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Spring 2010

## GJR Volume 33 Number 1 Spring 2010

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# Georgia Journal of READING

Volume 33 Number 1 Spring 2010



Inside Front Cover  
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# Georgia Journal of READING

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<b>Message From the Editors</b> <i>Elizabeth Pendergraft</i> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>President's Page</b> <i>Sallie Averitt Miller</i> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Using Children's Literature as a Resource Within Middle Grades Social Studies Curriculum</b> <i>Christine A. Draper</i> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Critical Literacy: From Theory to Practice</b> <i>Katie Simon Kurumada</i> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Extra! Extra! Read All About It!: Tapping Students' Popular Culture Interest Through An Elementary School Newspaper</b> <i>Andrew Huddleston</i> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>Can Digital Storytelling Improve Literacy Outcomes for Students with Autism?</b> <i>Brent Daigle and Margaret-Mary Sulentic Dowell</i> .....	<b>25</b>
<b>Project Pen Pal: A Win-Win Service Learning Project for College Students and First Grade Children</b> <i>Michelle Haney</i> .....	<b>35</b>

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# Message From the Editors

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BY SHERYL DASINGER AND BETH PENDERGRAFT

Welcome to the spring 2010 edition of the *Georgia Journal of Reading*. This edition offers a broad range of topics for educators in all fields. In her article, *Using Children's Literature As a Resource Within Middle Grades Social Studies Curriculum*, Christine Draper offers suggestions for how to incorporate children's literature into a middle grades social studies classroom, sharing specific strategies for utilizing children's literature. Critical literacy is at the forefront as Katie Kuramada provides an explanation and the relevance of critical literacy in today's classroom in *Critical Literacy from Theory to Practice*. She offers real examples of critical literacy in action.

Writing and publishing are the topics of the next three articles. Discussing how Digital Storytelling can be used to reach special needs populations, Brent Daigle and Mary-Margaret Sulentic Dowell describe their study in *Can Digital Storytelling Improve Literacy Outcomes for Students with Autism?* Andrew Huddleston shares how he used publishing a school newspaper to motivate student writers in *Extra! Extra! Read All About It! Tapping Students' Popular Cultural Interests Through an Elementary School Newspaper*. Finally, in *Project Pen Pal: A Win Win Service Learning Project for College Students and First Grade Children*, Michelle Haney describes a project in which college students studying human development are matched with first grade students beginning to learn letter-writing skills.

This edition is the first for the new editorial team of Sheryl Dasinger and Beth Pendergraft. Sheryl is the past president of the Georgia Reading Association and is currently a professor at Valdosta University. Beth was the guest editor of the fall edition of the *Georgia Journal of Reading* and is currently an associate professor at Augusta State University. Our goal is to provide the readers of *Georgia Journal of Reading* with relevant, timely information that can be used by all educators. As always, we are looking for suitable contributions for the journal including research based articles and exemplary pedagogical practices. Please consider submitting a manuscript for upcoming publications.

Happy Reading!

*All children have a "right" to learn to read from knowledgeable classroom teachers [National Council of Teachers of English, 1998].*

Americans everywhere are feeling the painful impact (some more than others) of the current economic state of affairs. During these unstable times will education play a significant role in whether people retain their jobs? Must a person be able to read and read well to compete in today's job market? We all know the answer to these questions just as we know that our future workforce may be at risk because there are too many children in our educational system who are reading below grade level. An estimated eight million students in grades four through twelve read below grade level and will not be successful in college or the workforce.

During a back-to-school speech, President Barack Obama repeatedly urged students to work hard and stay in school. "No matter what you want to do with your life – I guarantee that you'll need an education to do it," he says. "This isn't just important for your own life and your own future. What you make of your education will decide nothing less than the future of this country."

Reflecting on last year's Georgia Reading Association *Leadership Theme* and *President's Challenge*—Reading Instruction that Works may be a

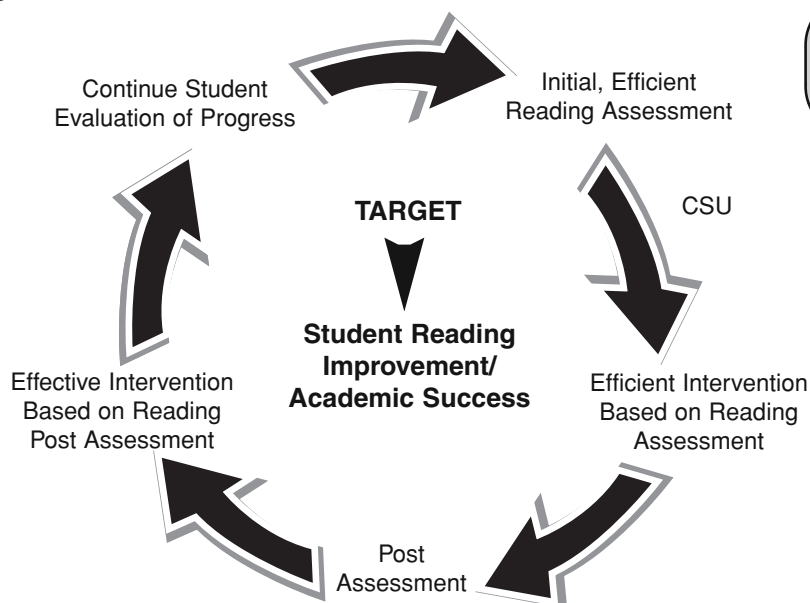
promising remedy for students reading below grade level. Unfortunately since many middle grades and high school classroom teachers have little or no formal training in teaching reading, professional development is a must! In the state of Georgia, quality, research based, and standards driven teacher preparation programs and professional development reading workshops are available.

