# Tennessee Literacy Journal

VOL. 4 NO. 2 JUNE 2023


*"What I care about is that kids are inspired to be better people because of their experiences in my school..." - George Couros*

LITERACY ASSOCIATION OF TENNESSEE

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# IMPROVING READING PROFICIENCY THROUGH EFFECTIVE SMALL GROUP IMPLEMENTATION:

# AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

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Educators who utilize effective small group instruction during their phonics block can offer focused individualized attention to early readers. This targeted support offered in small group settings can lead to improved literacy outcomes. Understanding the importance of effective small group instruction led a team of second-grade teachers to approach their instructional literacy coach for support with incorporating targeted small group instruction into their daily phonics block.

## Review of the Literature

Research supports the fact that small group instruction "better enables teachers to meet the needs of each student" (Wilson et al., 2012, p. 31). By utilizing effective small group instruction, teachers can provide targeted instruction based upon students' current level of performance (Noltemeyer et al. 2019). Further, in a small group setting, teachers can closely observe individual student performance and provide immediate corrective feedback, which can often be more challenging to accomplish in a whole group setting (Wilson et al., 2012).

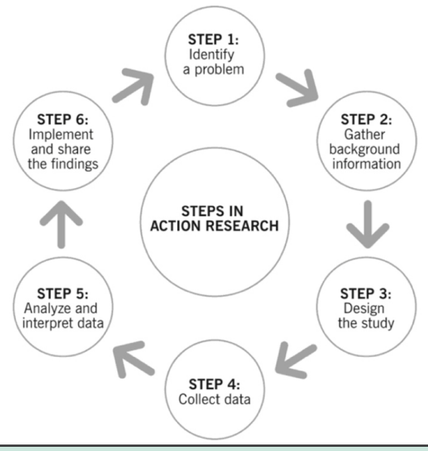
In the 21-22 school year, the action research method was used by an instructional literacy coach and seven second grade teachers within a public elementary school of approximately 800 students in Middle Tennessee to improve the reading proficiency of 136 second grade students through utilizing consistent and targeted small group instruction during the phonics block. The action research method is an available and effective tool for influencing positive change in teachers' instructional practices which often leads to improved student learning outcomes (Efron & Ravid, 2020).

## Step One: Identify the Problem

In the fall of 2021, the second-grade team met with their literacy coach to discuss and identify a problem that involved two essential components. First, the teachers acknowledged that effective and consistent small group instruction was not occurring across the grade-level during their 90-minute phonics block. Secondly, the second-grade teachers wanted support to understand and implement effective small group instruction in order to improve the reading proficiency of their students. It was determined that this problem could be addressed through utilizing the action research model.

***Figure 1***

*Six Cyclical Steps of Action Research*




***Note.*** From *Action Research in Education: A Practical Guide* by S.E. Efron and R. Ravid, 2020, The Guilford Press. Copyright 2020 The Guilford Press.

## Step Two: Gather Background Information

The research team, consisting of the literacy coach and second-grade teachers, reviewed the Fall Aimsweb literacy screening data. AimswebPlus is the online assessment, data management, and reporting system used by the school to determine the reading proficiency and growth based upon nationally normed data. The screening assessments are given three times per year (fall, winter, and spring) and growth is determined based upon students' composite score calculated through performance data collected on vocabulary, reading comprehension, and oral reading fluency assessments (aimswebPlus, 2017). The manual also categorizes students into three tiered groups based upon their composite score: Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3. Tier 1 students are those students scoring above the 25th percentile who are on track to meet the end-of-year target and least likely to have a need for intervention. Tier 2 students are those students scoring between the 11th and 25th percentile who are not on track and have a moderate risk of not meeting the end-of-year target. Tier 2 students require some intervention support. Tier 3 students are those students scoring below the 11th percentile who are typically well-below grade level. They are not likely to meet the end-of-year target without intensive, individualized instructional intervention (aimswebPlus, 2017).

After reviewing the fall screening data (see Figure 9), the research team discussed their concerns and determined next steps to improve the second-grade students' literacy outcomes. Upon examining this screening data, the team noticed that only 79% of the students met the Tier 1 expectation of reading above the 25%. The team desired to meet the district goal that 90% of the second-grade students would perform above the 25th percentile on the Aimsweb literacy screener by the end of the school year.

Collectively, the team expressed a desire to focus on consistently incorporating effective small group instruction into their phonics block throughout the remainder of the school year to allow additional targeted practice in order to improve students' literacy outcomes and meet the district goal. Together, the team designed a study that would meet their needs and lead to improved literacy outcomes for their second-grade students.

## Step Three: Design the Study

The team established a clear plan of action.

1. To begin, the team determined that the second-grade teachers would use collected phonics data to determine below-level, approaching-level, and on-level groups. The team decided these groups would be flexible based upon on-going data collections such as weekly or bi-weekly phonics assessment data collected as part of the district adopted phonics curriculum. The literacy coach provided three documents created by a fellow literacy coach within the district and shared during the district literacy coach meeting which took place in the fall of 2021 (see Figures 2-4). These documents were compiled from research presented during literacy training provided by literacy leaders within the district related to effective small group phonics instruction. These documents were shared to influence positive change related to small group instruction across this district. Literacy coaches within the district were encouraged to share these documents with literacy teachers within their building as a tool to aid in the creation, implementation, and evaluation of effective small group instruction (K. Watson, personal communication, April 28, 2022). The research team reviewed the first documents (see Figure 2) to better understand the similar characteristics of students in each group.
2. Following this, the team discussed appropriate research-based activities to utilize during small group instruction based upon student ability levels (see Figure 3). The team added additional agreed-upon activities to the original list provided.
3. The team then determined appropriate activities that the students who were not participating in small group instruction with the teacher could complete independently. These tasks are known to students as purposeful practice activities (see Figure 4).
4. Next, methods for organizing small groups and minimizing transition times during group rotations were collected from K-2 teachers around the school. Each suggested method was examined and discussed by the team. Each teacher adopted a method to use in her classroom (see Figure 5-Figure 8) to help small group rotations run smoothly and efficiently.
5. The team discussed and determined their level of comfort with implementing this plan. The literacy coach wanted to know how she could support the team in successful implementation of this plan. It was determined that the literacy coach would model small group instruction in several second-grade classrooms and observe small group instruction in the other classrooms. The literacy coach would offer feedback based upon observational data collected during classroom observations.
6. The second-grade team agreed to utilize consistent small group instruction throughout the remainder of the school year during their phonics block to improve the literacy outcomes of their students.

***Figure 2***

*Characteristics of Students within Small Group*

| On-Track | Approaching | Below |
|---|---|---|
| ✓ Students have mastered focus phonics pattern.<br>✓ Students demonstrate automaticity at the word level and within connected text.<br>✓ Students read smoothly, with expression.<br>✓ Students will self-correct difficult words.<br>✓ Students read fluently (at a conversational pace) | ✓ Students demonstrate some mastery of focus phonics pattern.<br>✓ Students demonstrate automaticity at the word level but struggle with connected text.<br>✓ Reading is choppy with pauses and hesitations.<br>✓ Readers may struggle with tracking.<br>✓ Students read at varying speeds throughout the text or moderately slow. | ✓ Students have not mastered the focus phonics pattern. They lack automaticity at the word level.<br>✓ Readers frequently hesitate to sound out most words and loses place in text.<br>✓ Readers may read word-by-word and often monotone.<br>✓ Students read slowly and laboriously. |

***Note.*** Adapted from personal communication by K. Watson, April 28, 2022. Used with permission.

***Figure 3***

*Small Group Suggested Instructional Activities*

| On-Track | Approaching | Below |
|---|---|---|
| ✓ Read sentences with focus pattern<br>✓ Write words/sentences<br>✓ Partner-read or independently read the decodable text and answer comprehension questions<br>✓ Practice fluency (expression and volume)<br>✓ If successful- read less controlled text<br>✓ Consider a Novel Study or Book Club | ✓ Reinforce/Reteach the Phonics Skill<br>✓ Read words and sentences with focus pattern (decoding)<br>✓ Write words/sentences with focus pattern (encoding)<br>✓ Read the decodable text (Whisper Read or Partner Read) and answer comprehension questions.<br>✓ Practice fluency (automaticity, pace, phrasing) | ✓ Include a phonological awareness activity<br>✓ Reteach the Phonics Skill<br>✓ Practice automaticity at the word level (decoding)<br>✓ Read Phrases and Sentences containing focus phonics pattern.<br>✓ Write words containing phonics pattern (encoding)<br>✓ Read decodable text (echo read or whisper read) and answer comprehension questions |

***Note.*** Adapted from personal communication by K. Watson, April 28, 2022. Used with permission.

***Figure 4***

*Purposeful Practice Activities for Non-Small Group Participants*

| On-Track | Approaching | Below |
|---|---|---|
| ✓ Phonics Lesson Extension Activities<br>✓ Vocabulary Practice<br>✓ Independent Reading w/ Purposeful Response<br>✓ Novel Study/Book Club<br>✓ Online Practice (Freckle/ Reading A-Z/ EPIC)<br>✓ Paired Text Readings and activities<br>✓ Create a story/Answer a prompt | ✓ Fluency Practice<br>✓ Listen to a story read aloud<br>✓ Whisper Read with Read-Aloud<br>✓ Partner Read<br>✓ Record and Listen to oneself<br>✓ Encoding Practice<br>✓ Online Practice (Freckle/ Reading A-Z/ EPIC) | ✓ Practice reading decodable words and high-frequency words<br>✓ Listen to story read aloud decodable and follow along in text<br>✓ Whisper read with read aloud decodable story<br>✓ Encoding Practice<br>✓ Practice independently reading from previous decodables (where mastery of phonics patterns have occurred)<br>✓ Targeted online practice (Lexia) |

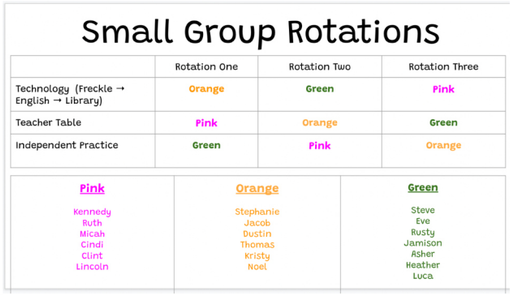
***Note.*** Adapted from personal communication by K. Watson, April 28, 2022. Used with permission.

There are many methods for organizing small groups to allow for smooth transition times between group rotations in order to maximize time on tasks. Figures 5-8 demonstrate several methods for organizing small group instruction used by various teachers within the focus school.

