

# Professional Development

Sophie Degener, Adelfio Garcia, Ivy Sitkoski, and Martin Mireles

## About this Column

For the past couple of years, there has been a persistent message in news stories, podcasts, and on social media that teachers are not teaching reading correctly and/or they are pushing a “woke agenda” through reading books with diverse characters that represent marginalized perspectives. One proposed solution to both of these perceived issues is to diminish teacher agency by mandating scripted literacy curricula that provide little or no flexibility for modifying lessons to meet the linguistic, cultural, academic, and social needs of our students. For many, it is a frustrating time to be a teacher.

As the 2023-2024 school year begins, let’s commit to changing the current narrative around teaching and teachers. If you are currently reading this column, then you are demonstrating intellectual curiosity and a desire to continuously improve your teaching craft. Find like-minded colleagues at your school or within your community to join together with and practice responding to the outrages, both big and small, that are befalling teachers. When you read a story critical of teachers in the newspaper, write a letter to the editor that provides a different perspective. When you read a Twitter or Facebook post that decries the “woke agenda” of teachers, respond with facts and share your own experiences. If your school district is considering mandating a scripted curriculum, show up at school board meetings or seek positions on curriculum committees so you are at the table when decisions are being made.

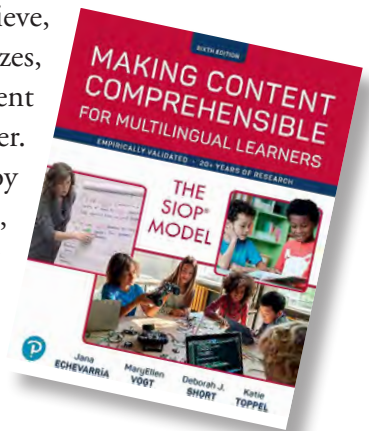
Teachers are professionals with vast sources of knowledge about what the kids in their classrooms need. We need to make sure our voices are heard. And to build your professional knowledge and support your sense of expertise and agency, we encourage you to keep reading! The books we have reviewed in this column will do much to build your knowledge so that you feel well-equipped to take on anyone that challenges or questions your work with children.

**Note:** Are there books that you’ve read that have had a profound impact on your literacy teaching? We’d love to read and review them. Send suggestions to Sophie at the e-mail address included at the end of our column.

## Elevating Teachers and Teaching: Changing the Narrative

Echevarría, Jana, Vogt, MaryEllen, Short, Deborah J., & Toppel, Katie. *Making Content Comprehensible for Multilingual Learners: The SIOP® Model* (6th ed.). Pearson Education, 2023, 400 pp. ISBN 9780137878857.

As I strongly believe, and as SIOP emphasizes, every teacher is a content and language teacher. Empirically validated by over 20 years of research, SIOP emphasizes equity in the classroom, ensuring that multilingual students have access to and acquire core content while simultaneously developing their language knowledge. For more



than 25 years, SIOP (formerly known as the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) has played a pivotal role in supporting multilingual learners in various classroom settings (p. v). Recently, Echevarría and colleagues released the 6th edition of *Making Content Comprehensible for Multilingual Learners: The SIOP® Model*, which provides guidance and scenarios to empower multilingual students in the classroom.

The authors begin by framing the discussion around an asset-based perspective while shedding light on the current outcomes of achievement. Consequently, SIOP and its instructional practices are introduced, starting with their research-based origins. In Chapter 2, the book provides lesson planning considerations and multiple-grade examples to ensure clarity. For instance, when planning differentiation for students with different language proficiencies, language scaffolds such as differentiated sentence starters and scaffolded note outlines tied to the content are presented as specific examples of support. Building on this asset-based approach, the importance of linking content concepts to students' funds of knowledge is explicitly stated in Chapter 3, where the significance of building background knowledge is discussed. Utilizing a student's knowledge to facilitate learning is just as crucial as leveraging their linguistic resources. In Chapter 4, two different methods for achieving comprehensible input are highlighted: (1) explicitly teaching cognates and (2) encouraging students to translanguage. This asset-focused theme is consistently maintained throughout the subsequent chapters, with specific examples and teaching scenarios being drawn out.

