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Middle School Journal leads the way in generating and disseminating the knowledge base of professionals engaged in the education of young adolescents. To that end the Journal publishes vivid descriptions of practice grounded in middle level literature. It also publishes the findings of new research with clearly drawn applications for practice and grounded, conceptual articles related to middle grades policy and practice.

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Rethinking charter schools

When my brother and, later, my sister announced that they were enrolling their children in a virtual charter school, I had reservations about their plans. At the time, I had little experience with online learning, and I also had little firsthand knowledge of charter schools. Many

of my questions had to do with issues of quality and accountability, and my dad, who was a guidance counselor in a traditional public school for 33 years, shared some of my concerns. “I had my doubts,” he now says, “but it has turned out to be the best thing for them.”

For members of my brother’s and sister’s families, a virtual charter school met certain unique needs their local public schools could not meet. While charter school options are not a “quick fix” or sure remedy for all the challenges of public education, they allow parents and students to choose schools with educational missions and programs that align with their unique needs, circumstances, or philosophies. In addition, because of their increased autonomy, charter schools can serve as incubators for innovation that may benefit all schools. Some promising practices developed in charter school settings have been featured in *Middle School Journal*. For example, the November 2011 issue included an article about project-based learning in San Diego’s High Tech charter school network, and a forthcoming issue will include an article about how STRIVE Preparatory Schools, a charter school network in the Denver metropolitan area, meet the learning and life needs of young adolescents and take an innovative approach to teacher professional development.

In the September 2012 issue of *Middle School Journal*, Miller and associates made a well reasoned argument that the unique charter school structure of the Promise Academies central to the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) initiative makes the HCZ model difficult to replicate in other settings. In making their argument, the authors listed many common criticisms of charter schools that they associated with questions of replication

and scalability of area-based initiatives like HCZ. I am concerned that this list of *criticisms commonly raised about charter schools* may be taken out of context and read as a list of *criticisms common to all charter schools*.

Because of the tremendous variation among charter schools in terms of size, structure, mission, and a host of other variables, it is very difficult to make any sort of useful, categorical generalizations about them. Nevertheless, examples of successes and failures of charter schools are seized and magnified by various political interests. Some focus on the successes because, to them, charter schools represent parental choice and the principles of free-market competition that will spur the improvement of the traditional public schools with which they compete (or force them out of business altogether). Some focus on the failures because, to them, charter schools represent loose oversight and—you guessed it—the principles of free-market competition that will spur the demise of the traditional public schools. Interestingly, the political divide does not fall along party lines. Both Democrats and Republicans at all levels, from the statehouse to the White House, support charter schools and the element of competition they engender.

What disturbs me most about the political rhetoric about charter schools is the polarizing manner in which educators are portrayed as villains (or superheroes) for purely political aims. In fact, most charter schools are managed responsibly and their faculties work hard to help their students succeed. The same can, of course, be said for traditional public schools. At the AMLE conference in Portland this month, educators from charter schools, traditional public schools, and other types of schools will assemble in workshops and presentations to learn from and with each other. They will exchange ideas, celebrate successes, and troubleshoot the challenges they face daily in their classrooms. They will do this because educators themselves—more so than anyone else—recognize that there are no silver bullets, magic formulas, or quick fixes to ensure student success, but there is one sure path to student failure—to give up and stop trying.



Seeing how to ask first: Photo elicitation motivates English language learners to write

Photos prompt middle grades English language learners to reflect upon and write about their lives.

Kristien Zenkov, Marriam Ewaida, Athene Bell, & Megan Lynch

“Mara Salvatrucha”

“Mara” means “gang.” “Salvatrucha” means “really angry.” Gangsters. They are bad people because sometimes they kill someone. ... They ask teenagers if they want to join the gang. Teenagers join a gang so they could have more people to fight or protect them. ... Gangs sometimes cause trouble in school because they bring knives ... [and] bring and buy drugs in school. ... I don’t get involved in gangs because I don’t want my parents to feel badly. ... If I do something bad, then maybe I’d have to go to jail. I’d like to be a doctor.

—Miguel

Miguel was an eighth grader who had recently moved from El Salvador with his family to our exurban community. For the first few months of the school year, Miguel struggled to participate and complete assignments in our English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class, but he began to engage with writing tasks when we relied on image-based inquiries into his relationship to school as the starting point for our lessons. He was motivated to attend our class and attempt our assignments when he was able to both show and tell why he came to school and what helped or hindered his attendance and achievement.

The photo image Miguel took (see Figure 1) and the related reflection he wrote allowed us to know more about why he was distracted in school. Furthermore, they help illustrate a potential solution to the disengagement crisis we face with English language learners (ELLs)

in language arts. We have learned that using image-based methods to *ask* young adolescents about their relationships to school—instead of only *telling* them about school’s importance—helps them to appreciate the writing tasks in which we ask them to engage. In this article, we discuss the positive effects these photo elicitation inquiries have had on our students’ growth as proficient writers and how these activities have raised their awareness of reasons to care about school.

Language dropouts

Miguel is a part of a dramatic demographic shift in our exurban, commuter community, located beyond the first ring suburbs of a major mid-Atlantic U.S. city. In 2000, fewer than 6% of the 900 students in our middle school were classified as ELLs, compared to approximately 50% in 2012. These young adolescents are arriving from as close as other less affordable suburbs and from as far away as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Sri Lanka. All of our ELL students are non-native English speakers and youth of color. Many are also inconsistent school attendees, in part, because our city borders one that has been actively deporting “illegal” immigrants. Often, these youth are afraid to come to school, and their families are cautious about drawing the attention of truancy reports. These factors contribute to the risk that these young adolescents will disengage from our classes and eventually drop out, or be “pushed out” of our schools (Children’s Defense Fund, 2008; Greene & Winters, 2005). In fact,

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: Value Young Adolescents, Meaningful Learning, Multiple Learning Approaches

Figure 1 Miguel, an eighth grader from El Salvador, provided this photo to accompany his writing.



the national dropout rate for ELL students in 2009 was 40%–60% (NCES, 2009).

Sadly, these grim dropout realities are no longer shocking to us, given our students' struggles with school and literacy. While most of the 14 eighth graders in this ESOL class appeared to be on track for graduation, they were, on average, reading at a second grade level. Much research reveals how students' literacy development plays a primary role in their decisions to remain in school (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). More recent studies have documented how schools' curricular responses to diverse populations' low traditional literacy rates contribute to overall school disengagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Zenkov, 2009). In addition, the cross-generational nature of school detachment has resulted in increased "aliteracy" among diverse urban community members: Our students and their family members often *can* read and write, but they frequently choose *not* to do so (Ivey & Broaddus, 2007).

Image-based methods in literacy instruction

Each year it seems more likely that ELL students will become just another uptick in the low literacy achievement and dismal graduation statistics, and every year we become more concerned about their lack of success in language arts class. We reached a point at which we had to wonder what motivated our students even to come to school. We realized we had little to lose by calling on them to tell and show us what they believed

about school. However, these students already struggled to read and write, so we could not simply ask them to write or orally answer questions about the purpose of school and factors that support or impede their success.

We also knew that these students "got" images in ways that schools rarely appreciated (Chicola & Smith, 2006). In response, we looked to current concepts of multi-modal literacy for a curricular framework through which we might engage these seemingly unmotivated students (Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky, 2009). These notions of literacy suggest that schools should rely more on types of texts with which diverse students are proficient, including visual and digital media (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; Morrell, 2007). Image-based tools have proven to be highly engaging for at-risk youth and capable of providing difficult-to-access information about young adolescents' perspectives (Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson, 2003; Van Horn, 2008 [Editor's note: See also Rajni Shankar-Brown's article in the November 2011 issue of *Middle School Journal*]). Research suggests that image-based tools promote students' abilities to share insights about school that language-centered methods cannot (Kroeger et al., 2004; Raggl & Schratz, 2004). Moreover, the use of these tools supports literacy curriculum that is exploratory, integrative, and relevant to students' interests (National Middle School Association, 2010).

Photo elicitation pedagogy

These insights into diverse adolescents' literacies led to the development and implementation of the curricular and research tools we used for this project. We used photo elicitation techniques with ELL middle grades students to explore their perspectives on curricula, pedagogy, and school in general (Harper, 2005; Streng et al., 2004). We provided participants with digital "point and shoot" cameras and instructed them in the basics of camera operation. We worked with these students in our language arts block for about three months, asking them to use the photo elicitation process to address three questions with images and reflections:

1. What is the purpose of school?
2. What helps you to be successful in school?
3. What gets in the way of your school success?

Each student was asked to shoot 10 to 25 images prior to each of approximately 15 project meetings held during our language arts class. From more than

3,000 pictures, our 14 students eventually selected approximately 50 photos (3 or 4 each) as illustrations of what they believed were their best or most intriguing responses to the project questions. We discussed these pictures in one-to-one and small-group sessions as part of an elicitation process, asking questions such as “Why did you take this picture?” and “What do you like about this photograph?” (Marquez-Zenkov, 2007). In most cases, we recorded and transcribed students’ oral reactions to these images; students drafted the transcriptions into paragraph-length reflections, and we eventually helped them edit their writings about these selected photos.

Photo elicitation study

Research methods

The writing project was accompanied by a research project in which we used multi-stage qualitative and visual analysis methods (Kress, 2006; Rose, 2006; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001) to identify themes that led us to the findings of this article (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). We collected data during the one-to-one and small-group discussions with students.

Rather than telling our ELL students why school and our literacy tasks should matter to them, we first asked them to document what they believed about school via photographs and writing.

Each of this article’s authors studied all the photo/reflection combinations, recording the subjects of the images, the topics addressed in students’ writings, and documentations of our photo elicitation conversations with youth. Based on these examinations, we began to identify themes that appeared across these data sets (Have, 2003; Pole, 2004). As a result of this content analysis—as well as the post-project session conversations among the authors—we established that writing instruction practices were among the most frequently mentioned topics in these data.

Because the students were in the classes the first and second authors were co-teaching, we were able to meet with most of them on a regular basis, even after the conclusion of our project. During these interactions we conducted informal member checks (Kirk & Miller, 1986; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002), sharing the themes we had identified with the students who had created the image/reflection combinations that served as key evidence of those themes. All the topics we discuss in this article are ones these young people agreed were accurate representations of the ideas they were either explicitly or unintentionally depicting in their photographs and related writings.

Throughout the project, students described the qualities of our language class pedagogies that they perceived as supporting or impeding their achievement. In the following sections, we use students’ reflections and visual data to describe and illustrate three categories of findings and implications that relate to young adolescents’ motivation and literacy instruction: the notion of an “ask first” approach to writing instruction, the utility of other young adolescents’ images as “ways in” to writing, and the necessity of moving beyond the classroom to engage young people in personally meaningful writing activities. Each of these themes holds instructional implications for teachers working with ELLs.

Finding 1: *Asking ELLs to write*

Our students were most motivated to write when we worked with them in one-to-one writing conferences and “asked first.” That is, rather than telling our ELL students why school and our literacy tasks should matter to them, we first asked them to document what they believed about school via photographs and writing. We initially invited students to respond independently to the project’s core questions through a handout we provided. But it was only when we worked with them one-to-one that these usually reticent learners engaged with this writing task and demonstrated their hidden capacities for writing.

Students frequently shared powerful and unexpected insights about motivational factors related to their school success. For example, some students revealed that their primary school and life mentors were local gang members. These family and community members were trusted experts on the importance of succeeding in school because they were living the consequences of not graduating from high school. Students also identified

difficulties with English as an obstacle to their school engagement and success but, again, not in the way we expected. Alex, who had recently arrived from Sri Lanka, illustrated with a photograph of picture books and young adult literature from his home country (see Figure 2) the motivational and language challenges he was facing. He explained in the following reflection:

Figure 2 Alex provided a photo of books from his homeland, Sri Lanka.



“My Name Is Short”

In Sri Lanka, my name is short and everyone can pronounce it. However, in America, my name is long and difficult to pronounce so nobody can say it correctly. When I do an assignment for class, I have to make sure there is a space provided for my name. Otherwise, I need to add a space so people will know it is my name and not just a word. ... Sometimes I cannot understand what Americans are talking about because there are a lot of differences between American and British English. ... Sometimes the teacher just says, “Read the book.” I can read, but I cannot understand everything I read.

—Alex

Our students were interested in answering the questions we posed about their relationships to school. However, asking them to compose their responses independently—even after they had discussed potential answers in class—was an impediment to their engagement in these writing tasks. Alex’s reflection above is a rich example of the writing that results from the instruction processes that we have found to be most successful with ELL students. Alex produced this paragraph—one of the most complex, detailed, and authentic we saw from him during our

year of working together—only after a combination of whole-class and several one-to-one interactions with the authors.

In response to the writing challenges Alex and other ELL students were facing, we began the writing process by gathering some ideas about their responses to the project questions through a whole-group discussion. This open-ended whole-class discussion provided students with a foundation from which they could each compose independently. We then worked one-to-one with a student—Alex, in this case—to draft a written response using one of their images as inspiration. We spent several classes in these individual conferences, prompting youth to examine their photos from different angles, while continuing to discuss them in whole-group, small-group, and think-pair-share formats. These activities provided many ideas that helped motivate students to begin writing and allowed them to forget their negative identities as writers.

Finding 2: Others’ images as engaging “ways in”

We also learned how to use peers’ work to spark student engagement and help them appreciate writing activities. We shared with our students examples of what other young adults from around the United States had described and illustrated about their own relationships to school. Using an activity we developed for this project (see Appendix A), we drew on images from previous versions of our project conducted in similarly diverse settings. This tool called upon young adolescents to identify which of the project questions they thought several images were intended to address.

These other adolescents’ photographs clearly were relevant to our students. The students in our class seemed to be motivated by the fact that these images represented some of the issues that also concerned them. Analyzing these photos helped our students recognize that photos leave a great deal of room for interpretation. They also started to appreciate that one person’s impression of an image is not necessarily any more “right” than another’s explanation. These open-ended brainstorming and composition activities were tremendously appealing to our students and useful for them as writers.

This photograph interpretation and elicitation activity also provided our students with “ways in” to their ideas that they had not yet discovered. For example, while we knew that gangs were a concern for our students,

it was only when we shared pictures from other young people encountering similar conflicts that they wrote openly about their own gang worries. Similar to Alex, who wrote about how language impeded his ability to engage with and find success in our language arts class, other students surprised us with their uncharacteristic perspectives on what many would consider a stereotypical concern. Juan was a recent immigrant from El Salvador who brought to class an image of a gun on a computer screen (see Figure 3). He accompanied this photograph with a description of how gang-related racism got in the way of his school success and how teachers might help to address these apprehensions.

Figure 3 Juan used a photo of a gun to tell about gang violence and racism.



“Guns and Racism in the United States”

I am scared that I might get shot ... because several of my friends are in gangs and have access to guns. Also, I am scared of ... other kids in the school, because some of them are racist towards Hispanic students. One time my friends and I were walking in the hallway, and a group of kids approached us. They said, “Get the @#\$\$ out of America, you stupid Hispanics!” ... These students had knives on them. I think teachers need to talk about these issues with students.

—Juan

It was troubling to us that the students who most often represented such threats to our ESOL students were from the shrinking white minority in our school. Through the photo elicitation process, we learned a great deal about the everyday difficulties our students were facing. In response to the issues Juan and his ELL classmates

depicted, we held discussions with both our ESOL and non-ESOL students about the negative impacts of harassment and how to react in positive, effective ways.

After viewing and discussing relevant images and writings from other youth, Juan was willing to engage with writing activities in ways that he had not previously done. He also revealed a factor that motivated many of our students to show up for school—the ability to fit in rather than feel threatened or judged. Allowing these young adolescents to preview other students’ work helped them see what was expected of them with our project, and this clarity of expectations motivated them in school—an institution that is often as foreign to them as the new language they are learning.

Finding 3: Walking—photo walking—beyond our classroom

Venturing beyond our classroom to provide real-world contexts for image-based writing assignments also served as a motivating activity for our ELL students. We escorted students on multiple “photo walks” throughout the school and into the community, during which they took photographs that they then reflected on in light of the project questions. Students appreciated moving beyond our ESOL classroom, especially since the school and its activities often seemed irrelevant to them and their families. This activity seemed to intrigue our students because it created an even larger space for the incorporation of their lives and voices into the language arts curriculum.

By taking the project cameras into their homes and communities, students were able to see that many things in their lives outside school had an impact on their successes and failures in our language arts setting. Lillian, a student from Guatemala who was still learning English after several years in the United States, committed a considerable amount of time to revising the reflection “No, Thank You,” which accompanied an image of a local police officer’s badge (see Figure 4).

“No, Thank You.”

One day I was at the library, and I found my brother’s friends, and they said, “Do you want to come to my girlfriend’s house?” I said, “No, thank you.” ... And [one of the boys] got mad and said, “You better come,”... and then he pushed me down and said, “Walk.” I was crying, and he said, “You better be quiet.”... Then he saw an old man. ... [M]y brother’s friend pulled out his knife and said

to the old man, “If you move, you are going to die. ... Take off your shoes.” The old man said, “No.” He said, “I said ‘Take off your shoes.’” The old man said, “Okay.” My brother’s friends said, “The police are coming. Run, Lillian.” And I ran fast.

—Lillian

Figure 4 A photo of a police badge accompanied Lillian’s reflection titled “No, Thank You.”



Because we had witnessed the power of using peers’ images and writing as a “way in” to promote writing engagement, we decided to invite Lillian to share this story with her classmates. We marveled at how involved they were in the resulting discussion about making wise choices and why they might value formal education.

While they had often been unmotivated about writing tasks in our classes, our students discovered a greater confidence in their composition skills through our willingness to let the outside world be a part of our curriculum. Their increased engagement and improved writing performance helped support their success with writing activities throughout the rest of the school year. Students repeatedly demonstrated a newfound awareness that they could question and analyze the academic and life challenges they were encountering. More importantly, they displayed the ability to devise and articulate potential solutions to these difficulties orally and in writing.

Conclusion

Through this project, our ELL students provided us with many insights into instructional practices they identified as effective and into their relationships to

school in general. The greatest aid to their motivation and academic success was developing an awareness of the factors that supported them in school, which was the focus of our photography and literacy project (Dutro, 2009). We came to understand that when students answer questions about their relationships to school with photographs, they are motivated to write, because visual materials are powerful and safe starting points for the composing process (Ajayi, 2009). Their images and reflections revealed that our dreams for their school engagement and success had become theirs as well.

Perhaps most important, the photo-driven writing process we employed allowed our ELL students to see beyond their negative identities as writers and students. We found ELL youth may engage more deeply with writing tasks and grow more as writers when they consider how out-of-school realities relate to their everyday lives. More specifically, they may engage and grow more when they see these realities in our classrooms through their own images. Middle grades ELLs, too often, are invisible in historically white schools and communities, appearing only as statistics in high school dropout rates. Image-based writing strategies challenge this invisibility and motivate ELL students to become aware of their own reasons to write. As a result, they appear to be more conscious of their potential as writers in our classes, as students in our schools, and as citizens in our shared nation.

