Educators are adapting teaching strategies to improve literacy instruction in the classroom. In this Spotlight, learn why states and districts are aiming to build ELLs’ literacy early, how invented spelling can improve reading ability, and how teachers can facilitate effective writing instruction.

Students recite their poems to the wall in English teacher Lance Fisher’s classroom at Mount Vernon High School in Mount Vernon, Wash. The exercise is designed to reduce jitters as students prepare to perform the poems they’ve memorized.

LITERACY INSTRUCTION

EDITOR’S NOTE
Educators are adapting teaching strategies to improve literacy instruction in the classroom. In this Spotlight, learn why states and districts are aiming to build ELLs’ literacy early, how invented spelling can improve reading ability, and how teachers can facilitate effective writing instruction.

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Breathing New Life Into An Old Art: Poetry Recitation

It’s as powerful as ‘slam,’ experts say

By Catherine Gewertz

Mount Vernon, Wash.

Everyone is standing up and shouting at once in Lance Fisher’s English class, and that’s exactly what he wants them to do.

Fisher’s 12th grade students are reciting—more like hurling—poems at the walls. They stand in a big circle, facing outward, simultaneously reciting poems they’ve memorized (or almost memorized). The teenagers work on projecting their voices, animating their faces, gesturing with their hands. Snippets of verse by dead and living poets zig through the air.

In this class, poetry isn’t a sit-at-your-desk-and-try-to-stay-awake affair. It’s a stand-up-and-get-into-it thing. But this isn’t “slam” poetry, where students perform their own work. Here, students memorize and recite other people’s poems.

The idea seems old-fashioned, even quaint at first. Until you get hit with a flying chunk of Natalie Diaz (“Angels don’t come to the reservation,” one girl snarls), or wince at a melancholy slice of Robert Frost (“I’m done with apple-picking now,” says one student, trying out a wistful tone).

Fisher’s work with these students is part of a national program that seeks to persuade students that reciting other people’s poetry can be as transformative as performing their own.

A Powerhouse Teaching Tool

English teachers say that memorizing and reciting aren’t dusty relics, but powerful levers that help them impart key skills to students: acquiring deep understanding of text structure and author’s purpose; building vocabulary, and finding a personal connection to written language.

“I just like them having the words in their mouths,” said Fisher, who has been teaching English at Mount Vernon High School, an hour’s drive from the Canadian border, for nine years. “The language is so much higher than what they’re normally using.”

He finds that the memorize-and-recite approach supports his teaching of common-core standards in reading and speaking. It also helps his English-learner students by exposing them to aspects of language they don’t otherwise use, Fisher said.

There are many ways to teach poetry through memorization and recitation, but the one Fisher is using is called Poetry Out Loud. It was developed in 2005 by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation, and is supported by NEA grants to states. Free for schools, it includes an online anthology of 900 poems by a diverse array of poets, performance videos, and a teacher’s guide with lesson plans.

Schools that participate in the program host schoolwide competitions that feed into regional contests. Local winners perform for cash prizes at the state level, and those contests produce an elite crop of about 50 who come to Washington, D.C., all-expenses paid, each April to vie for the national title.

The top nine performers on the national circuit can win $1,000 to $20,000, plus additional cash for their schools. More than 300,000 students from 2,300 high schools across the country competed last year.

‘You Really Have to Understand’

Eileen Murphy became a fan of Poetry Out Loud 12 years ago, when she was a high school English teacher in Chicago. She taught creative writing and coached slam poetry, but she found that having her students memorize other people’s verse deepened their understanding of written and spoken English in unique ways.

“To memorize, you have to assume the voice of the speaker, and to do that, you really have to understand what they’re saying,” said Murphy, who wrote a book about using poetry to teach complex text and now runs a Chicago-based company that supports writing instruction.

That’s what Ava Ross, a student in Fisher’s class in Washington state, discovered. She had to read her chosen poem, “Mr. Darcy,” a contemplation of marriage priorities by 47-year-old American poet Victoria Chang, many times to master its meaning and rhythms. Knowing she’d...
have to say it out loud to other people required her to dig deeper than if she only had to read it silently to herself, she said.

“To get the delivery right, to pause in the right places, to emphasize the right words, you really have to get everything that’s going on in the poem,” Ross said.

In Fisher’s class, memorization starts with the hands. He asks his seniors to copy their poems by hand five times, a repetition that helps students cement the words in their heads, he said.

Then they move into another approach: They reduce the poem to abbreviations. They write only the first letter of each word in each line. Then they have to decode each line by remembering what the letters stand for.

Gradually, they take on bigger pieces of their poems. They’re encouraged to recite chunks of the poem to friends, to the bathroom mirror, walking to school, anywhere they can.

From Memorizing to Reciting

Ross’ target was the windshield of her car. She recited her poem while driving to school or to friends’ houses.

“I just did it over and over while I was driving around,” she said.

While students are memorizing their poems, they’re also writing journal entries about them, and discussing them in class. Fisher uses the popular TP-CASTT method to help students analyze their poems. (TP-CASTT stands for title, paraphrase, connotation, attitude/tone, shift, title, and theme.) The students paraphrase each line, then wade into guided discussion about themes and tone.

Recitation strategies can be fun: Students perform tongue-twister exercises to work on diction. Fisher encourages them to stand up tall and talk “to and through” the walls (loud, in other words). Your aim, he tells the students, is to let the strength of the poem—not a hefty dose of drama—carry the delivery.

“You don’t have to die on stage like in Shakespeare to make this meaningful,” Fisher said. “Just anchor on that poem and deliver it with power.”

Before students stand up to recite simultaneously, he guides them to think about places in their poems where they could use an appropriate hand or facial gesture (“like when you talk to your friends”), places they could inject a meaningful pause, or speed up; places they could use a slightly higher vocal pitch to emphasize a point.

First, the students work in pairs at their desks, reciting their poems to each other. They repeat that exercise in table groups of four. Then they form the big outward-facing circle, and launch into the all-at-once recitation.

Snippets of Victoria Chang crash into lines from Robert Frost, Maya Angelou, James Whitcomb Riley, and David Dominguez. It’s a loud, spirited collision of words. But few students are comfortable enough yet to throw in even one hand gesture.

Surprising Discoveries

Facing the walls was supposed to put students at ease; they didn’t have to see an audience. But now they have to up their game. Everyone in the big circle turns from the walls inward, to face one another. They recite again. This time most students seem more relaxed, though a few nervous smiles punctuate the poems. More practice lies ahead.

Whether any of these students makes the cut for regional, state, or national competition is a question for another day. Right now, at least a few are enjoying a surprise: It turns out that they like poetry.

Ajeetpal Punian had to study poetry in other English classes. He never liked it: the teacher assigned poems, and the ensuing class conversations made him feel like there was a right way and a wrong way to understand them.

In Fisher’s class, he got to choose his own poem: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “The Arrow and the Song.” OK, so the fact that it’s short—12 lines—was pretty cool, he said.