While SIOP serves as an instructional model for multilingual learners, it recognizes that each multilingual learner is distinct and possesses a unique combination of content and language knowledge. The authors demonstrate this understanding by providing differentiation strategies for students with varying language proficiencies throughout the text.

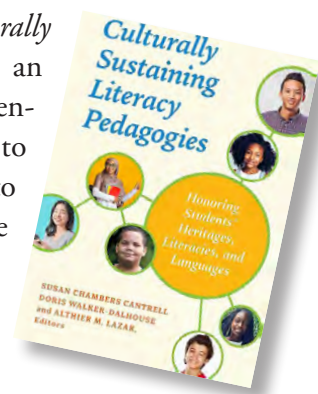
Additionally, since every classroom is different, the book offers a plethora of teaching scenarios that exemplify a spectrum of SIOP implementation. These scenarios encourage critical thinking about the SIOP components. As an educator, I understand that each school year is distinct and vastly different from the last. The teaching vignettes encompass a range of grade levels, from elementary to high school, and cover various content areas, making the scenarios relevant and applicable to a wide audience. Instructional coaches and other professionals who support educators in refining their craft will find these scenarios equally valuable.

In conclusion, Echevarría and colleagues have provided a solid foundation for instructional considerations and practices that foster equitable pedagogy for multilingual learners. —MM

**Cantrell, Susan Chambers, Walker-Dalhouse, Doris, & Lazar, Althier M. (Eds.). *Culturally Sustaining Literacy Pedagogies: Honoring Students' Heritages, Literacies, and Languages*. Teachers College Press, 2022, 200 pp. ISBN 978-0-8077-6702-3.**

The premise of *Culturally Sustaining Literacy Pedagogies* is an exciting idea: For the most beneficial outcomes, teachers need to help students use and continue to develop the funds of knowledge they bring to school, while at the same time learning and gaining access to the dominant culture. In other words, teachers need to not only affirm but *sustain* the diverse cultures and languages of their students.

Each chapter of this book is authored by a different group of literacy scholars and focuses on Culturally Sustaining Literacy Pedagogies (CSLP) enacted in a particular setting. The settings include elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school. All contributors are participants in a Literacy Research Association Study Group, coordinated by the book's



editors, that is devoted to conversations about CSLP. In the introduction, the editors explain the theories that undergird their initiative, and the authors of each chapter frequently refer to those theories and to additional scholarly support. The treasures, though, are the detailed descriptions of the ways in which theory can be put into practice.

Several elements weave throughout all the settings. For example, instruction begins with student interests and funds of knowledge. Additionally, to enable students to use the full range of their abilities, literacy is defined broadly, and includes oratory, images, videos, and music. Educators working with intermediate-grade students at one school employed Writer's Workshop to engage the students in an exploration of their career dreams. Students drew their ideas, created collages, listened to guest speakers from the community who held different jobs, and created career reports using *PowerPoint*. The students expanded their knowledge base about both their dream careers and about effective multimodal communication. Teachers at another school built a unit around the already well-developed knowledge base of 5th graders about injustices in their own communities. To deepen their insight, the students studied a novel in which the experiences of the characters paralleled their own. The teachers posed open-ended questions and taught reading strategies to help students get the most out of their reading. Students then undertook purposeful writing projects with the aim of working for real-life social change. Each student picked the community issue about which they cared the most, and they wrote letters to real people or created posters and public service announcements to share on media platforms.

An important theme is the recognition that culture is not monolithic. By getting to know their students, teachers can learn the varied ways in which culture is embodied, avoiding stereotypes and making their teaching authentically serve the students they have. Centering

curriculum around students' lives and defining literacy broadly helps shift focus away from White Eurocentric ways of knowing and demonstrating knowledge, a goal of anti-racist teaching and another important theme.