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Appendix A

“Matching Others’ Images”

Name: _____ Date: _____

Consider the photographs below as answers to the project questions. Decide which question you think each image addresses. A picture may answer more than one of the project questions. Explain why you think each photograph answers each question or questions.

Photograph #1



Photograph #2



Photograph #3



Photograph #1 answers the following question(s):

What is the purpose of school? What supports your success in school?
What things get in the way of your success in school?

Photograph #2 answers the following question(s):

What is the purpose of school? What supports your success in school?
What things get in the way of your success in school?

Photograph #3 answers the following question(s):

What is the purpose of school? What supports your success in school?
What things get in the way of your success in school?

Successful strategies for teaching reading to middle grades English language learners

Teachers can employ a variety of classroom-tested strategies to teach reading to English language learners.

Nicole Bolos

Carlos (a pseudonym) moved from Guatemala to the United States when he was in sixth grade. When Carlos started school, his teachers expected him to speak only in English and practice English in his Spanish-speaking household. Carlos's state test scores showed that, at the end of sixth grade, he was significantly below his grade level peers in reading. Sadly, Carlos began to state that he hated school and wanted to move back to Guatemala. That summer, Carlos moved again. At his new middle school in Illinois, Carlos's teacher allowed him to write in Spanish while learning English content at grade level and to read bilingual books (English and Spanish). He also received daily small-group reading instruction that focused on vocabulary in context and comprehension. That year on his reading tests, Carlos's scores grew significantly from the year before, and his motivation to learn became evident by the smile on his face and his desire to excel at each task his teacher assigned.

Carlos's story is not unique; similar educational experiences happen to English language learners, or ELLs, every year in the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2010), in 2008 there were approximately 10.9 million children in the United States who did not speak English in their homes. Unfortunately, today too many of the 10.9 million ELLs still receive instruction similar to Carlos's sixth grade instruction. ELLs face many challenges as they attempt to learn English and form their linguistic identities; the more languages students know, the more complex their

linguistic identities are. Simply treating ELLs just like everyone else will not close the achievement gap between these students and their grade level peers. In an age of differentiated instruction, middle level educators need to be cognizant of specific reading strategies that will allow their ELLs to achieve their true potential.

The benefits and challenges of biliteracy

ELLs have a variety of unique characteristics that teachers should consider when determining appropriate instruction. Because students come to schools with varying levels of first language proficiencies, the amount of language instruction required varies from one student to the next. Before instruction begins, it is essential for teachers to gauge each student's language proficiency level to guide future instruction. However, when teachers assess a student's language proficiency, it is important for them to keep in mind that a student may *sound* fluent in English when, in fact, he or she is not. According to Cummins (1981), students have two levels of language proficiency: "basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS)" and "cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)" (p. 16). Generally, students who sound fluent have strong social language skills (BICS) because these skills typically develop in the first three years of learning a new language (Watkins & Lindahl, 2010). In social situations, such as lunch time in the cafeteria, ELLs might have lengthy conversations in English about

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: Value Young Adolescents, Meaningful Learning, Multiple Learning Approaches

the past weekend. It is important that listeners do not equate these conversational skills in English as a gauge of students' academic proficiency level in English. ELLs often struggle with academic vocabulary (CALP) because it is a skill that takes a minimum of five to ten years to develop in a new language (Collier & Thomas, 1989). Content-specific vocabulary and specialized vocabulary for discourse have a greater linguistic complexity and require more complicated language structures. Thus, it takes students significantly more time to learn the new vocabulary, to talk about the vocabulary, to practice it, and to make it part of their knowledge base.

However, middle grades educators should not distress. When students have knowledge of reading in their native languages, that knowledge can facilitate the acquisition of English by giving students a knowledge and skill base from which they can build new English skills. According to Cummins (1979), a common underlying proficiency (CUP) exists between two languages; concepts, skills, and ideas learned in a student's first language will transfer to a student's second language. The more similarities that exist between the home language and English, the greater the transfer (Lems, Miller, & Soro, 2010). Language development is interconnected by a positive correlation; if teachers can increase a student's home language reading proficiency, the student's English language reading proficiency will increase as a result (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2009). Cloud and associates (2009) further explained that "linking literature instruction in English with the home language engages ELLs in the learning process because they can demonstrate what they know long before their competence in English is fully developed" (p. 86). In addition, students who know how to read in their first language have numerous advantages when learning to read in English. According to Freeman and Freeman (2009), "Students who read in their primary language ... understand reading is a process, ... subconsciously use cues from the linguistic cueing systems," and have a clear understanding of both the text's organization and text features (p. 104). Therefore, it is beneficial to encourage ELLs to use their home language to assist with English language acquisition. When teachers value the home languages of their students, it strengthens the linguistic identities of their learners. While there are certainly students who come to school with little or no literacy knowledge in their first language, teachers can still make connections between instruction and the students' life

experiences (August & Shanahan, 2006). Although it is beneficial to link a student's first language with English literacy instruction, the challenge for middle grades educators remains to implement this instructional task in their classrooms.

Strategies for teaching reading to middle grades ELLs

In recent years, an emphasis on higher test scores has pushed teachers to focus on best practice reading strategies. Over the last few decades, a great deal of research has been done on the effectiveness of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model and the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) (Herrera & Murry, 2005). Indeed, both methods have proven to be valid and reliable and should be considered when planning effective ELL instruction. However, three additional methods stand out among the research as effective instructional strategies for language learners. According to the research, interactive read-alouds, comprehension strategies, and vocabulary enrichment are three categories of reading instruction techniques to consider when planning lessons for middle grades ELLs.

Strategy 1: The interactive read-aloud

According to Freeman and Freeman (2006), "effective teachers ... read aloud to their students every day ... whether they are kindergarten teachers or high school teachers" (p. 132). Reading out loud to middle level students might seem like an elementary level idea; however, when they read aloud to older students, teachers model the process of reading for ELLs. Calderón (2007) stated, "In secondary schools, teachers read aloud to model reading fluency and comprehension skills—not to read for the students" (p. 52). With careful planning, teachers can model the use of reading strategies, fluent reading, and careful comprehension. It is important for teachers to plan an instructional focus for their read-aloud rather than simply to read the text to the students because they are learning to read. During an interactive read-aloud, teachers make predetermined stops throughout the reading. These frequent pauses support struggling ELLs by chunking the text into manageable parts and allowing for checks in student understanding throughout the reading (Chen & Mora-Flores, 2006; Freeman & Freeman, 2006). Teachers can

also build students' background knowledge for a unit of study by carefully choosing texts for a read-aloud. With difficult text, a "read-aloud plus strategy" is often helpful. Herrell and Jordan (2008) explained that the read-aloud plus "involves the teacher reading text aloud to students while adding visual support, periodic paraphrasing, and ... [an] extension" (p. 209). This can be an especially effective strategy for ELLs because it makes the text comprehensible to readers. According to Herrell and Jordan (2008), the following components are important to the effective implementation of a read-aloud plus:

- The teacher first prereads and chooses a text, considering the vocabulary and concepts that may be foreign to students.
- The teacher then gathers appropriate support materials (such as visuals, realia [photos or objects], or paraphrasing in simple language).
- Next, the teacher sets the purpose for the lesson, explaining the directions to all students in a clear and concise manner, followed by the teacher reading the text aloud to model fluency.
- During reading, the teacher needs to engage the students with the text to help students make connections between what is being read and the new vocabulary.
- As the lesson continues, the teacher checks students' understanding of the key vocabulary and concepts.
- Finally, the teacher assesses student learning in a manner that is appropriate for the lesson, such as creating a visual or paraphrasing what was read.

Although the read-aloud plus strategy requires significantly more planning than just opening up a book and reading out loud, incorporating this strategy into reading instruction will greatly assist ELLs in making reading comprehensible and vocabulary understandable (Herrell & Jordan, 2008).

When choosing a text to read aloud, teachers should first consider their learners. While most middle grades students are capable of handling larger portions of text, many ELLs will need the text chunked into smaller, more manageable pieces (Calderón, 2007). In addition, successful read-alouds require practice and careful planning before instruction (Freeman & Freeman, 2006). While the read-aloud is a useful strategy for instructing ELLs, it is also a wonderful opportunity to incorporate comprehension strategies.

Strategy 2: Comprehension strategies

A great deal of attention has been given to reading instruction in recent years, and one conclusion experts have drawn is that successful readers employ the use of comprehension strategies. But what are comprehension strategies? According to Kendall and Khuon (2005), comprehension strategies include "making connections, asking questions, visualizing, inferring, determining importance, and synthesizing" (p. 5). Successful readers use comprehension strategies to make sense of the texts they read. Many teachers are highly effective at teaching mini-lessons on comprehension strategies. Yet many ELLs may not learn the strategy through mini-lessons taught to the whole class (Freeman & Freeman, 2006). According to Calderón (2007), "explicitly teaching reading ... skills is just as important in secondary as it is in elementary schools, notwithstanding adaptations in delivery" (p. ix). When instruction occurs in a small-group setting, ELLs have more opportunities to interact with both their teacher and other students in the group in a low-anxiety environment; it is also much easier for the teacher to check for understanding and personalize instruction to meet the needs of his or her individual students (Kendall & Khuon, 2005).

One way teachers can teach comprehension strategies is through shared reading. Shared reading has traditionally been used with elementary students. However, according to Freeman and Freeman (2006), shared reading is crucial for middle grades students who find it challenging to read grade level texts. In shared reading, the teacher demonstrates fluency by reading a text aloud. The students then read the text aloud with the teacher while practicing fluency together. Teachers can also incorporate think-alouds to demonstrate the use of comprehension strategies during reading (Freeman & Freeman, 2006). As students gain proficiency with the strategies, teachers can gradually transition to a guided reading lesson with a shared reading component within the guided reading lesson. Guided reading is a beneficial teaching practice for ELLs because it focuses on vocabulary development, allows for individual instruction, and provides verbal interaction between the students and the teacher (Herrell & Jordan, 2008). Because grouping for this strategy is flexible, guided reading allows teachers to easily differentiate instruction based on their students' needs, interests, and abilities. To implement this method, teachers select a small group of students at the same stage of development, choose a culturally relevant text

to read, model fluent reading, and provide detailed vocabulary instruction (Cloud et al., 2009). While all of these methods for teaching comprehension strategies are beneficial to ELLs, it is important to choose the method that best fits the linguistic needs of the specific students being taught.

A plethora of resources is available to educators for teaching comprehension strategies (see Appendix A). It should be clarified that these strategies are merely the tip of the iceberg when it comes to comprehension. Many lessons that teachers already use in their classrooms can be easily adapted for ELLs, if vocabulary, reading ability, and interest are taken into consideration. Further, teachers can provide ELLs with authentic opportunities to practice English and communicate with their peers about literacy by incorporating technology into the reading classroom, such as online discussions, recording oral reading, and blogging (Aguilar, Fu, & Jago, 2007).

At the end of any reading lesson, it is critical for teachers to debrief (Calderón, 2007). Debriefing allows teachers to reinforce the key components of the strategies that were taught during the whole-class mini-lesson and small-group instruction. Although students can employ many comprehension strategies, if they do not, for example, understand the vocabulary words they are reading, they will not achieve comprehension.

Strategy 3: Vocabulary enrichment

Teaching vocabulary and fluency are both important parts of reading instruction for ELLs (Jiménez, García, & Pearson, 1996; Watkins & Lindahl, 2010). The type and depth of vocabulary instruction will vary from lesson to lesson based on the specific language needs of the students. At the middle level, teachers can: (a) rephrase dense text into simpler language, (b) allow students to draw pictures, (c) allow ample time for discussion about the words, and (d) provide questions or sentence stems. These are all strategies that allow ELLs to comprehend and demonstrate understanding of vocabulary (Watkins & Lindahl, 2010). It is important to note that vocabulary instruction should be infused within reading instruction and words should not be taught in isolation. Without context, students are less likely to learn and retain new vocabulary words.

Frontloading is one method for teaching vocabulary prior to the start of a lesson. Using cognates, word walls, or student-developed definitions with pictures are a few popular ways to preview vocabulary with students before

they encounter the words within a reading (Cloud et al., 2009). Teachers who incorporate “realia” in their reading instruction (e.g., photos, illustrations, objects) can teach vocabulary in a kinesthetic and visual manner (Vogt & Echevarría, 2008). For example, when teaching vocabulary, educators can present a photo or model of the item being defined along with its definition. This will allow students to pair something visual and concrete with the definition to make it more meaningful. Another

When teachers assess students’ language proficiency, it is important for them to keep in mind that a student may *sound* fluent in English when, in fact, he or she is not.

powerful vocabulary strategy for ELLs is identifying cognates, or words that come from the same base language and have a similar form. According to Jiménez and associates (1996), the most successful language learners read using “a variety of techniques to construct working definitions of unknown vocabulary such as using context, invoking relevant prior knowledge, questioning, making inferences, searching for cognates, and translating” (p. 100). Teachers can employ a multitude of vocabulary strategies during their reading instruction, some of which are highlighted in Appendix B.

Another vocabulary strategy teachers can employ is the use of graphic organizers to organize thinking. Using graphic organizers can be very beneficial to vocabulary instruction within the reading classroom because these tools “integrate language and thinking to highlight key vocabulary in a visual display of knowledge” (Calderón, 2007, p. 60). When teachers use graphic organizers for vocabulary instruction, ELLs benefit from the clear breakdown of the vocabulary words and their meanings. Semantic word webs, such as attribute charts, are “helpful to ELLs because they reduce the language demands while presenting information in a highly conceptual way” (Cloud et al., 2009, p. 138). Graphic organizers are beneficial for teaching difficult or abstract vocabulary concepts such as prefixes, root words, and suffixes. When

using graphic organizers, such as the Frayer Model, students (a) write the vocabulary word, (b) write the definition of the word, (c) use the word correctly in a sentence, and (d) draw an illustration (Cloud et al., 2009; Vogt & Echevarría, 2008). The more tools teachers have for teaching vocabulary—whether cognates, realia, games, or graphic organizers—the more likely ELLs will successfully learn new words.

Implications and conclusion

In looking at the best methods for teaching reading to middle level ELLs, it is important to understand that a variety of program options may be available. Depending on the school district the students attend, they may have the option for English as a second language classes (ESL), bilingual classes, dual language classes, or mainstream classes (Herrera & Murry, 2005). When choosing instruction for ELLs, it is important to consider not only the students' linguistic needs but also the students' personal learning styles. By building on what students already know, teachers can avoid oversimplifying the curriculum for their ELLs. According to Freeman and Freeman (2006), "a skill is a strategy that has become automatic" (pp. 133–134). Ultimately, teachers can facilitate the transition between short-term comprehension strategies and lifelong comprehension skills. Another important consideration for reading instruction is that all the strategies discussed are strategies that will benefit all learners, regardless of their language needs or the programs in which they are placed. Whether reading instruction occurs in the mainstream, special education, ESL, bilingual, or dual language classroom, all students can benefit from reading strategy instruction. No matter the program, teachers should work hard to ensure that students do not ever encounter the negative school experiences that Carlos felt when he first moved to the United States. The ultimate goal is for ELLs to experience success in reading and achieve their full potential.

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Appendix A

Comprehension Strategy	Definition	Sample Teaching Idea
Making Connections	Using schema (prior knowledge) to relate the reading to yourself, other texts, and the world (Kendall & Khuon, 2005; McLaughlin & Allen, 2002; Samway & Taylor, 2008).	<p>Save the Last Word for Me</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Give students an index card prior to reading a text. 2. As students read a text, students choose “an idea, phrase, quote, concept, fact, etc. from the text that evokes a response” (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002, p. 123). 3. Students write their choice on the front of the index card along with the page number where it can be found. 4. Next, students write their reaction to their choice on the back of the index card. 5. In small groups, students share each choice and discuss it. 6. Finally, the student who wrote the index card shares the back of the index card with the group. (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002)
Asking Questions	Generating questions to guide thinking before, during, and after reading (Samway & Taylor, 2008).	<p>The Questions Game</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. After reading a text, give students three index cards to write down three questions they want answers to or things they need help understanding about their reading. 2. Students pick a partner to trade index cards with. Students then read the cards and write down answers. 3. Then, the two partners meet together and talk about the reading, using their six questions to start the discussion. (Adapted from Allen, 2004)
Visualizing	“Creating mental pictures while reading” (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002, p. 13).	<p>Sketch-to-Stretch</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. After reading or listening to a selected text, students draw a visual representation of what was read. 2. Emphasize the importance of sensory details like touch, sight, sound, smell, and taste. 3. Below each sketch, students need to write one to two sentences explaining their sketch. 4. Students share their sketches with a small group. 5. Another adaptation of this activity is for students to create a series of visual images for a text in comic form. (Calderón, 2007; McLaughlin & Allen, 2002; Robb, 2000)
Inferring	“Reading between the lines” (Kendall & Khuon, 2005, p. 5)	<p>The Inference Game</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Write a series of scenarios on strips of paper or index cards. (Scenarios might include “A student enters the classroom crying.” or “Sit at your desk, yawn loudly, stretch, and put your head on the desk” (Robb, 2000, p. 176). 2. One student chooses a scenario. Without showing the scenario to anyone else in the class, the student acts it out while the audience infers what is happening. 3. The teacher should prompt students with questions such as, “What is the person thinking? Feeling? How do you know that?” (Robb, 2000, p. 176).
Determining Importance	“Selecting the important information in a chapter or section; knowing what’s relevant and what’s irrelevant” (Robb, 2000, p. 66).	<p>Generating Interaction between Schemata and Text (GIST)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify appropriate text for GIST to use with students. 2. Explain to students that after reading a chunk of text (amount to be determined by the teacher), they will need to write a one-sentence summary about what happened in that chunk of text. 3. After all the chunked text has been read, pull students into small groups to compare GIST summaries for each section. 4. Discuss similarities and differences and have students come to a consensus about the best way to summarize each section. (Herrell & Jordan, 2008)
Synthesizing	“Tracking how thinking changes based on what was read” (Kendall & Khuon, 2005, p. 73).	<p>Synthesizing Frames</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read aloud a portion of a text, doing a think-aloud as you read. 2. Write down each new thought on a Post-it® note, making note of the page number at which the thought occurred. 3. After finishing the reading, assemble the sticky notes on a surface in front of the student. 4. Have students complete the following sentence frame using their Post-it notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Before I started reading, I thought (title of text) was about... • Then, after we read a little, I thought it was going to be about ... because I read... • But then I read something different about ... so now I’m changing my thinking. • My synthesis has changed because...” (Kendall & Khuon, 2005, p. 127).

