

# How to use quality texts in the classroom for better student outcomes: Dr Lorraine Beveridge

Dr Lorraine Beveridge is a curriculum advisor for the NSW Department of Education, a former PETAA Board member and co-editor of *The Alphabetic Principle and Beyond: Surveying the landscape*, which won the Best Primary Reference Resource award in the 2019 Educational Publishing Awards Australia.

We asked Lorraine about the ways school leaders can support teachers in using quality texts in the classroom, from identification to instruction.

For more great teaching tips and resources, why not [become a PETAA member?](#)

## First, you need to define what makes a book a quality text for teaching

And you don't have to do this alone. Reference texts like *Language and literacy development in early childhood*, by frequent PETAA collaborators Robyn Ewing, Jon Callow, and Kathy Rushton, can help here. When I work with teachers and principals I like to recommend this book; it helps to explain what constitutes a quality text.

Simply put: a quality text engages the child and adult alike on different levels and it merits multiple readings; every time you read the text you get something new out of it. These texts will often trigger a lot of 'why' and 'I wonder' questions from students, which can lead to deep discussion and dissection of text.

Quality texts are aesthetically designed (like *The Glimme* by Emily Rodda, illustrated by Marc McBride, which I'm reading at the moment), but they are also rich in their use of imagery and symbolism. These books will be full of beautiful figurative language (like Bruce Pascoe's *Mrs Whitlam*) that we'd like to see students learning from their reading and then using in their writing – because, as you know, reading and writing processes need to be taught together, because where do students get these beautiful models? They get them from reading beautiful books.

These texts are exciting, engaging, and multi-layered – they should be open to a range of interpretations and evoke a range of different communities. Instruction needs to be guided by the school leadership, with the leading implementation by the Head of Curriculum and selected members of the teaching staff. Using a grammar book or worksheets as part of the literacy block is not effective, either for teaching how English works or for teaching literacy. Children are interested and fascinated in how language works when an integrated approach makes use of their own language and experience to help make the links between oral language, writing and reading.

## Don't forget to consider content and story

We need to be thoughtful about the content of the texts we bring into classrooms. I recently had an experience at a school I was working with where I had to advise a teacher that the book being

discussed in their Year 5-6 class wasn't appropriate.

It featured children living and working on a dump site in India. I know that happens in some countries sometimes, but I think that we have to resist negative stereotypes, and I think there has to be something uplifting in a text that will make students feel good or hopeful about the world. I don't think that books should drag you down.

They can be interesting – and kids love scary and dangerous and bloody and gory books! – but these books should still evoke a range of cultures, communities, and ways of being.

### **An example > Examining *To the Bridge*, by Corinne Fenton and Andrew McLean, for the elements of a quality text**

*About the book:* Nine-year-old Lennie Gwyther dreamed of seeing the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. With his father's blessing, he rode his pony Ginger Mick over one thousand kilometres from Leongatha in Victoria to Sydney, inspiring crowds of supporters to greet him in cities along the way. Through rugged bushland, fires and storms, Lennie and Ginger Mick finally arrived to see the bridge that had captivated his imagination and inspired his brave journey. It was then that he and Ginger Mick became a legend.

*Why is this a quality text?* This book is an excellent example of the historical narrative genre. It has the news articles about Lennie in the back, and the book itself is someone's interpretation of the events of those articles – something that happened in 1932. There are such wonderful story maps inside this text – you can see the story sequence. It has rich illustrations. One page has a timeline of 10 years of Australian history just in the drawing of a bedroom: it includes depictions of cricketer Don Bradman, legendary racehorse Phar Lap, and images of the Sydney Harbour Bridge being built. These details can be unpacked in the classroom; they'll create quality deep discussions about history and story. It's a prime example of a quality text as laid out in the Ewing, Callow and Rushton book.

### **Children need a balanced literacy diet**

So: why do we need to use quality literature? Teaching English starts with the fact that children need a balanced literary diet.

Students need to be able to read advertising and poetry and songs and multimodal texts (an increasing need, given rising numbers of digital content), drama, screen-based nonfiction, and imaginative kids picture books. It's important that they experience them all and know how to read them all.

Engaging learning experiences need a rich variety of quality children's literature. Sometimes that will mean literature that has stood the test of time and has built up literary value. Sometimes it's going to be new books on the market that offer new perspectives (*To the Bridge*, for example, was only released in April 2020).

Don't be afraid of something new. I support [Magabala Books](#), a First Nations publisher in Western Australia, and I've identified a couple of their titles that I'm excited to bring to classrooms: *Shirley Purdie: My Story, Ngaginybe Jarragbe*, by Shirley Purdie, is told in English

and Gija, an Australian Aboriginal language from the region of Halls Creek and Kununurra in Western Australia, believed to be spoken by about 100 people today. The other is called *[I Want to be a Superhero](#)*, written by Breanna Humes and illustrated by Ambelin Kwaymullina.

## Talk about it

Whether it's a new text or an older one, the crucial element is the importance of talk: talking about what the author means in the text and having deep discussions about the text.

I've been working with a Year 6 class whose reading results have gone up by a lot this time. We recently had a meeting to reflect on this achievement and to see if we could pinpoint what's made a real difference in reading to lead this result – and it's all about that deep talk. Through deep discussions you can ensure that students understand what the characters are doing, the plotlines, and the use of figurative language in the text. These are all in our syllabus, but here, we're teaching them not in their own isolated strategies – we're teaching them in the context of literary texts. Making the choice to structure your learning this way as a leader is the secret.

Make sure, too, that you're providing time and opportunity in your classrooms for students to read widely. Let them choose their own books for silent reading – and then ask them afterwards why they chose those books. It's always interesting to know who the latest authors are, according to the students, and to know what they really enjoy. That student voice tells teachers which high interest topics and texts to look for within the criteria of quality texts we discussed.

Listening to student voice and interest can cause in children that magic moment when they're all reading, and you could hear a pin drop.

## Invest in class sets

I wanted to make a serious note of this to all school leaders. It's important that each student has their own book, especially in primary, especially when you want to do a deep study of a text that encourages deep discussions.

I was in a school last week, and while they had lots of sets of picture books for kindergarteners to use, they didn't have many for their other primary students. Some teachers will say they can really only afford buy a full set of classics and teach them once every two years.

My advice to teachers in a situation like this one is: we should be sharing assets and sharing texts. Check in with the schools near you to find out which sets they have, and what you have at your school, and share them across your clusters to benefit all students. It's economical, it builds community, and it means that each student has their own book that they can use to really study and deeply dissect a text. And that will lead to improved outcomes.