Figure 5 is a visual depiction of three 20-minute rotations. This was created to be displayed on the smartboard to clarify expectations for student activities during each rotation. Students' names were listed under each color group depending on their group designation. Every student would spend 20 minutes working on targeted instruction with the classroom teacher during the phonics block each day. While not meeting with the teacher for small group instruction, students would participate in targeted literacy practice through technology and other assigned purposeful practice activities.

***Figure 5***

*Organizational Chart for Three Small Group Rotations*




***Note.*** Names have been changed to protect anonymity of students.

Figure 6 displays an option for a teacher to display if she only has time to meet with her below-level group during a particular class period. Again, students would be assigned to each group and their names would be listed below their assigned color and displayed on the smartboard during the Phonics block.

***Figure 6***

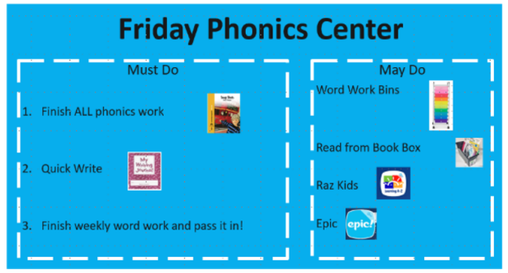
*Organizational Chart for One Small Group Meeting*


***Note.*** Names have been changed to protect anonymity of students.

Figure 7 was created to display on a Smartboard, so students understood the expectation while the teacher called specific students to her table to provide targeted small group instruction. It explained the tasks students were required to complete and then provided additional optional activities the students may choose to complete, if time allowed.

***Figure 7***

*Must Do/ May Do Chart*

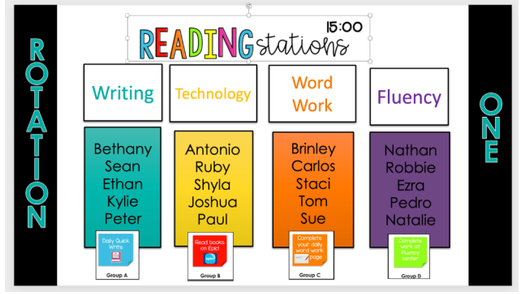



***Note.*** From personal communication by B. Fraser, March 21, 2022. Used with permission.

Figure 8 depicts another approach for organizing and managing small group rotations in a classroom. This example is one of several slides the teacher displays on her smartboard. The timer provides 15 minutes for each station. Students are assigned to a particular station. This assignment changes every 15 minutes. While students are working on the assigned tasks, the teacher is free to call students to meet with her for one on one or small group targeted instruction.

***Figure 8***

*Organizational Chart for Four Reading Stations During Small Group Implementation*




***Note.*** Adapted from personal communication by B. Fraser, March 21, 2022. Used with permission. Names have been changed to protect anonymity of students.

## Step Four: Collect the Data

After the winter screening window closed in January 2022, the literacy coach and second-grade team reviewed the collected literacy screening data. The Aimsweb Tier Transition Report (see Figure 9) showed 87% of Second Graders fell in Tier One (performing above the 25%) on the Winter screener. This was a growth of 8% since the Fall Screener. The research team celebrated their students' success and refocused their efforts on reaching the original goal that 90% of their students would be proficient in reading by the Spring screener at the end of the school year.

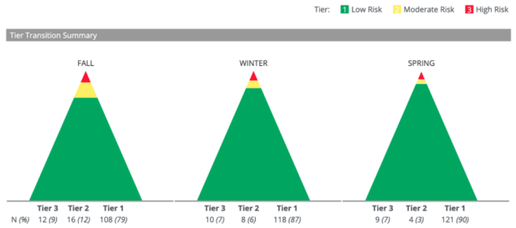
In April of 2022, the Spring screener was given to every second-grade student within the school. The data was once again collected and analyzed by the research team to determine whether the stated goal had been met.

## Step Five: Analyze and Interpret the Data

Following the Spring screener, the research team analyzed and compared the collected spring data to the fall and winter screening data (see Figure 9). The team celebrated the success of their students and the fact that they met their original goal. They observed that 90% of the second-grade students scored above the 25% on the Spring Literacy screener, thus meeting the district goal.

***Figure 9***

*Second Grade Tier Transition Report for 21-22 School Year*




***Note.*** From "Tier Transition Summary Report," May 11, 2022, aimswebPlus. Copyright 2017 by NCS Pearson, Inc. Reproduced with permission. All rights reserved.

## Step Six: Implement and Share the Findings

The research team shared their findings with school leaders. They plan to continue to utilize effective small group instruction during their phonics block in the upcoming school year. Further, they plan to encourage the Kindergarten and First grade teachers to utilize similar methods during their 90-minute phonics block in the upcoming school year. Finally, they determined that it would be beneficial to continue to provide targeted tier 2 and tier 3 intervention to the 10% of students who were not reading proficiently as demonstrated on the Spring ORF screener.

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# RETHINKING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

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Engaging families with schools to support the education of children has been a long-standing practice, but the outcomes have not always been as successful as educators hoped for. Often, most attendees at school-wide events or parent/teacher conferences are families that are white and middle income, and "whose home culture most closely matches the norms, values, and cultural assumptions reflected in the school" (Brewster, C., & Railsback, 2003, p. 3). To remedy that and boost attendance, planning such events involves more than creating a schedule and sending out invitations; it must consider the needs of all families. This commitment involves a long-term approach that requires school administrators and educators to truly understand the community and the families of their students, and to use that information to create meaningful and welcoming opportunities for families to participate in their children's education and the life of the school. In this article, we propose a few recommendations that may expand interest in school wide events for all families.

## Starting Point: What's Your Framework?

Administrators and educators should begin with a wide lens and honestly assess personal beliefs, attitudes, and the school culture in light of equity, inclusivity, and cultural responsiveness. In other words, the challenges when working toward "effectively engaging specific types of families, especially those from different racial or cultural backgrounds" (Jacques & Villegas, 2018, p. 2), can be addressed if administrators and educators reflect on how they approach building trust with families and consider any implicit biases they have that might undermine those efforts. A good resource for such reflection is *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*, by Zaretta Hammond (2015). In this book, several chapters provide guiding questions that help educators understand themselves in relation to students whose cultures and languages are not shared by the educator. This understanding is necessary because it is only through thoughtful reflection, which leads to respectful relationships and open communication, that trust can be built, for without those components, educators may rely on their own assumptions and worldviews alone (Winthrop et al., 2021).

Another starting place involves schools identifying their approach to family engagement based on the four models identified by the University of Minnesota Extension (Gengler, 2014). In the first model, schools approach engagement from an assumption that parents are not interested in active engagement and turn the responsibility over fully to the schools. In model 2, the school's approach is driven by a belief that when schools and families share expectations, students succeed. To make that model work, schools must enlist the support of parents. Model 3 is cooperative and does more than just enlist parent support. In this model, the school acknowledges parent expertise and draws upon their experiences and ways of knowing. Finally, model 4 takes a collaborative approach, evidenced by the regular two-way communication occurring between schools and families--especially when deciding the policies and practices of the school.

If a school identifies with models 1-3, the next steps would be to make changes as needed to approach and integrate the collaborative model. A dedicated team of school personnel hoping to make these changes first recognizes and respects the varied family structures and support systems, then considers how to apply them in the assembly of a new model. A guide to support this transition is available from WIDA (*ABCs of Family Engagement: Key Considerations for Building Relationships with Families and Strengthening Family Engagement Practices*, 2022). The ABCs include awareness, advocacy, brokering, building trust, communication, and connecting to learning. Each category includes guiding questions that require that same broad lens used to examine one's own biases. For example, one question asks educators to consider what makes families feel unwelcome at their school, and another asks them to consider how to ensure families are collaborators when establishing a common vision.

## Digging Deeper: Whose Party Is it?

Data demonstrate that while educators remain steadfastly middle class, white, and female, student demographics are shifting quickly as numbers of linguistically and culturally diverse families increase (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). For example, in Tennessee 37% of students are diverse compared to only 13% of teachers, mirroring a national trend (TN Department of Education, 2018). Recognizing that ways of knowing and doing are as varied among cultures as the students themselves should provide the impetus educators need to learn more about others and contrast that with their own ways of knowing and doing. For example, many cultures are collectivist in nature, whereas the heartbeat of American culture is individualism. Knowing the difference between the two provides opportunities for planning events that consider collectivist approaches, which may make more families feel comfortable.

Consider how a collectivist approach can change the tone of parent/teacher conferences by changing the emphasis from what students should be doing to what can be accomplished together to support student learning. This strategy can build partnerships between teachers, students, and families. Joe Hirsch, a teacher and leadership coach, suggests following a framework of "context, observations, emotions, value, and input" instead of the feedback sandwich, which attempts to "sidestep blame, conflict, and hurt feelings by surrounding negative feedback with positive statements" (Hirsch, 2018). The feedback sandwich is a praise-critique-praise method, and it amounts to trying to cushion criticism. Using Hirsch's method, a teacher explains a particular situation, the feelings surrounding the event, the reason why it is worth discussing together, and finally, requests parent input– an invitation to problem-solve together.

Being cognizant of the differences between themselves and culturally and linguistically diverse families, especially recent immigrants, will prepare teachers to assist those students and their families. For example, in some cultural environments, model 1 (referenced above) is at play when a lack of parental involvement is not lack of care, but rather complete trust in professional educators to take care of schooling the children (Jacques & Villegas, 2018). In this situation, asking caregivers to give input can create an uncomfortable situation because of their expectations that it is not their place to be involved. Language barriers can also keep family members away from conferences or family events. Yet solutions for overcoming differences do exist, including using "cultural brokers" (individuals who build trust between families and schools) to "play a critical role in bridging the racial, cultural, linguistic, and power divides between schools and nondominant parents and families" by creating safe spaces to help families understand the "dominant school culture, educate parents about improving their child's achievement, connect parents to institutional resources and knowledge, and advocate for changes to the institution" (Ishimaru et al., 2016, p. 852). Cultural brokers can be other teachers who are bilingual, or a parent volunteer who is bilingual or who has a shared background with the newcomers.

