed, but rather as evidence for why instruction must be complemented by equitable access to books and authentic representation that acknowledges children's intersecting identities and experiences.

Recent neuroscientific research reveals that reading for pleasure can help counteract the negative effects of poverty on brain development (Sun et al., 2023), yet these are precisely the children who often lack access to books due to financial constraints. Evidence also indicates that limited diverse representation compounds these access issues in intersectional ways (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000). Children from impoverished backgrounds have limited access to books in general, whilst culturally and racially marginalised children, those identifying as LGBTQIA+, and children with disabilities face additional barriers to accessing books that reflect their experiences and validate their identities (Adam & Urquhart, 2023).



Recent research in the USA demonstrates that when children have access to diverse classroom libraries, **students show significant improvements in reading assessment scores within just five months**, with LGBTQIA+ books improving scores by 4.5 points on average and the lowest-scoring students demonstrating the greatest improvements overall (First Book Research & Insights, 2023).

Transforming practice: Immediate actions for equity

Teachers can begin transforming their literacy environments through systematic examination of their classroom libraries, moving beyond simply counting books to understanding whose voices and experiences are centred in the texts children encounter daily. This involves noting not only which diverse groups are represented among protagonists, but also considering the authorship of these texts, the specific cultural backgrounds reflected, whether characters with disabilities are portrayed authentically, if and how LGBTQIA+ families and identities are included, and whether multilingual resources are available. When evaluating representation, it is crucial to recognise that children hold multiple, intersecting identities—a child might simultaneously identify as Indigenous, have a disability, and come from a single-parent household—requiring collections that reflect this complexity rather than treating identity categories as separate or mutually exclusive.

Research suggests that authentic representation—books written by members of the cultural groups they represent—has the strongest impact on children's engagement and sense of belonging (Adam & Byrne, 2023). This principle applies across all forms of diversity: LGBTQIA+ stories written by LGBTQIA+ authors, disability narratives by disabled authors, and culturally specific stories by authors from those cultural backgrounds. Authentic representation moves beyond tokenistic inclusion to provide genuine insight into diverse lived experiences.