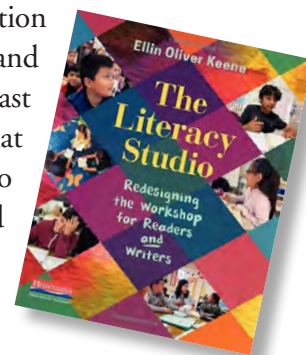
No doubt you are wondering, can we center curriculum on students and still meet standards and expectations? The editors and authors give full acknowledgement to the difficulty many teachers face implementing such a curriculum in the current climate. Challenges are a focus of the Study Group, and ways of addressing them are discussed in the book.

This book is somewhat dense, due to the frequent references to research and scholarship. Rest assured, however, that the ideas and examples are rich and make the book well worth reading. —IS

**Keene, Ellin Oliver.** *The Literacy Studio: Redesigning the Workshop for Readers and Writers.* Heinemann, 2022, 232 pp. ISBN 978-0325120058.

Reflecting on the instruction I observed in several urban and suburban classrooms this past school year, I can affirm that teachers' plates continued to be overwhelmed by published programs, school-based time-crunched literacy blocks, and plenty of instructional post-pandemic nuances. Ellin Oliver Keene wrote *The Literacy Studio: Redesigning the Workshop for Readers and Writers* for teachers with instructional demands and challenges in a constrained, limited-time instructional block.

In her introductory prelude, Keene offers an extensive overview of her instructional model that supports reading and writing instruction infused in one Literacy Studio. The book has seven chapters that build on each other. Chapter One begins with an overview of the research, demonstrating how students benefit from the integration of reading and writing.



Keene advocates for teachers to think of their literacy blocks as an artists' studio inspired by reading, writing, and students' showing their thinking with a strong habit of revision, rereading, rethinking, and editing as common practice. Chapters Two and Three address the common problems that most educators, like me, face daily: use of instructional time and time for planning. The book reminds us of how valuable time and planning are; however, in these post-pandemic years, in which demands come from many directions, instructional time gets cut, and time for planning quickly disappears and is instead used to meet all of the professional demands that arrive at our desks.

In Chapter Four, Keene explores the notion of the reader and writer's craft, including the construction of ideas, details, and all the literacy elements involved in crafting. Chapter Five follows up on crafting with the introduction of composing, engaging readers in how these two concepts come together. In Chapter Six, the author names composing as the heart of the Literacy Studio, emphasizing the different formats that can be introduced during whole and small group work. Keene also provides insight into the potency of language and the ways teachers successfully use it in elementary and intermediate grades. Also, the author emphasizes the design, plan, development, and formats of different minilessons for the crafting and composing sessions.

Chapter Seven addresses the process of launching the Literacy Studio for first-timers and for those teachers who would like strategies for managing the instructional demands put on them. Conferring is a must-have component to the Literacy Studio. The author provides benefits and processes on how to embed conferences into their time-crunched literacy block. This chapter shares different approaches for using time effectively in today's classrooms. Keene uses the term *invitational groups* and elaborates on how these groups can inform teaching decisions based on teachers' interactions to learn the

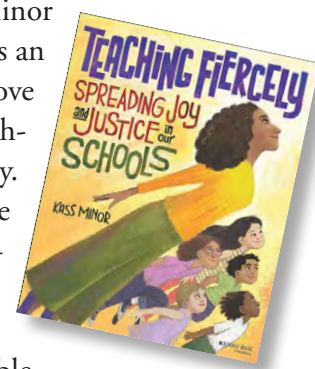
instructional needs of each group of students. In Chapter Eight, a reflective chapter, Keene reminds us of the joy of engaging with students, allowing us to watch them develop their reading and writing identities through conferring, the use of global and not-so-global questions, and the last most needed part of the Literacy Studio, the joy of sharing—using language to communicate and develop literate identities.