But as he read it over and over, trying to memorize it, he really got into it. The structure of the poem appealed to him, and his inner scientist—Punian aspires to be an astronautical engineer—responded. His love of rap music also opened him to a connection with the words of this guy who’s been dead for 135 years.

“I like that it rhymes. I love the structure, how the pieces fit together,” Punian said. “This poem could be a rap, the way it flows.”

Music also helped connect Ava Ross to her poem, “Mr. Darcy.” A trombonist, she enjoys marking Chang’s verse in places where she can raise and lower her voice, or shift the pace of her delivery speed, much like musical notations that direct volume and speed.

Punian said he’d signed up for Fisher’s English class to help him write college essays. But the poetry portion of the class has “opened me up to a different world.”

“I didn’t really care about literature very much,” he said. “Now I understand there are layers to writing, and if you can decode them, you can understand what it’s about.”

Think about it, they say: If you can’t read and write, you will have trouble voting, reading the news, getting a job, or otherwise being a fully formed citizen.

The unusual lawsuit is among the first to argue that public education should lead to a specific educational outcome in a content area: if not literacy outright, the schools must give access to literacy instruction.

A Complex History

As you probably know, the U.S. Constitution doesn’t say anything explicit about education, leaving it up to states to define in their own constitutions what educational rights are guaranteed. That’s why most
A coach makes decisions based on players’ stats…

shouldn’t educators have the same insights?

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a disservice to a particular class of students who are disadvantaged and non-white. Not surprisingly, the state of Michigan is fighting this argument. In its motion to dismiss the case, which was heard by U.S. District Judge Stephen Murphy last week, the state argued that “there is no fundamental right to literacy” in the constitution, and that it is not responsible for the Detroit school district’s woes.

“ Plaintiffs’ claims go far beyond mere access to education and ask this Court to determine and dictate educational policy in every school district and school building throughout the United States where an illiterate child may be found,” the state’s lawyers wrote. “This Court should soundly reject Plaintiffs’ attempt to destroy the American tradition of democratic control of schools by creating a fundamental right out of whole cloth.”

Mark Rosenbaum, the director for Public Counsel’s Opportunity Under Law project, said that during the hearing, he argued that the right the plaintiffs are fighting for isn’t anywhere near as extensive as the defendants claim.

“It’s not clear to me beyond basic education and access to literacy how much the 14th Amendment would admit,” he said in an interview. “But if kids can’t read and write, they are excluded from democracy and the ability to achieve based on merit.”

No matter which way this case ends up, it is emblematic of a subtle shift in lawsuits over educational rights. For years, access to school finance and funding were the name of the game in such lawsuits. And now, a handful of lawsuits are arguing that equity contains an instructional component.

The primary example is probably Vergara v. California, the 2014 case that sought to overturn that state’s teacher tenure and dismissal rules, arguing that they were concentrating poorly performing teachers in schools serving large numbers of needy students, in violation of the state constitution. That lawsuit was successful at the trial-court level, but an appeals court overturned it.

Public Counsel wasn’t involved in Vergara, but Rosenbaum was a key figure in another, similar equity lawsuit, Reed v. California. That case, in 2010, argued that seniority-based layoffs violated needy and minority students’ civil rights by subjecting them to a revolving door of teachers.

It resulted in a settlement with the Los Angeles school district, but the settlement was also overturned, this time over procedural problems raised by United Teachers Los Angeles.

The Gary plaintiffs’ legal team includes two law professors, Evan Caminker of the University of Michigan and Erwin Chemerinsky of the University of California, Irvine, alongside the Public Counsel and other pro bono lawyers. ■
provided universal access to free prekindergarten classes for every 4-year-old in the state, and Tulsa’s programs are considered the crown jewels.

The laserlike focus on literacy has produced notable early results here, especially for English-language learners—those students who come from non-English speaking homes.

Despite the program’s early success, questions remain about the long-term benefits.

Overall, the Hispanic children who pass through Tulsa’s pre-K classrooms come to kindergarten more academically prepared for school than those who don’t, according to a long-term study from Georgetown University.

The Georgetown researchers have found that they are, on average, months ahead of their peers who don’t enroll in pre-K in reading and four months ahead in writing.

The team has spent 15 years studying Tulsa’s efforts, and the data indicates that English-learners are among the student groups who have benefited most from the access to free pre-K classes.

But Tulsa’s state test scores in elementary reading have remained stagnant for the past decade and have even slightly declined for English-learners.

**Dual Language Learning**

Seeking out solutions, Tulsa has undertaken a small-scale experiment at the Dual Language Academy, where the classrooms are an almost-even split of native English speakers and Spanish speakers.

The dual-language approach makes it possible for an English-learner to help a native English-speaking child sitting next to him learn Spanish and vice versa.

Like Tulsa, more states and school districts are aiming to reach English-language learners in the earliest stages of the education pipeline.

Research indicates that early exposure to a language boosts a child’s odds of better academic performance later on.

That’s crucial for Tulsa, a district of nearly 40,000 students that has undergone a dramatic demographic shift in recent years.

Hispanic students are now 31 percent of the student population, outnumbering all other races and ethnicities in the public schools here.

In the past decade, the number of Hispanic students in Tulsa has more than doubled, and many of them are native Spanish speakers. Overall, nearly 1 in every 3 students in the district speaks Spanish at home.

“The urgency of getting this right is even more pressing,” said William Gormley, one of the lead Georgetown University researchers and a co-director of the university’s Center for Research on Children in the United States.

At the Dual Language Academy, a pre-K through 5th grade school, science and social studies lessons are taught in Spanish, while math instruction is in English.

The school’s 40 pre-K students bounce from teacher-led dance- and sing-a-longs to science and art stations every four minutes, with native Spanish- and native English-speakers often paired together to increase their exposure to the languages.

Recent research has found that there are benefits of dual-language learning over English-only classes for English-learners.

A joint study published in 2015 by the Houston schools and Rice University’s Kinder Institute for Urban Research found that native Spanish-speaking students in the district have more success learning English when they’re enrolled in two-way dual-language programs that include native English-speakers in the classroom.

It’s among a growing body of research that points to the benefits of teaching students in two languages.

In several North Carolina districts with two-way, dual-language instruction, students score statistically significantly higher in reading in 4th grade than their nondual-language peers, a pattern that continues through 8th grade, researchers from George Mason University found.

Thus far, the Dual Language Academy is the only school in Tulsa that provides dual-language instruction for pre-K students. That means less than 5 percent of the district’s 500-plus pre-K English-learners are experiencing the model.

Hopeful that the school’s approach will yield results for the district’s burgeoning English-learner population, administrators are closely monitoring assessment scores for students who have come up through the dual-language program.

Anecdotal evidence shows that the dual-language approach is working, said Laura Grisso, who oversees the district’s ELL programs.

Kindergarten students who participated in dual-language pre-K are working on writing half-page stories that they can explain in English and Spanish; and English-learner kindergarten students in English-only classrooms are working on recognizing and reciting the alphabet, she said.