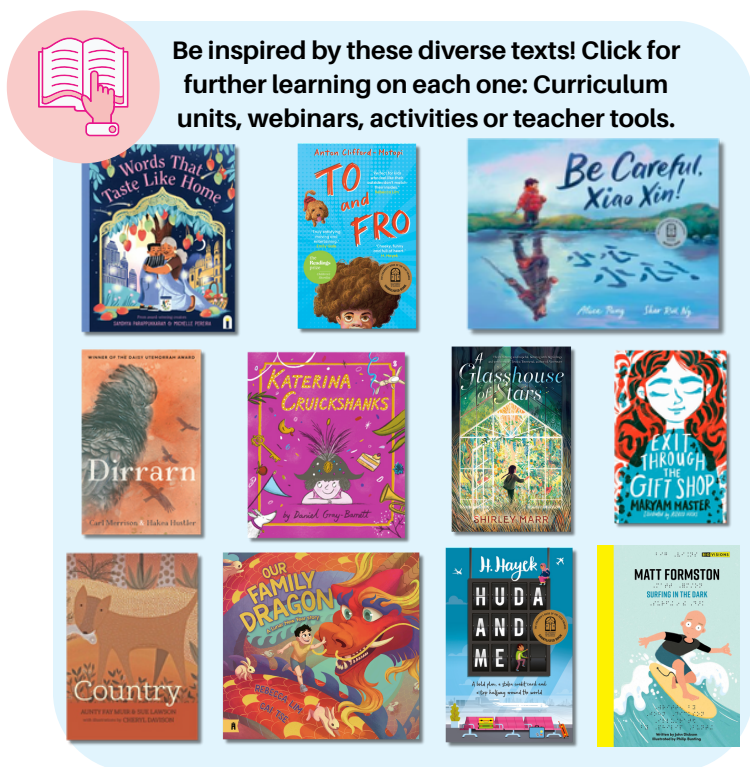
Establishing reading opportunities

Establishing daily independent reading time represents another fundamental step toward creating equitable literacy environments, even when curriculum constraints seem prohibitive. Research consistently demonstrates that reading volume directly influences literacy development, with studies showing that children who engage extensively with self-selected texts achieve better outcomes across multiple measures than those who receive intensive skills instruction without meaningful reading opportunities (Cremin & Scholes, 2024; Merke et al., 2024). This is especially important for children who may not have access to books or reading opportunities outside of school. Teachers can reclaim this time by utilising transition periods for silent reading, incorporating independent reading into literacy rotation activities, implementing periods where everyone in the classroom reads including the teacher, or creating reading partnerships where children share discoveries with one another. When reading engagement is positioned as essential to rather than separate from academic achievement, these approaches gain credibility with administrators whilst serving children's developmental needs.

Moving beyond restrictive reading levels that can limit children's motivation and growth requires understanding how freedom of choice and engagement with complex texts influences reading development (Shanahan, 2020; Shanahan, 2025). Research shows that children's reading identities and engagement are significantly influenced by their autonomy in text selection (Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2018). Rather than constraining children to predetermined levels, teachers can teach selection strategies whilst supporting and scaffolding children to engage with appropriately challenging texts (Shanahan, 2025). This approach involves supporting children in developing strategies for accessing complex texts rather than avoiding them and is supported by creating diverse book displays that highlight themes, authors, and genres rather than levels. These strategies honour children's agency whilst ensuring they receive appropriate support for continued growth as readers.

Working within policy constraints

Teachers often face pressure to focus on test preparation and measurable skills at the expense of reading engagement, yet research demonstrates that children who read extensively and develop positive attitudes toward reading achieve better outcomes across multiple measures than those who receive intensive skills instruction without meaningful reading opportunities (Cremin & Scholes, 2024; Softlink, 2024). This evidence provides teachers with a strong foundation for integrating pleasure reading with mandated curriculum requirements rather than viewing them as competing priorities. The challenge of creating equitable literacy environments is compounded by inconsistent approaches



Be inspired by these diverse texts! Click for further learning on each one: Curriculum units, webinars, activities or teacher tools.

Figure 2 Examples of texts with authentic representation

within schools themselves, with the PETAA National Teaching of Reading Survey showing that only 50 percent of Australian teachers view themselves as working within coherent whole-school reading frameworks (PETAA, 2024). This highlights how individual teachers often must advocate for change in the absence of institutional support.

One effective approach involves incorporating diverse texts into existing teacher-led reading instruction sessions and comprehension strategy instruction. When teachers select texts that reflect their students' cultural backgrounds, include characters with disabilities, or feature diverse family structures within existing phonics lessons, whole class or small group reading sessions, or comprehension instruction, they address curriculum requirements whilst fostering reading engagement. The PETAA National Teaching of Reading Survey found that teachers demonstrate sophisticated understanding of text selection, with early years educators appropriately balancing decodable texts for skills development with authentic literature for engagement (PETAA, 2024). This suggests teachers are well-positioned to integrate diverse representation within existing instructional frameworks by ensuring that all text types are selected with due consideration of authentic representation. Similarly, book discussions and author studies can be embedded within required literacy activities, demonstrating how reading enjoyment supports rather than competes with skills development.

Teachers who document the impact of reading engagement initiatives can build compelling cases for broader programmatic changes. Simple records of children's reading choices and preferences, observations of increased motivation during literacy activities, and anecdotal evidence of children's responses to diverse texts provide powerful data for conversations with leadership teams and parent communities.