An interesting concept from the book, *Families with Power: Centering Students by Engaging with Families and Community* (Cowhey, 2022), asks *whose party is it?* This invites a unique perspective on involving families. Because parents may feel like outsiders in their children's schools, Cowhey recommends shifting the power dynamic between schools and families. She advises having parents volunteer for and organize school events or activities connected to their communities and cultures and have teachers volunteer to help. While some may see this as counterintuitive to getting families to join *school-based* activities, the point is worth considering because of its underlying message. Cowhey proposes in her book that the problem with school engagement stems from the lack of understanding and/or consideration for how other people do things. The lesson for administrators and teachers? They need to make families part of the planning of events, and listen to them and their ideas, while letting go of the idea that teachers always know best. As Paulo Freire said, "Humility helps us to understand this obvious truth: No one knows it all; no one is ignorant of everything. We all know something; we are all ignorant of something" (Freire, 2005, p. 57).

Another common barrier to engagement is less about cultural differences and more about time constraints, such as scheduling conflicts or meetings that happen during dinner time. To work with such constraints, teachers should investigate times that shift changes happen in local industries, closing times of after-care facilities, and bus schedules. If most after-care facilities close their doors at 5 PM, start family nights later than that. If a large number of families are employed at nearby warehouses or industries, plan parent/teacher conferences to match changes in shifts. To increase attendance at family nights that begin at 6 PM, provide food.

One school in Sunderland, Massachusetts, decided to do just that when their open houses and family nights continued to have a stronger showing from white, middle class, educated families. Along with two other changes, the school started providing free dinner so people could come directly from work. They also personally invited every family to attend and hired a professional photographer to take free family photos. Later, they printed copies of those photos and lined the school hallways with them. Cowhey (2023) noted that implementing these shifts had a huge impact on parent turnout at that school, and added that it all began when the educators started having conversations and learning more about family engagement.

## What Works: Success Stories

Conversations are an excellent place to begin, but listening is equally important. Max Moll, the chief engagement officer for the Houston Independent School District, said that district and school leaders have the responsibility to help families engage with schools and need to begin "with the assumption that all parents care about their kids' schooling– and that they have the power within themselves to advocate" (Schwartz, 2023, para. 6). Starting with that value in mind, the district's journey toward better family involvement occurred when school leadership decided to listen by stepping away from their own meetings and joining a meeting of the Familias Latinas por la Educación—a Houston fellowship sprung from the advocacy group Latinos for Education (*Latinos for Education* 2022). During that meeting, the attendees learned from the fellows that communication continued to be a huge barrier to participation in school events. Soon after, the district instituted a new policy that a Spanish language interpreter would be present at every board meeting, which immediately changed the demographics of whose voices were being heard by the school board.

This district impacted family engagement with its schools by using several well-documented principles for increasing family engagement: it acknowledged that leadership needed to meet the Latino families in their spaces; it hired an interpreter for board meetings; and finally, it placed parent liaisons–cultural brokers–at every school "to lead parent and community engagement work" (Schwartz, 2023, para. 13).

Building relationships among school staff and families can include strategies such as those implemented by Washoe County School District in Nevada. In this district, the Council on Family Engagement hosts school walkthroughs that include family members and other volunteers who rank schools' family friendliness using a rubric aimed at improving relationships (Jacques & Villegas, 2018). They also assure that all signage is in multiple languages and that front office staff are bi- or multilingual.

Relationship building can also occur through family visits that are not evaluative in nature, but are focused on building understanding between families and schools. The public schools in the District of Columbia conduct visits to every student's home at least once in the school year. These home visits "led to increased parent engagement in other events (such as conferences) and more positive perceptions of families by school staff" (Jacques & Villegas, 2018, p. 12).

The Tennessee Department of Education takes family involvement seriously. It provides a parent and family engagement policy checklist for schools as a support tool for creating and assessing schools' existing policies. The expectation is that any such policies will be created jointly with families and school personnel, and it asks key questions such as "Is the school parent and family engagement policy presented in a format and written in a language parents/families can understand?" (TN Department of Education, 2018, p. 40) and "Does the school policy describe how

families will be involved in an organized, ongoing, and timely way in the planning, review, and improvement of programs…including the planning, review, and improvement of the school parent and family engagement policy?" (p. 41).

## Why This Matters

Schools that prioritize student achievement share several qualities, including strong leadership, strong staff collaboration, ongoing professional development, data-based and research-backed decision making, good relations with the community, and high levels of parental support (Taylor et al., 2004). A similar list of qualities identified by researchers showed that the following five supports resulted in improved student achievement in reading and math: school leadership, education personnel capacity, school learning climate, instructional guidance, and family and community engagement (Winthrop et al., 2021). Additionally, research showed that "a sustained weakness in even one of these elements led schools to stagnate, showing little improvement" (p. 10) in student achievement.

***Table 1: Do's & Don'ts***

| DO | DO NOT DO (AVOID) |
|---|---|
| Employ cultural brokers (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). | Random acts of involvement (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). |
| View families as partners (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Brewster & Railsback, 2003). | View families as bystanders (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). |
| Seek out and attend professional development on strategies to enhance cultural competence (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). | Create family nights with activities that failed to consider and include different ways of knowing and doing (e.g., collective v. individual). |
| Read books on education by BIPOC authors. | Fail to communicate (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). |
| Consider parent education workshops on weekends (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). | Jump to conclusions: "Nothing about us without us" (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020, p. 7). |
| Listen and be open (Jacques & Villegas, 2018). | Judge (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). |
| Communicate based on cultural norms and priorities (Jacques & Villegas, 2018). | Ignore class and cultural differences (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). |
| Focus on building trusting, collaborative relationships with families (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). | Believe that power resides only with the education professionals (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). |
| Welcome families in consistently appropriate and culturally competent ways (Jacques & Villegas, 2018). | Hoard responsibility (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). |

In these lists of evidence-based practices, community and parental involvement clearly matter and are not to be overlooked. In fact, much research has shown that parental support and family engagement are powerful strategies for ongoing student success (Jacques & Villegas, 2018). When families are engaged with schools and care about the success of their children, academic achievement is sought after and supported, and schools are "ten times more likely to improve student learning outcomes" (Winthrop et al., 2021, p. 10).

## A Few Do's & Don'ts

Clear guidelines exist for creating sustainable relationships with diverse families and promoting family engagement in schools, and it is just waiting to be learned and implemented by educators determined to improve student achievement. As a starting point, *Table 1* provides some key ideas to do and to avoid during the process of building connections with families.

## Conclusion

Bean and Goatley (2021) describe the critical need for increased family-school partnerships as an impetus for improved test scores, school completion rates, and attendance. This shift requires educators to look inward at their own beliefs and practices as well as to consider the embedded practices (or lack thereof) related to family engagement at their school. When we view families and students from an asset rather than a deficit-based perspective, we open up a myriad of possibilities that can benefit not just students but the school itself as we strengthen community and broaden the perspectives of all students (Milner, 2010). In this article, we have shared many strategies that can build stronger school-home connections. However, we caution educators to always position such strategies in the framework of their own specific and relevant school and community culture and needs. We believe as Cowhey (2022) does that when we "organize, connect, and collaborate; [when we] take hands and strengthen each other as we continue this work" (p. 181), we can build school environments in which all students and all families feel respected and valued.

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# “BLENDED” LEARNING: HOW VIRTUAL BOOK CLUBS STRENGTHENED COMMUNITY IN A REMOTE MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM

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In 2020, the pandemic changed the look of education, as the expansion of online learning and virtual classrooms quickly became the norm for public school classrooms. This brought forth the dire need for additional technological resources that allowed students to learn and engage in an online setting—something that prior to COVID-19 was primarily seen in post-secondary education. During this time of emergency remote learning, educators developed skills needed to maximize student engagement and collaboration in both in-person and online settings, and as such, virtual teaching methods have been normalized. Within in-person and online spaces, educators have learned to use virtual meeting spaces (i.e., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Google Hangout), virtual whiteboards (i.e., Jamboard), or other technological learning software (i.e., Google Classroom, Canvas) to facilitate learning. Since virtual classrooms and remote technologies are continuing to serve as the platform for many students in public education, schools are incorporating more nontraditional teaching methods that accompany in-person learning.

Within a hybrid instructional model, students may attend class in person, online, or a combination of the two. Students, educators, and families are cognizant of the educational learning opportunities that are now available in K–12 education. Teachers are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that students who are actively learning in hybrid environments are receiving the same levels of high-quality instruction as their in-person peers. Teachers acknowledge that active learning should encompass collaborative learning techniques, which strengthens the association between interactivity and students’ learning performance in positive ways (Chan et al., 2019).

One way to improve collaboration and interactivity with remote learners is to utilize constructivist learning that provides learners with opportunities to “construct new knowledge when they interact with others or objects in their surroundings, activate existing background knowledge in response to interactions, build new knowledge from prior knowledge, or transform older knowledge into newer information” (Unrau & Alvermann, 2013, p. 57). Using background knowledge, students have autonomy over their own learning by drawing upon lived experiences and by eliciting their views of reality within various learning tasks. Constructivist learning theories purport that students construct knowledge through their interactions with others. Because of this, educators can be mindful as they create learning opportunities for children that derive meaning inseparable from context and background.

## Exploring the Virtual Book Club

As teachers consider constructivism within an online setting, they must also consider how to meet state literacy standards. To elicit collaboration and discussion in digital platforms, virtual book clubs may be one solution. Within this remote learning experience, the constructivist approach not only fosters collaboration, but also prioritizes active learning, thereby making the reading process more meaningful for students. The relevance of the constructivist pedagogical approach lies in its ability to empower students to construct their own understanding of the word based on social interactions and prior experiences. An example of this approach can be seen in the use of online book clubs, like the one described in this article, which afford remote learning students the opportunity to engage in conversations during reading lessons and create a sense of “belongingness [that] affects children’s motivation for knowledge-sharing behavior” (Chou & Chen, 2021, p. 1). Because student “interaction is beneficial for reading behavior,” this virtual book club provided students with a collective learning space where they could connect with peers in a remote learning setting (Chou & Chen, 2021, p. 1).

The online book club created a sense of belonging, a safe space to open up about real-world events, and also allowed students to develop a deeper appreciation and understanding of others’ experiences—similar to and different from their own. The process of co-constructing knowledge and the opportunity for social interaction facilitated greater student engagement with texts and heightened motivation to learn within the confines of a remote setting (Chou & Chen, 2021).

## Students of the Book Club

Positioned as an after-school club, the virtual book club welcomed all students who enjoyed reading or who were curious to join a book club. The overarching objective was to offer students a choice that would nurture their motivation, ownership, and agency within their own learning and self-interests. Students who joined the voluntary virtual book club consisted of ten Grade 6 remote learners in a rural Middle Tennessee school. Open access to the district’s demographics indicated that 29% of the school’s population was economically disadvantaged during the time of the virtual book club (TN Department of Education, 2020). State test scores indicated less than one third of the school’s students were proficient in English Language Arts (ELA), demonstrating the necessity for impactful literacy experiences. Although 30 children were enrolled in the remote learning ELA class, only ten children joined the voluntary book club. Virtual book club participants included seven children who identified as White, two children who identified as biracial, and one child who identified as Italian. Eight of the participants were 11 years old; all others were 12. The number included six males and four females.