**Learning English Takes Time**

The stakes for achieving student literacy are high in Oklahoma.

State law requires that students who aren’t proficient on a 3rd-grade reading test repeat the grade. It’s one of at least 16 states that requires a do-over for 8- and 9-year-olds who do not meet grade-level reading expectations by the end of that year.
More than 90 percent of children in the Tulsa schools who've been affected by the law have been special education students and ELLs, said Andy Mackenzie, the assistant to the superintendent for early-childhood services.

Exemptions are granted for students with a limited grasp of English, namely those who have had less than two years of academic English instruction.

“When you're learning a second language, it's all a matter of time,” said Vanoy, the principal. “And sometimes our time does not match up with what our state requires. The law doesn't even take into consideration how much a child has grown,” in literacy skills.

Third grade is considered key for student literacy, as it's the year that students transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” In other words, they're expected to focus less on reading and more on the information they’re reading.

We need rich conversations, exposure to vocabulary, complex language.”

MARIA ADELIADA RESTREPO
DIRECTOR, BILINGUAL LANGUAGE AND LITERACY LABORATORY, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

An early focus on literacy is key if children, especially English-learners, are to make that crucial transition, said Maria Adelaida Restrepo, the director of the bilingual language and literacy laboratory at Arizona State University.

“We need rich conversations, exposure to vocabulary, complex language,” Restrepo said.

English-learners who enter kindergarten with a basic grasp of academic language, “either in their primary language or in English,” are more likely over time to be reclassified as former ELLs, an analysis from Oregon State University researcher Karen Thompson found.

Thompson, an assistant professor of cultural and linguistic diversity in the university's college of education, reviewed nine years of student data from the Los Angeles Unified School District to gauge how long it takes students to develop proficiency in English.

Thompson’s analysis shows that students who don’t reach proficiency by the time they reach the end of elementary school are less likely to do so at all.

Those students share a common characteristic: They enter kindergarten with a limited command of academic language, the skills that allow children to retell stories or solve word-based math problems. Students in this category are 24 percent less likely to be reclassified than their peers. They are also more likely to score lower on academic tests. The also graduate from high school at lower rates than their peers, Thompson’s analysis found.

### Does Pre-K Help ELLs in the Long Run?

Even with universal pre-K, Oklahoma has been treading water as it tries to keep up with the average national gains in 4th grade reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Gormley, the Georgetown researcher, said the reliance on state and national exam results to measure the program’s effectiveness is shortsighted.

“Fadeout occurs whether it’s an early-childhood program or piano lessons or anything else that kids are exposed to,” Gormley said.

The larger question, Gormley said, should be whether there are any long-term benefits, such as increased enrollment in honors courses, better grades, and improved discipline and attendance records, for the students who participated in pre-K.

Quality preschool programs can play a role in helping establish that strong start, and it's that much better if students are able to learn in their native language, too, said Restrepo.

There is a clear difference between early-childhood and pre-K programs that focus on language development and literacy and those with environments that more closely resemble a day-care setting, Restrepo said.

“They need to play, but there should be people talking with them,” Restrepo said.

“What I see is kids banging blocks in the corner and fighting with each other for the naked baby [doll] in the preschool classroom and nobody's building the language.”

English-learners enrolled in English-only courses often face two challenges: Their English instruction is often oversimplified, and there’s no reinforcement in their primary language, she said.

The pre-K classes at Tulsa’s Dual Language Academy could help address those issues, but finding bilingual teachers to staff classrooms has been a struggle in Tulsa, just as it is in many school districts.

Oklahoma has put a premium on increasing access to prekindergarten, and Tulsa has one of the highest participation rates in the country, with 3 out of 4 4-year-olds enrolled in a pre-K program.

But participation among Hispanics, and English-learners in particular, lags behind other groups here and elsewhere.

### Latino Families Least Likely To Access Pre-K

Historically, Hispanic parents have been less likely to enroll their children in early-childhood-education programs and Head Start, the federal education program designed to support the needs of low-income children and get them ready for elementary school.

Though Oklahoma offers pre-K that is open to all age-eligible children, the ability for families to access it isn't universal.

Gina Adams, a senior fellow with the Urban Institute in Washington, has studied the barriers to preschool participation for immigrant children and English-language learners in Silicon Valley and Chicago.

In cities around the country, transportation, cost, and lackluster outreach efforts are among the issues that emerge as obstacles for those families who want to enroll children in pre-K but don’t have the resources or time to do so.

The language barrier between schools and families with a limited command of English is often the primary hurdle, said Adams, who worked as a child-care teacher for infants and as a home visitor for low-income Latino families in Austin, Texas, before coming to the Urban Institute.

“If there’s nobody there who can connect, it makes sense that parents would be hesitant to take their children,” Adams said.

To attract more parents, pre-K providers have to actively recruit families, Adams said.

“If you don’t, the school readiness gap is not going to be addressed, because the kids who need [pre-K] most are not going to be there and they’ll still be coming to school unprepared,” Adams said.

One of the city’s early-childhood-program providers, Community Action Project-Tulsa has started opening Head Start sites in the city’s most heavily Hispanic neighborhoods in its push to get more families through the door.

Paving the way for families to enroll can make all the difference for the English-learners, said Restrepo, the Arizona State University professor.

“We’re trying to make up for lost ground,” she said.
Invented Spelling to Better Reading, Study Says

By Liana Loewus

Encouraging kindergartners’ attempts to spell unknown words on their own can help them become better readers, according to a recent study by two Canadian researchers.

Gene Ouellette, an associate professor of psychology at Mount Allison University, and Monique Sénéchal, a psychology professor at Carleton University, have done a number of studies on how invented spelling plays into literacy acquisition.

“What we’ve found over the years is there seemed to be something with kids who are doing invented spelling on their own that’s really helping them learn how to read,” said Ouellette in an interview. “I’d say it’s like the missing piece” in early literacy instruction.

Integrating Reading Skills

Invented spelling (also known as inventive spelling), as explained in Ouellette and Sénéchal’s recent study, published in the journal Developmental Psychology, refers to “children’s spontaneous or self-directed attempts to represent words in print.” Children generally start with the first sound in a word; for instance, they might spell dog by writing a d, possibly followed by random letters. Then they typically represent final sounds (d becomes dg), and gradually children will include the sounds in the middle.

“It’s an engaging and cognitively strenuous activity,” said Ouellette, “it helps bring together all the skills kids use when they learn how to read,” including alphabetic knowledge and phonemic awareness.

The researchers’ recent study followed about 170 students from kindergarten to 1st grade. It found that children who did more invented spelling and were better at it tended to have stronger literacy skills after a year.

With this study, the researchers “have mapped the powerful beginning reading-writing connection, moved us closer to being successful teachers of reading in 1st grade, and cleared up decades of confusion,” J. Richard Gentry, who was not involved in this study but conducted early research on invented spelling in the 1980s, wrote in Psychology Today.

