



THE RIGHT TO **BELONG**

Affirming individuality and identity through picture books and storytelling

By **Astrid Emily Francis**

“One of our most important responsibilities in school is to protect and advocate for our students’ individuality and identity; it’s their greatest gift.”
—Hamish Brewer, award-winning school principal

*P*ersonal experiences are powerful. My journey as a first-generation immigrant and a former English learner is now central to what I do. My personal experiences, coupled with my responsibilities as an educator, have helped me to embrace the role of an advocate and to create and establish a sense of culture that values students’ greatest gifts: identity and individuality.

When ILA launched its Children’s Rights to Read campaign last fall, I immediately saw connections to my teaching philosophy and the role I can play in advocating for those rights.



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Children’s Rights to Read (rightstoread.org)—10 fundamental rights ILA asserts every child deserves—is a campaign in which ILA aims to activate educators around the world to ensure every child, everywhere, receives access to the education, opportunities, and resources needed to read.

As a high school teacher of English as a second language (ESL), my job is to analyze my students’ needs and to develop their linguistic and communicative competence in English in all language domains.

My goal as an educator is also to create meaningful learning experiences that serve as pathways for connection. I can create those experiences through the framework of Children’s Rights to Read.

Enacting the rights

Right No. 4, borrowing language from scholar Rudine Sims Bishop, is the right of students to read texts that mirror their experiences and languages, provide windows into the lives of others, and open doors into our diverse world.

I do this by providing texts that validate and celebrate my students’ unique backgrounds. We make time to share our own personal stories and experiences to bring awareness to our cultural diversities. We create projects that take us beyond learning the rules of the English language. We don’t just extract information to learn from it; we transact with the text by taking what we read and finding ways to apply it to our lives or to change the world around us.

I find it imperative to establish a classroom culture where my students feel a sense of belonging and acceptance—where they celebrate both their similarities and their differences.

Having a clear understanding of my students’ rights to read—specifically the “right to read text that mirrors their experiences and language” and “the right to read as a springboard for other forms of communication”—I use picture books and storytelling as tools to facilitate language acquisition and comprehension.

Making connections through picture books

When selecting picture books for my lessons, I intentionally choose books that do the following:

- Provide rich text and illustrations to build literacy competencies
- Facilitate language acquisition
- Validate my students’ experiences and perspectives

Examples of books I’ve used are the following:

- *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan* by Mary Williams (Lee & Low)
- *Four Feet, Two Sandals* by Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammed (Eerdmans)
- *I’m New Here and Someone New* by Anne Sibley O’Brien (Charlesbridge)
- *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña (G.P. Putnam’s Sons)
- *My Shoes and I* by René Colato Laínez (Boyd’s Mills)
- *Turning Pages: My Life Story* by Sonia Sotomayor (Philomel)

Picture books are powerful tools for English learners, even at the high school level, to acquire and develop their English skills because the illustrations provide the support they need for meaning making. Picture books also serve as pathways to understanding our own experiences. My immigrant journey, as well as my students’ immigrant journeys, may be viewed by ourselves and others as something unworthy to share, read, or learn about. However, diverse picture books with characters that highlight and celebrate journeys like ours can provide the sense of validation we need to embrace our experiences.

Through the connections we make with the characters who not only share our experiences but also exemplify courage and belonging, we are empowered to create—and be the heroes in—our own stories.

Affirming existence through storytelling

Affirming students’ individuality and identity requires action. First, we must learn about our students. We can do this by providing opportunities for them to research and share information about their personal

histories. This allows us to build upon students’ knowledge, culture, language, identity, and experiences to create a more culturally responsive curriculum.

In our class, reading diverse books that reflect students’ culture, language, and experiences empowers them to not just understand their experiences but also tell their own stories. Through this storytelling, we exercise Right No. 9: the right to read as a springboard for other forms of communication, such as writing, speaking, and visually representing.

Using the app WriteReader, my students and I share our immigrant stories. This platform serves as a long-anticipated opportunity to showcase our experiences, our culture, and our language. Our stories cultivate a culture of value, respect, and acceptance for our identity and individuality and encourage us to share and consume stories that matter.

Following are some of our stories:

- Mrs. Francis’s Story: bit.ly/2RrTEbg
- Brian’s Story: bit.ly/2t4HeN7
- Leny’s Story: bit.ly/2RqDqPZ
- Dwayne’s Story: bit.ly/2sXoETW
- Brandon’s Story: bit.ly/2UuDpFH
- Dilan’s Story: bit.ly/2S21gGZ

So embrace the right our students have to read and to be inspired by diverse characters and experiences. Empower your students with continuous opportunities to share their story—opportunities that reaffirm their existence, identity, and individuality. ■

READ THE SERIES

This article was originally published on ILA’s blog, *Literacy Daily*, as part of series on how educators are supporting ILA’s Children’s Rights to Read campaign in the classroom. To read the series, visit literacyworldwide.org/implementing-CRTR.