## Development of the Virtual Book Club

At the time of the book club, there were approximately 1.6 billion children who were unable to attend school in person, leaving many children with limited access to physical copies of books during the pandemic (Miks & McIlwaine, 2020). Educators recognize the importance of children’s access to books, as the more volume a child reads, the better reader he will become (Krashen, 2004; Miller & Sharp, 2018). Furthermore, it is well documented that the size of home libraries significantly impacts educational attainment (Evans et al., 2010). It is imperative, then, that literacy professionals ensure children who do not have regular access to classroom and school libraries have ongoing opportunities to read and/or build their home libraries.

The virtual book club began after receiving a $250 reading improvement grant from the Upper Cumberland Literacy Association (UCLA). Using grant dollars, three middle grades texts were purchased for 30 remote students: Blended by Sharon Draper, *Allies* by Alan Gratz, and *Other Words for Home* by Jasmine Warga were the three titles selected for the virtual book club.

When deciding which titles to select for inclusion in the virtual book club, texts were selected that provided children with books that could serve as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). The selected texts were contemporary realistic fiction award-winning chapter books, age-appropriate, thematically challenging, and appealing to a wide range of readers’ interests. One student in the book club, Angeline (all names are pseudonyms), expressed how she loved the book because she shared similar experiences with the main character, having one parent who was Black and one parent who was White, struggling to determine which race she more closely identified with. Angeline admitted that she often felt divided when she had to claim a racial side, but it was helpful for her to see that she was not the only person who had encountered a similar situation.

Using grant funding, drawstring bags, novels, pencils, highlighters, and bookmarks were distributed to book club members. Screencastify, a screen recording software, was used by the teacher to read aloud each chapter in the text in advance of the assigned readings. The weekly read-alouds were then uploaded into Google Classroom where students could access audio recordings. The online book club met weekly via Zoom for approximately one hour to discuss the plot and character development, as well as to unpack dense themes presented in the chapters. The teacher also used digital whiteboards for students to ask questions or contribute to class discussions in interactive, engaging ways. Students led organic discussions, bringing up points that were relevant to them. Although student-led discussion took precedence, the teacher prepared questions to fill in the gaps that were centered around grade level standards. Examples of such prompts included: *What is revealed about Isabella’s dad in his reaction to the shooting at the ice cream parlor? What can be inferred about the way Isabella responded when a peer stated that she looked exotic? What do you think will be the ripple effect of Isabella’s dad remarrying? How do you think other children would react to a similar situation? and: If you were going to tell someone about this book, what would you want to say and why?*

During the first of the three virtual book clubs, students read *Blended* by Sharon Draper. This novel consisted of an 11-year-old biracial girl’s struggle to define her identity, constantly feeling torn between her middle-class, White mother and her rich, Black father. Through a series of racial events, the main character, Isabella, began to understand society’s discrepancies, all while embracing her own identity and realizing how being *blended actually* made her special and unique. She became proud of her identity in such a way that it inspired readers to honor their own culture and values, just as Angeline was able to embrace her own identity as a biracial student. During one book club meeting, Farrah, another book club member, shared how *Blended* positively impacted her because it helped her realize “people are people, and the color of your skin does not matter.” At the conclusion of each of the three books, students presented their text-to-text connections as well as self and world connections to the story by either constructing a paper, creating a poem, or producing a video during a Zoom meeting. The same format followed for the other two texts: *Allies* and *Other Words* for Home. Students continued to participate as they did in the first virtual book club—interacting through various modes of learning that incorporated tools and authentic interactions that encouraged engagement and collaboration.

## Virtual Book Club Impact

Students’ interactions during virtual book clubs equalized the opportunity for remote learners to develop literacy skills including comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency as they made meaningful connections to the text, discussed complex words and phrases, and increased the amount of time spent reading per week. For this particular book club, students who joined received two books, which provided access to literature and allowed remote students to explore a variety of chapter books, written from different authors, and incorporating different topics. These books provided children with access to literature and increased their home libraries, while equalizing time spent reading for kids learning from home.

The interaction with peers, as well as the discussions about character development in relation to specific events and circumstances, helped the students see that through their actions they could make changes in their own lives and in the world. Remote students often lack the ability to learn from their peers like they would if they were in an in-person classroom. In this virtual book club, students were able to discuss the books and their interpretation of plot elements and character development, all while sharing their varied perspectives, points of view, and insight. Students also learned how to respond critically to thinking prompts, share their ideas effectively, and communicate well with their peers and teacher, all of which are school-centered skills.

Literacy projects can also contribute to the development of meaningful impacts between participants and their communities (Davis, 2013). Students who participated in the virtual book club felt empowered to make a difference in the lives of others within their community. After reading Blended, one student, Jamaal, was so inspired by the story that he had

an idea to start a support group for kids whose parents are divorcing or who were already divorced. He felt that the support group would allow his peers who shared similar experiences to comfort and confide in one another. Farrah, another book club participant, agreed that the “support groups could help [other students] find books and articles that might help [them] understand the problems they are having.”

Another positive impact the virtual book club had was increasing the number of books inside middle school students’ homes. For children living in high-poverty areas, adding easy access to books is imperative because “it is at the bottom, where books are rare, that each additional book matters most, not among the literate elite; each additional book yields more ‘bang for your book’ among the book-poor than among the book-rich” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 17). Thus, voluntary virtual book clubs have the potential to positively impact readers by providing access to books and book choices to children living in poverty or low-literacy environments. Through the online book clubs, these spaces may serve as an opportunity for students to trade physical copies of books or recommend new books to peers.

## Discussion

The purpose of this article was to share how one middle school ELA teacher utilized a local literacy chapter’s mini-grant funds to purchase diverse texts for her remote learners. Through each book’s rich plot, relatable characters, and pressing themes, the students in the virtual book club found themselves able to connect and identify with the stories and loved discussing the readings during their weekly meetings. Despite the book club being run virtually, students were afforded similar learning opportunities as their in-person peers, developing a love of reading and a sense of ownership of the text selections. Constructivism was effectively implemented within this remote learning environment, providing students with invaluable opportunities to cultivate critical thinking skills and participate in meaningful discussions. Importantly, this approach fostered a community among remote peers, enabling them to engage in a collective learning journey (Chou & Chen, 2021).

Although in many classrooms, texts are prescribed and mandatory, virtual book clubs provide students with opportunities to self-select the texts they want to read, which continues to be essential for middle school readers. As teachers develop relationships with their students through online book clubs, they can begin to make better book recommendations for their students based on their interests and reading profiles, creating a lifelong love for reading.

Teachers can provide resources to students that enable them to find interesting or relatable books. Databases such as the Children’s Book Council (CBC) and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Teen Book Finder are excellent ways to expose middle grade readers to curated book lists for high-quality texts published each year.

## Summary

The volunteer book club serves as an illustration of how models like ours can effectively address the need for equitable educational opportunities in remote learning settings, whether they be fully online or hybrid. The project successfully secured grant funding from the Upper Cumberland Literacy Association, which equipped us with necessary support to provide books and essential supplies for the remote students. By filling the void created by the absence of school libraries, the project bridged the gap and ensured students in the voluntary remote book club had access to chapter books like their in-school counterparts. By fostering a constructivist learning environment, we observed the impact of students' engagement with chapter books and their participation in meaningful collaborative learning discussions. During zoom meetings, students collaborated, exchanging their thoughts and perspectives on the books they read. Moreover, the book club served as an additional opportunity to enhance literacy skills, specifically vocabulary and compression of fiction texts. Notably, the online book club facilitated the development of text-to-self and text-to world connections, increasing the value of their time spent reading the texts. The virtual book club provided the flexibility of a meaningful online learning experience for students to discuss the books’ content, as remote learners socially engaged asynchronously and synchronously with their classmates, seeing themselves as changemakers within their communities, building their home libraries, and developing their love for reading.

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# PREPARING TEACHER CANDIDATES TO USE LITERATURE CIRCLES IN REMOTE AND IN PERSON CLASSROOMS

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## Introduction

Literature circles are a collaborative approach for students to construct meaning about a text with other readers. Literature circles embody comprehension skills, writing for meaning, and evaluating the text based on students' own experiences. In literature circles, the members of the group read the same text and participate in the discussion about the text, while taking on a different role or task (Karatay, 2017). To implement this structure in a classroom means developing a student's capacity for engaging in literature conversations. Literature circles hold students accountable to the reading because they are focused on the task and are using critical thinking skills (Briggs, 2010; Burner, 2010). The students learn the importance of self-learning while increasing their self-confidence on understanding the content (Daniels, 2002). McCarthy (2015) affirmed when the students are engaged in literature circles, the teacher moves to student-led instruction, which builds their capacity to lead.

Providing teacher candidates (TCs) the opportunity to participate in literature circles will help them become familiar and comfortable with this structure technique so they can implement the strategy in their future classroom. For novice teachers to be proficient in setting up effective literature circles, we have implemented this structure in the senior level Communication Arts Course for TCs in early childhood and elementary education programs. This article will look at setting up the structure, using writing to think more deeply about the text, assessment of learning, and evidence of effectiveness in both in person classroom and virtual course settings.

## Using Literature Circles with Teacher Candidates: Face-to-Face and Virtually

The Communication Arts Course is a four-credit hour section which allows for the TCs to have the opportunity to activate prior knowledge about communication arts and apply what they have learned so they are prepared for the future classroom. The course starts with an emergent literacy module and follows with modules on vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, teaching writing, and using data to drive literacy instruction. Each of these two-weeks to four-weeks modules are the focus for the literacy classroom. Weekly, TCs are assigned a reading, which they use as the basis for their literature circle conversations. Table 1 provides a side-by-side comparison of an in-person and a virtual format literature circle along with an overview of literature circles in the TCs' Communication Arts Course to prepare them to implement the structure in their future classrooms. Both in person and virtual formats are provided. Additionally, a rubric is provided (Table 2) to hold students accountable during the literature circles along with a table of the roles defined (Table 3).