To put this into practice, Ouellette recommends that teachers let students attempt to write words before showing them the correct spelling. “Instead of giving them a word list and telling them to memorize it, before a student has ever seen the word, you’d encourage them to spell it,” he said. “It’s a spelling-first approach.”

But the idea of encouraging self-directed spelling does worry some people. Critics of the tactic are often concerned students will learn incorrect spellings for words and hang onto them.

“People get super defensive” about invented spelling, said Ouellette. “They think we’re saying you should just let kids spell how they want and never teach them the right way.”

But teachers can be supportive of students’ attempts without actually reinforcing misspellings, said Ouellette. After students try to spell a word, the teacher can show them the correct spelling and talk about how the spellings differ. “You gradually shape them into the correct spelling,” he said.

As some will remember, invented spelling was once seen as part of the “whole language” approach to reading, which minimizes phonics in favor of simply exposing students to text. That approach fell out of favor in the 1990s based on research showing that students learned to read better through systematic phonics instruction.

Ouellette emphasized that the way invented spelling was used in his research is distinct from the whole language approach, and not compatible with it. “That approach has children writing passages and narratives with invented spelling,” he wrote in an email. “We are advocating word-level work. ... We would also help [children] discover how to improve their spellings over time.”
COMMENTARY

Published January 3, 2018 in Education Week's Classroom Q&A With Larry Ferlazzo Blog

Avoiding ‘Missed Opportunities' In Writing Instruction

By Larry Ferlazzo

The new “question-of-the-week” is: What is the biggest mistake teachers make in writing instruction, and what should they do instead?

In Part One, Lisa Eickholdt, Kathleen Neagle Sokolowski, Mary Ann Zehr, Nancy Frey and Valentina Gonzalez share their commentaries. You can listen to a 10-minute conversation I had with David and Jill on my BAM! Radio Show.

Eugenia Mora-Flores, Julia G. Thompson, Karen Sher, Bret Gosselin, Dr. Vicky Giouroukakis, and Emily Geltz contribute their suggestions.

Response From Eugenia Mora-Flores

Eugenia Mora-Flores is a Professor in the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California (USC). She teaches courses on first and second language acquisition, Latino culture, and in literacy development for elementary and secondary students. Her research interests include studies on effective practices in developing the language and literacy skills of English Learners in grades Pre-K-12. She has written 9 books in the area of literacy and academic language development (ALD) for English learners. Eugenia further works as a consultant for a variety of elementary, middle and high schools across the country in the areas of English Language Development (ELD), ALD and writing instruction:

Writing instruction is one of my favorite areas to teach, mainly because I struggled as a writer. Specifically as an English learner I spent extra time working on improving my writing and have spent almost twenty years learning about how to best support writers in K-8 classrooms. Though there are many areas in writing instruction that teachers find helpful to focus on, one area I think we often misunderstand or overlook in writing instruction is the role of teacher as facilitator as opposed to editor.

The Role of Correcting, Teacher as facilitator: Teachers often ask me, “How do I correct their writing when there is so much to correct and how do I go about telling them what to fix?” I have a few guidelines that might help teachers in thinking about when and how to correct.

1. Ask yourself, have I taught the students the error they are making? If you know that you have already taught a rule, a spelling pattern, a convention, sight words, transition words, etc. then you have to hold students accountable. Provide a list of all the things you have covered that they should go through and check for. Editing checklists of what was taught in YOUR classroom. Sometimes we provide standard editing checklists, but they are not as meaningful as those that come from what they know and was taught in your class. As teachers of writing we often do a lot of editing practice by correcting our students’ papers and having them just fix the errors WE found. This practice does not lead to transfer. Students do not pay attention to what they are fixing and why. Guide them to find their own errors by providing a familiar checklist and hold them accountable.

2. Correct a “chunk” of the writing with the student first. A chunk can be a paragraph, a page, an introduction, a short portion of the writing and make note of the errors they are making in a small section to apply throughout the rest of their writing. Students will make common errors throughout a piece of writing. If we focus on a small chunk they can begin to apply it throughout the rest of their writing.

3. Notice and focus on one teachable moment at a time. These are the moments when we do one on one conferencing with students. Show them one new strategy or skill as a writer and have them apply it throughout the text. This is an opportunity to teach them something new as a writer to work on as they improve their writing.

Response From Julia G. Thompson

Julia G. Thompson received her BA in English from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg and was a classroom teacher for forty years. As a seminar leader for the Bureau of Education and Research, Julia currently works with educators to determine the best ways to help challenging students. Author of Discipline Survival Guide for the Secondary Teacher and The First-Year Teacher’s Survival Guide, Thompson also provides advice on a variety of subjects through her Web site, www.juliagthompson.com; on her blog, juliagthompson.blogspot.com; and on Twitter at https://twitter.com/TeacherAdvice. You can contact her at thompsonteacheradvice@gmail.com:

I must admit that teaching students to write is my favorite part of teaching. And I will have to also admit that grading papers is, hands down, my least favorite part of teaching. I just hate grading papers. Although my primary desire as a teacher of writing is for my students to learn to express themselves with clarity and precision, another part of me (the dark side) wants them to write well just so it is more fun for me to grade their papers. With this guilty dichotomy in place, I have worked hard to make it easy for my students...
to be successful. Here are the things that have worked for my students.

While it is true that students need models to go by as they write, many teachers just give them only one. I found that when I did that, students would just parrot back to me the verbiage of that sample. Instead, I offer at least three complete models and several partial ones that explain the trouble spots such as transitions or graceful ways to introduce evidence for each assignment. Because they see that there are different ways to write something and still be “correct,” I have found that this encourages my students to develop their own voice.

Although I give students a detailed rubric at the time that I make the assignment, I have found that they don’t really pay as much attention to it as I would like. I think that too many of us use generic rubrics that really don’t guide students effectively. What I started adding as I made an assignment is a stylesheet similar to the ones that editors give professional writers. With the stylesheet, I can have built-in mini lessons as I remind them of some of the common mistakes that they have made in the past as well as some of the usage and grammar that may be specific to the current assignment. For example, a style sheet could include information about how to make certain problematic words possessive or how to eliminate contractions in formal writing or how to spell a particularly tough word from the text. I found that while students ignore the rubric, they are diligent about using their style sheets.

I have always found it awkward to hold writing conferences after an assignment is graded and returned, but I have observed many different teachers doing just that. It’s too much like a sad autopsy with an embalmed or angry student. Instead, I like to schedule writing conferences with students between rough drafts. At that time, they can share with me what is bothering them about their papers and together we can work through solutions. To make this even more effective, I like to put a projected grade on a draft—a sort of “If you keep on going this way with this paper, you can expect a grade of ___.” Because many students focus on grades, this tends to allow our mid-assignment conferences to be intense conversations about their writing as they work to improve their projected grade.