Building professional knowledge for inclusive practice

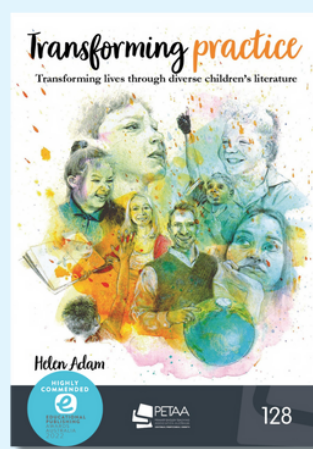
Research reveals a concerning gap in teachers' knowledge of children's literature, with a UK study showing over 37 percent of pre-service teachers unable to name a single author they would recommend to children (Hendry et al., 2025). Research in Australia revealed that many pre-service and practising teachers gravitate towards the books that were their own favourites in childhood or are considered classic books (Adam, et al., 2021). These findings highlight the need for intentional professional development that extends beyond understanding teaching techniques to encompass deep familiarity with the literary landscape that shapes children's reading experiences. Recent research demonstrates that pre-service teachers who read infrequently—despite having positive attitudes towards reading—still possess valuable reader identities that can be built upon through targeted professional learning (Cremin et al., 2025).

This finding suggests that frequency of reading alone should not be used to dismiss teachers' potential as reading role models but rather indicates the need for structured support to help all teachers, regardless of their current reading habits, develop the literary knowledge essential for effective reading instruction. Teachers who read widely and possess extensive knowledge of a range of diverse children's literature are better equipped to recommend appropriate texts and engage in authentic discussions about books with their students (Cremin et al., 2014; Cremin & Scholes, 2024).

This need for expanded professional knowledge is particularly urgent given that many teachers are largely self-directing their professional learning about reading instruction. The PETAA National Teaching of Reading Survey evidence shows educators primarily rely on online resources and social media rather than formal professional development opportunities (PETAA, 2024), suggesting that accessible, practical guidance about diverse children's literature and culturally responsive practices is essential.



Resources such as PETAA publication *Transforming Practice: Transforming lives through diverse children's literature*, and PETAA Paper #205, *Educating for values and diversity through culturally inclusive children's literature* and related professional units of work such as PETAA's *Year of Texts*, and PETAA's *curated list of texts to support reading authentic texts on Indigenous Literacy Day* provide structured support for this knowledge development.



- **Educating for values and diversity through culturally inclusive children's literature**
Helen Adam and Laurie Harper
- Children's literature is frequently integrated across the curriculum to supplement and extend literacy learning. However, the benefits of quality literature extend well beyond academic skills and achievement. Literature can be a powerful tool for developing children's social and emotional wellbeing. Children who read stronger ability to display empathy, consider multiple perspectives and to consider the opinions and beliefs of others (Harper, 2016; Mar & Quilty, 2010; Kidd & Costello, 2013). In particular, quality inclusive texts representing diverse perspectives can assist in developing children's understanding of, and respect for, diversity (Boatle, Hopkins & Watkins, 2016; Harper & Brand, 2018). Developing these qualities in children lies at the heart of the General Capabilities of the Australian Curriculum which highlights the potential of literature to help 'shape personal, cultural and national identities' (ACARA, 2016), as well as create the potential for 'stretching students' lives and expanding the scope of their experience' (ACARA, 2016). Literature is also valuable in developing the imaginative application of ideas, flexibility of thought, ethical and critical reflection and motivation to learn' (ACARA, 2016). This PETAA Paper highlights research-based, best instructional practice, to assist teachers to select and use literature with students as they implement the Australian Curriculum: English. In doing so, teachers create citizens with a strong sense of identity, social justice and sense of place in the world.

Understanding cultural authenticity

Understanding cultural authenticity represents a crucial component of professional knowledge that many teachers need support to develop (PETAA, 2024; Adam et al., 2021). This involves learning to evaluate not merely whether books include diverse characters, but how those characters are portrayed and by whom those stories are told.

Priority should be given to books by authors from the diverse groups they represent, contemporary stories that reflect current lived experiences rather than historical stereotypes, specific cultural details rather than generic representations, and diverse representation across all genres rather than limiting it to folktales or historical fiction (Adam & Urquhart, 2023). The goal is creating collections that provide both mirrors for diverse students and windows for all readers, ensuring that every child can see themselves whilst learning about others.