Appendix B

Vocabulary Strategy	Explanation of Strategy
Word Sorts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The teacher selects a list of vocabulary words for the students to work with and writes them on word cards. 2. "Students sort vocabulary words into categories provided by the teacher (closed sort) or by self-selected categories (open sort)" (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002, p. 45).
Word Bingo	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The teacher hands out a 4 x 4 bingo sheet to each student. Students record 15 vocabulary words on their bingo sheet (leaving the free space blank). 2. Then, "one at a time, a student pulls out a card, reads the clue, and students cover the word with a marker. The first student to get four in a row wins" (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002, p. 45).
Word Riddles	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "Students can make riddles for others to solve. The process includes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • choosing your answer to the riddle, • finding synonyms for words in the answer • substituting the synonyms for the word in this question: What do you call a _____? (e.g., Q: What do you call a plump primate? A: a chunky monkey)" (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002, p. 46). 2. Riddles can use hink pinks, homophones, or alliteration (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002).
Cloze Activities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To create a cloze paragraph, the teacher chooses a paragraph from a text at the students' instructional reading level and deletes words. 2. The teacher provides students with a list of the vocabulary words that were omitted. 3. Students then work in small groups to try to figure out the correct vocabulary word that fits in each blank (Herrell & Jordan, 2008).
4 Corners Vocabulary	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Split a rectangular chart into four equal sections. In the upper left corner, students draw a picture of the vocabulary word. In the upper right corner, students should write a sentence that correctly uses the vocabulary word in context. In the bottom left corner, students write the definition (preferably in their own words), and in the bottom right corner, students write the vocabulary word (Vogt & Echevarría, 2008).
Concentration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Locate two different colors of note cards (for example, blue and green). 2. On each of the blue note cards, write a vocabulary word. On each of the green note cards, write the definition of each vocabulary word. 3. Shuffle the blue and green note cards and place them face down on a flat surface. In teams, have students turn up one blue note card and one green note card. If those cards match the word and definition, students keep the cards. If they do not match, they flip both cards back over. 4. Take turns until all the cards are correctly paired up (Samway & Taylor, 2008).

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Association for Middle Level Education



Using chants and cadences to promote literacy across the curriculum

Chants and cadences engage students in creative writing and critical thinking.

Lisa Ciecierski & William P. Bintz

In our teaching, traditional spoken and written responses may be the most common, but they are not the only modes of representation to which we and our students have access. Poetry, drama, music, and art permeate all subjects of content area study and may provide more meaningful and creative ways for students to represent their ideas. (McLaughlin, 2009, p. 211)

Daniel (a pseudonym) had benefitted greatly from the idea that students can creatively represent their ideas in a content area in ways other than traditional spoken and written responses. He was a preservice teacher enrolled in a teacher education program at a small northeastern university. During one class, he shared the following experience he had as a science student in school.

In science class, I wrote [a song] to the tune of “Jingle Bells.” I thought it was pretty cool because, while writing it, I had to think about all of the scientific concepts involved and then figure out how to make them rhyme. I was always thinking about this piece. I could really hear the rhyme in my ears and picture the concepts in my mind. The most important thing, however, is this: Because I had to think about, work with, and write about these concepts, I didn’t memorize them. I really learned them. I still remember them today.

Daniel explained that his teacher often used popular songs to teach important concepts in science class. In this instance, his teacher invited students to write new

versions of popular Christmas carols to demonstrate their knowledge of science concepts covered in class. Daniel composed a new version of “Jingle Bells” to demonstrate his understanding of Newton’s laws of physics. He composed this new carol to help him actively learn, not passively memorize, these important laws. The experience left a lasting impression on him. Today, Daniel remembers his Christmas carol vividly and fondly, can sing it without any prompting, and still uses it to identify and explain Newton’s laws of physics.

We were impressed with Daniel’s story. Writing a new version of a famous Christmas carol or any song can be difficult for a student who, like Daniel, is not an experienced or professional songwriter; and it may be especially difficult if it is about a complex topic such as Newton’s laws of physics. We were also inspired by Daniel’s story. Like all teachers, we always look for innovative ways to help students learn effectively and efficiently across the curriculum. For Daniel, creating a new version of a familiar Christmas carol like “Jingle Bells”—with a distinct rhythm, rhyme, and cadence—was an enjoyable, effective, and memorable way for him to learn difficult science content. We wanted to see what would happen if we used a similar strategy with our students, all of whom are middle school teachers enrolled in a graduate course entitled Reading and Writing across the Content Areas.

This article shares a demonstration lesson from our graduate course in which we showed teachers how to

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: Meaningful Learning, Challenging Curriculum, Multiple Learning Approaches

use chants and cadences to teach content area material across the curriculum. We selected chants and cadences for two reasons. First, in the past we had used a variety of musical genres such as marching songs, rap music, jump rope rhymes, hand claps, and patriotic songs across the curriculum. We wanted to explore other musical genres, such as chants and cadences, to teach content area material. Second, we wanted participating teachers to actually use chants and cadences in their own classrooms. To achieve this, we felt it was important for the teachers to actually experience the activities that we ultimately wanted their students to experience (Harste, 2004).

Struggling readers: Locating the problem

When students struggle with learning in the classroom, all too often, teachers assume the problem lies primarily, if not exclusively, with the learner. This “way of looking” (Wheatley, 2001) at struggling learners has been particularly prevalent in reading education. When students struggle with reading, teachers tend to look at the reader and not the reading materials. Some teachers, however, know the value of looking elsewhere, or at least looking in more than one place, to explain student disengagement in reading. As one teacher explained:

I’m required to teach special standards in my content area. That’s a good thing. My challenge is not teaching standards. It is understanding why students are bored in class and finding ways to get them engaged. Many teachers think students are just lazy. I don’t think that’s the problem. My hunch is they are bored with the reading materials I am using to teach the standards. I feel like a chef. Each day I plan a meal of delicious readings, but students don’t even nibble. I suspect it’s the curriculum. I need to find ways to make curriculum more appetizing. (Bintz, 2011, p. 34)

This teacher recognized that when things go wrong in the classroom, of course teachers need to look at the learner, but they need to look at the curriculum too. She is right! Middle grades educators need to find ways to create an “appetizing” reading curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory, as recommended by *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association, 2010; see also Anfara et al., 2003; Erb, 2005; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Chants and cadences are excellent tools for developing integrated curriculum across the content

areas—they have the potential to make the curriculum more appetizing.

History of chants and cadences

According to Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary (1999), a cadence is “a rhythmic sequence or flow of sounds in language” (p. 159) and a chant is “a rhythmic monotonous utterance or song” (p. 191). Chants are similar to cadences, in that both possess easily recognizable rhythms; however, chants are different, in that they are most commonly used in sports settings by coaches, fans, and cheerleaders.



Writing chants and cadences is an effective way to engage students in learning content while enhancing their literacy skills. photo by Tim Vacula

Cadences have been used primarily in the military. For example, during the American Revolutionary War, cadences were used by soldiers to gauge the number of steps a marcher or runner took and also to count the sequence of loading and firing a musket. Over time, many cadences have been written and performed by soldiers in the Army, Navy, and Marines. Today, they are used primarily as a way for soldiers to build unity and establish and maintain rapport.

One of the reasons chants and cadences are so popular is that they have recognizable patterns and catchy rhythms and, therefore, are relatively easy to learn. Many use a “call and response” rhythm in which

a lead person, such as a drill sergeant, calls out one line and other members respond back. Chants and cadences that use this particular rhythm include “I Don’t Know, But I’ve Been Told,” “Mama, Mama,” “Everywhere We Go,” and “Sound-Off” (also known as the “Duckworth Chant”). Here, we build on this history by using chants and cadences to learn across the curriculum.

Chants and cadences in content area literacy

Little research has been conducted on using chants and cadences in content area literacy. Recent advances in brain research, however, provide some interesting findings related to chants and cadences. For example, much brain research indicates that, from birth until death, the brain actively develops strategic thinking behaviors to make sense of the world (Medina, 2008). Specifically, throughout life, the brain focuses on recognizing patterns and connecting these patterns to larger and larger patterns over time. Humans learn by copying, imitating, and mimicking other people’s behaviors, speech, habits, and mannerisms. In this sense, humans are “patterners” (Gardner, 1985, p. 152) who recognize, utilize, and learn with, from, and through patterns. According to Tankersley (2005),

The brain likes patterns and seeks to connect new learning to prior knowledge and experiences, so it makes sense to provide it with as many ways as possible to connect new information to known information as we are reading. The more ways that knowledge is grounded and secured with links within our mental storehouse, the more accessible and usable the information becomes. (p. 114)

Chants and cadences support what the brain naturally does continually throughout life. They are also entertaining, enjoyable, and innovative ways to learn content area material. According to Silberg and Schiller (2002), “All it takes to unleash the power of rhymes, songs, poems, finger-plays, chants, and tongue twisters is to have fun. And while children are having fun, they will also learn listening skills, vocabulary, and humor” (p. 12).

Chants and cadences are also effective alternatives to memorizing and recalling information from traditional textbooks. Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, and Hurwitz (1999) captured the importance of alternatives to traditional textbook learning through the voice of one social studies student: “When I think about studying history, the things that come to mind are boring facts

and memorizing dates. I think of a boring teacher and a big, huge textbook, and endless nights of studying, outlining, and cramming” (p. 108). This student’s experience is far too common. As Chapin (2011) observed,

Too frequently, students think history is boring because the class is the same from day to day and does not capture their interest. Although content and skills do need to be revisited, if the repeated instruction is at low levels with little or no development of complexity, students gain little. (p. 176)

Chants and cadences are useful alternatives because they draw on the power of rhymes, rhythms, and songs. They can help students make content area material more engaging, informative, and memorable and less boring and dull. Because students become more engaged, they may also learn at a much deeper level than through traditional instruction.

When students create chants and cadences, they apply critical-thinking skills: investigating possibilities, using problem-solving skills, and demonstrating creative thinking.

When students create chants and cadences, they apply critical-thinking skills: investigating possibilities, using problem-solving skills, and demonstrating creative thinking. The process of selecting a chant or cadence that best fits a particular subject area involves a variety of critical-thinking skills. Simply stated, “critical thinking involves a complex set of dispositions and abilities including seeking reasons, trying to be well informed, taking into account the total situation, and looking for alternatives” (NCSS, 1994). Creative thinkers use “basic thought processes to develop constructive, novel, or aesthetic ideas or products” (Sunal & Haas, 2011, p. 75).

Lastly, chants and cadences can support writing growth and development. Using the pattern and rhythm of original songs to create new versions helps inexperienced writers stand on the shoulders of expert

writers. Hoyt (1999) found this strategy particularly beneficial for reluctant writers interested in writing rap-style music: “I find that even the most reluctant writers enjoy the format and gladly engage in lots of revision to make their phrasing match the rhythm they select” (p. 187).

A demonstration lesson on using chants and cadences

Many students struggle to learn challenging content area material across the curriculum (Ness, 2009), largely due to lack of student interest, even apathy, in important topics like experimental design in science, order of operations in mathematics, cultural and social change in social studies, and inferential thinking in language arts. Many teachers struggle, too, to find innovative ways to help students become interested in topics in which they currently have little or no interest. One method is the use of way-in books. Way-in books are high-quality and often award-winning books that provide students an interesting and engaging “way-in” to a world of topics they might otherwise find uninteresting and even boring (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). Teachers can incorporate way-in books at the beginning of an instructional unit lesson to generate student interest and “promote student exploration of topics across the curriculum” (Bintz, 2011, p. 35). We decided to develop a demonstration lesson that used way-in books to generate interest in using chants and cadences across the curriculum. The aim of this lesson was to help teachers in our graduate course effectively teach content they themselves had difficulty teaching or their students had difficulty learning.

We introduced the lesson with a text set on chants and cadences (see Figure 1). A text set is a collection of texts that are connected by a theme, topic, genre, or some other feature (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1995). Teachers may use text sets in a variety of ways in all content areas (Bintz, 2011; Bintz & Batchelor, 2012; Bintz, Moore, Wright, & Dempsey, 2011; Bintz, Moran, Berndt, Ritz, & Skilton, 2012; Bintz, Moran, Berndt, Ritz, & Skilton, 2012; Bintz, Wright, & Sheffer, 2011). Students use text sets to read broadly and deeply about a theme or topic and make intertextual connections across texts. Here, we used a text set to introduce chants and cadences to participating teachers.

We invited teachers to browse the text set and, while browsing, read several chants and cadences to become

Figure 1 “My First Amendment Rights”

My First Amendment Rights

I don't know but I've been told
 Our constitution's mighty bold.
 They made some changes to protect
 Freedoms we've come to expect.
 The First Amendment keeps in sight
 These freedoms that we call our rights.
 Any religion of my choice,
 I'm allowed to give a voice.
 I don't know but I've been told
 Our constitution's mighty bold.
 The First Amendment gives in kind
 The sacred right to speak our minds.
 The First Amendment has no less
 Eternal freedom of the press.
 I don't know but I've been I've been told
 Our constitution's mighty bold.
 This same amendment gives the right
 For us to gather as we like.
 And if they take these rights away
 Our courts will let us have our say.
 I don't know but I've been I've been told
 Our constitution's mighty bold.
 (Chant to “I Don't Know What I've Been Told” or
 “Sound Off,” also known as “The Duckworth Chant”)

familiar with different rhythms, rhymes, and sounds. Next, we invited them to select a favorite chant or cadence and write a new version that taught content area material they had difficulty teaching or their students had difficulty learning. Finally, teachers wrote and illustrated the new version and performed it aloud to the class. As a culminating event, teachers wrote reflections on the experience. The following are samples from the demonstration lesson organized by content area. The samples were selected because they represent different content areas; accurately reflect the original chant or cadence; contain accurate and substantial content area material; use rich and descriptive language; and read smoothly and fluently, as if to create a musical reading that rolls off the tongue (Tunnell, Jacobs, Young, & Bryan, 2012).

Social studies: “My First Amendment Rights”

Figure 1 depicts a chant written by a middle grades teacher about the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. He wrote it for a very personal reason: “First Amendment rights are important. In school I had been taught many things about First Amendment rights but didn’t remember any of it.” He hoped this chant would help his students really learn this content and not easily forget these important rights.

This chant identifies important aspects of the First Amendment. It highlights that this amendment provides U.S. citizens with certain freedoms and rights, such as freedom of religion, speech, and the press; the right to assemble peacefully; and the right to express and resolve grievances. The author did not write this chant to provide young adolescents with a deep and thorough understanding of the First Amendment. Rather, he wrote it to help build student background knowledge and spark interest in this important amendment. He also

wanted it to function as an invitation for students to start conversations and ask new questions as they developed a deeper understanding of and appreciation for this and other amendments.

Mathematics: “Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally”

The chant in Figure 2 was written by a middle grades language arts teacher who was interested in integrating literacy and mathematics. In the past, she had collaborated with math teachers and noticed that students had difficulty understanding order of operations, an important concept in the math curriculum. She wrote this chant to share with math colleagues in the hope that it would help students learn this concept more effectively, enjoyably, and meaningfully. The chant identifies and explains some fundamental understandings of order of operations. In mathematics, an operation can refer to adding,

Figure 2 “Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally”

Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally	
I don't know what I've been told How math equations must unfold The answer's here at this math rally "Please excuse my dear Aunt Sally" She will help us understand Equations that we have on hand Look to her for the right way A math foundation, she will lay PEMDAS is her other name Remember this and you've got game! Sound off, PEMDAS Sound off, PEMDAS Please excuse my Dear Aunt Sally! She's an acronym to know How operation orders go Parentheses is where we start Grouping numbers is their art Work the problem left to right Teacher says, "You're Dynamite!" Exponents, the next concern	Do them now, 'cuz it's their turn Sound off, PEMDAS Sound off, PEMDAS Please excuse my Dear Aunt Sally! Multiply and then divide Show your work with grace and pride Almost done, now that's a fact Last you add and then subtract Remembering Aunt Sally's rule Always makes our math class cool! Sound off, PEMDAS Sound off, PEMDAS Please excuse my Dear Aunt Sally! (Chant to "I Don't Know What I've Been Told" or "Sound Off," also known as "The Duckworth Chant")

subtracting, multiplying, dividing, squaring, and so forth. The order of operations refers to the sequence or rules that need to be followed when doing calculations. The catchy phrase “Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally” is the basis for the mnemonic PEMDAS, which is commonly used by mathematics teachers to help students understand, remember, and correctly use the order of operations. The letters stand for:

1. Items in **P**arentheses
2. **E**xponents
3. **M**ultiplication and **D**ivision (left to right)
4. **A**ddition and **S**ubtraction (left to right)

Language arts: “Verbs”

“Verbs” was written by a middle grades language arts and special education teacher (see Figure 3). She wrote it because each year she struggles to teach parts of speech, primarily because her students find the topic dull and boring. She hoped this chant would spark student interest in this topic. Moreover, while this chant focuses on verbs, she also hoped it would motivate students to write their own version of the chant on a different part of speech.

The chant introduces students to verbs, particularly action verbs, as an important part of speech. It provides several examples of action verbs and italicizes each for

Figure 3 “Verbs”

Verbs
<p>Verbs are active let me see, What they really mean to me. When I need to <i>jump</i> or <i>play</i>, Verbs are types of words I say. When I <i>eat</i>, <i>sleep</i>, <i>run</i>, or <i>walk</i>, I use a verb when I <i>talk</i>! <i>Am</i> and <i>is</i> are verbs as well, Just like <i>skip</i> and <i>run</i> and <i>tell</i> Action, action they do say We use verbs like them each day.</p> <p>Sound off 1, 2 Sound off 3, 4 Sound off 1, 2, 3, 4</p> <p>Go Verbs! (Chant to “I Don’t Know What I’ve Been Told” or “Sound Off,” also known as “The Duckworth Chant”)</p>

emphasis. Non-action verbs are also included (e.g., am, is, are). The teacher wanted to use this chant to highlight differences between action (talk) and non-action verbs (am) and to help students understand that non-action verbs are forms of the verb “to be” and represent simple tense verbs. She also wanted to use this chant to teach writing—specifically, to show students that action verbs are more descriptive and powerful than passive verbs.

Science: “Rainforests Have Four Layers”

A language arts teacher wrote a cadence related to science titled “Rainforests Have Four Layers” (see Figure 4). She wrote it primarily for her young daughter who, at the time, was studying the rainforest in kindergarten and, secondarily, for her middle grades students who enjoyed earth and environmental science. She wanted to help her daughter and her students better understand the term “ecosystem,” the complexity of an ecosystem (i.e., a rainforest), and the variety of species that live in a rainforest ecosystem. The cadence teaches that a rainforest has many layers, identifies and names the different layers, and provides hints that each layer is almost its own biome. The cadence separates each layer, describes the primary occupants who inhabit those layers, and includes animal names and interesting information about them. Additionally, this cadence orders the layers in terms of height (i.e., highest to lowest) and concludes with a dramatic ending about how the rainforest is being eradicated. Many species are disappearing, along with indigenous groups who have called the rainforest their home for centuries, due to over-logging and the quest for new pharmaceutical resources.