***Table 1: Literature Circle Examples***

| | In Person-Example | Virtually-Example |
|---|---|---|
| ***What is it?*** | A small group comes together to have a focused discussion on a text/article | A small group comes together to have a focused discussion on a text/article |
| ***Why do we do literature circles?*** | Allows a collaborative way for comprehension to be taught, allows students to evaluate a text based on their own experiences:<br>• Respond to questions and discussion with relevant and focused comments.<br>• Respond to a question with textual evidence<br>• Identify and analyze literary elements in text.<br>• Ask relevant questions to clarify understanding. | Allows a collaborative way for students to learn about a topic connected to reading and make personal connections based on their experiences.<br>• Respond to questions and discussion with relevant and focused comments.<br>• Respond to a question with textual evidence<br>• Ask relevant questions to clarify understanding. |
| ***Literature Circle Plan*** | 1. On Day 1 of the semester, students will complete a learning preference inventory, and students will be placed into literature circles.<br>2. On first meeting, Group meets and determines roles based on description<br>3. During the first meeting, the literature circle completes Do This and Do Not Do This to determine and establish norms.<br>4. Following the first meeting, the Personnel Director submits the agreed upon Roles and Norms to the instructor.<br>5. For subsequent meetings, students will agree to have reading and quick write complete prior to meeting | 1. During the first online literature circle, the instructor will go over the expectations for the learning module and the roles in the literature circle.<br>2. The students will be sorted into breakout rooms in Zoom.<br>3. During the Zoom breakout sessions, the students will identify their roles.<br>4. The instructor will join the breakout sessions to check in on the groups and to answer any questions throughout the session.<br>5. For subsequent meetings, students will agree to have reading and any follow up notes completed. |
| ***What Do We Read in Literature Circles*** | In this class, each module has a selected reading for each week that will be discussed in literature circles. As we move through the semester, texts and articles will be co-selected. | In this class, if an online session is needed for a snow day or quarantine, literature circles are held to work through the weekly module. |
| ***Connecting Writing to Literature Circles*** | Each week before coming to class, you will have the selected reading for the week read and a quick write completed. The quick write will be in response to a prompt. This quick write is the foundation for discussions when you meet in literature circles. | When the literature circles are completed virtually, the students complete the Google Jamboard to display their learning and as well as their groups' takeaways from the content. |
| ***Dialogue and Discussion in Literature Circles*** | Starting with the quick write and teacher prompts, students will move into literature circles to discuss the text/article of the week. During and after the discussion, students will have a chance to revise and add to your quick write, adding information from the discussion. This is also a chance to write about any concerns with group dynamics. The revised quick writes become the entrance ticket into class and worth 5 points each. | During the Zoom session, the students are given an article to read and instructed to think of their top 10 takeaways, connections, questions they had while reading and discussing, as well as any connections to what they have seen in classrooms. |
| ***Roles*** | Discussion Director<br>Taskmaster<br>Text Detective<br>Personnel Director<br><br>Roles change with each module | Discussion Director<br>Taskmaster<br>Text Detective<br>Personnel Director<br><br>Roles change with each module |
| ***What is the Classroom Teacher Doing?*** | The instructor is walking around listening into the literature circles, conferencing with the groups and completing an observation checklist to provide information on supporting specific groups and members in content knowledge. | The instructor creates meeting rooms/breakout rooms. In Zoom, the instructor creates breakout rooms. This allows for each literature circle group to meet. The instructor enters the breakout sessions to ensure each group is on task and to provide support or answer questions. |
| ***Discussion Director*** | Sample questions they may prepare to ask the group (needs to be prepared in advance):<br>• What was going through your mind when you read this?<br>• How did you feel when…?<br>• Can someone summarize this section?<br>• Did anything surprise you about this section of the book?<br>• How does this apply to us as future teachers? | Sample questions they may prepare to ask the group (needs to be prepared in advance):<br>• What was going through your mind when you read this?<br>• How did you feel when…?<br>• Can someone summarize this section?<br>• Did anything surprise you about this section of the book?<br>• How does this apply to us as future teachers? |
| ***Literature Circle Artifacts*** | 1. Weekly Quick Writes<br>2. Module Literature Circle Reflections<br>3. Anecdotal Student feedback gathered three times a semester | 1. Google Jamboard |

*Table 2: Proficiency Scale for Literature Circles - Student Accountability*

| | |
|---|---|
| **4** | The student is actively participating (listening, contributing to discussion, completing assigned roles). The student is prepared with the needed materials for the literature circle. |
| **3** | The student is participating by completing the assigned role with some active participation and comes to the literature circle mostly prepared. The student completes the assigned role with support from peers. |
| **2** | The student is not fully participating and contributing to the conversations. The student is completing the assigned role with many errors. |
| **1** | The student is not contributing to the conversation or completing the assigned role or the student is disruptive during literature circles. |

***Table 3:Roles Defined***

**There are various roles to use in literature circles. Roles can be determined on how many students are in each group.*

| | |
|---|---|
| ***Discussion Director*** | The discussion director can also be referred to as the discussion facilitator is charged with the responsibility to create a list of questions connected to the book or article that the group can discuss. The questions should allow for critical thinking. |
| ***Task Master*** | The taskmaster has the responsibility to keep the group moving and keeps the group on task throughout the duration of the literature circle.<br>Keep your eye on the timer and give your group 10-, 5-, and 2-minute warnings- “Five more minutes!” “Back to the task!” |
| ***Personal Director*** | Keep everyone involved in the chat by encouraging unmuting, cameras on, and typing in the chat box.<br>Update absentees<br>Check for understanding: “Did everyone get that?” “Let’s hear from everyone!” |
| ***Text Detective*** | Examine all answers making sure they are text based.<br>Lead your group through the search for powerful evidence- “Let’s look for quotes!” |

## Literature Circles in Action

In both in-person and virtual literature circles, it is the conversation that is the center of the learning. Two examples are provided: an excerpt from an in-person literature circle where students extend each other’s conversations and an example from a virtual literature circle conversation.

## Excerpt from an In-Person Literature Circle

In both in-person and virtual literature circles, it is the conversation that is the center of the learning. Two examples are provided: an excerpt from an in-person literature circle where students extend each other’s conversations and an example from a virtual literature circle conversation.

Excerpt from an In-Person Literature Circle

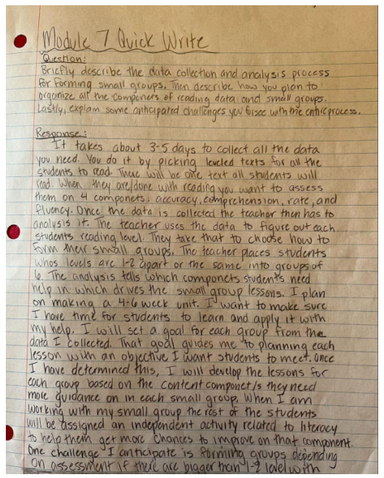
In the in-person literature circles, groups are assigned articles based on the module topic. For example, in the final module of the semester, using data to drive English Language Arts ELA) instruction, students were to read the article by “How to Use Data to Create Small Reading Groups” (Schmidt, 2017) and then respond to the following prompt in their quick write journal:

> *Briefly describe the data collection and analysis process for forming small groups. Then describe how you plan to organize all the components of reading data and small groups. Lastly, explain some anticipated challenges you foresee with the entire process.*

Each member of the literature circle brought their quick write response to their group. The *Discussion Director* posed the prepared questions for a focused collaborative discussion. In this session, the discussion questions were:

1. What are the four components to assess a student on reading?
2. How does your cooperating teacher organize their data and then share goals with students?

The *Task Master* ensures the group stays on topic while the Text Detective guides the literature circle to certain parts of the text if there is disagreement or the conversation needs added support. Based on the group's dialogue around the questions and quick write prompt, they add an addendum to the end of their quick write and submit as their entrance ticket to that class session. Shown below is an example of a Quick Write on this topic.


Module 7 Quick Write

Questions:

Briefly describe the data collection and analysis process for forming small groups. Then describe how you plan to organize all the components of reading data and small groups. Lastly, explain some anticipated challenges you foresee with the entire process.

Response:

It takes about 3-5 days to collect all the data you need. You do it by picking leveled texts for all the students to read. Twice will be one text all students will read when they are done with reading you want to assess them on 4 components: accuracy, comprehension, rate, and fluency. Once the data is collected the teacher then has to analysis it. The teacher uses the data to figure out each students reading level. They take that to choose how to form their small groups. The teacher places students whos levels are 1-2 apart or the same into groups of 6. The analysis tells which components students need help in which drives the small group lessons. I plan on making a 4-6 week unit. I want to make sure I have time for students to learn and apply it with my help. I will set a goal for each group from the data I collected. That goal guides me to planning each lesson with an objective I want students to meet. Once I have determined this, I will develop the lessons for each group based on the content component/s they need more guidance on in each small group. When I am working with my small group the rest of the students will be assigned an independent activity related to literacy to help them get more chances to improve on that component. One challenge I anticipate is forming groups depending on assessments if there are bigger than 1-2 levels with

The entrance tickets were then assessed by the professor for assessment of ad for learning. The quick writes serve as a snapshot of the new learning the TCs developed as well as a visible artifact on how they started thinking more deeply about their literacy practices in both their current practicum classroom and their future classroom.

## Excerpt from a Remote Literature Circle Conversation

In the remote learning literature circle conversation, one group was assigned the topic of *structured literacy* while another group was assigned the topic of *balanced literacy*. Each group was given an article to read over their assigned topic. While observing the groups in breakout sessions, the discussion was centered around what they observed in the classroom during their junior and senior level practicum experiences. They displayed their learning by creating a Google Jamboard which was then presented to the other group. An example of a Google Jamboard creation over balanced literacy is provided.


## Issues to Address and Possible Solutions when Implementing Literature Circles

In literature circles, there are three common challenges. These are (1) equal participation, (2) high levels of thinking in questioning and reflecting, and (3) developing trust early in the semester. The first challenge of equal participation is partially addressed in the members of the literature circle each having a role. The Discussion Director is the primary driver of the conversation, not just based on their questions. Karatay (2017) stated, “The teacher or the moderator, to manage the discussion, should set the rules for participation at the very beginning and give equal right to speak to everyone.” (p.72). The second challenge is connected to higher level thinking and reflecting. This can be resolved by allowing ample time to read the assigned article, model higher order questions and time to reflect by providing prompts to answer. For the third challenge, the teacher sets the tone for the classroom community. Gilbert (2000) suggested the teacher should create expectations that will facilitate activities in the literature circles which will in return help students understand the meaning and importance of learning communities.