Creating inclusive reading environments

The classroom environment communicates powerful messages about whose reading and literacies are valued. Research indicates that when teachers create physical spaces that reflect student diversity—displaying book covers that represent various cultural backgrounds, abilities, and family structures at children's eye level, establishing comfortable reading spaces that accommodate different cultural preferences and physical needs, including multilingual books and resources, and featuring student-created books alongside published texts—children develop stronger connections to literacy learning (Boutte et al., 2008; First Book Insights and Research, 2024; Souto-Manning et al., 2018). These physical changes must be accompanied by cultural shifts that foster inclusive reading communities (Duke & Cartwright, 2021).

Teachers who understand the importance of cultural responsiveness establish routines that honour different literacy traditions, invite families to share their own reading practices and favourite stories, and create opportunities for children to teach others about their cultural knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; Morrison et al., 2019). Celebrating reading achievements beyond test scores—such as children's growing interest in particular authors, their willingness to engage with challenging texts, or their connections between books and personal experiences—communicates that engaged reading and personal connection to texts are valued alongside technical skill development.

Family and community partnerships

Evidence suggests that many families possess rich literacy traditions that may not align with school-based definitions but remain valuable resources for children's reading development (Compton-Lilly, 2007; Heath, 1983; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Teachers who recognise this cultural wealth can engage families as literacy partners through reciprocal exchanges that honour diverse literacy traditions. This might include creating two-way communication systems where families share book recommendations alongside receiving suggestions from school, inviting family members to contribute oral stories, songs, and traditional narratives to classroom collections, establishing regular opportunities for families to share reading practices and storytelling traditions from their cultural backgrounds, and collaborating with families to identify community book access programmes and cultural literacy resources.

Such partnerships position families not merely as recipients of school-determined literacy practices but as valuable knowledge-holders whose oral traditions, storytelling customs, and cultural reading practices enrich the entire learning community.

Community connections can extend these partnerships beyond individual families through collaboration with local libraries to expand student access to books, organisation of book drives with specific criteria for diverse, high-quality texts, connection with local bookshops for author visits or reading events, and engagement with community organisations to sponsor classroom book purchases. These partnerships require teachers to position themselves as learners alongside their students and families, recognising that different communities bring valuable knowledge about effective literacy practices (Grieshaber et al., 2012). When teachers approach these relationships with genuine curiosity about diverse literacy traditions rather than seeking to impose school-based practices on families, they create authentic partnerships that support children's reading development across home and school contexts.

Professional growth and sustainability

Creating equitable literacy environments requires sustained effort and can be emotionally demanding work, particularly when teachers are advocating for change within systems that resist transformation. Beginning with focused efforts rather than attempting wholesale change represents one effective approach to sustainability. Teachers might choose to concentrate initially on one dimension of equitable literacy environments, such as diversifying their classroom library by adding carefully selected diverse books each term, or establishing brief daily independent reading time that gradually expands as students develop reading stamina.

Finding professional allies becomes crucial for sustaining this work over time and supporting ongoing professional learning that extends beyond traditional workshop models. This learning involves developing deeper understanding of diverse children's literature, refining skills in cultural responsiveness, and building knowledge about effective approaches to engaging families and communities as literacy partners. Through its range of membership packages including school and professional learning memberships, PETAA strives to act as support for communities of practice where teachers can connect with like-minded colleagues who share equity commitments and seek mentorship from educators successfully implementing equitable approaches in similar contexts.



- Explore PETAA's [resources for supporting professional development in schools](#)
- Explore [professional learning school memberships](#)

With teachers often seeking support through online communities and social media groups (PETAA, 2024), there is strong potential for creating virtual networks focused specifically on inclusive literacy education. Online groups discussing and sharing diverse books, virtual book clubs for discovering new resources, PETAA's online course, **Teaching using culturally diverse children's books** and **PETAA's Year of Texts** provide educators with units of work built around diverse materials, all offering accessible pathways for professional growth. Engaging with current research about reading engagement, diverse representation, and culturally responsive pedagogy helps teachers articulate evidence-based rationales for their approaches whilst staying current with evolving best practices (Paris & Alim, 2017).



Figure 3 PETAA's *A Year of Texts, Year 2* and PETAA's *A Year of Texts, Foundation*

Practical implementation guidance

Teachers seeking to implement more equitable literacy practices can begin by conducting a systematic examination of their current classroom library to understand patterns of representation and access. This involves:

- noting which diverse groups are represented among protagonists;
- considering the authorship of these texts;
- considering the genres in which diverse characters appear; and
- the quality of representation provided.