When I was a new teacher, I wrote in my horrible handwriting all over their papers. After a while, I learned to focus my comments and to make them meaningful. I realized that it was not my place to edit a student’s paper, but to evaluate it and make suggestions for the future. With this shift in thought, I focus my comments on teaching and not just on marking mistakes. I also got into the practice of using a highlighter to mark the passages that were particularly strong. Instead of just pointing out the awful bits, I could also show them what they did right. What a much more pleasant and useful way to spend grading time than just slicing up a student’s writing errors.

Timely feedback is key—and not always easy to do. I like to have students work through a peer’s almost-final draft with a very specific checklist similar to the stylesheet and the rubric that I give with each assignment. This allows for one level of non-judgmental feedback just when they need it. It also cleans up some of the smaller errors that I won’t have to mark later.

My evaluation of the final draft is almost always returned to students within three days even if the assignment was a long one. Is this tough? Yes. Is this tedious? Yes. Is it worth the effort? Absolutely. My students know that I take them and their effort seriously and I make the effort to return their work quickly.

Response From Karen Sher

Karen Sher is an Instructional Coach at Lemonwood K-8 School in the Oxnard School District in Oxnard, California and is a member of the Instructional Leadership Corps, a collaboration among the California Teachers Association, the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, and the National Board Resource Center at Stanford. She is also a member of CTA’s Institute for Teaching and a Governing Board Member for the Oxnard Union High School District in Oxnard, California:

The greatest missed opportunity is the one to build a community of writers, simply by writing alongside students.

I offer at least three complete models and several partial ones that explain the trouble spots such as transitions or graceful ways to introduce evidence for each assignment.

- Julia G. Thompson in Education Week Teacher

Show. Don’t tell.

A writing teacher is not one who assigns writing and then watches it happen from afar. A writing teacher is in the mix, writing alongside students. Simply telling students to produce a piece of writing is not enough. We must show them how to write, by writing. Is the thesis strong enough? Which transitions will work best? What is my counterargument? Does a comma go there? The strength and courage that students develop when they see what a strong and courageous writer does—what a writer actually does to develop his or her writing—this is the single, most powerful tool a teacher has—to show, not tell. A teacher’s writing need not be perfect...there is no such thing, but to build a community of writers, a teacher’s writing must be authentic.

I do. We do. You do.

The expectation is that students in every content area will write routinely over time for a variety of tasks, purposes and audiences. Therefore, just as every teacher is a reading teacher, every teacher is a writing teacher. Students must be presented with, and look closely at, strong models of content-specific, academic writing from a variety of primary and secondary sources.

Teachers may have clear expectations for what a finished piece of writing should be, but if they have not experienced the process of developing an answer to the question they have asked, there cannot be a clear understanding of how to help guide students to meet those expectations. If a teacher is going to assign a piece of writing, it should be a given that they are going to write a response themselves. This is
strong modeling. This is the “I do.” Next is the “We do.”

Each class is a community unto itself. Like fingerprints, there are no two alike. What does remain consistent in each of these communities is the teacher’s responsibility to provide strong models of content-specific, academic writing from primary and secondary sources, including our own writing. Together, we closely examine these pieces, and communicate about what interesting things we discover and what ideas we might like to pursue further. Together, we construct responses - possibilities of what may be - and then, we write. We use our creativity. We collaborate with others. We work. We think critically. We edit. We revise. And we write some more. We are a community of writers, and this is where the magic happens!

Finally, it is time to set them free to see what they can do on their own. It is time for the “You do.” A writing teacher’s job is to push his or her students to the next level of academic writing...whatever that next level may be. The “You do” is the summative assessment. It is time for the students to produce, publish and shine. Every student can show growth in his or her writing. It is not by accident that growth occurs. It is by intention.

Not writing alongside students, this is a writing teacher’s single, greatest missed opportunity.

Response From Bret Gosselin

Bret Gosselin teaches writing to his high school ELLs in North Texas. In his eleven years in education, he has been a teacher, an instructional specialist and sheltered instruction trainer. He believes all students can write well and makes sure his have the opportunity to do so every day:

The short answer to that question is low expectations from the teacher. The long answer involves educator priorities, lack of foresight and inexperience with innovative writing approaches. On the whole, we tend to make assumptions and focus on what our students can’t do instead of giving them opportunities to prove what they already know. From this perspective, teachers often approach their assigned writing tasks with a procedural mindset; reducing what is meant to be an organic, creative process into a step-by-step formula to meet the “needs” we believe our students to have.

As a result, we have implemented graphic organizers, sentence stems and rigid writing structures that hem our students in and prevent them from exploring original ways to express their ideas. While I understand that much of this comes from the reality of the high-stakes testing world we live in, we also must consider the significance of the real world that also needs to be prepared for. When we limit our students’ writing in order to fit a specific genre for a fabricated purpose with an inauthentic audience, we hinder their ability to become true writers with the necessary skills to function as educated adults.

I have seen teachers give their students “fill-in the blank” essays where the sentence structure was so scripted that all students had to do was add a few words in like a Mad Libs page. I have seen teachers create meticulously detailed formulas and acronyms prescribing the location of every sentence from start to finish; leaving the student thinking to memorizing the pattern rather than meeting the author’s purpose. These practices, however well intentioned, promote the assumption that students already understand why they are writing and that their weakness lies in the details of crafting sentences.

Not only is the opposite true, but shifting the focus to the author’s purpose actually produces the quality details that teachers fear their students can’t accomplish. When students set out to write a persuasive piece, for example, and understand what it means to really convince an audience, their diction, syntax, and grammar will align itself accordingly. If they know they need to be persuasive then they will make better decisions that lead to true persuasive writing. When a student understands fully why they are writing, the how becomes less of a challenge.

As to the pragmatics of accomplishing this with students, I have found Allison Marchetti and Rebekah O’Dell’s “Writing With Mentors” to be the most helpful. The premise of the book is that purpose guides form, and that the use of professional and modern “mentors” serves as a guide to producing writing that can effectively meet that purpose. Before a student can successfully craft meaningful text, they need to see what real writers are doing well so the process is concrete. From there, they can make informed decisions about how to organize and construct their initial drafts.

As a teacher of ELLs, this is especially helpful as providing mentors gives my students more access to vocabulary and language structures that cannot be directly taught one lesson at a time. With the help of mentors, my students are able to use language authentically and communicate real messages in complex and nuanced ways that a formula would never be able to. As a result, I read unique pieces from my students that are truly interesting rather than the same essay repeated a hundred and fifty times. I like teaching writing this way and more importantly my students like learning to write this way.

Good writers are good writers. If you know what you’re doing and why you’re doing it, you’ll be able to apply your skills in any context. When time is spent letting students learn, internalize and own the purpose for writing, the form and structure will follow with less help than what many teachers feel comfortable with. We need to start trusting our students’ ability to think and do for themselves so they have the chance to see what they are truly capable of. It may require a significant shift in thinking, but that is the nature of being an educator, isn’t it? I think we can all agree our students deserve at least that much from us.