I invite all educators to lighten their instructional demands by trying the ideas Keene shares in this book. We all may be surprised by the results when students are allowed to shine despite the published curriculums and time-crunched literacy blocks. —AG

**Minor, Kass. *Teaching Fiercely: Spreading Joy and Justice in Our Schools*. Jossey-Bass, 2023, 320 pp. ISBN 978-1-119-86767-8.**

If you have ever met Kass Minor or seen her speak, you know she is an effervescent person with a deep love of children, teachers, and teaching. She exudes passion and joy. Reading *Teaching Fiercely* is like being in conversation with her—her voice shines through, and her optimism and sense of possibility radiate off the pages. It is impossible to read this book and not believe that we can make schools better and that we can positively impact the lives of all of our students, particularly those who have been most marginalized in schools. She writes, “I am obsessed with teaching and learning in ways that support kids feeling like their whole human selves in the place we call school” (p. 25), and indeed her book is really about finding ways to teach that fulfill this goal.

Minor begins her book by acknowledging how difficult teaching has been over the past few years and how teachers are overwhelmed and often just barely surviving. Her goal is to support teachers in reclaiming their joy, and she suggests that engaging with the book in “small



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bites” (p. xxvii) and with a thought partner or partners will make the reader’s journey through the book more impactful. Throughout each of the chapters, Minor includes “work alongs” and “reflections,” which invite the reader to stop reading to write, reflect, plan, or brainstorm, considering their own settings and contexts. I found these extremely valuable for processing Minor’s ideas and visions while considering how they would work for me and my students.

I appreciate how Minor drills down on the concepts of *justice* and *joy*. Many of us understand how school systems are impacted by the dominant culture, but have we considered how even the notion of justice is influenced by the dominant culture? When it comes to social justice in our schools, who gets to define justice? And who is that justice for? Minor asks similar questions about joy, and she provides several work-alongs to unpack our own thinking about these terms.

Minor understands that “to move forward, we must look back” (p. 62). We need to understand our own experiences in schools and how these have shaped our teaching, and we also must understand the history of schooling in our country. Minor provides historical perspectives on how injustices pervade public schools as well as historical examples of schools (such as the Folk Schools) that have embraced justice. She also provides a link to a must-read digital download that goes even deeper on the historical underpinnings of justice/injustice in schools.

Truthfully, providing a succinct summary of Minor’s book is nigh impossible in such a short space. In brief, though, several ideas stood out:

- Her framework for teaching for social justice: collaborate, nurture, build, and reflect (Chapter 3)
- The structure for shared vision planning with colleagues that builds on each other’s values and ideas regarding the optimal classroom learning environment (Chapter 4)

- The importance of agency for teachers as they work to design, with their students, learning spaces, experiences, and curricula that are immersed in joy (Chapters 5 & 7)

*Teaching Fiercely* is not a quick read but, instead, is a book to take your time with, to savor. It is a book that centers you, the reader. You must be willing and committed to digging deep into yourself (e.g., summoning your inner child, considering your own values, defining your purpose) and making time for reflection. While Minor guides your journey, providing lovely and vulnerable examples from her own teaching (successes and failures), as well as tools for planning and reflection, you must be willing to do the work, and you must recognize that the work cannot be accomplished quickly and without deep thought and meaningful action. –SD

## About the Authors

Sophie Degener is an associate professor in Reading at National Louis University. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy, and her research interests include early literacy, family literacy, and teacher education. Adelfio Garcia is a biliteracy consultant to Chicago Public Schools and Chicagoland school districts. He received his doctorate in Reading and Language from National Louis University, and his research interests are in the areas of biliteracy, translanguaging, family literacy, language development, and methods of teaching literacy in Spanish. Ivy Sitkoski teaches reading, library, and computers at Grass Lake Elementary School in Antioch and is also an adjunct professor at National Louis University. Her research interests include methods for teaching literacy as well as collaboration among reading specialists and speech language pathologists. Martin Mireles, our new co-author, is the District Instructional Coach–Biliteracy Specialist for Cicero District 99. All serve as school district consultants and are frequent presenters at local, state, national, and international literacy conferences. If you have comments about this column or suggestions of books to review, please send them along to Sophie Degener at [sophie.degener@nl.edu](mailto:sophie.degener@nl.edu).