## Lessons Learned from Implementation of Literature Circles

### In-Person Learning Format

In the in-person format, the quick writes were effective at having students synthesize, reflect, and have discussions about the text or article, but in future literature circles, students would make explicit connections to using literature circles in their future classroom. For example, if the weekly text or article was on teaching fluency to third graders, the entrance ticket would include an understanding of the key content, an application of the content to their practicum classrooms and future classrooms and how the topic intertwines and supports other module topics. There were 28 TCs who completed weekly quick writes for their literature circles. Feedback at the end of the semester showed while the quick writes were helpful in synthesizing module content, it was the dialogue among peers on a focused question and hearing what it looked like in action in four different practicum classrooms was most beneficial.

### Virtual Learning Format

In the virtual learning format, a 3-2-1 exit was an effective way to gather feedback on the TCs’ experience with literature circles. TCs discussed three things they learned, two ways they would implement literature circles in their future classrooms, and one question they had about literature circles. There were 13 TCs in the course and 100% of the students completed the exit ticket. When reviewing the three things they learned about literature circles, there were similar responses in all the responses which focused on collaboration, assigned tasks, and how the roles kept everyone involved. The TCs also shared how the literature circles provided an opportunity to think critically while having positive interactions and discussions with their peers.

When reviewing the responses over two ways TCs would use literature circles, the responses were similar. The TCs stated they would use literature circles in reading and allow each group to choose their own book. They would also use literature circles in science and social studies. Three of the thirteen TCs wrote they would use literature circles in math when working on word problems. One TC stated they would have literature circles be a part of a unit of study on a particular topic.

The TCs had several questions connected to using literature circles. To answer their questions, a table was created with the question and the instructor’s response. This was shared with them in a handout when we met in person for class. See Table 4.

*Table 4: TCs' Questions Connected to Literature Circles*

| ***Questions from TCs*** | ***Answers from Instructor with a Resource Support to Questions*** |
|---|---|
| ***What would a good amount of time be for the circles?*** | It depends on the length of the book and level of the book. Meeting twice a week in literature circles is a good idea.<br><br>It also depends on the needs of your students. Some students will only be able to handle it once a week. If your class is independent and can manage their circles appropriately, then more than 2 times a week is appropriate.<br><br>**Source:** Teacher Thrive (2023). Tips for successful literature circles. https://teacherthrive.com/tips-for-successful-literature-circles/ |
| ***What other websites would be beneficial other than Jamboard?*** | Students can create a Prezi, PPT of their work. Additionally, students can present any work in Canva, Flipsnack, or Padlet. Also, students could audio record through Flipgrid or create short videos.<br><br>It is not necessary to use a website with literature circles. The students can use reading journals and graphic organizers. |
| ***What is the best practice for a stalled lit circle conversation?*** | This depends on the students in the classroom:<br><br>1. Maybe the students are not prepared, and they need to be directed to go back and read some more of their book.<br>2. If a student is choosing not to participate, it could be they are not interested in the topic or book. So, that is why student interest inventories are important.<br>3. If enough wait time is given when students are talking, then encourage the students to move onto a different type of question.<br><br>**Source:** Harvard Graduate School of Education (2023). Instructional moves. https://instructionalmoves.gse.harvard.edu/ |
| ***Should you let students pick their roles or assign the roles?*** | This depends on the group of students. The roles can change each time or can stay the same for the semester and switch at semester. When students can pick their own roles, I think this can empower choice. However, some students may need help from the teacher in the assigned roles. |
| ***Can literature circles be used effectively with young readers?*** | Yes, literature circles can be used effectively in K-2 classrooms. The literature circles may involve having discussions about the pictures in their book club/lit circle. It is a great way for the students to work with their peers on speaking and listening.<br><br>For more information on literature circles check out Noe (2013) Literature Circles Resource Center (www.litcircles.org) |
| ***What is the best way to keep students on task that struggle with group work?*** | Most of the time, when students are assigned a task they enjoy in lit circles, they stay on task. The use of close proximity is effective. Be sure to not give the students a lot of time in the literature circle if students struggle with being on task (instead of 20 minutes, shorten it to 10). Have students rate their level of engagement on a scale of 1-5 (1 being low and 5 being high). This is a good way to set a goal for the student who struggles.<br><br>A valuable resource with 5 tips to keep students involved from Learning in Room 213 (2017) can be found here: https://learninginroom213.com/2017/06/5-ways-to-keep-students-on-task-during-group-work/ |
| ***Can lit circles be used across other content areas?*** | Literature circles can be used across content areas. During math, when students are working on math word problems, they could work in a literature circle, which is referred to as a math circle. Literature circles can be used in Science and Social Studies, as well.<br><br>**Sources:** Literature Circles: A Basic Start-Up Guide (n.d)<br>An Overview of Math Circles (n.d) |

## Next Steps

As professors of the early childhood and elementary education program, we see the value of preparing teacher candidates for literature circles. Providing teacher candidates with a plethora of ideas to take into consideration in their future classrooms is one way to help them be successful in their career. The next step would be to require a lesson in their practicum where it is centered around literature circles. This experience will not only allow them the opportunity to experience literature circles in coursework but take what they learned and apply it in a real-world experience. The lesson developed will be scored and evaluated, but the main component will be the post reflection questions the TCs will answer after they taught the lesson. Questions for the candidates to answer post teaching will be:

1. Did your students learn what you intended them to learn? Explain.
2. What modifications and accommodations did you make while implementing literature circles?
3. What adjustments did you make during the lesson?
4. What feedback did you give to your students during literature circles?
5. What classroom management strategies did you use while implementing literature circles?
6. What adjustments would you make if you implemented literature circles again?
7. What would the follow up lesson be based on today's lesson?

When TCs can implement the strategies and learning structures learned in coursework, it provides them opportunities to have a valuable discussion with their peers. Fisher et al. (2021) affirmed. "Students should be provided time to engage in dialogue with their peers" (p.132). After the implementation of the literature circles, the TCs will be given time in coursework to share their experiences with peers. This can be done in a whole group, small group, or even through a cooperative learning strategy where they respond to questions through a gallery walk. The questions TCs could respond to through peer conversations or gallery walks could be:

1. What challenges did you have with literature circles?
2. What successes did you have with literature circles?
3. How did you manage disagreements or off task behavior when students were in their literature circles?
4. What would you do differently the next time you use literature circles?

## Summary

Using student-led instruction such as literature circles builds students' confidence in not only understanding the content but working with their peers in a collaborative manner. A structure such as literature circles, requires students to focus on the task at hand while the teacher is the facilitator of the classroom. The teacher can check in with groups while they are working to ensure task behavior and understanding of content. Having Ts immerse themselves in the framework of literature circles, both as an active participant and to model the process in their future classroom holds promise for both college classrooms as well as K-12 classrooms. Literature circles provide a platform for collaboration, critical thinking, and applying content, but literature circles also provide a vehicle for flexibility in the classroom and differentiation for diverse learning needs in communication arts.

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# NORMALIZING INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS: THE IMPACT ON LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

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## Introduction

How do you get from point A to point B? Is there only one way, and should everyone follow that one way? Oftentimes, the curriculum will outline and encourage a single method, strategy, or technique for accomplishing a goal (Coakley-Fields, 2018), and there are those who subscribe to the belief that students should "conform to rules around quiet reading and reading only certain leveled books" (p. 2). Although beneficial for practicing good behavior and skills, this line of thinking can be limiting and not inclusive. The general education classroom includes a heterogeneous group of students with diverse wants and needs. In order to meet these diverse wants and needs as educators, we need to become more inclusive by accepting, understanding, and providing for those with diverse backgrounds, cultures, and identities. The purpose of this article is to better understand and normalize inclusive classrooms through practice, as well as highlight the impact inclusive classrooms have on literacy development in early childhood education.

## What Are Inclusive Classrooms

Unfortunately, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to understanding the effect inclusion has on students with disabilities and their peers (Coakley-Fields, 2018; Francisco et al., 2020). Generally speaking, inclusive classrooms are classrooms that are accessible for, and accepting of, all students regardless of ability. Inclusive should not be confused with accessibility, diversity, or equity. Although interconnected, inclusivity encompasses all three while adding a layer of acceptance. Inclusive classrooms have become a very controversial topic among educators and researchers. Teachers are notoriously underpaid, overworked, and allotted an insufficient amount of support for the job required (Oliver-Kerrigan et al., 2021) while also juggling high student-to-teacher ratios. These barriers, along with a lack of understanding, all contribute to teachers' hesitation toward inclusive classrooms.

The inclusive movement was originally galvanized by individuals with disabilities, and the term inclusion made its first appearance in federal legislation concerning education rights for students with disabilities.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal legislation ensuring that students with disabilities receive a free, public education, regardless of environment, ability, or financial status (Alasim, 2019; Francisco et al, 2020). Within the IDEA, there is a Least Restrictive Environment provision that requires students with disabilities to be educated with their non-disabled peers to the fullest extent as deemed necessary. However, students with disabilities are often segregated to separate classrooms for more specialized learning, widening the gap between them and their peers, both academically and socially (Coakley-Fields, 2018). Fortunately, in recent years inclusion and inclusive classrooms have come to embrace all diverse others making the classroom more multicultural and truly comprehensive (Francisco et al., 2020). This welcome change now requires a more in-depth look and understanding of inclusive classrooms. With that in mind, meeting the needs of students with disabilities is often perceived as one of the more challenging hurdles to overcome.

## Misconceptions of Inclusive Classrooms

For many years, the education system has subscribed to the segregation model and has placed students in separate classrooms based on perceived ability (Coakley-Fields, 2018). A common misconception among educators is the belief that having a student with a disability in the classroom classifies the class as inclusive. This belief is misplaced due to the fact that there are visible disabilities and invisible disabilities. A teacher may or may not know if they have a student with a disability in their classroom until explicitly stated or demonstrated through performance. Regardless, inclusive classrooms are not based on knowing if a student has a disability, but instead, it is based on accepting and making the most accessible class for all students.

Unfortunately, this misconception is not the only one of its kind.  Chen et al. (2019) believed that practicing inclusive classrooms could potentially increase the likelihood of isolation and rejection for students with disabilities, which, in turn, could have an impact on their social and academic development. Soukakou et al. (2014) suggested that "program standards, professional development, and resources could affect the quality of inclusive classrooms" (p. 4), and thus should be carefully examined to ensure inclusive practices. It comes as no surprise that the belief that a lack of funds has suppressed educators' creative problem-solving capabilities regarding inclusivity (Francisco et al., 2020). However, as more information is made available and more creative solutions are discovered, financial restraints are no longer a pressing issue. Because in the end, it is not about how expensive of a gadget you have but how useful your accessible idea can be. This mindfulness, along with many other markers, has shifted the segregation model to more of a social model in that the problem lies with the environment, not the person. Inclusive classrooms have the ability to "strengthen learning and development for both children with and without disabilities" (Soukakou et al., 2014, p. 10). Furthermore, **Alasim** (2019) found a positive correlation between inclusive classrooms and literacy development, but that stereotypes, stigmas, and preconceived notions have limited students and teachers in their pursuit of knowledge.