Response From Dr. Vicky Giouroukakis

Dr. Vicky Giouroukakis currently teaches English and ESOL methods at Molloy College and started her teaching career as an English and ESL teacher at a high school in Queens. She has presented and published extensively on the topics of literacy, curriculum and assessment, and diversity, and her latest co-authored publication is titled, Achieving Next Generation Literacy: Using the Tests (You Think) You Hate to Teach the Students You Love (2016; Corwin):
I have been coaching at an elementary school for the past two years and at one of our sessions, the upper grade-level ELA teachers were complaining that their students simply did not seem to care about their writing. Even though they produced multiple drafts, the final writing product still was weak in content and form and lacked thoughtfulness and careful attention to detail. When I asked who the audience typically is for these young students, the response was, "the teacher, of course."

The biggest mistake teachers make in writing instruction is having students write with the sole audience of the teacher in mind because it typically leads to inauthentic writing in which students are not invested. Instead, teachers need to get students to care about their writing by asking them to address different audiences and purposes on topics that matter to them. In fact, one of the seven capacities of the literate individual as outlined in the Common Core State Standards document is the ability to respond to varying demands of audience, task, purpose and discipline. So what should teachers do to help students develop this ability?

1. **Begin with questions.** Have students ask questions about a text that they are reading or a topic in which they are interested. You can even assign the questions, but it is better if most of them come from the students. Then, have students respond to these questions by providing their own knowledge, opinions, prior knowledge. You can continue this pattern of questioning and responding to stimulate more curiosity and develop more writing.

2. **Have students respond to various audiences, tasks, and purposes.** It is best when writing develops organically, when students have something to say. If students are frustrated that they are not able to use cell phones in school, then have them write a letter to the principal trying to persuade him or her to allow cell phone use. Request that the principal respond to these letters and discuss with students the impact that their letters had based on the principal’s response. Letter writing (e.g., to parents, friends, administrators, politicians) facilitates audience awareness far more than any other type of writing. Similarly, a blog is another opportunity for students to voice their opinions and reflect on their own thinking. Engage students in different kinds of writing—to inform, explain, argue, tell a story. Share and discuss mentor texts with varying styles of writing, written for different audiences and purposes.

3. **Use technology as a way to motivate authentic writing.** Youngsters today use social media, so they know how to use them and for what purpose. Create classroom Twitter or Facebook accounts and have students tweet or post the summary of a text or an opinion to an article that they read in class. You can also create a Google Classroom and incorporate presentation apps, such as Peardeck and PowToon Presentations that students use to demonstrate their knowledge and express their views on a topic. Websites, like Grammaropolis and NoredInk, improve students' grammar and writing skills.

4. **Encourage students to work together to compose or revise.** They can work in pairs to read each other’s work and anticipate comprehension problems. You can also have them collaborate on traditional writing or word processing or digital storytelling (Storyboard That, Storybird) and co-creating multimedia documents (Collabfrify Writer).

5. **Focus on the process of writing, of course, but also on the product.** Students need to understand that going through the process of writing is important in that it helps them understand, appreciate, and enjoy writing, but the product reflects the process and how much work and effort they put into it, and should, therefore, be something of which they are proud. Working on the final draft, editing and proofreading are essential steps in clearly and accurately communicating a desired message. In order to show the importance of strong writing that demonstrates command of standard English conventions, you can have students do a scavenger hunt and identify errors or misuse of language in texts that you provide and discuss why good writing is important. The other disciplines should also teach discipline-specific writing and enforce strong writing so that students understand both that they need to be able to respond to varying demands of discipline and that good writing is not reserved for the English class but is also important across the content areas.

6. **Publish students’ work.** What better way to celebrate students’ work than to publish it on the school bulletin board or website or teacher page or even an online journal? Invite parents and other members of the community to read students’ work or listen to it presented.

**Response From Emily Geltz**

Emily Geltz is a sixth grade ELA teacher at Oyster River Middle School in Durham, NH in her fifth year of teaching:

The biggest mistake teachers make in writing instruction is not being writers themselves. The most important thing I have learned as an ELA teacher is that writing beside my students and taking them through my process is invaluable for teaching writing. If I am going to expect my students to write anything—from a Personal Narrative, to a Persuasive piece, to poetry, I need to show them examples. While showing exemplary models is great, I also need to show them the way a piece of writing looks in draft form—and that is where I come in.

Growing up, I cannot remember one time where my ELA teachers wrote in front of me. Writing was an assignment—to be done at home and turned in. Because of this, I wrote one draft and I was done. I never learned the intricacies of drafting and revising—the time spent searching for the right word or title, the struggle of trying to make a paragraph or a point work, the heartbreak of coming to terms with deleting it if it just doesn’t fit. That’s my job as a writing teacher—to peel back the layers of the final draft to show all the work that goes into a piece of writing. The only way I can do this is to be a writer myself.

Even if you think you can’t do it—push yourself to write in front of your students, to share your writing, to be a writer yourself. It’s the best thing I’ve done for my students as writers.
Motivating students to read and managing effective reading practice is easier when you know what they love. Based on new data from our 2018 What Kids Are Reading report, here’s a summary of what 9.4 million kids who read more than 323 million books and articles during the 2016–2017 school year like to read most.

What Kids Are Reading, the world’s largest study of book reading behavior, provides a snapshot of the most popular reads in each state and nationally. Researchers at Renaissance® produce the annual report by analyzing data from the Renaissance Accelerated Reader® platform. Each day at tens of thousands of schools, kids spend time reading and checking their understanding with Accelerated Reader® quizzes.

The report answers important questions about what students are reading to help educators guide reading practice and accelerate growth. This year’s 10th Anniversary Edition shares reading trends for last school year and a look back at reading practice over the past 10 years, all based on deep insights from Accelerated Reader data. This year’s report includes:

- Top 25 books overall in each grade and top 10 nonfiction books by grade
- Students’ highest-rated picks and books educators consider must-reads
- A nostalgic look back at #1 books in every grade for the past 10 years

What are kids reading?

When looking over the lists for early grades, it’s clear that kids continue to gobble up Green Eggs and Ham. The celebrated Dr. Seuss story has held the top spot among first-grade students every year since this report was first published. It also was the favorite book of second-grade students for six of the past 10 years.

Diary of a Wimpy Kid books remain popular in grades 3–6; The Giver and The Outsiders take the two top spots in grades 7–8; and literary classics such as To Kill a Mockingbird, The Crucible, and Of Mice and Men are most-read titles in high school.

In addition to the book lists, the report has three sections that dig deep into Accelerated Reader data to show what we know about kids’ nonfiction reading, struggling readers, and reading trends over time.

Room for growth in STEM

STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) books are a natural fit to nurture students’ nonfiction and informational text reading. Yet according to data from Accelerated Reader, not quite half (45%) of students read a book on a STEM topic last school year. Get the report to see the top nonfiction STEM book for each grade.

