

FISHTANK ELA GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Through our ELA curriculum we strive to create critical readers, thinkers, and writers while building content knowledge and an appreciation for diverse literature and texts. Our ELA curriculum centers texts and content, meaning the text and understanding of content drives instruction, followed by the standards. It is also designed to offer frequent opportunities for writing and discussion, building knowledge and critical thinking, and generating a lifelong love of learning. Each of our courses include multiple units that focus on social justice topics, in which students learn about respecting people and cultures different from their own and articulating the ways they can fight social injustice. Our curriculum is a valuable asset to teachers who are striving to be culturally relevant and anti-racist teachers.

CONTENT SELECTION AND KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

A main goal of the Fishtank ELA curriculum is to instill specific content knowledge about particular topics and themes. Units are crafted around a series of Essential Questions that push students to build a deeper understanding of key content knowledge and themes while also promoting authentic engagement.

Research shows that “knowledge of content and of the vocabulary acquired through learning about content are fundamental to successful reading comprehension; without broad knowledge, children’s reading comprehension will not improve” (Hirsch, 2016). If students have a gap in content knowledge, it can affect their reading comprehension, which explains why students may understand some texts and not others. This was confirmed by the Baseball Study (Recht, D.R and Leslie, L., 1988) which asked a group of students with varying reading levels and background knowledge to read and reenact a passage about a baseball game. The study found that a student’s reading ability had little impact on how they understood the story, but knowledge of baseball did. Weaker readers who had a knowledge of baseball did just as well as strong readers because they understood the baseball vocabulary and content. Therefore, to help build student reading comprehension, Fishtank ELA uses essential questions and carefully curated texts to build a range of content knowledge.

The content of our units is carefully curated based on a variety of factors. In kindergarten through 5th grade, students engage in Literature and Science & Social Studies units simultaneously to build background knowledge and increase exposure to informational texts. In Science & Social Studies units, students read nonfiction and informational texts that look at key historic events with a critical lens, and explore scientific concepts that help them understand the world around them. In Literature units from Kindergarten through 8th grade, students read texts that explore themes applicable to their lives while also building knowledge of historical events and time periods. Most of the literature units focus on developing identity, diversity, justice, and activism, which are key components of [Teaching Tolerance’s Social Justice Standards](#).

The content of all of our K–8 units, both Literature and Science & Social Studies, aim to provide students with windows and mirrors to ensure students see their own identities, experiences, and motivations in texts (mirrors), alongside texts that allow students to gain insight and build empathy for the identities, experiences, and motivations of others (windows) (Style, 1996). And, wherever possible our units aim to engage students in discussions of current events. We also frequently update our units to incorporate articles and discussion topics that reflect current issues in the world around them.

TEXT FIRST VS. SKILLS FIRST

Rather than organizing lessons around specific skills (e.g. how to find the main idea) and teaching these skills in isolation, we organize our curriculum around carefully-selected texts that will engage students and facilitate deep thinking and strategy development. The text, and the demands of the text, drive the focus of a particular unit or lesson. Text-dependent questions in each lesson are sequenced in order to build a deeper understanding of the key ideas and themes presented by the text. Units across the curriculum require students to read a combination of longer texts to build stamina and engage in discussions about the full text, as well as close readings of specific passages or excerpts. Text-dependent questions and close readings push students to pay close attention to the author's craft and text structure, word choice, and challenging vocabulary and syntax (Coleman and Pimentel, 2012). All grade-level Common Core Standards are carefully woven into the units and lessons, introduced and reinforced through text-dependent questions and close reading moments, and work in service of deep understanding of the text.

Texts included in the Fishtank ELA curriculum are carefully selected based on the quantitative and qualitative demands of the text. The complexity of texts may vary across a course, but Fishtank units require ALL students to read and engage with complex texts. According to a study done by the ACT, “performance on complex texts is the clearest differentiator in reading between students who are more likely to be ready for college and those who are less likely to be ready for college” (ACT, Inc. 2006). But, based on a study done by [TNTP](#), most students, especially students of color, are not receiving grade-appropriate assignments that require reading complex text. And in many cases students are required to read texts at their “reading level” until they “read on grade level.” Fishtank ELA believes that with the right scaffolds and supports, all students can and should interact with and access complex text and grade-level assignments daily.