## Peer Interaction and Support

Bandura's social learning theory proposes that imitation and observation are two key components in peer interaction that result in social, emotional, and academic development (Chen et al., 2019); whereas, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory suggests "that learning and development occur within social activities wherein children co-construct their cognitive and social knowledge together with their peers" (p. 3). In both cases, peer interaction is essential to cognitive and social development. Coakley-Fields (2018) found that not only were peer interactions and relationships important for academic and social development but for literacy development as well. Literacy is a multifaceted, complex concept, a butterfly effect. A simple change in how a story is presented or how an interaction is perceived can have an effect on communication development, which could impact how a child socializes, which then could influence how literacy is learned (Taylor & Leung, 2020). The seemingly smallest decision made by a teacher could alter the course of a child's education. In fact, Avcioglu (2017) found a correlation between teacher interaction and peer acceptance of students with disabilities in the classroom, further supporting the butterfly effect of literacy. Not only is peer interaction important but teacher interaction and perception can be equally influential. Teachers need to frequently perform self-evaluations to ensure they are not perpetuating any negative stereotypes or microaggressions.

In order to promote acceptance, as well as support academic and social development, some simple suggestions include: evaluating students based on interests shown in class, making eye contact with students, addressing all students by name, using love and compassion when approaching, modeling respect, respond with positive non-verbal gestures such as smiling and head nods, use positive words of affirmation and validation, and highlight good behavior with encouragements (Avcioglu, 2017, p. 22).

## Literacy Within the Inclusive Classroom

According to Eredics (2014), the first step toward inclusivity is to acknowledge that the students within your class are diverse. Each student learns differently, and thus, each student will have a different need. It is important to hold each student to a standard but to also acknowledge that each student will begin at a different level of understanding and will need to be met at their current developmental milestone. Adaptations, accommodations, and modifications can be made and true growth can be seen after this is understood.

To that point, accessibility is not just for those with disabilities; it is an inclusive culture that benefits everyone. Many accommodations used for students with disabilities can be applied to the general class as a whole, normalizing inclusive classrooms and providing alternative learning modalities for all students. For example, closed captioning and subtitles on videos, tv shows, and movies have been shown to increase foundational literacy skills such as word recognition, phonics, and fluency (Eredics, 2014). Using closed captioning and subtitles can help struggling readers, English language learners, and students with disabilities. Each streaming platform such as Hulu and Netflix, along with TV shows, movies, and video platforms like YouTube will have captioning and subtitle options under their settings. This is a simple way to make your classroom inclusive while benefiting everyone.

Next, classroom bookshelves should include a wide variety of literature, including a variety of genres, reading levels, and formats, including print, audio, and eBooks (Eredics, 2014; Menna et al., 2020). Classrooms should support both multimodal and multicultural texts to normalize cultures other than one's own and preferred modes of literacy (Coakley-Fields, 2018). "Multimodal perspectives embrace language, literacy, and learning in and across all modes" (Narey, 2017, p. 3-4), which leads to acceptance, and ultimately, to the normalization of inclusive classrooms. Simple ways to incorporate multimodal literacy include but are not limited to projecting an eBook on the board or listening to an audiobook, then dramatizing the story through movement as the class reads; making and eating food related to the story; and playing music at specific parts of the story when keywords or phrases are mentioned (Taylor & Leung, 2020, p. 5). Try to use more than one source of sensory input (I.E., hearing, seeing, tasting, touching, smelling), keeping in mind that those with disabilities often need some visual component, such as hands-on experience or visual aids.

## Accommodations

Typically, closed captioning and subtitles have been designated as approved accommodations for those who are deaf or hard of hearing (Alasim, 2019). However, closed captioning and subtitles have also been shown to improve literacy skills for those with attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), English language learners (ELL), and those who struggle with reading. The use of pictures, videos, and movies alongside closed captioning and subtitles has proven useful to increase literacy development in the general education classroom (Alasim, 2019; Gernsbacher, 2015) Additionally, regardless if there is a student with hearing impairment in your class, using closed captioning and subtitles normalize this accommodation.

Integrating technology into the classroom is also very helpful (Eredics, 2014). Assistive technology is classified as an accommodation, and it can help with listening, math, organization and memory, reading, and writing by allowing students to showcase their abilities and mitigate any physical or cognitive challenges they may face (Stanberry & Raskind, 2009). Most mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets, will have accessibility features built into the device itself (Understood, 2018). IOS, the operating system for Apple, accessibility settings include vision accommodations such as voiceover, which makes the device accessible for the blind and reads everything on the screen; zoom, which allows those with limited vision to "zoom-in" on the screen and makes words and images larger; hearing, which includes captioning and subtitles, sound recognition; physical and motor, which changes the motion and button sensitivity on the device making it easier for those who have difficulty holding the device still or pressing buttons. The Apple app store and Google Play also provide endless opportunities for accessible applications to be used inside the classroom. Both IOS and Android devices provide talk-to-text and dictation options for those who may have difficulty writing or typing. This feature can be just as useful as traditional methods in

that the students can think and process what they want to say, speak or dictate it aloud, and then review for errors and make corrections. Text-to-speech is also provided in that a student can highlight a section of a page, and the device would then read it aloud. A number of activities, resources, and examples relating to inclusive literacy practices can be found on the Reading Rockets website (Kluth & Chandler-Olcott, 2017). Remember, accommodations and adaptations are the original life hackers. If you think someone has found a shortcut, it can be used in an inclusive classroom.

## Conclusion

As Inclusive classrooms become more accepted, teachers in the general classroom need more training, multicultural sensitivity, and classroom accessibility. Educators need to have more diversity awareness training; be aware of the effect inclusive classrooms can have on not only children with disabilities but also their non-disabled peers and teachers; and actively practice inclusivity within their general classroom. So, the next time you are asked, "Do you know how to get from point A to point B?" You can answer" Yes, the inclusive way."

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TEACHING TIP

# UNLOCKING LITERACY AND PERSONAL IDENTITY THROUGH HISTORICALLY AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICE


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## What is Historically Responsive Literacy?

As teachers of literacy, we are always on the lookout for ways to bring literacy to life, to make it relevant, engaging, meaningful, and to know our students more deeply so that we can help them make authentic connections to literacy. In this article, we will describe and share how we moved a step closer to achieving these goals through the implementation of historically and culturally responsive literacy activities. Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) is a reconceptualized literacy education framework that "authentically draws upon and responds to the histories, identities, and literacy and language practices of students for teaching and learning" (Muhammad, 2020, p. 49). This framework was created by Dr. Gholdy Muhammad, an associate professor at Georgia State University, and explained in her recent book *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*. Her work in this field was influenced by her study of historical literacy development, specifically, the formation and presence of Black literary societies of the 19th century. Muhammad's revolutionary framework reflects these historical models of literacy acquisition in order to affirm and address the current educational needs of our most marginalized groups of students. The HRL framework (Muhammad, 2020) includes four pursuits, or goals, that educators should help students cultivate during all forms of instruction:

1. **Identity**- The "notions of who we are, who others say we are (in both positive and negative ways), and whom we desire to be" (p. 67).
2. **Skills**- The competencies, abilities, and expertise students need to successfully learn in each content area (p. 85).
3. **Intellect**- The knowledge we "learn or understand about various topics, concepts, and paradigms" (p. 104).
4. **Criticality**- "The capacity to read, write, and think in ways of understanding power, privilege, social justice, and oppression, particularly for populations who have been historically marginalized in the world" (p. 120).

## Why is the HRL Framework Important?

According to Muhammad (2020), a reconceptualized literacy education framework like HRL is urgently needed in our current society. Every student deserves to learn in an environment that honors their unique histories, identities, and language practices, and it is up to all educational stakeholders to embody this work. Implementing culturally and historically responsive teaching practices generates a path toward success for all students, specifically consistently underserved culturally and linguistically diverse groups of students (Paris & Alim, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2014).

Due to oppression and lack of diverse representation in the present-day school curriculum, developing opportunities for students to learn about themselves and evaluate histories of injustice through thinking critically will support learners in becoming intelligent, empathetic individuals. Culturally and linguistically diverse students have suffered from systemic discrimination and underrepresentation for far too long. Muhammad (2020) describes HRL as a tool that can be used to advocate for the representation and inclusion of all students throughout daily instruction. Choosing culturally representative texts to use as read alouds or for close reading activities is an example of how the HRL framework can be easily incorporated into classroom instruction while simultaneously affirming students' identities.

Schools must thoroughly and intentionally support the diversity of their community by working to provide students with an education that is reflective of the unique histories, cultures, and language practices (Paris & Alim, 2014; Allman & Slavin, 2018) and, additionally, help cultivate their "genius that lies within" (Muhammad, 2020, p. 14). In this teaching tip, we aim to help educators understand the importance of a reconceptualized literacy framework, like HRL, and describe how to incorporate aspects of it in the general classroom setting. We begin with an example lesson of how to integrate identity and literacy through Name Stories and end with supplemental classroom activities that promote the development of the other three pursuits of the HRL framework: skills, intellect, and criticality.

## Classroom Connection: Developing Identity and Literacy Skills Through Name Stories

A simple way to begin to incorporate aspects of the HRL framework into classroom instruction is through the implementation of Name Stories. Every student's name is unique to their identity and something they should celebrate. Allowing students the time to discuss then write about the story of their name helps cultivate that first layer of the HRL framework–identity–while also developing their writing, speaking and listening, and social emotional skills as they share their stories with others. Below is a simple multi-day lesson plan that explains how to implement this Name Story activity in any classroom setting.

### MATERIALS:

- *Alma* and *How She Got Her Name* by Juana Martinez-Neal (2018)
- Chart paper
- Picture of the writing process
- Decorations and/or snacks for celebration

### DAY ONE:

- Read the book Alma and How She Got Her Name (or any other text that highlights and celebrates the diversity of names–see Table 1).
- After the quick interactive read aloud, share that you also want to learn more about each student's name! Have students generate questions they can ask their families at home to learn more about the stories of their names. Record these questions on chart paper and include them in a family letter explaining the activity. (Who named me? Is there anything special about our family's naming practice? Am I named after anyone? What does my name mean?)
- Give students a few days to gather this information from their families and watch their eyes light up with excitement as they become eager to tell everyone their name stories! **It is important to be aware of the students who might not have the best relationships with their families or are adopted–in these situations, this work might trigger big emotions. If this is the case, modify the lesson to focus on the meaning of their names rather than the familial stories behind them.

