

Reading Our Worlds

The impact of COVID-19, its rapid spread, and the actions we took became an imperative for all of us. Our lives were reshaped as we were blitzed with news of the spread of the virus and what was needed to protect ourselves and our communities. We were not just observers or individuals; we were participants and community members. And not only was our reading a source that shaped our lives, but also our changed lives shaped our readings—who, how, what, where, and why we read.

Our readings aligned with dramatic shifts in our worlds as schools moved to virtual environments, businesses operated from other venues, restaurants were closed, jobs were lost or changed, and we were called on to be responsible in terms of isolation and social distancing.

On the heels of this pandemic, in which members of the black community in the United States died in disproportionately higher numbers from COVID-19, we witnessed the murder of George Floyd at the hands of a white police officer. This murder was filmed, and the resulting video became a flashpoint for uniting groups of people in Minneapolis, throughout the United States, and all over the world against the ongoing racist and violent attacks on people of color from those who are meant to protect us. Many of us viewed the video of his death, the response of the Minneapolis community, and the response of family members. We heeded the words of black commentators who compared his death to a lynching, and we listened intently to the sermon by Rev. Al Sharpton, who referenced the officer's knee as a symbol of society's chokehold on the black community.

The video recording of George Floyd's death threw into stark relief the systemic racism that was present. Integral to this moment are the many surrounding texts and readings of those texts, including readings of our readings—commentaries by journalists, community members, athletes, and spiritual leaders, to name a few. As we reckoned with this event, our readings were not passive; we

were outraged, empathetic, and mobilized. Our readings were tangled, unsettling, and provocative. Black men and women reported firsthand knowledge and resonance with these events; others have done their best to listen, to be active allies, and to reconsider their own complicity.

The event brought to the surface a range of related issues existing in our lives, especially concern over the rising white supremacist movement and the divisiveness and precipitousness of hate speech from tweets and blogs or tied to political policy speeches. As some commentators noted, racism represented a form of a virus of pandemic proportions.

In the United States, spurred by yet another death resulting from police violence along with renewed conversations, the focus was on racism and America's narrative of systemic discrimination, disenfranchisement, and inequity. Soon the protests spread in recognition of systemic racism in other parts of the world, including Europe and Australasia. In Australia, despite a history of mistreatment and murder of Australian Aboriginals at the hands of police, Australian politicians have a history of foiling constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australia and an aversion to systemic cultural accommodations. As with black Americans, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders represent a hugely disproportionate number of the incarcerated in prisons.

In New Zealand, despite enormous pride in their diversity, especially related to the Indigenous Maoris, they were forced to confront the targeting of more recent migrants with the killing of some 50 New Zealanders of Muslim faith at the hands of an Australian white supremacist. Befittingly, the prime minister of New Zealand emphasized the need for a moral compass that embraced one another, and also passed legislation that changed the gun laws.

For most of society, such events have been riveting—indeed, signaling once again the necessity of change, and perhaps this time achieving the

traction to do so. For the literacy educator, they illustrate how reading can be integral to change, that these events and readings should be a focus of the curriculum, and particularly of our literacy engagements with young people. They highlight the need for reading to go beyond school walls and do more than acknowledge such events in passing.

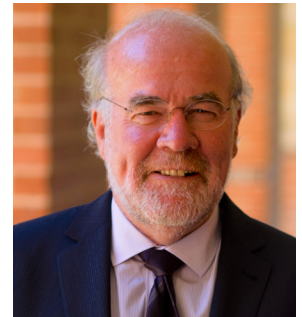
These times suggest that reading can be powerful when it includes the following:

- Enlisting social frames pertinent to our worlds, especially frames that address racism, matters of equity, freedom of expression, social responsibility and censorship, liberty and violence, including police violence, as well as politicians' responses, media coverage, and judicial matters
- Unpacking the historical and socio-political conditions that undergird these developments
- Recognizing that reading is far ranging, as we read various readings for which there may never be a last word
- Reflecting on and extending our readings to incorporate our views and positionings,

whether detached or engaged with the communities as an ally and activist

Reading involves not just reading but also responding in ways that demand our questioning, discussing, discerning, linking, reconsidering, re-reading, rethinking, composing, and acting on. Reading our worlds requires stepping inside, stepping outside, or stepping to the side of people and events reservedly and respectfully—taking into consideration an appropriate balance so that one's interests do not override or displace others, or are enlisted in ways that are presumptuous or opportunistic.

As historic developments reverberate through our lives, challenging the status quo, our readings, and how we read, becomes consequential—indeed, potentially life changing.



Rob Tierney
Vice President of the Board