Lessons learned

We learned several lessons from this experience. First, we learned that the participating teachers were actively engaged throughout the lesson. Specifically, they were actively engaged in problem posing and problem solving. They spent time posing and reflecting on questions about content they have difficulty teaching or their students have difficulty learning. They also spent time solving problems, such as deciding which chant or cadence would be best to use to write a variation that could teach content area material and determining how the chant or cadence could be written to teach content area material while maintaining the catchy rhythm and rhyme of the

Figure 4 “Rainforests Have Four Layers”

Rainforests Have Four Layers
Rainforests have four layers o-e-o-e-o
emergent layer is on top o-e-o-e-o
with high winds here and monkeys there here a drip there a drop everywhere a drip-drop.
Rainforests have four layers o-e-o-e-o
and canopy is right below o-e-o-e-o
with iguanas here and pythons there here a chimp there a sloth everywhere a flying moth
Rainforests have four layers o-e-o-e-o
look out for the understory o-e-o-e-o
with jaguars here red-eyed tree-frogs there here a bug there a bat everywhere a stalking cat
Rainforests have four layers o-e-o-e-o
and last to come is forest floor o-e-o-e-o
with gorillas here tarantulas there here a plant there an ant everywhere a logger’s chant
Rainforests have four layers, o-e-o-e- oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!
(Sing to the tune “Old MacDonald”)

original. Participating teachers also actively engaged in personal reflection as they shared with others how this experience helped them be better teachers and learners.

Second, we learned that participating teachers became authors, not recipients, of integrated and exploratory curriculum. That is, they personalized

their own curriculum by creating and sharing new interdisciplinary curricular resources. These resources were meaningful to them and responsive to their students’ needs. In this instance, they personally created interdisciplinary curriculum by developing, performing, and reflecting on writing chants and cadences to integrate content areas.

Finally, teachers in our course were actively engaged in critical thinking. In their written reflections, many teachers discussed how this experience broadened and strengthened their thinking. One teacher’s reflection was particularly illustrative:

I have a real sense of authorship and ownership about my chant on the amendment. I have never felt that before. While writing it, and especially when revising it, I started thinking about the amendment in a much deeper way than I ever had before. In many ways, it was a balancing act. Not only did I need to make sure I was communicating historically correct and accurate information about the amendment, I had to stay true to the original chant. I had to analyze what was most important for my students to know while creating language and manipulating words to fit the rhythm of the chant. I was surprised at how deep my thinking became when I worked on word manipulation. I had not envisioned this being a major factor. However, throughout this experience I was proud of the amount of thinking and learning I did and am looking forward to passing this experience on to my students.

Final thought

All the participating teachers found this experience enjoyable, personally rewarding, and professionally informative. According to them, the keys to their success and enjoyment were personal interest, active engagement, and thoughtful writing and revision. We hope this article will be a key to success for other teachers interested in developing and implementing relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory curriculum in the middle grades and, more specifically, for teachers interested in using chants and cadences to teach content area material across the curriculum.

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Literary artistic spaces engage middle grades teachers and students in critical-multicultural dialogue

Urban students write about their lives in one-word poems and on traveling scrawled walls.

M. Kristiina Montero

The value of the arts in education recently received attention in a report by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities (2011). The committee explored the challenges and opportunities currently facing arts education in the United States and found that arts integration contributes to improvements in school culture and climate with benefits for both students and the broader school community. Of particular relevance to this article is the committee's finding that arts integration has significant benefits for students' academic and social development, particularly for marginalized and economically disadvantaged students in urban school settings.

Effective integration of the arts (e.g., music, poetry, performing arts) in teaching and learning has the potential to enable student voice (Hanley, 2010). Poetry, in particular, can serve as a form of expression that allows students to write or speak about their life experiences uncensored without the constraints of the structures and rules of formal language (Jocson, 2006). Through a heightened sense of language, authors can say with poetry what might otherwise go unsaid (Cahnmann, 2003) or, in the words of Luis J. Rodríguez (2007), poetry can create opportunities to engage in *soul talk* that occurs in a space in which "truth and honest emotions are conveyed through image, metaphor, and rhythm" (p. xviii). This article reports how five urban middle grades teachers used Rodríguez and his poetry to engage students in public writing activities about social problems that are typically ignored in school and how

they analyzed the writing to gain insights into the ways their students' viewed themselves.

Listening to silenced voices

Student voices, especially those of marginalized and economically disenfranchised young adolescents, are rarely included in conversations that impact teaching and learning in schools (Editor's note: See Margaret Zoeller Booth's article in the January 2010 issue of *Middle School Journal*). Despite more than 50 years of multicultural educational theory and practice, principles of multicultural education continue to be implemented superficially, resulting in little change to or critique of the mainstream content, structure, and delivery of curriculum. All too often, educators make curricular content "multicultural" through "contributions" or "additive" approaches that do not involve critical thinking or consideration of diversity as a basic premise (Banks & Banks, 2005). These approaches do not seek to transform mainstream curricula; they simply add ethnic content to the existing curriculum. For example, a teacher might present the accomplishments of an ethnic hero or heroine at a specific time of the year or include an ethnic section in a unit without paying attention to either visible (e.g., race, ethnicity) or invisible (e.g., sexual orientation, religion) sources of institutional and societal discrimination. These watered-down approaches to multicultural education have been heavily critiqued in the literature because they tend to emphasize ethnicity

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: Value Young Adolescents, Meaningful Learning, Multiple Learning Approaches

and culture as material constructs devoid of the social, historical, and political contexts that highlight the inherent power struggles associated with inequitable education (see, e.g., May, 1999; Sleeter, 1995).

To avoid engaging students in “difficult conversations,” teachers often silence or superficially address social and educational inequities related to social class, race, culture, sexuality, religion, and/or politics (Glazier & Seo, 2005). When they do this, teachers fail to recognize and consider the social problems of young people, particularly poor, urban youth (Giroux, 2009). From a critical-multicultural stance, teachers must provide students with authentic opportunities to express themselves in ways that affirm their own class, cultural, racial, and gender identities (Giroux, 2009). For young people to become critically literate and effectively engaged citizens, teachers and other adults must hear and respond to their voices (Giroux, 2009) and move beyond simply recognizing and celebrating cultural and ethnic differences. Teachers must address deeper, structural constraints in society—such as racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination—that impact marginalized individuals’ daily lives (May & Sleeter, 2010). Efforts to elicit students’ voices are only effective if teachers *really* listen to and analyze what students have to say about their realities and then use this knowledge to help transform mainstream-centric curricular and pedagogical practices.

Engaging urban students with Luis J. Rodríguez’s poetry

Luis J. Rodríguez was born on the U.S./Mexico border in 1954. Rodríguez, who is of Mexika/Rarmuri indigenous descent, is not foreign to the negative aspects of urban life. In the 1960s and 1970s, he was an active street gang member in the East Los Angeles area, experienced drug and alcohol addiction, and served time in prison. He documented his early experiences with street life in a memoir titled *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.* (1993) and has authored numerous works of poetry, nonfiction, fiction, and children’s literature. His collective work speaks to urban life and expresses the idea that young people need hope and healing to exit a downward life spiral and become actively engaged in the betterment of their communities. (Note: More information about Rodríguez can be found at www.luisjrodriguez.com) Rodríguez was scheduled to speak

about his book *Hearts and Hands: Creating Community in Violent Times* (Rodríguez, 2001) at a university that was partnered with an urban school district and, because he had an interest in working with urban students, he opened up his schedule to speak with selected middle grades and high school students.

Efforts to elicit students’ voices are only effective if teachers *really* listen to and analyze what students have to say about their realities and then use this knowledge to help transform mainstream-centric curricular and pedagogical practices.

To make the visit more meaningful, I worked with teachers to develop a writing project that drew inspiration from Rodríguez’s poems published in *My Nature is Hunger* (2005) and *The Concrete River* (1991), and from his children’s book titled *América is Her Name* (1998). The goals of the project were to allow students to voice aspects of their urban lives through writing and to give teachers a way to transform their curriculum and instruction through analyzing and acting upon what students wrote. The project involved middle grades and high school English language arts teachers from a large urban school district in New York State that served more than 20,000 K–12 students and had student and faculty populations representative of a typical U.S. urban center—higher than average levels of poverty (81% of students were eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program), an ethnically diverse student population (54% African American, 29% Caucasian, 11% Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 1% Native American/Alaskan), and a faculty largely representative of the dominant culture (white European origin, English-speaking, middle class, heterosexual, Christian). While students who participated in this writing project represented the ethnic and socioeconomic characteristics of the overall school district, the participating English language arts teachers generally identified themselves as members of the dominant culture. Students created

public displays of original poems and responses to poetry, and they produced an anthology of original poetry, *Soul Talk: Urban Youth Poetry* (Montero, 2007).

At the beginning of the writing project, five middle grades and three high school English language arts teachers participated in a series of workshops I designed to help them connect to Rodríguez's poetry from an aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 2004). These workshops encouraged teachers to feel and think about the poems as "readers" instead of simply reading the poems as possible instructional texts. After interacting with Rodríguez's poetry, teachers put their proverbial "teacher hats" back on and thought of ways they could meaningfully engage students with these texts. Collectively, the teachers decided to encourage students to respond to Rodríguez's poems from an aesthetic stance. One teacher described her approach in the following manner:

Rather than focusing solely on the analysis, I focused more on the emotion. I discussed the poems with the students instead of dissecting [them] line by line. I concentrated on eliciting emotional reactions to the poetry, like we did in the workshops. I asked students to explore their feelings while reading the poems by simply asking them "How did you feel while you read the poem? What were you thinking? How did you connect to the poem?" I chose or had students choose meaningful quotes and/or phrases and explored their reactions through dialogue and writing. I realized in a very concrete way, that if you want students to write with emotion, you have to allow them to experience poetry through emotion—emotion, emotion, emotion, not analysis!

Teachers also used Rodríguez's urban poems as anchor texts to support students as they created their own poems. For example, many students wrote their own "My name's not..." poems that juxtaposed defining and non-defining characteristics of their identities, modeled after a Rodríguez poem: "My name's not Rodríguez, / It is a sigh of climbing feet, / the lather of gold lust, / the slave masters' religion / with crippled hands gripping greed's tail" (Rodríguez, 2005, p. 105). These identity texts helped students explore and strengthen how they perceived themselves and how they wished to be perceived in their communities.

In addition to having students engage with and write poems within the context of their classrooms, the teachers and I planned two public writing activities, One-Word Poetry and Traveling Scrawled Walls, to encourage

dialogue among middle grades students throughout the school district. To move past the mere recognition and celebration of differences, as recommended by critical-multicultural advocates (e.g., Banks & Banks, 2005; May, 1999; Sleeter, 1995), the teachers also examined the student-generated texts as a way to understand and learn from what the students were saying about their urban lives. In the next section of this article, I describe the two public writing activities; I also discuss the process by which teachers analyzed the texts through a critical-multicultural lens so that they could reflect on their students' lived experiences in relation to their teaching practices.

One-word poetry

Although one-word poems are short in length, dialoguing about them can elicit a reader's worldview by drawing on social, cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts. Aram Saroyan (see, e.g., 2007) is known for his concrete and minimalist poetry of the 1960s and is considered to be the master of the one-word poem (Hell, 2008). He was most famous for his one-word poem *lightht*, which he meant to be both read and viewed for meaning. The artistic longevity of the poem was lengthened when, after its publication in 1965 in the second volume of *The American Literary Anthology*, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), Republican Representative William Scherle and Senator

Figure 1 Creating one-word poems with students

- Choose a text or topic of discussion that connects with students' lived experiences or that might generate discussion about visible and/or invisible sources of institutional discrimination.
- Allow students an opportunity to discuss the issues openly. The teacher should facilitate the dialogue, but not control it.
- Invite students to write a one-word poem about the topic being discussed. The teacher can prepare writing prompts in advance or develop prompts in response to the ongoing dialogue.
- Collect students' one-word poems and compile them into a community poem. Read the community poem to the students.
- The one-word poems and/or community poem can be further analyzed by asking critical multicultural questions (guided by May's four characteristics of critical multiculturalism) and engaging in further dialogue.

Figure 2 The 50 most frequent one-word poems



Jesse Helms used the publication of the poem as fodder to support their position that Federal funding of the arts was a waste of tax payers' money. They launched a national campaign against the NEA for wasting public funds on what they perceived to be a trivial poem. The controversy raised by Scherle and Helms over Saroyan's one-word poem points to the value of the genre—its ability to stimulate discussion—which can be exploited in an instructional context.

If arranged to address traditionally silenced topics, as discussed earlier in this article, one-word poetry in the classroom can produce profound responses in a minimal amount of time and generate discussion among students and educators (see Figure 1). The middle grades students in this project were asked to generate one-word poems in response to a read-aloud of Rodríguez's (1998) picture book titled *América is Her Name*. The book fictionalizes Rodríguez's experiences working with Spanish-speaking children and their parents in the Pilsen barrio of Chicago. It tells the story of América Soliz, a nine-year-old girl who rediscovers the strong voice she thought

she had lost after her move from Mexico to Chicago. She finds her voice through poetry after Mr. Aponte, a visiting poet, tells her: "There's poetry in everyone, when you use words to share feelings with somebody else, you are a poet, and poets belong to the whole world" (p. 11). To help them respond to Mr. Aponte's call to América Soliz, teachers gave middle grades students the following writing prompt: "Write a one-word poem about your life in the city." Students wrote their one-word poems on sticky notes, which were then collected, quickly transformed into a community poem, and read to the students using repeated words and phrasing.

With the collected one-word poems, the teachers and I examined the most common words students used to describe their lives. A visual representation of the compiled one-word poems was created for the purpose of this article using Wordle (Feinberg, 2009), an online software that creates "word clouds" by giving greater prominence to words that appear more frequently in the source text. The most frequent 50 of the 200 one-word poems collected are presented in Figure 2.

The teachers and I began asking questions of the one-word poems, such as: How are students loved? How are the students respected and/or disrespected? In what ways do the students feel cared for? The questions and resulting conversations reflected a basic assumption that urban students' lives were socially and emotionally empty and that teachers needed to fill these voids in the context of the classroom. Questions that mirror privileged social, economic, and political stances risk essentializing—reducing them to a single characteristic or attribute—and “othering” those who are not in cultural, social, linguistic, and economic positions of power and, therefore, move instruction away from critical multiculturalism.

To engage more critically with one-word poems, educators could begin to dialogue with and about the poems by asking critical-multicultural questions that consider the four characteristics of critical multiculturalism detailed by May (as cited in Locke, 2010):

1. Acknowledge the role of ethnicity and culture in identity formation *without* [original emphasis] essentializing them.
2. Recognize unequal power relations as a part of life and understand that “individual and collective choices are circumscribed by the ethnic categories available at any given time and place.”
3. Recognize the ways in which certain cultural knowledge can become marginalized in society.
4. Recognize the social situatedness and provisionality of one’s “speaking position.” (p. 87)

For example, referring to the one-word poem “Black,” one of the white teachers asked, “Why do the students need to identify themselves as “black?” Don’t they realize that skin color doesn’t matter?” This question, which did not recognize unequal power relations, invited the racial elephant into the room and helped move the discussion to social (focusing on race) and economic inequities in education and in society, in general. As a result of this question, the teachers began to move their thinking beyond the recognition and celebration of difference toward prejudice reduction. Subsequently, they asked questions that named and actively challenged racism and other forms of injustice in the classroom and beyond, which Berlak and Moyenda (2001) identified as central to critical multiculturalism.

Listening to the voices on the traveling scrawled walls

Graffiti in public spaces has the potential to exert menacing power or to engage its readers in democratic dialogue. Inspired by Rodríguez’s (1991) poem “The Village,” in which he creates a powerful image of urban life, “concrete border of scrawled walls, railroad tracks, and sweatshops” (p. 25), the teachers and I engaged the students in a wider dialogue about their urban contexts through “traveling scrawled walls.” The scrawled walls activity seemed to resonate with students in this school district, especially considering that many experienced life within a similar concrete border of scrawled walls, particularly on the West and South sides of the city. It was a vehicle for students to democratically communicate with their peers, teachers, and community members about their urban lives.

To implement this writing opportunity, I provided each participating teacher in five middle schools with one or two large cork bulletin boards, measuring approximately three feet by two feet, and asked them to encourage students to post on the board their thoughts about Rodríguez’s writings or about their own lives in an urban context. Students posted poetic responses, graffiti, and drawings. The traveling scrawled walls (see Figure 3) consisted of ten panels that, together, measured approximately 20 feet in length and formed a zig-zag, accordion-like display. For approximately one week, the completed walls were displayed for public viewing in each of the schools’ public spaces—the front foyer, outside the main office, or in the library. The wall was also displayed for viewing by the general public at a community event hosted at the local shopping mall. Teachers reported that the wall generated much excitement and dialogue among students. Students compared their wall contributions to those of others, dialogued about the contents, and, in many cases, added content to their respective walls in response to the viewing.

The student-generated texts inscribed on the traveling scrawled walls were later analyzed using qualitative content analysis methods for the purposes of “making inferences from texts and making sense of these interpretations in a context surrounding the text” (Hoffman, Wilson, Martínez, & Sailors, 2011, p. 30). We believed a content analysis of the students’ writing might help reveal subtle messages and provide insights into the students’ collective voice. As presented at the beginning of this article, it is critical for teachers to

Figure 3 Traveling scrawled wall



analyze students' voices and to use this knowledge to help transform teaching practices.

To engage in a simple content analysis of students' texts, a teacher must define the purpose for the content analysis, often guided by a question. In addition, a teacher must code the texts or data into categories by considering the messages, themes, and belief systems that can be inferred (Hoffman, et al., 2011). Reliability of content analysis is enhanced when at least two coders arrive at a consensus of how data is coded and categorized; however, such precision may not be necessary for the purposes outlined here. While dialogue about students' texts among professionals has many benefits, the reality is that practicing teachers may not have time for this level of analysis. Teachers may, instead, choose to write journal entries about their analyses as they reflect on how the insights gleaned might impact their practice. This simplified form of content analysis would be acceptable for the purposes described in this article. Figure 4 provides an overview of how a

teacher might go about conducting a simplified content analysis, followed by a description of the content analysis conducted of the students' writings on the traveling scrawled walls.

The guiding question used to understand the texts presented on the traveling scrawled walls was: "What are young people saying about their lived experiences in an urban context in the U.S.?" To answer this question, the teachers and I extracted 125 student-generated words, poems, and artistic messages from the traveling scrawled walls. Of these texts, 12 were dismissed—three messages were attacks on previously written messages and nine messages were expressions of gratitude to Rodríguez. The remaining 113 messages were read, re-read, and categorized according to their explicit or implicit meanings about students' lived experiences in an urban context. The messages were grouped into the following three categories: (a) need for safe spaces or a sense of community, (b) identity in an urban context, and (c) call to action.

Figure 4 Content analysis of students' writing

- Create a question that could be answered by analyzing students' writing.
- Read and reread students' writing and try to infer the authors' messages, themes, and belief systems.
- Code students' writing by noting key words in the margins. Analyze key words for emerging themes.
- Categorize students' writing based on the identified themes. Note any outlying texts that don't fit into the identified categories.
- Analyze the texts and identified messages, themes, and belief system in light of the posed question. Consider the outliers as well. Note: The question posed at the beginning of the exercise may need to be changed in light of the findings.
- Write ongoing journal entries about emerging insights during the analysis.
- Reflect on the ways in which new insights might inform teaching practice.

