

Chapter 22: Using Class Novels

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While all stories offer opportunities for exploring issues of power, identities, and communities, class novels can act as powerful platforms for sparking children’s imaginations and fostering a love for reading. Class novels can span all genres (eg contemporary fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, science fiction) and they offer significant opportunities for writing, listening, and speaking, as well as individual reading and co-reading. It can be familiar and tempting to choose and keep using the same well-known ‘classic’ book as your class novel each year. However, the class novel occupies a particular status as ‘the’ book that all the children in the class will collectively and formally be required to simultaneously interact with over a sustained period of time. It is thus important to reflect personally and professionally on your decisions around choosing or not choosing particular books as class novels, how these judgments enact your values, and the extent to which these books cater to the needs and experiences of all the children in your class. Selection and use of class novels can play a powerful role in disrupting or perpetuating the “hidden curriculum” (the unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons, values, and perspectives that students learn in school) as well



as the “null curriculum” (the content that schools omit and do not teach) of educational practice. **Sometimes what is not said is just as important, if not more so, than what is said, especially regarding systems of privilege, norms, discrimination, and inequity. It is important to welcome and embed global, multilingual stories and storytellers in everyday reading cultures and reading lists in order to go beyond “tokenism” and to think critically about the traditional literary canon.** As the grassroots organisation by



teachers for teachers, [#DisruptTexts](#), says, ‘literacy is liberation’ and educators must collectively “create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve” (Ebarvia et al., no date).

Recent movements and initiatives have challenged inequities and Eurocentric biases in children’s literature in order to produce and promote fiction and nonfiction that reflects and



honours the diverse lives of all young people eg the non-profit organisation, [We Need Diverse](#)



[Books](#), and the [#OwnVoices](#) hashtag on X.



In addition to considering your students' literacy levels and reading tastes, consider how the novel's content and setting relate to the lived experiences of your students and to local and global issues in the school community:



- Is this novel offering a **mirror** (familiarity and affirmation) or a **window** (unfamiliarity and difference) for your students?
- How does this novel contribute to an overall balance of diverse authors and characters throughout the year?

Some reflective questions to consider include:

- Whose voices are prioritised and privileged in the book that you are considering for your class novel?
- Whose voices are marginalised or silenced or erased?
- What norms regarding race, ethnicity, language, religion, class, gender etc are operating within this book?
- To what extent does this novel recognise, perpetuate and/ or disrupt inequities and discriminatory power systems?

Practical examples and ideas for implementation in the classroom

- Cross-curricular project work across disciplines to explore multiple perspectives and encourage further independent research,
- Drama Education methodologies empower students to be creators, and to investigate bias and point of view eg role play, hot seating, freeze frames, writing their own alternative endings or perspectives that are missing in the novel,
- Walking debates inspired by dilemmas or challenges faced by characters,
- Exploring literary techniques and their impacts on reading eg how does the narrative voice position readers to empathise with certain characters and what consequences are there of these unconscious and conscious biases?





Some online resources for building your collection of class novels which address GCE:



The [Children's Books Ireland \(CBI\)](#) website has a wide range of free activity packs, articles, book reviews, and thematic reading resources for educators, parents, authors and illustrators, librarians, arts organisations, and readers. CBI Reading Lists and Reading Guides that include Irish-language and Irish-published books and which promote and affirm diversity, equity, and representation include 'Together With Refugees', 'Politics and Activism', 'Going Green', 'Free To Be Me', 'Inclusivity and Representation', and 'Building Communities'.



[Social Justice Books: A Teaching For Change Project](#) curates lists of international books for children, young adults, and educators on equity, inclusion, diversity. The website also has articles on 'Creating an Anti-Bias Library' and a 'Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books'.



The [Manitoba Council for International Cooperation](#) in Canada creates annual reading lists for students and teachers regarding global sustainability, social justice, climate activism, equity for indigenous voices, and gender equality.



The [Jane Addams Children's Book Award](#) commends books in which young people feel seen, celebrated, valued, and empowered to question, discuss, and act collectively to dismantle injustices and build a more peaceful, equitable world.