STEM books are just 7% of all books read by kids.
Educators and students weigh in with top picks

New to the report this year, we polled 500 educators about books they consider must-reads for students. The Dr. Seuss collection and Elephant and Piggie series, by Mo Willems, tied for the top pick in grades K—2. Educators selected The Harry Potter Series, by J.K. Rowling, in grades 6—8, and To Kill a Mockingbird, by Harper Lee, in grades 9—12, with George Orwell’s 1984 coming in second.

Also, because students can rate their enjoyment of each book they read on a four-point scale after they’ve completed an Accelerated Reader quiz, we included kids’ highest-rated books for every grade. In kindergarten, the top pick was What Do You Do With a Tail Like This? by Steve Jenkins. The top book selected by students in grade 6 was The Skin I’m In, by Sharon G. Flake, and in grade 12 students’ top pick was The Glass Castle: A Memoir, by Jeannette Wells. See all the top choices of educators and students by grade range in this year’s What Kids Are Reading report.

Practice closes gaps for struggling readers

By taking into consideration the number of words read, text difficulty, and other data from Accelerated Reader, we can estimate how long per day students are engaged with text. Dedicating time to daily reading practice makes a big difference in struggling students’ reading scores.

To become proficient readers, students need high-quality instruction and other supports, but reading volume (time) is nonnegotiable. Having sufficient time and energy devoted to reading practice is one of the hallmarks of skill development in many disciplines (Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007; Fogarty, Kerns, & Pete, 2018).

Our data show that struggling readers who started the year well below the 25th percentile made significant gains the more time they dedicated to reading. Kids who read for 15 to 29 minutes a day gained 13 percentile ranks or more. Students who read for 30 minutes or more grew even more, increasing by an average of 15 percentile points during the year.

What else is in this year’s report?

In the Author’s Corner, Renaissance is pleased to feature essays by authors/illustrators Nick Bruel (Bad Kitty series) and Janet Stevens (Tops and Bottoms). In the Educators’ Corner, hear the stories of several educators who reflect on reading and their experiences using Accelerated Reader. You’ll also see books kids in grades K—2 read independently, chapter books most read in grades 3—5, and books students read most at the beginning and end of the school year in grades 6—12.

References


Please note: Renaissance® is deeply committed to protecting school and student data. For all publications, we go to great lengths to provide aggregated data that is useful to educators, parents, and researchers, but stop well short of releasing information that could identify any district, school, teacher, or student.

See What Kids Are Reading, 10th Anniversary Edition

Motivate students to read by knowing what they love. See top picks by grade and state, gain insights on student achievement and growth, and enjoy a look back at 10 years of #1 books in every grade. No other study captures reading behavior on this scale.
On-demand webinars

Six Minutes and Reading Growth

What’s the difference between (a) students who start and end the school year as struggling readers, and (b) students who start out struggling but end up succeeding? Research suggests one key factor is an increase in deliberate reading practice—in some cases, as little as six additional minutes per day.

Don’t miss this powerful, research-driven edWebinar presented by Jan Bryan, Ed.D., National Education Officer at Renaissance. Gain insights into how the right reading practice will lead to substantial gains in student growth.

WATCH NOW

Unlocking Student Growth: The Power of Deliberate Reading Practice

Each day, educators make decisions about how to structure learning. But when it comes to reading practice, are we making the right decisions to maximize student growth? Learn how to transform independent reading into deliberate practice, and how reading quantity, challenge, and feedback make practice more effective.

WATCH NOW

Maximize Practice for Greater Growth with Renaissance Accelerated Reader 360®

Watch this session to see how Accelerated Reader 360 will support “perfect practice” for each of your students, from struggling readers to those performing far above grade level. See how to set the right goals to maximize growth, and easily track progress toward goals, skill development, and reading mastery.

WATCH NOW

Education Leader’s Guide to Reading Growth

Visit the Renaissance® blog for the latest news, research, and insights for pre-K–12 educators, such as the brand-new Education Leader’s Guide to Reading Growth series. Discover how you can leverage reading research to boost achievement and accelerate growth. Here are a few posts to get you started.

6 more minutes: Struggling readers, reading practice, and growth

What can six minutes mean for struggling readers—and how does early success affect future achievement? Dive into the research to learn more.

READ NOW

The magic of 15 minutes: Reading practice and reading growth

Did you know most students read less than 15 minutes per day? Reading practice is declining—and that might affect reading scores. Equip yourself with the insights needed to support student success.

READ NOW

Maximized minutes: Growth factors and high-quality reading practice

Get the most out of every minute students spend on reading practice. See the three different elements—or “growth factors”—that contribute to high-quality reading practice.

READ NOW

VISIT RENAISSANCE.COM
Encouraging Literacy Via Reading for Pleasure

By Anwar Alhusban

At the age of 14, out of boredom, I read my first book, *Immigration of Bani Hilal Tribe*. I fell in love with the power of reading. This book talked about one of the tribes Arabs descended from and how they struggled to survive in the Arabian Peninsula. I was fascinated by how much more I learned about the history of my people from a book than from any chat I ever had with anyone about it. Since then, I have been reading books in Arabic and English from different genres and by various authors.

One of the most shocking statistics I have ever encountered is that Arabs read an average of six minutes a year. And, I noticed that none of my family members or friends had ever read for pleasure before. I believe that reading for pleasure is an indication of a true educational experience. Therefore, when one does not read for pleasure, one is not a true learner. Devastated that no one around me had experienced the powerful and inspiring learning opportunity that reading brings, I decided to make my Glocal Service Project (GSP) about encouraging other young kids to read for pleasure and to answer the question: “How might we inspire children to love reading for pleasure and thus lead their own learning experiences?”

The Project

The first step I took was to raise awareness about my project within the governmental elementary schools in my hometown of Mafraq, Jordan. I talked to the school principals about my project and my vision to have a library in every school in Mafraq and a reading curriculum for kids in first to third grades. I started with the principal that showed the greatest support for my project: the principal of Hai Al Husban School.

Finding Partners

First, I contacted Jordanian publishing houses and presented the idea of book donations, and I was delighted that most of them praised my project and its mission and showed great support for it. I decided to work with those publishing houses, like Dar Al Salwa and Dar Al Yasmeen, that have books to donate consistently and to also look for ways to raise funds to buy more books. Some publishers also gave me great deals and valuable pieces of advice regarding my project.

I interned at We Love Reading a couple of years ago, so I knew what the organization was capable of doing when it came to implanting the love of reading in young children. I contacted the staff, including the director, Dr. Rana Dajani. They helped me outline my project and an effective timeline. Since I am attending university in the United States this fall, they guaranteed the continuation and activity of the project in the future when I will not be physically there to direct it. They also suggested having We Love Reading ambassadors lead some of the reading circles in the governmental schools in Mafraq, in which children can engage in listening to narrated stories by trained ambassadors.

Program Impact

The children listened thoughtfully and asked clever questions about the protagonist. They even suggested creative story endings! The teacher even commented about how some of her students became more talkative after reading classes, the only class “where grades did not accompany the books.”