Need for safe spaces and/or sense of community. Of the 113 messages analyzed, 49 (43%) either explicitly or implicitly communicated the need for safe spaces or a sense of community. Such messages included: "Everyone should have a home to go to," "Violence does not solve anything, but shatters the innocent," and "Peace is graffiti." Students expressed a need for safe spaces in which they could live, learn, and work for their desired futures.

Identity in an urban context. Twenty-five (22%) of the messages analyzed were identity statements. Students wrote messages such as "reformed gangster," "low socioeconomic status," or "I am who I am." One student, Cherelle Pace, wrote two identity poems and posted them to the traveling scrawled walls. Both poems communicated a perceived problem with society's perception about her identity and her response to society. Fashioned after Rodríguez's (2005) poem "My name's not Rodríguez," Pace wrote about the meaning of her name and how she has her own identity, separate from being a sister and from being a twin, while at the same time connecting herself to a larger cultural body: "My name is from the great Indian culture. My name represents my fashion couture. ... My name means justice and things that are right. My name means brains and things that I might" (Pace, 2007a).

In "My Race Is Not Trouble," Pace (2007b) expressed her awareness that racial discrimination, bound in a

particular historical context, exists and that she must address such injustices to succeed in social, economic, and political realms. She directly acknowledged that she is not part of privileged society; thus, her poem is counter-hegemonic. The poem is reproduced in its entirety because the 13-year-old's depth and insight merits wide readership. Furthermore, the following poem could be used to facilitate a discussion with students about silenced topics:

My skin is black / And because of that / They treat me like I'm trouble / I'm really nice / And I don't bite / I'm hard-working and I'm humble / I'm not a slave / So don't portray / That I've worked on plantations / So give me respect / For I have success / Because I have dedication / What my ancestors did / Was placed in my skin / Now I am stereotyped / I will not give up / No matter what / I will win this constant fight! (p. 13) (Permission to reprint granted from New City Community Press)

Call to action. Thirty-nine (35%) of the messages were imperative statements, calling upon the author or others to act upon perceived injustices in the community. Students wrote messages such as "stay in school" or "stay out of gangs," or they offered words of encouragement to answer the call: "be strong," "believe," "never give up," and "keep hope alive." There was a common understanding that the students were to "rise up" and be part of the solution.

Transformation of curriculum and pedagogy

Young adolescents' attempts to address issues of inequities often get dismissed because of the prevailing attitude that adults better know their needs (Cervone & Cushman, 2002). Careful consideration of the urban students' messages as a complete narrative and as their collective "call to action" reveals that these young people are acutely aware of society's low expectations for them, and, despite this awareness, they believe that they possess power to change their futures. One student, for example, wrote on the traveling scrawled walls: "Then one day they decided to prove everyone wrong, so they got up, went to school, got good grades, and graduated at the top of their class."

Committed critical-multicultural educators need to engage students in conversations about, for example, obstacles to doing well in school and then help them access the cultural and linguistic capital that will help navigate their future success without losing sense of

personal identity. Teachers decide how to interpret the curriculum and what material will be used to address specific curricular goals. If teachers are unaware of what is happening in students' lives both in and outside school, it is difficult for them to respond to students' particular social, economic, and political needs.

Transforming curriculum and instructional practices that are rooted in mainstream-centric principles is a slow process that requires teachers to engage in purposeful, reflexive practice. This community-engaged poetry writing experience helped create a professional learning community for teachers to work with their colleagues and learn about ways to transform their teaching practices. Through this experience, teachers learned at least two ways (one-word poetry and traveling scrawled walls) for students to express themselves and their lived realities, and they learned how, through systematic analysis, they could think about the students' expressions beyond a curricular activity. While it is important for teachers to create opportunities for students to engage in sensitive or controversial conversations that would likely be silenced in the classroom, they must also engage in deeper reflection about the student voices raised during such conversations. Through such pedagogical practices, teachers might help to address the deeper structural constraints and other forms of discrimination that impact the lives of students who do not see themselves represented in mainstream curricular content and related instructional practices. One teacher reflected on the experience in the following manner:

On a deeper, perhaps subconscious, level, I was afraid to hear the stories my students had to tell about life in an urban context. I was pushed beyond my comfort zone, but I'm glad I did it, because engaging with students' thoughts about their lives in an urban context has altered the way I teach and how I view my job as a teacher in an urban context.

Since this project's conclusion, teachers involved in the project have provided updates on ways their teaching practices have changed. One teacher, for example, started her own community writing project in the style of *Chicken Soup for the Soul* (Canfield & Hansen, 1993). The entire school district engaged in a district-wide reading of Grimes' (2002) *Bronx Masquerade*, a story about students at a high school in the Bronx who reveal their innermost thoughts and fears through the poems they have written. One teacher dusted off a copy of *Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature* (Chapman, 1968) as a place to find culturally relevant

texts with which students could interact, while a group of middle grades teachers decided to engage students in writing about their personal stories of freedom in response to their reading of *Free! Great Escapes from Slavery on the Underground Railroad* (Cary, 2005). It should be noted most teachers reported that they made changes to their curricular content and materials; however, understanding how their teaching styles may have changed would require an analysis of data beyond self-reports. Based on the self-reported changes, it is safe to say that the teachers intentionally provided more culturally responsive learning opportunities that validated students' social realities and engaged students in understanding and acting on their civil rights and responsibilities.

Reflecting on the use of Rodríguez's poetry to engage students in writing about their lived experiences, one teacher noted:

Resulting from this experience, I've gone the other way. I think I'm better off finding any contemporary poem that students can relate to immediately. If we don't reach these kids now and get them engaged in learning, then needing to know the content of the canon in college, for example, becomes a moot issue if the students never go to college. I've seen how Rodríguez's poetry resonated with the students. It was extremely powerful for me to see the kids so engaged and excited about learning. This experience has changed my teaching style.

Transforming mainstream curricular content, materials, and teaching styles requires time and reflexive thought. Such changes do not come quickly; however, a meaningful experience through which teachers listen to students' voices can help teachers move toward critical-multicultural pedagogy.

Final thoughts

There is a powerful scene in the film *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore, 2002) in which Michael Moore asks alternative rock artist Marilyn Manson, whose controversial music some blamed for the 1999 killing spree at Columbine High School in Colorado (O'Hagan, 2000), the following question: "If you were to talk directly to the kids at Columbine and people in that community, what would you say to them if they were here right now?" Manson eloquently responded, "I wouldn't say a single word to them. I would listen to what they have to say, and that's what no one did."

The one-word poetry and traveling scrawled walls provided ways for students to communicate their private social problems in public spaces. They also served as data to help teachers more closely analyze students' self-expressions. Before teachers can help students engage with their communities, they must take time to really listen to what students are saying. Before they can help students name racism and other social injustices, teachers must first recognize and validate students' lived experiences.

When educators listen to what students have to say, they are able to design curriculum and instruction that responds to students' lived experiences and leads them to higher levels of engagement in school and improved academic achievement. Providing students with opportunities to engage with literary art, as described in this article, can be a starting (or middle) point in helping young people on their way to becoming critically literate and effectively engaged citizens empowered to transform their lives and communities.

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Multimodal learning clubs

Students in multimodal learning clubs use a variety of texts to learn important content.

Heather Casey

According to the PEW Internet and American Life project, adolescents' Internet use grew from 75% of adolescents in 2000 to 93% in 2010 (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). As a result, the lines between the physical and the virtual worlds are blurring for many adolescents (Black & Steinkuehler, 2009). In the middle grades, educators in all disciplines need to understand how students are using text in these digital spaces so that they can best support their students' learning (O'Brien, Stewart, & Beach, 2009). Multimodal learning clubs is a classroom strategy that supports students' acquisition of new knowledge by pairing digital tools with requisite literacy strategies.

Locating the adolescent in a digital world

The nature of reading and writing continues to change in response to the mosaic of texts adolescents encounter and construct on a daily basis. Ninety-three percent of youth ages 12 to 17 report going online occasionally and 63% report doing so daily (Lenhart et al., 2010), and what they find online are mixed media, or multimodal content, that they use to construct meaning about a topic and to convey their understanding to others. Research suggests that approximately one in five teens accesses multimodal content (e.g., pictures, written text, video, music) and then synthesizes and remixes this content to create hybrid texts that integrate these forms for representation (Lenhart et al., 2010).

The ease with which adolescents access technology, however, is too often confused with their capacity to use these tools critically for academic purposes (Casey, 2011; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006; Zawalinski, 2009). Middle grades educators play an important role in mentoring students to use these tools appropriately to access and share information (Duffy, 2009; Hartman, Morsink, & Zheng, 2010; Zhang & Duke, 2008). Gee and Levine (2009) argued, "It is far more likely that students will learn complex language and sophisticated problem-solving skills when the fate of a digital world depends on it" (p. 48). As adolescents weave through these digital worlds, they interact with one another through fixed and moving text, and they use these interactions to make their own contributions to this digital landscape. In the classroom, students can learn how to use these digital communication tools in ways that support academic learning.

Theories of student engagement in the middle grades suggest that teachers should offer opportunities for students to engage in academic decision making, build relationships with students that connect their social identities with their academic development, and draw on relevant assessment results to differentiate learning activities for the range of learners in the classroom (Anderman & Anderman, 2010; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Guthrie, 2004; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). This theoretical framework is useful for understanding the appeal of digital platforms for many adolescent learners today. Digital platforms (a) provide opportunities for

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: Meaningful Learning, Multiple Learning Approaches, School Environment

choice, as there are multiple pathways, tools, and media from which they can select; (b) offer empowering feelings of success, as feedback is often immediate; and (c) give the perception of belonging to a larger, often virtual, community (Gee & Levine, 2009). The intersection of what we understand about middle level engagement with these 21st century tools offers potentially powerful possibilities for classroom instruction and increased adolescent motivation, engagement, and, subsequently, achievement.

Understanding multimodality in the classroom

Multimodality, by definition, refers to the use of both traditional print material and dynamic digital content, including fixed and moving images, to construct and comprehend information (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). As Gee (2003) suggested,

Language is not the only important communicational system. Images, symbols, graphs, diagrams, artifacts, and many other visual symbols are significant, more so today than ever. ... In such multimodal texts (texts that mix words and images), then, the images often communicate different things from the words. Further, the combination of the two modes communicates things that neither of the modes does separately. And, indeed, multimodality goes far beyond images and words to include sounds, music, movement, and bodily sensations. (pp. 2-3)

Multimodality—this intersection of both print and non-print materials to convey a message—has always been a feature of communication. Reading gestures and photographs alongside printed text or considering the emotions evoked by music while viewing a silent film are just two examples of the multiple modes used to convey or receive meaning. As our world becomes increasingly digital, however, so too does our awareness of how multimodality contributes to learning. Kress, Tsatsarelis, Jewitt, & Ogborn (2001) described the importance of multimodality in understanding student learning in the middle grades.

Learning can no longer be treated as a process [that] depends on language centrally or even dominating ... meaning is made in all modes separately, and at the same time, that meaning is an effect of all modes acting jointly. Learning happens through (or to put

it as we see it, learners actively engage in) all modes as a complex activity in which speech or writing are involved among a number of modes. (p. 1)

This fascination with ready access to streaming content, web sources, and immediate written exchanges for personal and academic purposes at early ages is creating a generation of readers and writers who develop new knowledge by mining information from varied types of texts (Coiro & Dobler, 2007; Hazari & North, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Rowsell & Casey, 2009).

The ability to synthesize information from these modes is a sophisticated literacy activity that needs to be modeled and supported in the classroom. Research suggests that students who have developed literacy skills and habits with ready access to these tools are poised to receive and synthesize information from multiple modes and are likely to convey information using these same modes. Learning, as Kress and associates (2001) offered, is a tapestry of modes of communication that students are offered and access to build understanding.

Educators today must not only use technology as a tool to engage students, they also have to consider how technology has changed what it means to be an adolescent reader and writer in the 21st century.

The mentor texts teachers use today as exemplars still include traditional bound, printed texts but, for the 21st century adolescent, these are comprehended alongside streaming video, social networking sites, and web pages that blend personal and academic learning (Boling, 2008; Zhang & Duke, 2008). Educators today must not only use technology as a tool to engage students, they also have to consider how technology has changed what it means to be an adolescent reader and writer in the 21st century and the implications of this shift for developing students as readers and writers alongside (and sometimes through) these tools.

Disciplinary literacy in the 21st century

Adolescents are the largest demographic to make use of mixed media for comprehending and constructing text (Lenhart et al., 2010), and studies show that there is often a mismatch between the tools students use to access information outside school and those available for them to use in school (Alvermann, 2009; Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008). That gap is closing, however, as access to resources and continued professional development has allowed the digital immigrant educators—those who have encountered these tools later in their life—to understand how to support the literacy development of our digital native students who have lived their entire lives with these tools (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008; O'Brien et al., 2009; Prensky, 2001).

Students gain and share information in the digital world through a mix of individual investigation and social collaboration. It is not uncommon, for example, for an adolescent to first independently research an assigned topic or a topic of personal interest through Internet searches and then engage with others in online social communities to collaboratively build further understanding (Alvermann, 2009; Kuiper, Volman, & Terwel, 2005). Research suggests that when students use these tools to read and write for authentic purposes, their achievement in school is enhanced (Coiro & Dobler, 2007; Gee, 2008), and this has important implications for learning in all content areas (Casey, 2011, 2012; Doering, Beach, & O'Brien, 2007). Pairing academic content with engaging modes of information may invite students to be more strategic about how they use literacy tools to support discipline-specific learning (Casey & Gespass, 2009; Daniels & Steineke, 2011; Rowsell & Casey, 2009). A large body of research suggests that adolescents engage as readers and writers when they have access to multiple texts and text types, opportunities to engage collaboratively with peers, and opportunities to make decisions throughout the process (Casey, 2009, 2011; Daniels & Steineke, 2011; Guthrie, 2004). In middle grades schools that are departmentalized according to traditional disciplines, engaging students with texts is often seen as the domain of the English language arts classes. The multimodal learning clubs project described in this article evolved in an effort to understand how this approach can move outside the language arts classroom to support discipline-specific learning.

Methodology

From September 2010 to January 2011, Ms. K (the author), a reading specialist, collaborated with a classroom health teacher, Mr. James (all names used are pseudonyms), to develop multimodal learning clubs to support content area learning. Ms. K was a participant-observer in the classroom and her involvement included weekly on-site visits as well as daily communication via e-mail or phone. Mr. James and Ms. K were interested in understanding:

1. In what literacy practices do sixth graders engage?
2. What motivates sixth graders to investigate a content area topic?
3. What literacy practices do sixth graders need to use to learn the content?
4. What influence does technology have on the students' meeting the course goals?

Participants and goals

Mr. James was a well respected middle grades health and physical education teacher who cared about his students' learning. In reflecting on his work with health education, he felt that many of his students were challenged by the textbook and only engaged in the content when whole-class videos were played. "I'm just not sure they are getting this, you know, how the body systems help. It's important, but they really just rewrite what is in the book to answer the questions." Mr. James was experiencing a common phenomenon in content area classrooms (Draper, 2010).

Studying human body systems is a curricular requirement for all sixth graders in River School District. Mr. James teaches health in Mountain School, a grades 5 and 6 school in an upper class suburb in the Northeast. Mr. James, like many of his content area colleagues, does not believe he is equipped to teach the requisite literacy skills his sixth grade students need to access the complex scientific information offered in the text. This situation supports the belief that literacy educators need to partner with content area colleagues to help students develop the genre-specific literacy skills needed within the respective content areas (Draper, 2010).

Data collection and analysis

The data included approximately 30 hours of video documentation of teacher and student work, surveys that identified the literacy habits of the sixth graders who engaged in the work, the student-generated physical and virtual artifacts (e.g., wikispaces, photographs, journals, and three-dimensional models), as well as a series of student focus groups at the conclusion of the study to better understand how these tools supported the students' learning. In addition, assessment data from the teacher was used to describe the utility of this approach in the classroom. Data were initially coded by source, then these codes were compared across sources, and four themes emerged. The themes were: (1) the value of blending modes for learning, (2) the importance of individual and collective engagement, (3) the need to expand conceptions of mentor texts, and (4) the importance of managing technology.

Putting multimodal learning clubs into practice

The multimodal learning clubs project draws on previous research conducted with adolescents that shows evidence of increased engagement and improved student learning when students have the opportunity to work collaboratively, are empowered to make individual strategic choices about resources, and have flexibility in the methods and modes they use to convey meaning (Casey, 2009, 2011; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002).

Mr. James' mandated curriculum requires all students to have a basic understanding of human body systems at the conclusion of sixth grade health. Previously, Mr. James had met this goal by having students use the assigned text and the video clips he shared to write a report that described each system. Mr. James found that this method was not unsuccessful. Surveys of students' written work suggested that, in general, his students had developed a basic understanding of each of the systems, but Mr. James was concerned, based on his observations of students as well as direct student feedback, that the process of learning this information was somewhat artificial. Many students had difficulty comprehending some of the material Mr. James offered them, and the students did not seem excited about their learning. Mr. James thought the

multimodal learning clubs approach would motivate students to engage with material more authentically.

Mr. James began the revised unit by describing each of the body systems to the 24 students in his class. The systems studied were the nervous, digestive, immune, muscular, circulatory, and skeletal systems. Students selected the systems in which they were most interested, and Mr. James organized groups accordingly, with three to four students per group. Once groups were formed, Mr. James introduced the goals of the project, which, as the curriculum stipulated, included being able to describe each of the systems' functions. This time, instead of merely surveying each of the systems, students would spend the time becoming an expert in one system with the expectation that they would develop a learning tool for helping their peers understand the topic.

The groups met approximately once per week for 40 minutes to learn more about their topics. Each meeting included a mini-lesson Mr. James developed collaboratively with Ms. K, the reading specialist, to help students use literacy strategies to access the content. These mini-lessons included

- Using printed reference materials.
- Using the Internet strategically to mine information.
- Understanding the goals of different text types as readers and writers (i.e., how to read and construct a diagram, interpret video, etc.).
- Creating web spaces to share content.
- Synthesizing information from multiple modes.
- Constructing text to share information.
- Creating materials with audience and goals in mind.

The students had access to the Internet, articles, and textbooks during each session. Students were provided with web sources to support their research, and they were encouraged to locate additional resources. Each session followed a similar format, beginning with 10 to 15 minutes for a whole-group mini-lesson, followed by 20 minutes of structured investigation and individual conferencing. During that time, each group made decisions about how to structure their time, with some working collaboratively on their goal for the day and others dividing tasks among individuals in the group.