LANGUAGE AND CONTENT DEVELOPMENT THROUGH DISCUSSION AND WRITING

Speaking and listening, writing, and language development are intertwined and embedded in all aspects of Fishtank ELA. Students regularly engage in academic discourse with partners, small groups, and large groups with minimal teacher intervention. Discussion questions are carefully framed and encourage students to use new vocabulary, test out ideas, listen to other ideas, reconsider arguments, and strengthen their reasoning. Over the course of the year, students learn how to clarify and share their own thoughts, engage with the thinking of others, and critique and

analyze the reasoning of others. The focus on academic discourse is especially important for students who are English learners.

Students regularly write about what they read. There is no separate writing block and no separate writing curriculum, all writing instruction is embedded directly into lessons and units. Through embedded on-demand and process-writing assignments, students learn to build powerful evidence-based arguments and develop their ability to express their own voice in a variety of genres. Because students need solid knowledge and understanding of a subject matter in order to write about it, all Fishtank ELA writing assignments are connected to a core text, or ask students to write about content knowledge from the unit, ensuring that all students have equal access to the assignment. This ranges from writing daily about the Target Task question to the end-of-unit process writing assignments. Fishtank writing assignments allow students to use writing as a way to solidify and deepen their understanding of content, while simultaneously allowing teachers to monitor what students understand.

Through explicit writing instruction, Fishtank writing lessons provide students with clear structures to think about, construct, and communicate knowledge. Writing coherent sentences is a building block for all writing, therefore writing lessons in K–5 Fishtank ELA focus on teaching students how to construct simple and complex sentences. Based on *The Writing Revolution*, students solidify their understanding of sentences before moving into writing paragraphs, and ultimately longer essays. In K–5 writing, the focus is on quality not quantity. In 6–8 Fishtank writing, students continue their exploration of the conventions of language and use language to communicate precise ideas. Having a strong command of language will allow students to effectively communicate ideas across a multitude of writing genres.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT/RESPONSIVE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE FOCUS

Our curriculum has a social justice focus that can be a valuable asset to teachers working to create a culturally relevant and anti-racist classroom. Curriculum is only one small piece of culturally relevant education, and the unique composition of each classroom requires teachers and schools to make choices about what their student population needs. Therefore, the content in our units focus on developing windows and mirrors, to allow varied identities and experiences to be identified, honored, and used to support new learning.

Based on work done by Gloria Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant pedagogy describes teaching that engages learners whose experiences and cultures are traditionally excluded from mainstream settings. To engage students, teachers must hold high expectations that ensure academic success, teachers must help students develop positive ethnic and cultural identities while simultaneously helping them achieve academically, and teachers must support students' ability to recognize, understand, and critique current events and social inequalities. Based on Teaching Tolerance's Social Justice Standards, social justice education focuses on teaching students knowledge and skills related to prejudice reduction and collective action and addressing bias in all forms—gender, disability, race, religion, income.

It is important to note that a big part of culturally responsive teaching and social justice education is the classroom culture and relationships teachers establish. For a classroom to be truly culturally responsive, teachers need to know their students and customize units and lessons to be inclusive. While Fishtank ELA provides some guidance on how to do this, we recommend that schools engage in their own equity and antiracism work in order to ensure the curriculum is brought to life in a way that values and represents the students in their classrooms. Teaching Tolerance provides plenty of great resources to help teachers engage in this work including their [Critical Practices for Anti-Bias Education](#) guide and [Let's Talk](#), a guide to facilitating critical conversations with students.

TEACHER AUTONOMY WITH GUIDANCE ON DECISION-MAKING

Our materials are designed to support innovation and differentiation without compromising content or quality. Curriculum implementation consists of a dynamic relationship between teachers and curriculum materials. Curriculum materials need to be educative and support teacher decision making. For teachers to make the right decisions about instruction, they need to have a strong understanding of their students and the content in the curriculum. Therefore, Fishtank ELA places emphasis on teacher Intellectual Preparation. Prior to teaching the unit, teachers should have a strong understanding of the unit texts, essential questions, standards, and how they will progress. Having a deep understanding of the content will allow teachers to make adjustments that meet the needs and diversity of the students in front of them.

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