Authentic representation—books written by members of the cultural groups they represent—tends to have the strongest impact on children's engagement and sense of belonging.

Building connections with local libraries and community organisations provides pathways for extending access beyond classroom resources. These partnerships can include regular class visits to public libraries, librarian visits to classrooms, and coordination around book selection and programming that reflects the community's cultural diversity. With the annual Softlink School Library Software survey consistently showing that schools with school libraries and librarians demonstrate stronger performance in NAPLAN reading results (Softlink, 2024), the evidence supports the promotion of increased access and use of school and community libraries.

When developing diverse classroom collections, teachers need frameworks for evaluating both quantity and quality of representation. Priority should be given to books by authors from the cultural groups they represent, contemporary stories that reflect current lived experiences rather than historical stereotypes, multiple genres featuring diverse protagonists, and texts that challenge stereotypes whilst celebrating cultural specificity. The goal is creating collections that provide both mirrors for diverse students and windows for all readers, ensuring that every child can see themselves whilst learning about others. Both [PETAA Paper #205](#), and PETAA publication *Transforming Practice: Transforming lives through diverse children's literature*, provide multiple resources to assist assessing and curating a diverse classroom and school library.

Conclusion: Teachers as agents of transformation

Whilst systemic barriers to equitable literacy education persist, teachers possess significant power to create change within their spheres of influence. By understanding reading as both a technical skill and a social practice, teachers can implement approaches that simultaneously develop children's reading abilities and affirm their cultural identities.

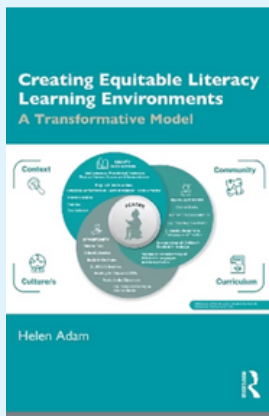
The three dimensions of the MELLE framework—quality instruction, opportunity, and representation—provide a practical structure for teacher action that transcends policy constraints and resource limitations. When teachers ensure that all children receive culturally responsive instruction, have access to diverse books and meaningful reading experiences, and see themselves authentically represented in texts, they create conditions where every child can develop as a confident, engaged reader.

The [2024 PETAA National Teaching of Reading Survey](#) of 500 Australian teachers reveals both the strength of current practice and the opportunities for transformation. Whilst teachers demonstrate strong confidence in evidence-based instruction and sophisticated understanding of text selection, persistent challenges around differentiation, inconsistent whole-school approaches, and reliance on self-directed professional learning highlight why individual

classroom changes must be supported by systemic transformation. The evidence demonstrates that such approaches benefit all children whilst particularly supporting those who have been historically marginalised in literacy education. Children who see themselves reflected in books, have choice in their reading, and experience literacy as personally meaningful develop stronger reading identities and achieve better long-term outcomes (Souto-Manning et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2023).

Creating equitable literacy environments represents both an educational imperative and a moral commitment.

Teachers who embrace this work contribute not only to their students' academic success but to the broader goal of creating a more just and inclusive society where every child's right to read is truly realised. The strategies presented in this paper recognise the realities teachers face whilst providing concrete steps toward transformation. Change begins in individual classrooms with teachers who refuse to accept that some children's reading struggles are inevitable and who commit to creating learning environments where all children can flourish as readers, thinkers, and community members.



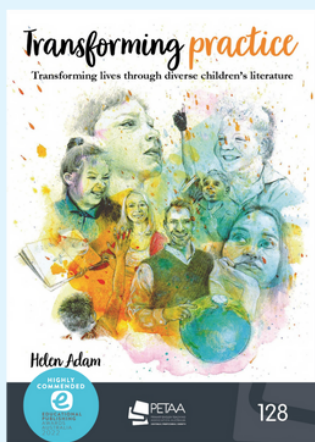
Further Reading

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Further Learning



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