Mr. James and Ms. K used that time to facilitate each group's progress and to pull small groups of students and individuals aside for conferences based on need. For example, early in their work together, the digestive

system group was trying to uncover resources that both explained their topic and would be useful to others. During that session, they organized their work according to text type, with some using the laptops to uncover relevant websites and others using the bound reference materials. The session ended with the groups sharing with one another and recording (initially on a paper learning log and, as the sessions went on, electronically) their learning for the day as well as their goal for the next session. This structured goal setting proved important for the group's ability to stay on task and make effective use of their resources. Throughout the project, Ms. K recorded the content students were learning as well as the literacy processes they enacted through student interviews, observational notes, and video.

The project culminated with all groups sharing their sources. Groups developed wikispaces about their body systems that were carefully designed to teach their peers. Generally, students authored a multimodal mix of compositions, bulleted descriptions, PowerPoint slideshows, video links, and photographs that were constructed on or imported to their wikispaces. These student-generated texts were modeled after the text types they used to access the information during their research. Students were not required to use their web space as a vehicle for sharing. While all of the groups developed a wiki and were taught how to use the technology to share information, one group opted to create a three-dimensional model of the lungs that viewers could manipulate to demonstrate the properties of the respiratory system. Their demonstration was recorded, and the video was uploaded to their wikispace.

Mr. James and Ms. K assessed student learning through a survey. At the beginning of the project, they asked students to describe each of the body systems. At the conclusion of the project, students responded to the same questions and showed growth in all areas. Mr. James and Ms. K read each survey to determine whether students demonstrated a basic understanding of each body system. They defined "basic" as the ability to identify the organs of the system as well as the main functions. At the beginning of the project, no student had a basic understanding of all systems. At the conclusion of the project, approximately 75% had a basic understanding of all systems, with 50% showing advanced understanding (defined as the ability to synthesize and apply information). Approximately 85% demonstrated a basic understanding of five

of the systems, and approximately 90% had a basic understanding of four of the systems. Ten percent failed to show a basic understanding of three or more of the systems. All the students had a basic understanding of at least their individual group's system.



Multimodal learning clubs allow for collaborative learning and collective engagement. photo by Tim Vacula

Ms. K surveyed students about their literacy habits and interviewed them in focus groups at the end of the project. The survey data was very much in line with what was reported by the PEW project, though on a smaller scale. All but one of the students reported accessing the Internet at home for personal and academic purposes, though about one-third of the class indicated they needed the help of a parent or older sibling to do so effectively. In the focus groups, students said they valued the ability to access and author multiple types of text and use digital sources to support their learning.

The value of multimodal learning clubs in the middle grades

The opportunity for students to choose a topic of study motivated them to be interested in the curricular content. This motivation was sustained by the multiple modes students could use to gain information and demonstrate comprehension. In reviewing each of the

data sources (i.e., surveys, focus groups, video data, and reflective observation notes) four themes emerged that describe the project. These were (1) blending modes for learning, (2) the value of individual and collective engagement, (3) the expansion of mentor texts, and (4) the importance of managing technology.

Blending modes for learning

Throughout the project, the students had access to multiple modes of information for learning, including textbooks, articles, websites, diagrams, three-dimensional models of the body, and video clips. It was not uncommon to observe students inspecting a three-dimensional model then moving to printed texts and video images for further study. For example, during one session, Ms. K observed students in the muscular system group moving between the textbook and the Internet to locate information, while other members of the group developed paper charts and electronic files for composing and note taking. The conversation shifted as students moved from one mode to another, using whatever means necessary to achieve their goal of understanding the function of the system:

Mark: You look up how the muscles work on that site, and I'll find it here.

Sam: Okay, but I can't find the information. Mr. James, can you help?

Mr. James: One moment ... (working with another group)

(The group is still at work as they wait for two minutes for Mr. James to join them.)

Jen: I'm putting the chart together, can't you find it Sam?

(A fourth group member is working with the three-dimensional skeleton the class affectionately calls "Bones" to demonstrate what she is reading about in the textbook.)

Sam: Oh, here it is, it was under "how things work." Got it. I think our first heading should be "Principles of Action"—that's how this website has it.

Mr. James: (joining them) Okay, Sam, but be sure to give credit. What do you think that means?

As the student groups worked with different modes of information, their conversations wove the various modes together. While each member was responsible for a different task during their investigation, all shared the common purpose of understanding how the system worked. Using multiple modes, they began to arrive at various layers of meaning. The printed text prompted one student to demonstrate the motions while others considered how the type of text containing the information could be used as a model to develop their own method of sharing what they learned.

Students did not naturally access these modes, however. Their capacity to effectively use multiple modes of information to foster comprehension was linked to their opportunities to learn more about them in whole-group mini-lessons or small-group and individual conferences. This was not surprising, as student comprehension of content area texts typically improves when focused instruction is offered to help them locate information via various modes (Casey, 2012). However, there is a common assumption that it is enough to simply offer the computer to support learning when, like any other text, students need careful, direct instruction in both the architecture of the tool (how to access the text) and the strategies they can use to comprehend the material.

Early in the project, it was clear that students did not have the tools to discern how to mine useful information from the Internet, which offered a much larger landscape of information to consider than the carefully mediated textbook. In response, Mr. James and Ms. K developed a mini-lesson on navigating web-based texts. The students were taught to use the "WWW" strategy (What do I want to know? Where did I find it? Where else can I find it?), which is based on research in online, self-regulated reading (Coiro & Dobler, 2007). The following is an excerpt from the transcript of that mini-lesson and the whole-class discussion that ensued:

Ms. K: When you are reading information you find online, it is helpful to think of this when you type in that www: What do I want to know? Where did I find it? Where else can I find it? When we are using the Internet to learn information, we need to find the same fact in at least two places before we can believe that it is credible. Why do you think that is?

Jon: Because you want us to read more.

Mr. James: True, we do want you to read more, but it is more than that. One thing you need to know about using the Internet for information is that anyone can make a web page—even us, right? In fact, that’s something we are learning more about next week. So, you need to be really careful about what you believe, and one of the ways to help you with that is to confirm what you find. Make sense?

To further highlight the necessity of this we shared with the students a series of popular web hoaxes to demonstrate how important it is to read carefully.

The students then continued to develop their understanding of the body systems using these multiple sources. After this mini-lesson, students were observed blending text types as they used multiple sources to both investigate their topic as well as confirm what was being learned. During a typical class session, students’ desks were riddled with papers and pens, laptops were opened to web pages or video clips, and students were searching through the textbook and articles. This required a good deal of collaboration, as some students would act as “fact checkers” to be sure that what other group members were finding was accurate.

The value of individual and collective engagement

The opportunity to select a topic was important because, from the start, students felt a degree of independence and control over their learning as well as a responsibility for their peers. This is consistent with research on motivation and engagement that suggests adolescents are motivated to participate in the learning process when they have opportunities to make choices about their work and opportunities to collaborate with others (Casey, 2008/2009, 2009; Guthrie, 2004). In groups that worked effectively together, the opportunity to collaborate with peers fostered continued interest and supported the learning process. This was evident as students directed one another through and to relevant texts and looked to each other for help.

While Ms. K and Mr. James saw such collaboration throughout the project, it was especially evident in the work of the skeletal system. In the following transcript excerpt from the midpoint of the project, the students were attempting to create a product to share with the class while simultaneously building their understanding. The students were getting ready to start for the day, making decisions about how to use their time.

Michelle: Do you think we need a visual too? (Points to the bulleted description she has created on the screen.)

Mort: I think we should have one. I played around with the wiki at home, and I found a way to connect that cool video we found. I think that might be good too.

Jana: Did you finish watching it, though? I watched it ‘til the end last night, and it was actually made by a fifth grade class and put on their blog. I think we need to check some of that info out—they put their sources at the end.

Mark: Okay, I’ll do that. So, today, Michelle do you want to finish the outline while Jana and I fact-check? Mort, do you get the wiki? Do you think you can start putting some stuff up—I’m still not sure.

Mort: Yeah, I’ll start, but you guys need to start signing on from home too. That’s when I really started to figure things out.

There was a lot going on in this excerpt. In addition to the organization of group roles and the implementation of the shared mini-lessons, the dialogue reveals that some students embraced technology and others resisted it. The collaborative nature of the project offered the informal peer support systems that have been documented as being important when using these tools (Coiro et al., 2008; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006; Rowsell & Casey, 2009).

The use of technology and digital modes of texts offered further opportunities for engagement, in part, because students found these tools inviting, but also because they had more opportunities to work with materials that were specific to their individual needs. For example, there were several instances in which students dismissed a website because the language was too difficult to comprehend, so they simply navigated to one that was easier to access. When working with a single text or type of text, opportunities to abandon difficult texts are limited. This may result in increased frustration for many struggling readers and interfere with the content learning goals for the unit of study. Mr. James reflected on this in one of our post-session conversations: “It’s nice to see them in charge of what they are doing. Usually, I am called over to define a word or explain a sentence, and I don’t seem to be doing as much of that this time.” While the technology may have played a part in this,

Mr. James's collaboration with a reading specialist allowed for a more focused discussion of literacy strategies students might need (Draper, 2010).

The opportunity to work in groups was generally a positive aspect of the multimodal learning clubs, as documented in the literature, but teachers must carefully develop collaborative groups (Casey, 2012; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Nevgi, Virtanen, & Niemi, 2006). Groups often fail when students are not held accountable individually. Creating a sense of community within each group was important, and this was achieved by holding students *individually* accountable for the material and *collectively* responsible for their peers' learning (Casey, 2012; Daniels & Steineke, 2011; Nevgi et al., 2006).

Expansion of mentor texts

The use of mentor texts, which are exemplars of literacy products, has been documented as an important strategy to support literacy development (Robb, 2010). The use of mentor texts was expanded in the multimodal learning club project to include still and moving images as well as dynamic, interactive text conversations (Hicks, 2009). Multiple mini-lessons and student conferences taught students how to approach these texts as strategic readers as well as how to make decisions about selecting from different modes of text when preparing to share information with others. For example, after viewing an interactive video on the respiratory system, one group created their own three-dimensional model using PVC piping for their peers to use to support their understanding of the pulmonary system.

Miles: You see, this is where the air comes. (Points to pipe.)

Jake: And we made the lungs out of plastic bags at the end here, because they can contract and expand, like the lungs.

In this brief exchange, the students discussed the pulmonary system, using their construction of the model as a way to illustrate the process. While some of the science behind the model needed some revision, the students were clearly able to use it as a mentor text, and other groups had similar experiences creating various text types. In addition, almost all the groups created some type of PowerPoint to include on their wiki, in part, because a large portion of the mini-lessons relied on this platform to convey information.

Importance of Managing Technology

Working with technology adds a layer of complexity to classroom management, and middle grades teachers often cite management challenges as a reason to disband an idea (Garrett & Casey, 2010). There were times, for example, when the portable laptops would suddenly freeze or power down. This resulted in frustrating down time for students and inefficient learning opportunities. While the physical layout of the health room with laptops appeared ideal, the frequent technological interruptions made learning difficult, so midway through the project, the students elected to change rooms.

Mr. James: Okay, so we are at a point here where we can continue to meet in our room at these tables and deal with the computer difficulties or move to the computer lab, where it will be tight and you can't move around as easily, but we know they work. What's your choice?

Student response (all): Lab!

When Marge, one of the students, was asked during a focus group discussion about the decision to change rooms, she said:

I think if it was the beginning, we wouldn't have voted to move, but since we already had figured out the group thing, we really needed to know that the computers would work. It didn't matter as much anymore if we were sitting near each other, we figured things out enough so [that] we could work it out.

When teachers abandon technology because of glitches, they deny students the very necessary opportunity to work with a mode of learning that will be standard when they enter the workplace as adults. There is value in helping students understand how to weather these distractions and disappointments in an effort to achieve the larger learning goal.

The possibilities for content area instruction

While multimodal learning clubs began as a project for one unit, it will be important to continue this approach for additional units of study because multimodality becomes natural when it is threaded throughout all learning. While the findings are limited in their generalizability because the study focused on one classroom, this glimpse at multimodal learning clubs

inside one health classroom provides an idea of what this strategy might look like in other content areas.

Multimodal learning clubs are consistent with the Association for Middle Level Education's (formerly National Middle School Association [NMSA]) positions regarding how students learn and how schools should support meaningful, engaging instruction and the use of digital tools (NMSA, 2010). At the conclusion of the project, the students made the following comments, suggesting the multimodal learning clubs met these aims.

- "I liked working with the wikis because we were writing for someone real. I mean, even our parents could go on and see what we did. That was cool."
- "It was good that we got to choose. I wasn't that interested in some of the other systems, but then once I learned about mine and how it connected to some of the others, it was good. The other groups did a lot of charts and writing to help us understand, and that was helpful."
- "I didn't realize how much reading and writing I would have to do to understand this until Mr. James and Ms. K kept talking about it at the beginning of each class. At first I was like, come on, let's just get to the websites; but then when I started having trouble with some of them, I was sort of glad they taught us how to figure things out on our own. But I think I still need some help in understanding some of the topics."

Middle level educators need to expand their understanding of what counts as "texts" in school and how students access and convey information from them.

Middle level educators need to expand their understanding of what counts as "texts" in school and how students access and convey information from them. Future studies of content area classrooms linked to high-stakes assessments would offer an opportunity to understand how this learning clubs tool supports student achievement on multiple types of assessments across content areas. Content specialists can work with literacy

colleagues to help students uncover the discipline-specific literacy tools needed to mine content using varied text types (Casey, 2012; Draper, 2010; Duffy, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2009).

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Four components to promote literacy engagement in subject matter disciplines

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Teachers and teacher educators share a common goal—they all strive to help their students become knowledgeable, lifelong learners. Language arts teachers want their students to become proficient readers and writers, to appreciate and understand quality works of literature, and to apply their literacy skills with all texts. Social studies teachers want their students to read and write like historians, to value primary sources of information, and to use this knowledge to understand the world around them and how we got here. Science teachers want their students to read and write like scientists, to understand how the world works, and to question things around them. Similarly, mathematics teachers want their students to read and write like mathematicians, develop skill in manipulating numerical data, and learn problem-solving skills applicable in the real world.

The literacy tools people use for communicating and learning constitute a thread common to learning in all disciplines. Middle grades students must be able to read, write, listen, speak, view, and visually represent information in every content area. With the volume of information students must learn, teachers cannot possibly tell them or read to them everything they need to know. They must, instead, help their students become self-directed learners, enabling them to take control of their own learning—a highly motivating experience essential for knowledge building (Guthrie, 2007).

We understand that literacy is important for learning, but we also know that implementing literacy strategies for supporting learning in the content areas is a difficult and complex undertaking. Middle grades teachers face many constraints that hinder the

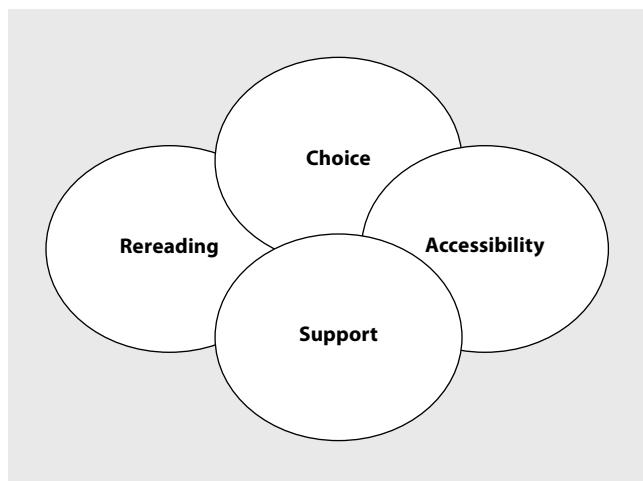
use of literacy practices as tools for learning. With a predominant focus on content knowledge and so little time in which to teach, many content area teachers are reluctant to invest in instructional practices that appear to be too time consuming or unrelated to their immediate purpose. For these reasons, we highlight four essential literacy components that we believe can be realistically implemented by all teachers who work with young adolescents. While there are other literacy components, we selected choice, accessibility, rereading, and supported reading with the hope that teachers can readily consider how such facets of instruction can be used in their programs (see Figure 1). We first provide a rationale for these four instructional components and then offer suggested activities that illustrate the components. In this article, we show how these activities can be applied in language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics classes.

Choice

It is important to allow students to make choices in school, and it is for this reason that we include choice as a critical literacy component that can be realistically addressed in all middle grades classrooms. Studies concerning students' reading preferences have shown a disconnect between in-school and out-of-school reading (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Such studies are the basis for reexamining the purposes for the required readings included in the curriculum and for considering the role of student choice in academic programs.

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: Meaningful Learning, Challenging Curriculum, Multiple Learning Approaches

Figure 1 Four components of literacy engagement



Research also has shown the importance of choices for middle grades learners in different instructional settings. For example, Triplett (2004) found that one important feature of the tutoring program for a struggling sixth grade reader was the opportunity to make his own choices about what to read. This feature, among others, created a “context for success” (p. 221) that provided the reader with a positive reading experience. In a study of another tutoring program, Friedland (2005) noted that student engagement increased when the tutors were responsive to the needs of the students, and such responsiveness involved honoring student choice. In a study that investigated a literature-based developmental reading program (Stewart, Paradis, & Ross, 1996), the researchers included choice as one of several important program facets that led to reading improvement. In particular, choice in book selections proved to be a powerful motivation for students to read.

While choice is important, we concur with Guthrie (2004) that choice should match the maturity and ability levels of students. Furthermore, student choice must be carefully examined and realistically structured within a program to ensure a balance between teacher selection and student choice of texts. Such cautionary measures are necessary. As Moley, Bandre, and George (2011) found that, when given the choice of what to read, students may be motivated by a variety of concerns, such as the number of points particular books are worth. They described one extrinsically motivated student who elected to read *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker simply because it counted for three books based on the teacher's

guidelines, not because it was interesting to her or matched her reading level. To avoid such pitfalls, we can keep in mind what Guthrie (2007) calls the teacher's role in student choice.

The teacher's role is usually not to inspire students to prefer choice. Rather, the teacher's role is to provide students with academically significant and realistic choices. Effective teachers expand students' liberties and levels of self-direction as the lesson, unit, and course proceed. (p. 7)

There are a variety of realistic ways in which choice can manifest itself across subject matter disciplines. Students can choose not only what books to read but also what topics to investigate, what side to support in a debate over a controversial issue or in a political election, what order in which to accomplish required tasks, and so on (Guthrie, 2007).

One way to value student choice in middle grades classrooms is through the use of a strategy known as Think-Tac-Toe (Samblis, 2006). The Think-Tac-Toe strategy is an open-ended framework created by the teacher to provide students with a menu of activity options. Using a structure similar to a Tic-Tac-Toe board, the teacher creates meaningful and engaging activity options for students. Think-Tac-Toe boards can include before-reading, during-reading, and after-reading activities that foster deeper interaction with text to enhance students' comprehension. These activities integrate writing skills, speaking and listening skills, collaboration, and the use of technology—all of which are expectations in the Common Core State Standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). Think-Tac-Toes can be written specifically for a given text such as a class novel, textbook, or online articles, or they can be constructed in an open-ended manner to coordinate with a particular genre that the students read independently. A sample seventh grade language arts Think-Tac-Toe for the book *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) can be found in Figure 2.

