## WORLD LITERACY SUMMIT – 2025

**Speaker Information:** Valerie Williams-Sanchez, PhD
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**Bio:** Dr. Valerie Williams-Sanchez is the creator of the self-published, children's picture book series, Cocoa Kids Collection® She is a passionate researcher and champion for diverse literature, self-publishing, and empowerment literacy for readers of all ages. She is Mom to Lorena, Auntie to Isaiah, and teacher to countless at-risk and special needs kids. With a Ph.D. in literacy, Dr. Valerie's practice, writing, and research focuses on cultural fluency, multimodal reading, and health literacies.

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**Presentation Title:** *Bridging Literacies with Empathy; Connecting Worlds with Picture Books.*

As literacy education evolves to incorporate diverse picturebooks, it offers a unique opportunity to bridge cognitive, cultural, and emotional worlds. This shift highlights the role of social-emotional learning (SEL) in literacy, reflecting the growing recognition of empathy as a crucial developmental outcome. Grounded in principles often seen in therapeutic practices—such as perspective-taking, emotional regulation, and self-awareness—literacy practices that center empathy-building can nurture not only stronger readers but also more emotionally aware and socially engaged individuals, attribute that are increasingly important society.

Going beyond wide reading, skimming the realm of bibliotherapy, The *Reading Builds Empathy (RBE)* study responds to this need by developing and piloting a novel instrument designed to measure empathy development in children ages six to eight through the shared experience of picturebook reading. This study engaged 21 parent-child dyads (N = 42) and piloted a comprehensive tool that evaluates empathy across three key dimensions: affective empathy (emotional connection), cognitive empathy (understanding others' perspectives), and ethnocultural empathy (cultural responsiveness). Reflecting therapuetic attributes and principles, the RBE instrument incorporates parent reports of children's at-home literacy engagement and social-emotional behaviors, as well as a researcher-administered tool that directly measures children's empathy using a developmentally appropriate format.

Much like effective therapeutic practices, this approach emphasizes active engagement, reflective thinking, and the co-construction of meaning between child, parent, and educator. Initial findings from the pilot study reveal how picturebook reading can function as a dynamic

"therapeutic space" where children practice empathy, process emotions, and develop the critical skills necessary for healthy social interaction. The RBE instrument, therefore, becomes a bridge connecting traditional literacy outcomes with SEL, supporting children as they become literate, emotionally intelligent global citizens.

For this presentation to the World Literacy Summit, we will discuss the instrument's development, reflections on initial pilot data, and recommendations for improving the tool's efficacy. By embedding empathy-based principles into literacy measurement, the RBE instrument bridges multiple literacies—cultural, emotional, and cognitive—offering new pathways for interventions and family literacy strategies. Aligned with the conference theme, *Bridging Literacies: Connecting Worlds*, this work illustrates how literacy education can move beyond reading mechanics to embody therapeutic principles, fostering empathy, inclusion, and intercultural understanding.

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