The children’s excitement about the activities and passionate reactions to the narrated stories were a true pleasure for me to witness and a sign to broaden and vary the reading activities into an uncredited reading curriculum.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

One of the obstacles I faced in setting up my project was to get the government’s permission to work with the schools. I went through a long process of writing and translating requested information about my project for the Ministry of Education, which delayed my progress. However, once we had the official permission, things went more smoothly, since it earned me the trust of collaborators and donors.

It has also been difficult to communicate with collaborators and the publishers because I was attending King’s Academy and far from Mafraq. Nevertheless, I decided to use the time I was away from
my town and my collaborators to work on other aspects of my project. For instance, I started working on the reading curriculum that was supposed to guide the teachers in their reading classes. I referred to a book certified by Jordan’s Ministry of Education for teachers on how to run creative activities in class and a couple of other books on how to narrate stories for kids. The principal and the teachers offered to organize the curriculum to fit within the children’s school schedule, and I was grateful to accept their help.

I learned that listening to my collaborators and studying their advice is essential for the project’s success. I also learned that it is crucial to remember myself of why I am doing this project and where the mission of my project came from, for it will motivate me to make the project work and succeed in helping my community. Moreover, I learned that barrier communication is an important skill, and I’m glad I quickly developed it while communicating and making deals with the publishers.

My biggest concern is the sustainability of my project as I will be studying in the United States for the next four years. Thus, I decided to hand the management of my project to my greatest collaborator, Ms. Rana and the We Love Reading team, because they are the most experienced in leading projects to encourage kids to read. Yet, my job has not ended with Reading to Flourish. I will always contact Ms. Rana, visit the team during university breaks, and run a huge part of the project during the summer which includes contacting the publishing houses and collecting books for other schools in my town.

Advice to Others

My biggest piece of advice to youth implementing their own projects is to never lose hope. Choose an issue that you are very passionate about solving and nothing will stop you. You are going to face obstacles while setting your projects up, but do not let them discourage you or slow you down. Many people will try to step in your way and mock your age and naivety, but always believe in yourself and do not let age be a measure of the success of your project.

For educators, it is very urgent to prepare youth to become global citizens and take initiative on different global issues. The world’s leading generations to come are the current youth, so it is very important to educate them about global citizenship and their paramount role in making the world a better place. It is important to let the youth know that they matter and their actions are influential even if they are still in high school or college. Educators can be supportive to youth by offering them guidance and connections while letting them lead and make their own decisions regarding their projects. Educators should never underestimate youth for it will only degrade the world’s future leaders. Therefore, it is crucial to let them lead their own initiatives and experiment in the world of global citizenship and impact.

In an ideal world, my project would grow into an institution that would play a great role in fighting illiteracy and a wrong idea about education: that learning can only happen in classrooms and with teachers. This institution would provide every school in Jordan with a library and a reading curriculum. It would also arrange reading circles in every town. Then, this institution would spread its influence throughout the Arab World and then the world as a whole.

This post is by Anwar Alhusban who, as a high school senior, created the Reading to Flourish program in Mafraq, Jordan. This blog is part of our ongoing series by young adults who participated in Global Citizens Initiative’s Summer Youth Summit.

In this School, 100% of Kindergarteners Are on Target for Reading

By Shanda Barnett

It can be quite a challenge to excite students about reading when they’re coming to school hungry or overly tired. It can be harder still when their communities lack the resources and funds to provide these kids with the literacy instruction they need. In the fall of 2015, my school, Haleyville Elementary, was looking for a way to provide our students the best possible way to meet their literary potential. With a mission to change our students’ educational experience and improve their future opportunities for success, we embarked on a multi-sensory reading initiative.

Haleyville Elementary is a rural school in northwest Alabama serving a population of 839 students. The combination of a poverty rate of 70% with high truancy and transiency rates has given our faculty and staff a sense of urgency, inspiring us to make every moment with every student matter. Our school family and community have dedicated themselves to making sure our students’ needs are met, no matter what their financial situation.

Our biggest literacy challenge was that some students were not demonstrating sufficient progress in reading. The same students sat in our tiered instruction groups year after year. We were determined to find a more effective way to reach our students and to provide them with a key to foundational literacy. So, we did some digging, and after coming across Reading Horizons’ multi-sensory approach to instruction, began developing a plan that would help us close the achievement gap. Reading Horizons even provided online teacher training that taught me and my fellow teachers how to instruct our students with this new, all-encompassing method. Our staff, motivated to see our students achieve, dedicated themselves to the approach.

In order to get the most out of the program, the school decided to adopt a full multi-sensory approach to reading...
instruction. This meant using a combination of decoding, word games, dry erase boards and hand motions to help incorporate all aspects of learning into lessons instead of relying solely on sight words and memorization. The lessons became more thorough than any approach we had tried before. With these interactive and easily accessible lessons, learning to read no longer felt like a chore for our kids. It became something fun and engaging that everyone had access to. The results we’ve seen have been amazing, but they hardly compare to the joy we all feel when our students come to us excited to learn how to read.

By taking a “decoding” approach to literacy, our students gain a strong understanding for the reason behind the words and letters they’re reading. This method removes the pressure to memorize and drill sight words into their minds. Now they take their time to understand why letters make certain sounds when arranged a certain way. This puts the power into their hands and even makes the challenge of reading fun.

This approach changed my perception of teaching, too. By learning how to teach the method, I found a confidence in my lessons that I hadn’t had before. The multi-sensory approach broke down reading in such a way that when I taught it, I could see my students understanding the process—interacting with it with their writing, their speaking and their hand motions—and I could feel assured that they were actually walking away with a skill that would stick with them for the rest of their lives, not just memorizing something because of how it looked on the page.

Prior to the mid-point of the school year, we were already seeing students make tremendous strides in comparison to years past. The results were so significant that we rallied to have the program extended into the second grade. According to our most recent progress reports, 100% of our kindergarten students are now on target in reading and more than 70% of both our first- and second-grade students have demonstrated improvement in reading since the fall benchmark. We’re so excited about the progress we’ve seen that Haleyville has decided to expand the program into our third-grade classrooms this fall.

As one teacher put it, the multi-sensory approach “has changed our entire school climate, and we want to shout its praises from the rooftops!” We have seen our students’ success and interest in reading soar, along with their confidence and belief in themselves. When I talk to my fellow teachers, I hear a renewed passion and vigor. Because of these strategies, we feel fully equipped to provide the strong reading foundation our kids deserve.

With the ability to read comes knowledge, and knowledge is power. Literacy is an invaluable, lifelong tool. Reading Horizons and its multi-sensory method have inspired both our teachers and students here at Haleyville. Our classrooms are now filled with confidence and a renewed passion for learning.

Shanda Barnett is a second-grade teacher at Haleyville Elementary in northwest Alabama. She can be reached at sbarnett@havc.k12.al.us.
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