The Think-Tac-Toe gives students ownership over their learning by allowing them to make decisions about their learning and engagement. It also provides teachers with a better understanding of their students' learning styles, interests, and strengths based on the activities selected by the students and the open-ended nature of the work. The use of Think-Tac-Toe creates a balance between teacher-selected activities and student-selected activities. The parameters developed by the teacher

Figure 2 Sample Think-Tac-Toe for language arts

<i>The Hunger Games</i> Think-Tac-Toe		
Directions: Choose a total of three activities to complete.		
Create a map of the setting for <i>The Hunger Games</i> . Include text features such as captions, labels, and a legend.	Write a letter from the perspective of one character to another character.	Choose three characters and explain what poem you think they would carry in their pockets and why.
Create a digital or print comic strip to retell the events from <i>The Hunger Games</i> .	FREE SPACE You create an activity to develop and support your reading.	Create a digital book trailer to promote <i>The Hunger Games</i> .
Choose one of the main characters, such as Katniss or Peeta, and create interview questions and the character's responses.	Create an artistic depiction to represent the main theme(s) in the book. Provide a written summary describing your artistic representation.	Write and deliver a speech explaining the author's purpose and the themes of the book. Provide sufficient reasons and evidence from the text to support your claim.

ensure academically significant and rigorous activities. Furthermore, this activity can be easily adapted to meet a range of learner needs.

Accessibility

Texts that are too difficult to read will not support learning for anyone at any age. If a book is far beyond a reader's capability, even support from a more knowledgeable other may not be enough to make it productive for learning. Common sense dictates that this is true, yet teachers continue to place unreasonable demands on students to read texts that are too hard, or they eliminate the reading aspect of learning and use other ways to expose students to content knowledge, such as lecturing. By resorting to such actions, teachers do students a disfavor by not providing them the needed opportunities to become independent readers and learners in the various content areas. Both situations—using texts that are too difficult and bypassing reading—do not address students' content area literacy needs. As previously mentioned, students, regardless of ability level, will not be able to comprehend a text that is beyond their capabilities. Even with teacher support, school texts can sometimes be beyond the reach of some students, and requiring them to read such texts leads to frustration and low self-esteem, with little or no learning occurring.

One solution to this problem offered by experts in the field involves the use of accessible texts. Accessibility

refers to providing books for students and making sure they can read them. Tovani (2004) defined accessible texts as quality, well written books and passages that are of high interest to students and, most important, are suitably matched to students' reading levels. Moreover, Ivey (2010) argued that to promote lifelong reading that results in independent learning, students need to read books they can handle. Students cannot successfully engage in higher-level, critical reading of texts involving close analysis and questioning of ideas with books that

The end goal of any reading instruction is the development of independent, strategic readers and writers.

are too difficult for them. As Allington (2007) observed in his research, effective literacy teachers in Grades 4 through 12 used multiple texts to ensure that all students had opportunities for active engagement: "Virtually all students could find texts that they were able to read accurately, fluently, and with comprehension" (p. 278)—that is, accessible texts.

A collection of multiple resources, known as text sets (Darigan, Tunnel, & Jacobs, 2002; Hamman, 1995;

Hartman & Hartman, 1993; Short, Harste, & Burke, 2002), provides a range of reading material unified by a particular topic, theme, or concept. Texts included in text sets offer a variety of genres and reading levels to meet the diverse experiences, interests, and reading abilities of adolescent readers. Text sets may include print and digital genres such as narratives, nonfiction, charts, maps, timelines, primary sources, photographs, poetry, song lyrics, letters, journals, and graphic novels. Moss,

Lapp, and O’Shea (2011) discussed the notion of “tiered texts” that allow students to begin with shorter, easier text reading on a topic to gain experience and knowledge and then proceed to more difficult and challenging texts.

When designing text sets, it is important for teachers to select texts at a variety of reading levels to ensure accessibility for all learners. The Lexile system provides a readability formula, or Lexile level (Smith, Stenner, Horabin, & Smith, 1989), based on syntactic and

Figure 3 Sample text set for the Holocaust

Picture Books
<p>Bunting, E. (1993). <i>The terrible things</i>. New York, NY: The Jewish Publication Society. Using an allegory to describe the Holocaust, Bunting depicts animals as Jewish people and others who suffered as a result of the Holocaust. The message teaches the reader to stand up for what one believes in and not to be prejudiced against others.</p> <p>Hesse, K. (2004). <i>The cats in Krasinski Square</i>. New York, NY: Scholastic. (Level V) Two sisters who escaped the Warsaw ghetto befriend the many cats abandoned by their Jewish families. The cats help the girls discover holes in the Ghetto walls to help smuggle food to those still in the Ghetto. When the soldiers find out about the plan, the cats play an instrumental role in helping the girls continue with their plan.</p> <p>Innocenti, R. (1990). <i>Rose Blanche</i>. Mankato, MN: Creative Education Incorporated. (430 Lexile) Rose witnesses the occupation of German soldiers in her own small town in Germany. Curiously, Rose follows one of the military trucks until she comes across a barbed wire fence corralling hungry children in striped uniforms. For the next several weeks, Rose returns with bread for the hungry children. One day she returns to find that the camp is empty. Suddenly, a shot is fired and Rose never returns home.</p> <p>Johnson, T. (2004). <i>The harmonica</i>. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge. (Level W) When Nazi soldiers separate a Jewish family by taking them away to a concentration camp, the son smuggles in a harmonica that was a gift from his father. The harmonica becomes his solace in the camp. When the commandant learns of his music, he orders him to play on command. While the soldiers do not demonstrate a sense of humanity, other Jews in the camp hear the music and find it comforting.</p> <p>Polacco, P. (2009). <i>The butterfly</i>. New York, NY: Penguin Group. (430 Lexile) This true story of the author’s aunt, Monique recounts her experience growing up in France during WWII. When Monique’s French village is occupied by the Nazi soldiers, she meets a young Jewish girl, Sevrine, who has been hiding in her basement. The two become friends, but when Sevrine’s family is discovered, they must flee.</p>
Graphic Novels
<p>Spiegelman, A. (1993). <i>Maus: A survivor’s tale. I. My father bleeds history. II. And here comes trouble again</i>. New York, NY: Pantheon. (Lexile unavailable) The author recounts the removal of his parents from their home in Warsaw to concentration camps including Auschwitz and Birkenau. While they all survived the horrific experience, Spiegelman describes the suffering his family endured in an attempt to comprehend how these experiences shaped his parents and his challenging relationship with his father. The author uses little mice to represent Jews and towering cats for the Nazi soldiers.</p>
Chapter Books
<p>Boyne, J. (2006). <i>The boy in striped pajamas</i>. New York, NY: David Fickling Books. (1080 Lexile) Bruno’s family moves due to his father’s promotion with his job during WWII in Nazi Germany. Bruno, young, adventurous, and curious, explores the area around the new house and comes across a barbed wire fence separating him from another young boy wearing striped pajamas. This new friend faces different circumstances than Bruno, and, ultimately, their friendship has devastating consequences.</p> <p>Lowry, L. (1989). <i>Number the stars</i>. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin. (Level U) Annemarie’s family disguises her best friend as a member of the family when the Germans invade Copenhagen in 1943. As part of the Danish Resistance movement, Annemarie’s family engages in a dangerous mission to smuggle the Jews to safety in Sweden</p>

semantic measures of text complexity. Texts are assigned a Lexile level ranging from 0–2,000 with increasing complexity. Teachers can incorporate this staircase of levels into text sets to assist students with finding texts at their independent reading levels and not limit them to grade level texts. Furthermore, the incorporation of text sets with increasing levels and complexity addresses the Common Core State Standards to read and comprehend literature and informational text within the 6–8 grade level text complexity band that ranges from 955–1155 Lexile levels (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010).

Creating a text set with a variety of levels is especially crucial for reluctant readers. Because many classroom textbooks are written above grade level (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011), it is common for struggling readers to experience frustration. Difficult text, combined with a mismatch between students' experiences and interests, may lead students to resist reading and achieve low comprehension. As Allington (2002) noted, students cannot learn from texts they cannot read. Teachers must create ways to engage readers—particularly reluctant readers—with accessible, engaging, and interesting texts. When students are matched to appropriate texts, the material becomes more relevant and meaningful.

Tovani (2004) explained how text sets allow readers to develop understanding of a concept rather than being limited to the textbook as the primary text. Because text sets allow readers to focus on a given topic or theme, they develop deeper understanding of subject matter and more critical reading experiences. Figure 3 shows a sample text set for the study of the Holocaust.

Rereading

Rereading is a long-standing, effective instructional practice that serves a variety of purposes. As Tovani (2004) explained, “Good readers reread and return to text to build and extend their knowledge of specific concepts, or to enhance their enjoyment of texts they have enjoyed previously” (p. 21). There are many benefits associated with rereading texts, as long as the rereadings are done for an explicit purpose. Lynch (2008) provided several reasons for using rereading as a learning tool: as a study strategy for prior learning, as a fix-it strategy for monitoring comprehension, as a way to deepen understanding of conceptual ideas, and as a tool for changing perspectives to think differently about a topic.

Furthermore, repeated readings of the same text promote fluency as students become more efficient in accurately recognizing words, such as high frequency words, and in increasing their reading rate (Gunning, 2012). Such practices are especially important in one-on-one tutoring sessions.

Rereading also has a place in content area instruction to clarify information in class discussions, to find new facts, to develop appreciation for conceptual ideas, and even to broaden understanding (Gunning, 2012). Gunning argues that rereading is not necessary when students understand what they are reading during the initial read, and he contends that rereading should be done silently, reserving oral rereading for a specific purpose, such as to answer a question.

One way teachers can promote purposeful, engaged rereading is by using a type of “statement guide” called the Reaction Review Guide (Wood, Lapp, Flood, & Taylor, 2008). As the name implies, these guides use statements instead of questions to get students to think about, discuss, share, and reflect on key concepts from a text selection. The guides give teachers the opportunity to see cognitive growth in students because they typically span the pre-reading, reading, and post-reading stages of a lesson.

During the pre-reading stage, students respond to the statements in the guide with a partner or small group, contributing their thinking and prior knowledge about each statement. Then they use the statements to guide and focus their attention while reading. Afterward, they return to discuss what they have learned by referring back to the related parts of the targeted text (i.e., rereading). Statement guides such as the Anticipation and Extended Anticipation Guide can be used with any subject area, any grade level, and any form of text (e.g., online, traditional). The Reaction Review Guide is particularly suited for mathematics instruction because learning mathematics often involves the introduction of new concepts for which students may have little prior knowledge. Here, students are asked to respond to statements *after* the reading and learning of new concepts to confirm and solidify their new learning. A student who has had little experience in geometry will have difficulty responding to the statement, “An equilateral polygon and a regular polygon have the same properties.” Yet, encountering the same statement after teacher explanation and group and individual practice can assist students in thinking over the statement, rereading

previous lessons and sources for clarification, and then sharing their reactions in the space provided.

Teachers frequently comment how difficult it is to get students to reread and refer back to their mathematics textbooks to answer questions they may have or to refresh their memories about how to solve a computation problem. The Reaction Review Guide (see Figure 4) is one way to engage students in the rereading of mathematic source material. As can be seen in the figure, the guide also provides an opportunity for students to justify their writing as they seek to determine if the statement is correct or incorrect according to what they have just learned. The Reaction Review Guide should precede any individual classroom test to allow pairs of students to review, process, share, and confirm their new learning.

Supported reading

When students read texts that are easy or at their independent levels, very little or no instructional support

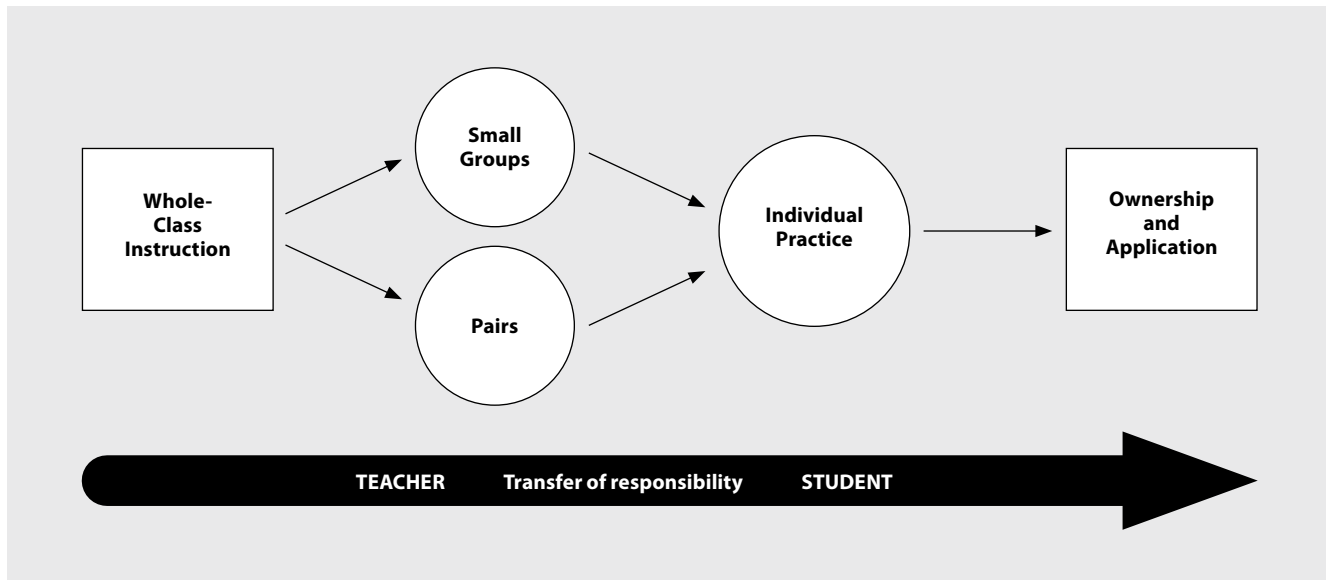
is needed for them to comprehend the texts. On the other hand, most texts used in content classrooms are at many students' instructional reading levels or even frustration levels. Thus, carefully planned instructional support is necessary for comprehension and learning to occur. There are many suggestions for what this support might look like, such as scaffolding reading experiences (Appleman & Graves, 2012), questioning the author (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997), and concept-oriented reading instruction (Guthrie, Anderson, Aloa, & Rinehart, 1999), to name a few.

Instructional support can occur before, during, and after reading, or BDA (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Before-reading activities are frontloading devices for building or activating important background knowledge, stimulating interest and motivation to learn the topic to be addressed, arousing curiosity, and, especially, providing a purpose for reading. During reading, teachers can support student interactions with the text by using prompts to stimulate responses and help students

Figure 4 Sample Reaction Review Guide applied to mathematics

Using Percentages in Everyday Life
<p>Directions: With your partner, take turns reading each statement below and discuss possible responses. Indicate if you agree or disagree but be sure to go back to your text and related materials to support and explain your answer, just as we did together in class. Use examples whenever appropriate and tell how you came up with that answer.</p>
<p>1. A percentage is way of representing a fraction. I agree ____ x ____ I disagree ____ because: On page 96 of our book it said that. We learned that the fraction has a denominator of 100. So 25% would be 25/100 which means one fourth.</p>
<p>2. You can think of a percentage as meaning "out of 100." I agree ____ x ____ I disagree ____ because: it also said that in the book and in class (See statement number 1) So 6% tax added to 100 pennies (\$1.00) would be \$1.06.</p>
<p>3. A sales tax of 7% means that for every dollar something costs, a person would need to pay seven times more. I agree ____ I disagree ____ x ____ because: the person would have to pay 7 cents not seven times more. It would look like this: $\\$1.00 + (7\% \text{ of } 1.00) = \\$1.00 + .07 = \\$1.07$.</p>
<p>4. If the state sales tax is 6%, the total cost of the \$30.00 shirt is \$36.00. I agree ____ I disagree ____ x ____ because: that is too much. You just multiply 6×30.00 which comes out to \$1.80, so the total price would be \$31.80.</p>
<p>5. Lunch was \$15.00 and with the 20% tip, it was \$18.00. I agree ____ x ____ I disagree ____ because: It is easy to determine 10%, which would be \$1.50. So then you just add another 10%, which makes it \$3.00. $\\$15.00 + \\$3.00 = \\$18.00$</p>
<p>6. Knowing how to calculate percentages is essential in everyday life. I agree ____ x ____ I disagree ____ because: we talked about doing percentages to figure out tips in restaurants. Also when something you want to buy is on sale, you need to figure out how much it will cost. You need to know percentages if you are doing a survey to find out about something.</p>

Figure 5 Phased Transfer Model of instruction with flexible grouping



grapple with important and difficult concepts. After-reading activities can serve to extend and reinforce text ideas gleaned from the reading.

While the end goal of any reading instruction is the development of independent, strategic readers and writers, it is sometimes necessary for teachers to demonstrate and model a new strategy for students and

Even with teacher support, school texts can sometimes be beyond the reach of some students, and requiring them to read such texts leads to frustration and low self-esteem, with little or no learning occurring.

then give them the opportunity to work in groups, pairs, and individually to master the strategy. The Phased Transfer Model of Instruction with flexible grouping (Wood, 2002; Wood, Lapp, Flood, & Taylor, 2008) can be used in any subject area or grade level to teach particular skills and strategies. Figure 5 is a generic illustration of the model, including the flexible grouping element

that provides the added social support necessary for sharing knowledge and authentic learning. This model acknowledges that teaching and learning are discursive and transactional because it allows students to work in groups, pairs, and individually, with the teacher involved in varying capacities. Figure 6 is a step-by-step description of how the model can be applied in a classroom setting. In this figure, we describe the process of teaching students how to retell, put information in their own words, and then put their oral retelling in print form as a summary of the content read (e.g., digital or print text), viewed (e.g., a science experiment), or heard (e.g., a lecture or explanation). One science teacher we know used the online resource “How Stuff Works” (<http://science.howstuffworks.com/environmental/green-science/recycling1.htm>) to simultaneously teach a literacy strategy (retelling) and science content (recycling). She followed the steps of the model and used various sections on the website related to the benefits, guidelines, scientific background, and history of recycling to illustrate how to synthesize and retell content.

