

# WA State Literacy Framework K-6

## Student Belonging

This document is a section from the [Washington State Literacy Framework K-6](#). Refer to the main source for more information. If you have policy questions related to the WA State Literacy Framework K-6, please contact [ELA@k12.wa.us](mailto:ELA@k12.wa.us).

### Defining Belonging

Belonging is the feeling of being valued, respected, and included in a group. In the classroom, this sense of belonging is essential for both academic and emotional growth, influencing how students engage with learning. When students feel included and recognized, they are more likely to participate in literacy activities, contribute to discussions, and collaborate with their peers. Research demonstrates that a strong sense of belonging is associated with improved academic performance, psychological well-being, and overall health (Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012). When a child feels connected to their learning environment, when they see themselves reflected in books, and when they know their voice matters, literacy becomes an act of identity and empowerment. A classroom becomes a place where they are regarded as capable learners, feel willing to take risks, and develop the confidence to engage with literacy in meaningful ways. When students participate in a classroom culture of belonging, learning is not transactional, but transformative.

*"The feeling that we're part of a larger group that values, respects, and cares for us—and to which we feel we have something to contribute."  
—Geoffrey Cohen*

At the heart of belonging is teacher support, one of the strongest predictors of whether students feel connected in school (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2018). Teachers create an environment of belonging by fostering authentic relationships, ensuring students feel seen and valued, and providing opportunities for student voice and choice. When students have a sense of autonomy and see their own experiences, languages, and cultures reflected in their learning, they develop a deeper connection to their education. Practices which foster belonging in early literacy:

- Greeting students at the door.
- Building a classroom library with representative texts.
- Predictable daily routines, such as morning meetings.
- Displaying student work.
- Sharing appreciations and shout-outs, like "Student Spotlights."
- "Opportunities for students to share about their interests, favorites, family, and friends."



## Belonging as the Foundation for Literacy Development

A sense of belonging must be established early and nurtured continuously. Literacy instruction is most effective when it is contextualized and connected to students' lived experiences and the world around them. By integrating literacy with real-world connections and personal experiences, educators enhance student engagement and comprehension, leading to stronger literacy outcomes.

Research has shown that belonging significantly impacts students' social emotional, academic, and behavioral outcomes (Souto-Manning, Ghim and Madu, 2021).

One key aspect of student belonging is the establishment of trusting relationships between students and teachers. In addition to strong relationships, incorporating inclusionary literacy practices is of benefit to all students, not only those experiencing disabilities or reading difficulties. Inclusionary practice and strong relationships create a sense of security allowing young learners to explore new concepts and develop their reading and writing skills without fear of judgment or failure.

## Fostering Belong Through Culturally Responsive Practices

Culturally responsive teaching is a form of inclusionary practice that validates and affirms students' cultural and linguistic identities and backgrounds. This contributes to a sense of belonging, making literacy instruction more relevant and engaging. Culturally responsive teaching practices support students' belonging by recognizing and valuing diverse cultural identities, creating an inclusive learning experience, and strengthening teacher-student relationships. These practices are essential for fostering a positive and supportive environment where young learners find joy and success through literacy. By creating an inclusive environment, teachers help students from diverse backgrounds feel that they belong and can thrive academically and socially.

When students see their identities reflected in the district-adopted instructional materials, they are more motivated to engage in learning. Culturally responsive teaching helps students engineer successful outcomes without compromising their cultural and social identities (Stembridge, 2020).

Culturally responsive classrooms:

- Recognize and honor diverse backgrounds.
- Use linguistically and culturally relevant instructional practices.
- Provide culturally and linguistically relevant materials.
- Provide instructional choices that support student agency and autonomy.

*"Students are more willing to invest in spaces and communities that support and connect with who they are."*

## The Warm Demander Approach

By combining high expectations with supportive relationships, teachers can empower young learners to persist through challenges, develop resilience, and see themselves as capable learners. In 1975, Judith Kleinfeld conducted research on teacher-student interactions in Native Alaskan communities. She identified a teaching style within Native Alaskan classrooms she termed the “warm demander.” This approach involves teachers who combine high expectations with a supportive and caring attitude towards their students. Kleinfeld found that effective teachers in these communities were able to balance firmness with warmth, creating an environment where students felt both challenged and supported.

Kleinfeld's research on warm demanders significantly influenced the field of culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching shifted away from a deficit-based perspective where learners from multilingual and racially diverse communities were seen as lacking. Instead, it adopted a strength-based perspective that recognizes and builds upon learner cultural assets. In response to this inclusive and challenging teaching style, learners taught by warm demanders demonstrate better academic performance, self-reported motivation, and self-discipline as they navigate the structured yet caring classroom environment.

This stance is especially important in the developmental phase of students in an early literacy setting. Learning to read and write is a complex process that requires multiple skills. This process can be overwhelming, especially for students who may not have had much exposure to literacy activities outside of school. Warm demanders encourage their students by believing in their brilliance while providing a nurturing and supportive environment. By providing a consistent, supportive environment, warm demanders encourage students to keep trying, even when tasks feel difficult. By showing genuine care and high expectations, warm demanders build trust with their students. This trust makes students feel valued and understood, fostering a strong sense of belonging in school and communicating to students that they are a part of a supportive community.

### What a Warm Demander Looks Like in the Literacy Classroom

- Encourages students to play with sounds, recognize rhymes, and experiment with language.
- Provides gentle guidance in writing, celebrating progress from scribbles to full sentences.
- Creates a classroom culture where students feel safe to express themselves, share stories, and build oral language skills.
- Protects and supports each student’s literacy journey, providing just-right challenges for growth.
- Promotes a love of reading, writing, and conversation by making literacy engaging, joyful, and accessible.
- Promotes gradual independence as students build confidence.

