

# *Connecting History to Practice Today*

## **Literary Presence**

Literary presence means staking a claim and making one's self visible within the intellectual community through acts of literacy. Black people did not wish to merely exist in the country; they wanted to exert their presence and make their mark on history in telling their own narratives. They had a thirst to seek new knowledge as well as to be known and recognized for their contributions to scholarship. Members of these societies were keenly aware that this was possible through their writings and public addresses, by educating themselves through literature. Their writings were one major display of literary presence because this would mean their works were accessible for others to read and learn. Literary presence within societies gave them platforms to project their goals and to put their voices on record publicly with goals of having rights granted in larger political, social, educational, and economic contexts.

## **Literary Presence in the Classroom**

1. Create in-school contexts for students to share their voices and visions through acts of reading, writing, and speaking.
2. Select texts that speak to their multiple identities instead of selecting texts based on their reading identities alone.
3. Scaffold ways for students to share their thoughts and respond to texts.

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## **Literary Pursuits**

Literary pursuits are specific acts of literacy that are both individual and collaborative. In the most simplistic form, one may think of literary pursuits as literacy activities; however, members of literary societies did not label their endeavors as simple activities. Rather, these acts of literacy embodied greater goals and were consequently referred to as pursuits that they believed would lead to liberation, self-determination, self-reliance, and self-empowerment. Examples of literary pursuits included reading, discussing issues (often subjects found in texts), giving lectures, offering peer critique on other members' writings, debating, and penning and publishing original writings. As they engaged in literary pursuits, the members of the literary societies surrounded themselves with enabling texts for reading, writing, thinking, and debate.

## **Literary Pursuits in the Classroom**

1. Engage students with texts that create social action and cause them think differently as a result of what they read.
2. Create an environment that affords students the opportunity to shape their own ideas through acts of literacy.
3. Structure opportunities for critiquing and evaluating what students read and write about within the instruction.

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## **Literary Character**

Literary character is the personal and academic characteristics a person developed as a result of their engagement in literary pursuits. The strength of members' personalities and characters was tied to acts of literacy that became absorbed in the lives of Black members. McHenry (2002) describes the development of literary character as the process of accumulating literary skills, which gave "free" African Americans living in the North the means to become exemplary citizens who could participate in the civic life of their communities. Literary character specifically meant being endowed with self-discipline, intellectual curiosity, civic responsibility, and the ability to use reason, self-expression, eloquence, and agency (McHenry, 2002) through literary pursuits. In many ways, acquiring literary character was the ultimate goal.

### **Literary Character in the Classroom**

1. When literary pursuits are enacted, students will become thinkers and resilient beings.
2. Students will have confidence in reading, writing, and sharing their ideas.
3. This confidence will transfer to other spaces in and out of the classroom.