***Table 1***

| Other Picture Books about Names |
|---|
| • *Becoming* Vanessa by Vanessa Brantley-Newton |
| • *My Name is Yoon* by Helen Recorvits |
| • *That's Not My Name!* by Anoosha Syed |
| • *Your Name is a Song* by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow |
| • *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi |

### DAY TWO/THREE:

- Share a picture of the writing process chart (see Serravallo 2021 chart below) and point out the "Rehearsal" step. Share how this is an important step when writing because it helps them organize their thoughts before they even put pen to paper.
- Model how to orally rehearse your own name story with the help of a co-teacher or volunteer.
- Partner students up and allow them time to rehearse their name stories a few times. *For EL students or those with IEPs, it might be helpful to provide extra support for this part of the writing process through sentence stems/frames.
- When students feel ready, let them start to draft their name stories.
- Allow the next few days for revisions and editing.

***(Serravallo, 2021)***


### DAY FOUR/CELEBRATION:

- Before students walk in, spend a few minutes that morning (or the afternoon before) turning your classroom into a Name Story Cafe. This doesn't need to be extensive: turn on a few lamps if you have them, play soft cafe music in the background, offer light refreshments if possible, and create an inviting place for students to come up to the front of the class and share the name stories they have worked so hard to complete. You could also allow students to be a part of the Name Story Cafe setup, as well!
- Invite other school staff to this celebration so they can hear and share the stories of their name, too!
- When finished, display students' name stories on a bulletin board or display outside the classroom!


***The Name Story Cafe sign that was quickly created and displayed right outside the classroom doors.***

***The principal sharing the story of his name during the Name Story Cafe celebration.***

***After students shared their name stories, their work was displayed on the bulletin board outside their classroom.***

## Possible Next Steps and Conclusion

How educators choose to continue implementing HRL in their classroom is individualized to the specific group of students they work with. Dr. Muhammad encourages educators to take small steps in tweaking their daily instruction to cultivate all four pursuits (identity, skills, intellect, and criticality), making the implementation of HRL more feasible and manageable. The provided lesson plan can be used as a springboard to explore other ways to develop and build upon students' literacy acquisition through historically and culturally responsive practice. Below is a list of "next steps" or simple ways Muhammad (2020) suggests to continue incorporating aspects of HRL into the classroom:

- Find current and engaging culturally representative and diverse texts for students to cultivate their sense of ***identity*** and learn more about the identities of others. Questions to ask yourself when choosing quality diverse texts are:
  - "How will this text advance my students' learning of identity of themselves or other people/cultures?" (p. 145).
  - "Is the content and language of the book culturally authentic?" (p. 146)
- Include checklists and rubrics during reading and writing lessons/activities so students know what ***skills*** to use and how to use them in order to be successful (i.e., "How to Write an Opinion Piece Checklist" or "Informational Writing Rubric").
- Create a culture of ***intellect*** by displaying current learning and accompanying student work on the classroom walls. Hallways and shared school spaces are also a great place to display the topics, texts, projects, and ideas students are engaging in during classroom instruction–this helps students see themselves as "intellectual beings" and know that intellectualism is a valued part of their academic experience (p. 108).
- Allow students the opportunity to understand the "power of their pen" by writing open letters about topics that are important to them. This will help them develop their sense of ***criticality*** as they voice their thoughts and opinions through writing (p. 130).

As practicing teachers ourselves, we understand the everyday pressures of curriculum, policies, and the ever-changing world of education. Sometimes the idea of adding even one more piece to the puzzle seems impossible! However, we can attest that incorporating these simple ideas based on the HRL framework is invaluable. Knowing our students deeply and understanding their histories, identities, and literacy and language practices has been a springboard for connecting with students and providing them with exemplary literacy instruction that will propel them forward in their academic pursuits and beyond.

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TEACHING TIP

# ENGAGING READER RESPONSE WITH AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL LIBRARIANS (AASL) BEST WEBSITES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

**RENEE' C. LYONS**
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Literacy professionals understand reading response activities are paramount to proficient or advanced student reading comprehension skills. They understand the sound and proven precepts of founder Louise Rosenblatt's response theory, to include Rudine Sims Bishop's expansion to: windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors.

Over the past few years, researchers have discussed a turn toward *focused* reading response, that which "motivates students to 1) critically engage with reading assignments toward more transformative thinking, and 2) write more substantive and reflective reading responses" (Kane, 2022, 28). Also, they are encouraging low-stake, experimental responses in which experimentation and creativity diminish the fear of failing (Flierl & Hamer, 2019, 96). In fact, it is theorized that readers using technology to conduct such focused assignments see themselves as actors in a process - planning, executing, and evaluating their own learning (Pasaribu, 2020, 21). Thus, literacy proponents are constantly on the look-out for reader's response activities and innovations. Enter the specialty professionals who join English Language Arts and Literacy educators as teammates – school librarians.

Each year the national professional network for these team players, the American Association of School Librarians, publishes an award listing known as: ***Best Digital Tools for Teaching and Learning*** (https://www.ala.org/aasl/awards/best). We will discuss how many of these selected tools, as awarded and disseminated broadly on AASL's website, help students "buy-in" to their own learning, paired with the facilitation of a trained literacy educator. But, first, let's define this award a bit. The initial "best" website award in 2009 included listings such as Wikispaces, Animoto, Teacher and YouTube, Voice Thread, Wordle, Facebook – sites which now seem etched in everyday life, universal to all learners. Additionally, Animoto, Voice Thread, and Wordle are currently used on a frequent basis to enhance reader response. Each year these digital tools are recognized for user friendliness, as well as encouraging:

- Innovation and Creativity
- Active Participation
- Collaboration
- Exploration
- Pursuit of Information and Reference

All such qualities are necessary to pertinent and judicious reader response activities and strategies. Annually, nominations for this award are solicited from web developers, school librarians, or the general public (the site must be fully accessible). The award cycle begins each September, with a nomination deadline of February 1st.

*Which of these help literacy professionals, in 2023, create engaging, sustainable, and 21st century reader response activities to help with the establishment of a whole classroom (and school) of progressive, independent readers?*

Let's begin with the very young, those just learning to love language. Do you read aloud and use theatrical technique to engage reader response for kindergarteners and first graders? What if those read-alouds "magically" could include fun and quirky sound effects, such as boinging, drumming, or other musical effects? Simply associate the awarded site/app, ***Novel Effect*** (a 2022 winner, https://noveleffect.com/) with the book to be read, connect a Bluetooth, begin reading aloud, and instantly the book comes to life, turning into a soundscape. As the student progresses through grades, he or she may complete independent read-alouds/sound theater. Many e-books are included within Novel Effect that can be used for such read-alouds, everything from board books to early chapter books. Educator resources for reading response activities, paired with soundscapes, are also included. For example, each month a read-aloud calendar of 30-31 books is provided, along with pre-designed graphic organizers which assist kids as they become individual "composers."

Want to discover a site which helps YOU to develop reader response activities appropriate to varying ages? Try ***SlidesMania*** (a 2022 winner, https://slidesmania.com/). Use pre-prepared templates to create your own version of mind maps, class debates, causes and consequences, write your conclusion, or station rotation in association with any chosen story. Create a "Paradise Island " board game tied to a children's classic, a "can you guess the character" game, or a fun choice (of activities or responses) board. And, there's more! In the Edu for Edu section, use templates to create rubrics associated with student choice: a video, creative writing, or creative notebook response activity. Finally, allow students to create their own digital reading notebook/journal, complete with stickers, fonts, shapes, and illustrations/photos. Any of these templates may be placed in PowerPoint or Google Slides when complete.

More advanced readers love graphic novels, right? Why not use the format to encourage and develop advanced reading skills? With ***Pixton*** (https://www.pixton.com/), students can create a digital comic mirroring the book featured in classroom instruction. Students create avatars or plot out a day in the life of a character, write and detail acrostic poems associated with a certain narrative, create a "news flash" associated with the story at hand, or analyze the author's work or works in detail, all in the form of a colorful, three-dimensional comic/graphic creation. Ideas for educators are provided in association with literacy objectives, such as: opinion, analysis, argument, critical thinking, description, and language skills. Subject-based integration is also a possibility, as slide examples are organized for everything from social studies to special education. Pixton's website states: "Pixton cures classroom boredom and empowers every student by unleashing their artistic and writing potential." (The website also reveals nineteen award designations, to include Chicago and New York City Public School systems)!

These examples provide bright ideas for reader response, no doubt, but, remember, the awarded listing also includes subject-area possibilities you can share with peers and colleagues, such as the ***World Wildlife Federation's "Wild Classroom."*** Using these digital tools will certainly contribute to a "wild" time of reading fun, activity, engagement, discussion, and creation! Be sure to visit AASL's curated listing often to discover the up-and-coming technology which cannot help but develop students whose reading skills and levels reach "out-of-the-ballpark," and land "off the charts." Thank your school librarian along the way, the instructional teammate who can collaborate, create, and assist as such activities and plans are developed, strategized and delivered.

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POETRY

# The Fabulous Witch of the South

LINDA SADICK FURMAN

Everyone knows about Glinda, the Good Witch,
Who comes from the land of the North.
And then, there's the green one, the Wickedest Witch
Of the West, who was ever brought forth.

Her sister, the Witch of the East, was dispatched
Without ever opening her mouth,
But what do you know of that sweet southern belle –
The fabulous Witch of the South?

She's like Glinda with magnolia flowers and grace,
The genteel, mannerly one.
Whether dressed for her garden or decked out in lace,
She is charming and oh, so much fun!

Her social calendar always is full.
All the ladies want her for their friend.
Miss Scarlett O'Hara has nothing on her –
She is popular with all the men.

I reckon she'll visit, she's fixin' to jog
Back to Oz just as soon as she's free,
But right now she's helping a girl and her dog
Get back home to Tennessee!

**Author bio:**

During Linda's nearly 30-year teaching career, she wrote original songs, stories and poems to teach reading and math to struggling students. She has been active in theater from childhood. Among Linda's favorite roles are Lady Macbeth, M'Lynn from Steel Magnolias, and The Wicked Witch of the West. linda.furman23@gmail.com

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