## Cultivating Criticality in Young Learners

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad (2020) defines criticality as the capacity to read, write, and think in the context of understanding power, privilege, and oppression. This concept is part of her Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) framework, which includes four key learning goals: identity development, skill development, intellectual development, and criticality.

Teaching criticality is crucial for young learners as it empowers them to understand and question societal structures, fostering a sense of agency and confidence. It enhances comprehension by helping young learners grasp the broader context in which texts are written, allowing them to appreciate diverse perspectives and narratives. Criticality also encourages analytical and critical thinking skills, which are essential for academic success and informed community engagement. Criticality in young learners promotes cultural awareness and sensitivity, enabling students to respect and appreciate different cultures and viewpoints. Engaging with texts through the lens of criticality makes reading and writing more relevant and interesting for young learners, increasing their curiosity and motivation for learning.

By integrating criticality into early literacy, teachers can help young learners develop a whole understanding of the world around them and become thoughtful, informed members of their communities. There are many classroom-based activities which foster criticality while building foundational literacy skills in young learners, such as:

- **Diverse Read-Alouds:** Reading aloud helps young learners develop listening skills, vocabulary, and comprehension. Discussing diverse perspectives enhances their understanding of different cultures and viewpoints, fostering empathy and critical thinking.
- **Role-Playing and Drama:** Acting out scenes improves oral language skills, fluency, and comprehension. It also encourages young learners to think more deeply about characters' motivations and perspectives, enhancing their analytical skills.
- **Critical Questioning:** Teaching young learners to ask questions about texts helps them develop comprehension and analytical skills. It encourages them to think critically about the author's purpose and the messages conveyed in the text. For example, "Why do you think the character felt this way?" or "How would the story change if it were told from another character's perspective?"
- **Reading Circles:** Small group discussions improve oral language skills, comprehension, confidence, and critical thinking. Young learners learn to articulate their thoughts, listen to others, and consider different viewpoints.
- **Creative Responses:** Responding to texts through art, writing, or drama allows young learners to express their understanding and interpretations in diverse ways. This enhances their creativity, comprehension, and communication skills.
- **Reflective Response:** Writing reflections in journals helps young learners develop writing skills, comprehension, and critical thinking. It encourages them to think deeply about texts and relate them to their own experiences.
- **Comparing Texts:** Comparing different texts enhances comprehension and analytical skills. Students learn to identify themes, compare authors' approaches, and think

critically about the messages conveyed.

- **Community Projects:** Connecting literacy activities to community projects makes learning relevant and meaningful. This enhances comprehension, critical thinking, and encourages students to apply their learning to real-world situations.

*"Skills may be difficult to teach if they are taught in decontextualized ways and disconnected from students' lives and the world."*

*–Gholdy Muhammad (2023)*

## Curating Diverse Texts to Foster Belonging

Using diverse texts as mirrors and windows fosters inclusivity and strengthens students' sense of belonging (Bishop, 1990). This approach helps students see themselves in the curriculum and understand the diverse world around them. When students see themselves in books, they feel validated and valued. Literature affirms identity while also expanding perspectives, fostering cultural understanding and connections across diverse communities (Bishop, 1990).

- **Mirrors:** Texts that reflect students' identities, languages, and experiences, allowing them to see themselves in literature.
- **Windows:** Texts that provide insight into other cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives, helping students understand lives different from their own.
- **Sliding Glass Doors:** Stories that transport readers into new worlds, enabling them to step into characters' experiences and broaden their perspectives.

## Reinforcing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) into literacy instruction is crucial for fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment. SEL helps students develop essential skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. By incorporating SEL strategies, educators can create a positive classroom climate that enhances students' ability to engage with literacy content.

ELA Learning Standards provide a developmental framework for reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills that require students to engage with diverse perspectives, communicate ideas in multiple mediums, and attune to the social emotional experiences of characters in stories. In other words, to become proficient in ELA skills and become literate in a text-rich world, young learners develop, apply, and nurture multiple social emotional competencies (knowledge, skills, and mindsets). The [WA Social Emotional Learning Standards, Benchmarks and Indicators](#) coincide with and build on ELA Learning Standards to encourage robust, personal learning experiences for all students in Washington. Educators may consider the following questions when planning literacy lessons to intentionally integrate and nurture social-emotional competencies. These questions are from the module series "Academic Learning Is Social and Emotional: Equity-Centered Social Emotional Learning in Washington."

- **Explicit Skill Alignment:** Which SEL standards include the same skills, knowledge, and mindsets as those within the ELA standards?
- **Explicit Strategy Alignment:** What social-emotional competencies within the SEL standards do students use to accomplish specific ELA tasks?
- **Ways of Interacting:** How do students use their social-emotional competencies within the SEL standards to participate in activities that help them learn ELA skills and content?
- **Ways of Being:** What social-emotional mindsets and habits do ELA scholars (e.g., authors, journalists, and novelists) exhibit to be successful in various literacy disciplines?

As educators consider these examples, the goal is to create conditions that encourage young learners to develop, apply, and exhibit their social-emotional competencies while they are developing foundational literacy skills. SEL-integrated literacy practices include:

- Journaling: Encouraging self-expression through writing.
- Collaborative Storytelling: Strengthening relationships through shared narratives.
- Reflective Discussions: Building understanding by discussing different perspectives.

### Evidence-Based Practices that Support Belonging

- Promote high expectations while offering responsive support for all students.
- Encourage cooperative problem-solving through structured group work.
- Foster a classroom culture where mistakes are seen as part of learning and effort is valued.
- Provide instructional choices to increase student voice, agency, motivation, and engagement.
- Offer multimodal opportunities for students to engage in literacy activities and participate interactively.
- Select diverse texts that reflect various cultures, backgrounds, identities, and experiences.