

Units of Study for Teaching Reading  
A Workshop Curriculum, Middle School Grades

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**Question:** *What does research tell us about the importance of diversity and representation?*

**Mary Ehrenworth:**

So, then there's another set of research that I think is really, really important that intersects with Allington's and Peter Johnston's research, and that is Alfred Tatum's. So, Alfred Tatum wrote a book, it came out maybe eight years ago and it was called *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males* and, even if your kids aren't black or adolescent or males, I think it's one of the most important books on reading in the last 10 years. And in that book, Alfred talks a little bit about how kids could go weeks in school and never encounter a book that felt relevant to the social lives that they actually live. You know, that's just not fair. It's not fair, it's not okay, it's not okay that some kids get to see themselves in books and some kids don't. When Matt de la Peña was visiting at Teachers College last summer, he gave this keynote that would move you to tears. And what he talked about was how one of the fastest, in fact, the fastest growing demographic in this country is kids who are multi-literate. They're growing up in more than one language, and they're recent immigrants. And yet when you look at the libraries that are in schools, that's often under 10% of the books that are at a classroom library. So when you put together what Matt de la Peña is saying, and meanwhile he's of course writing books for these kids by the dozen, he's one of the great young adult authors, you should have all of his books in your library. When you take what he says and you take what Alfred Tatum says, it means that we've got work to do. That there's like, you have to be looking at issues of representation, you have to be looking at issues of diversity.

And then there's another thing that Alfred Tatum said in that book, and then he said it even more in his second book, which was called *Reading for Their Life*, which is it's not enough to teach kids strategies. It was maybe 12 years ago when Alfred Tatum came to work with us at Teachers College, and he said something to us, which I will never forget. It was really humbling. He said that at that time, 12 years ago, he said that we were in danger of becoming too much strategy and not enough soul. Too much how to read and not enough why to read. And I found that was life changing for me in terms of my professional life, in terms of what I wanted to do in terms of teaching reading. And so what Alfred really says, is he says you have to teach reading as a way to learn how to live. And that has really informed our units of study. For instance, when the Common Core came out, it was all about can you pass these Common Core tests? And we got behind that, we want kids to be able to take any high-stakes test. And can you be able to read and stay within the corners of the text? Sure, we want that. We want kids to be able to do close reading. But,

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ultimately, we have rejected some of that and said that we're going back to not just what Alfred Tatum says but Louise Rosenblatt.

Louise Rosenblatt, who was the first researcher who looked at transactional reading, and she said that the meaning of a book happens in between the reader and the book. So, that, for instance, you can get a kid who reads *Charlotte's Web*, and when they read *Charlotte's Web*, it's all about the pig, it's all about Wilbur. Because Wilbur is the child in that story. You get an adult who reads *Charlotte's Web*, you read it again later in life, it's all about the spider. It's all about Charlotte. So, for a kid, it's a book about friendship, and for an adult, it's a book about sacrifice. So that book has changed its meaning because the reader has changed. And so we really do believe that one of the things we want to do in these units of study is to convince kids their lives will be different because of what they learn from books. And that you can learn just as much from novels as you can from non-fiction.

And then, one last that we should just mention is Toni Morrison because if you're teaching in middle and high school, especially, one of the things that Toni Morrison looked at when she looked at the books that were put with the Common Core, she said those weren't the books that she would've chosen, and that just gets back to the whole notion of trying to create classrooms for kids who are going to live in part of a global environment. Whether your kids are in a small town or a big city, they're part of a bigger world. And, as Toni Morrison says all the time, one of the things that reading does is it takes you out of yourself and puts you into this richer community of people that you might never meet off the page but you'll meet them within the page. And that could be life changing.