Summary

In this column, we have presented four components for promoting literacy engagement in all content areas: choice, accessibility, rereading, and supported reading. The four components are not distinct entities but

Figure 6 Phased Transfer Model lesson description

Using Percentages in Everyday Life
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The lesson begins with the teacher showing an example of the finished product, an exemplar of what the students should achieve. (In other instances, this could be a series of predictions, a descriptive paragraph, a final research project, etc.)• Then the teacher and the students analyze the product, looking at the features and how it represents the selection read in a succinct manner. (All the examples and passages used are related to the science topics under study to further enhance learning.)• Next, the teacher displays a passage and thinks aloud how to summarize and put the information in her own words to illustrate the invisible thought processes for the class.• The teacher displays an additional passage and, together with the students, comes up with an oral and then a written retelling of the content, discussing why they left out certain information to get to the main points.• At this point, the students are asked to work in their pre-assigned groups (preferably heterogeneous) to contribute to an additional retelling of passage content. The grouping allows the teacher to circulate, monitor, assist, and assess whether additional practice is needed.• After feeling that the groups are ready to move into pairs, the teacher again asks them to engage in a retelling of the content of a new passage. This paired arrangement is repeated until the teacher determines the students are ready to move to the independent practice phase.• The final two phases involve individual practice and then illustrating how to apply the new learning to other subject areas.

represent ideas that can overlap in various ways during instruction. Rather than offering a template for teachers to follow, we present choices teachers can consider as they tailor instruction to fit the needs of their students. We invite all middle grades teachers to think about how these four components can actually promote learning in their content areas and to keep in mind the words of Allington (2011): “In the end, it is the amount of appropriate instruction that a student participates in that is the best predictor of that student’s learning” (p. 12).

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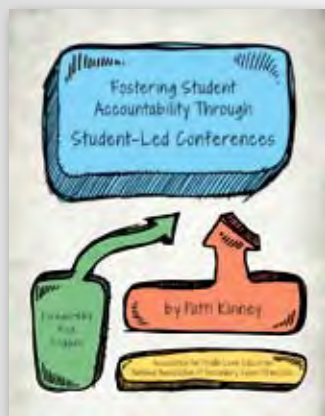
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Professional learning communities create sustainable change through collaboration

Ginger M. Teague & Vincent A. Anfara, Jr.

The term *professional learning community*, or PLC, has been widely used in education to represent various groups assembled to work together for a variety of reasons. These groups often include grade level groups, interdisciplinary teams, and subject area departments. Growing numbers of schools have implemented professional learning communities as a method for bringing about sustainable change. DuFour (2007) noted that schools use professional learning communities to increase the capacity to transform and improve. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) defined professional learning communities as “[organizational structures in which] teachers work collaboratively to reflect on their practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the particular students in their classes” (pp. 3–4).

Studies from the world of business have helped educators to examine schools and to understand why traditional methods and structures are ineffective in improving student learning and teacher performance (Cowan, 2003; Senge, 1990; Wenger, 2000; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The ideas of shared vision, shared purpose, and trust that are embedded in Senge’s learning communities and in Wenger’s communities of practice have laid the groundwork for developing professional learning communities in educational settings to bring about sustainable reform.

At the core of the professional community concept lies the belief that simply providing instruction is not enough; educators must also ensure students are learning (DuFour, 2004). The work of educators in professional learning communities has been found to increase the

capacity of all members to assist students to achieve academically (Bezzina, 2008; Boyd-Dimock & Hord, 1994; Cawalti, 2003; Hord, 1997, 2008; Huffman, 2003; Kruse & Louis, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, 2010; Olivier & Hipp, 2010).

We must not forget that developing and sustaining professional learning communities in schools requires leadership and direction. School administrators have the opportunity to perform a vital role in developing these structures. Huffman and Jacobson (2003) noted, “As visionary leaders, administrators can incorporate the professional learning community model in their schools to increase understanding and communication, improve problem-solving capacities, and develop an organized change process for collectively building ‘community’ in the organizational structure of the school” (p. 248).

In this column, the focus will be on our understanding of professional learning communities: early research findings, the essential elements of these structures, and potential barriers to their implementation. By examining the essential elements, we can be better prepared to evaluate the functionality and effectiveness of professional learning communities; and by being cognizant of the barriers to implementation, we can avoid possible problem areas.

The roots of professional learning communities

To understand the concept of professional learning communities, one must look at the research both inside and outside the field of education. The concept of professional learning communities has roots that

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: Professional Development, Organizational Structures, School Environment

can be traced to the work of Judith Little (1982), Peter Senge (1990), Susan Rosenholtz (1989a, 1989b), and Etienne Wenger (1998). Little (1982, 2006) examined the connection between school improvement efforts and relationships among teachers to add to the foundational aspects of professional learning communities. In a focused ethnographic study of six urban, desegregated schools, Little examined school as a workplace. She found that professional development that is continuous in nature is more likely achieved when: (a) teachers engage in frequent, continuous, and increasingly concrete talk about their practice; (b) teachers are frequently observed and provided with useful critiques of their teaching; (c) teachers plan, design, research, evaluate, and prepare teaching materials together; and (d) teachers teach others the practice of teaching. In schools that are more successful, Little (1982) found that “interaction about teaching is consciously and steadily focused on practice, on what teachers do, with what aims, in what situations, with what materials, and with what apparent results” (p. 334). One of the contributions of Little’s research was the idea that teacher isolation is not conducive to school improvement. Schmoker (2005) described this research as beginning to make a case for learning communities.

Rosenholtz (1989a, 1989b) provided additional foundational research for professional learning communities. Rosenholtz’s research demonstrated that achieving high levels of collaboration among teachers benefits schools. From a study of 78 elementary schools in Tennessee, Rosenholtz (1989a) identified schools as high-consensus schools or low-consensus schools. In high-consensus schools, there was evidence of shared purposes and goals as well as collaboration in the development of policies and criteria for teacher and student performance. Collaboration in problem solving was a key element in establishing what Rosenholtz called a “common technical culture.” Low-consensus schools lacked the elements of collaborative practice that developed a common technical culture. The result in low-consensus schools was the isolation of teachers in their classrooms, which led to “insulating barriers around their working lives” (1989b, p. 430). Rosenholtz’s research (1989b) also identified principals as playing a significant role in shaping the organization of the school and, therefore, the professional learning community. In most academically successful schools, principals demonstrated a belief in the relationship between teacher learning and student learning.

An examination of the roots of professional learning communities also leads to the work of Etienne Wenger (1998). Wenger and associates (2002) defined communities of practice as “groups of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). While such groups occur naturally in organizations, “leading knowledge organizations are increasingly likely to view communities of practice not merely as useful auxiliary structures but as foundational structures on which to build organizations” (p. 21). Wenger and associates observed in their work that participants have ideas, experiences, and knowledge that lead to new approaches to solving problems. Other elements of communities of practice that are also foundational to professional learning communities include shared practice and purpose, trust, and mutual respect.



Professional learning communities may reduce or eliminate the sense of isolation teachers experience in many schools. photo by John Lounsbury

In short, Little (1982, 2006), Rosenholtz (1989a, 1989b), and Wenger (1998, 2000) discovered the following common characteristics of successful schools: supportive working conditions, shared values and goals, collaboration among teachers and administrators, and a focus on student learning. Groups of educators possessing these attributes would eventually be known as professional learning communities.

Early research on professional learning communities

In addition to the foundational work of Little (1982), Rosenholtz (1989a, 1989b), and Wenger (1998, 2000), studies were conducted in the 1990s that provided insight into professional learning communities in schools. In one of the studies conducted by Newmann (1991), 24 public schools that had been involved in restructuring were selected to “develop new knowledge on how organizational features of schools can be changed to improve the education of students” (p. 1). Newmann (1991, 1994, 1996) and Kruse and Louis (1995) identified learning communities as an essential component of schools most successful at restructuring. Newmann (1996) identified the conditions that fostered the development of learning communities as: (a) shared governance that increases teachers’ influences over school policy and practice; (b) interdependent work structures, such as teacher teams, that encourage collaboration; (c) staff development that enhances technical skills consistent with the school’s mission; (d) deregulation that provides autonomy for the school to pursue a vision of high academic standards; and (e) parent involvement in a broad range of school affairs (excerpted from p. 8). Kruse and Louis (1995) identified reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, a collective focus on student learning, collaboration, and shared values and norms as the elements necessary for professional learning communities.

Dimensions of professional learning communities

In summary, the attributes of professional learning communities gleaned from the research include: (a) shared values and vision (e.g., focus on student learning, high expectations for teachers and students, shared vision for teaching and learning); (b) shared and supportive leadership (e.g., nurturing school administrators, shared power and authority, broad based decision-making); (c) collective learning and application to practice (e.g., sharing information, seeking new knowledge and skills, working collaboratively); (d) shared personal practice, (e.g., peer observations, coaching, and mentoring); and (e) supportive conditions that encompass both relationships (e.g., trust and respect, risk taking) and structures (e.g., resources of time, money, people, and materials and communication) (Hord, 1997, 1998, 2008).

Shared values and vision

Senge (1990) asserted, “You cannot have a learning organization without a shared vision” (p. 209). Shared vision, beliefs, and values imply more than a mission statement that is handed down to a group of teachers. A vision statement that is imposed on the group does not provide the impetus to move the group forward in achieving its goals (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Senge, 1990). Developing a vision that is “characterized by an undeviating focus on student learning” (Pankake & Moller, 2003, p. 8) has been identified as a hallmark of a true professional learning community.

Schools immersed in the professional learning community concept have used shared leadership and decision making to bring about school improvement.

From Senge’s (1990) work, a vision leads to the collective courage for risk taking and new thinking and serves as a rudder for direction. Shared values and vision impact the ways in which teachers work individually and collectively toward common goals. Printy and Marks (2006) found that when teachers and principals share a belief in providing an excellent education for their students, the “schools do not undertake innovation purely for the sake of change” (p. 131). Eaker and Keating (2008) stated, “When schools passionately and sincerely adopt the mission of ensuring high levels of learning for all students, they are driven to pursue fundamentally different questions and work in significantly different ways” (p. 15) that, according to the research, help improve student achievement (Andrews & Lewis, 2007; Hord & Sommers, 2008) and increase the efficacy of teachers and administrators (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). This goes a long way toward motivating teachers and administrators to maintain confidence and high expectations for increasing student academic performance.

Shared and supportive leadership

Schools immersed in the professional learning community concept have used shared leadership and decision making to bring about school improvement. According to research (Hord, 1997; Huffman & Hipp, 2003), administrators in schools with effective professional learning communities participated in a nurturing relationship with the school that allowed for shared leadership, shared power, shared authority, and shared responsibility. Administrators have the critical opportunity to build the capacity of teachers and direct the focus of that capacity toward improving student learning (Sergiovanni, 1990). To do this, a principal must clearly communicate the expectations that exist for teachers, build capacity, and monitor and review the process.

Collective learning and application to practice

Hord (2009) described the learning within professional learning communities as “a habitual activity [in which] the group learns how to learn together continually” (p. 40). Collective learning and application to practice has been found to promote seeking answers to questions about what students need to learn, how we will know it has been learned, and how we will act when students struggle (Cohen & Hill, 2001; DuFour, 2004).

To incorporate collective learning, the capacity for dialogue among the members must be fostered. A professional learning community must function as a democratic environment that “allows dissent and debate among its members, and this can result in increased understanding and learning of the members” (Hord, 1997, p. 37). When educators learn together, new skills and strategies evolve as they question the status quo in search of the best knowledge and practice (Hord, 1997).

Shared personal practice

Shared personal practice requires respect and the development of trust (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Conducting peer observations, sharing feedback, and coaching or mentoring all assume a major position in the professional learning community. Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) noted that shared practice enables teachers to assume roles such as mentor, mentee, coach, specialist, advisor, and facilitator. DuFour (2004) posited that shared practice requires “team members to make public what has traditionally been private—goals, strategies,

materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results” (p. 4). In discussing shared practice, Sergiovanni (2000) noted, “Within communities of practice, individual practices of teachers are not abandoned but are connected to each other in such a way that a single shared practice of teachers emerges” (p. 140).

Supportive conditions

From their research, Huffman and Hipp (2003) concluded that supportive conditions are the “glue that is critical to hold the other dimensions together” (p. 146). Supportive conditions include both supportive relational conditions and supportive structural conditions (Hord, 1997, 2008). Relational conditions are characterized by trust, respect, caring relationships, recognition, celebration, risk taking, and reflective dialogue (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997). Structural conditions include time and space for collaboration (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Teachers often report that time and the pressure to meet other demands of the job were stumbling blocks to professional learning community development. Proximity of people, consideration of the schedule, and common planning times were reported to be structural considerations that impacted the success of developing learning communities.

Barriers to developing and sustaining effective professional learning communities

While the positive effects of professional learning communities are found throughout the literature, drawbacks that inhibit their implementation do exist. The development of professional learning communities requires significant change for a traditional school (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010). Oper and Pedder (2011) stated, “Creating systems, supports, and norms that encourage both individual and organizational learning and getting the balance between internal and external resources of learning are difficult for most schools” (p. 392). Building professional learning communities that will bring about change in the classroom and thus student achievement is challenging due to the amount of work and time involved and the cultural changes that are necessary (Fullan, 2006; Wells & Feun, 2007).

Beyond the potential difficulties associated with developing a professional learning community are the tremendous challenges involved in sustaining this

innovation (Olivier & Hipp, 2010). Fullan (2006) noted that a change will not be sustained if the district or other system levels do not actively support and foster it. In one study, Maloney and Konza (2011) found that the sense of shared vision that was initially perceived for the community waned as the group faced challenges with the passage of time. They observed, “When differences in philosophical perspectives arose, some teachers did not appear to have the confidence to voice their opinions or challenge the more dominant views” (p. 83). Outside assistance may also be needed to sustain a professional learning community, especially due to gaps in pedagogical and content knowledge in the group (Huggins, Scheurich, & Morgan, 2011).

In the current version of *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010), attention is paid to a shared vision of courage and collaboration. Emphasis is placed on creating organizational structures that foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships (p. 31). The emphasis is on creating a “team,” characterized by a sense of family. “Students and teachers on the team become well acquainted, feel safe, respected, and supported, and are encouraged to take individual risks” (p. 31). There is note of the positive impact the team has on the “professional lives of teachers, expanding a collegial focus” (p. 31). In essence, the 16 characteristics and the four essential attributes of successful schools for young adolescents work interdependently to set the stage for professional learning communities in middle grades schools. If the middle school concept as described in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) is implemented, the barriers to implementing professional learning communities may be avoided.

Concluding thoughts

The literature on professional learning communities has three implications for practice: the significance of professional and personal relationships in schools, the importance of principal support, and the necessity of supportive structures. Researchers have documented the importance of relationships in developing successful professional learning communities. Teachers expressed the belief that for teachers to develop caring and trusting relationships in schools, principals must serve as models. Principals need to understand that they set the tone for professional and personal interactions that occur within their schools. Price (2012) noted, “Principals’

relationships with their teachers affect principals’ and teachers’ satisfaction, cohesion, and commitment levels” (p. 40). This implication for practice is in sharp contrast to the negative impact of favoritism, principal isolation, and creating the school as a competitive environment.

The role of leadership is to create conditions that support continuous professional learning that results in improved classroom practice.

The second implication for practice that emerges from the research deals with the principal’s support in developing and sustaining professional learning communities. As Hord (1997) concluded, a professional learning community can only be implemented successfully with “the leader’s sanction and active nurturing of the entire staff’s development as a community” (p. 6). This sanction and nurturing can come in the form of providing time in the daily schedule for staff to meet and setting expectations for what happens when members of the learning community come together.

The third implication for practice from the research is the necessity to create structures that support the work of professional learning communities. While structures can vary according to school context, the role of leadership is to create conditions that support continuous professional learning that results in improved classroom practice.

As Hargreaves (2008) summarized in the foreword to *Leading Professional Learning Communities: Voices from Research and Practice* (Hord & Sommers, 2008):

Professional learning communities are now ubiquitous. Few educational leaders and decreasing numbers of teachers remain unaware of what professional learning communities are meant to be—communities of professionals caring for and working to improve student learning together, by engaging in continuous collective learning of their own. (p. ii)

Conversation Starters for Professional Learning Communities

The following questions correspond to the five dimensions of professional learning communities discussed in this column. Use these questions to begin conversations about professional learning communities among your faculty and staff.

1. What evidence in your school points to a shared vision and values that are focused on students?
2. What evidence in your school exists for shared and supportive leadership?
3. In what ways are teachers at your school sharing their practice with colleagues?
4. What structures are in place at your school to support collaboration among teachers, administration, and other staff?
5. How would you describe the relationships that exist in your school among teachers, administrators, and other staff?

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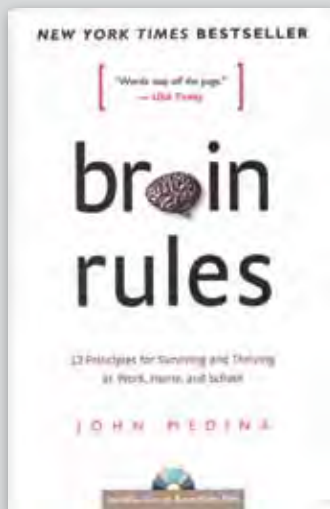
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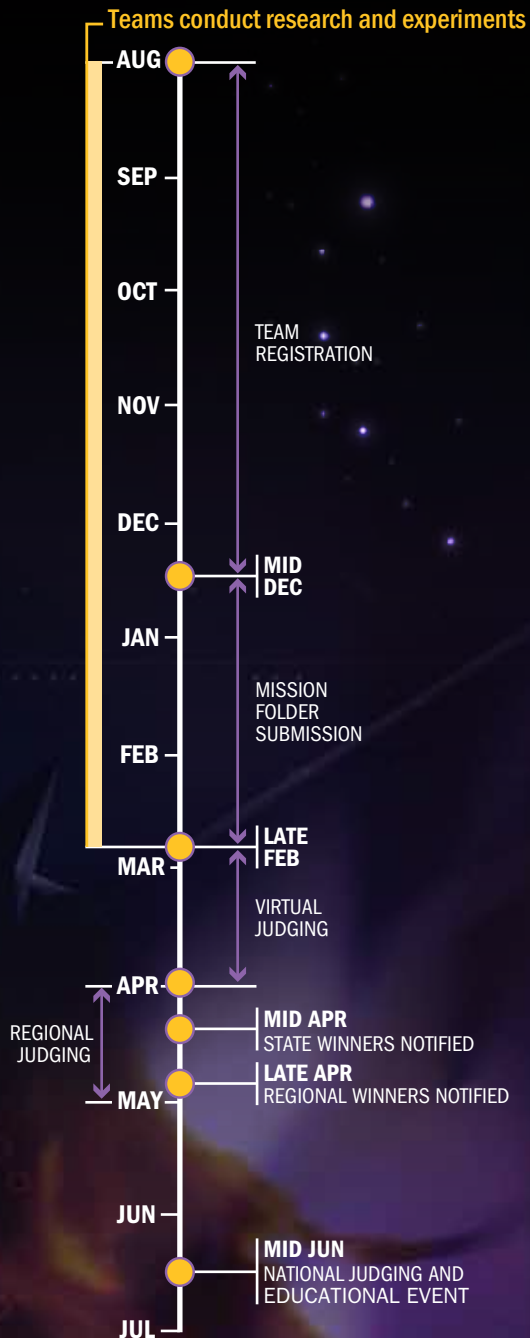


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