Most classroom teachers can readily identify their students who struggle with learning to read and reading to learn. However without a reading diagnosis, selecting intervention strategies for these students is not evidenced based, at best it is a hit or miss technique. The following model provides the classroom teacher with a structured and efficient assessment process as well as an effective intervention process based on a diagnosis. The assessment and instructional processes are ongoing and target a measurable outcome; specifically, the child's reading improvement.

I look forward to seeing many of you at the International Reading Association 55th Annual Convention in Chicago, Illinois.

## READING MODEL

### Reading Instruction That Works!



Do you know how to plan evidenced-based reading instruction?

All intervention strategies are Georgia Performance Standards driven and aligned with the International Reading Association Standards and the National Reading Panel's Report.

# Using Children's Literature as a Resource Within Middle Grades Social Studies Curriculum



BY  
CHRISTINE A.  
DRAPER

Many of us remember sitting in a social studies class simply reading from a textbook, answering comprehension questions, reciting mere facts and dates, and taking a weekly test. Most of us remember hating this course for those very same reasons. For many middle school students, social studies are “a fragmented, hit-or-miss portion of the curriculum often lacking in roots, continuity, personal relevance, and comprehension of the multiple causes and effects of historical events” (Perez-Stable & Cordier, 2000, p. 23). As a social studies teacher, I felt that it was time that this disenchantment with history was put to an end. One method that worked favorably with my 7th grade history students was to incorporate children's literature into my social studies curriculum. Children's literature can be utilized at multiple levels in a wide variety of classroom settings (Villano, 2005) and proved to work especially well in my middle school social studies classroom.

Using children's literature and not just textbooks can help students understand, comprehend, and retain information while enjoying social studies. This article addresses why textbooks simply can't stand alone and how children's literature can serve as a beneficial resource within the social studies classroom. In addition, several response strategies that I utilized with my students are included throughout the article. This article seeks to inform teachers that learning doesn't have to be frustrating or boring; it can be exciting and engaging through utilizing children's literature within the social studies curriculum.

## **Why Textbooks Aren't Enough**

Content area instruction has regularly depended upon the dominant use of a single textbook with the center of instruction being the teacher. This is related directly to time constraints teachers encounter when they are pressed to address more content at a faster pace, maintain control in the classroom, and enact accountability with lower level worksheets and assessments. A message is being sent to students that covering content is more important than gaining depth and understanding of a topic (Bean, 2000).

Unfortunately, research has found that textbooks are generally too difficult for the students reading them and are not written for the purpose of increasing students' comprehension of ideas (Seda, Ligouri, & Seda., 1999). In addition, textbooks don't commonly provide for the wide range of reading abilities found in the classroom (Tyree, Fiore, & Cook, 1994). Generally these textbooks present historical events in the form of simple narratives with very few references to the controversies and uncertainties that surround historical concepts (Britt, Rouet, Georgi, & Perfetti, 1994). Research has also shown that the understanding students gain from the textbook presentation is rather shallow. Tyson-Bernstein (1988) pointed out textbooks generally “cover more information than can be treated respectfully” (p. 9). This is frustrating for both teachers and students who are rushed through curriculum. It is also common for textbooks to highlight and discuss the exceptional figures in history and to ignore the typical or often avoid controversial topics such as religion, women and minorities (Culclasure, 1999; Loewen, 2007). This works to silence the voices and perspectives of a large portion of society. Though these textbooks have colorful graphics, photos and headlines, they often “touch everything and explain nothing” (Fantin, 2004, p. B1). Textbooks simply cannot teach the subject alone.

Superficial coverage of content often leads to confused students unable to understand the content (Levstik & Barton, 2005). To ensure success in both personal and academic lives, students must learn to locate, understand, evaluate and use written information (Fisher & Frey, 2008). Georgia's social studies standards currently call for enhanced reading in all



curriculum areas through the building of good habits for reading, researching, and learning (Georgia's Performance Standard SS7RC1). Based on these recommendations and findings, I knew that I needed to move beyond teaching social studies with the traditional textbook. I found that incorporating children's literature related to social studies concepts worked well with the time constraints of the middle school class schedule and with my students' attention spans.

### **How Children's Literature Supports Learners**

Children's literature is a tool that supports teaching in all content areas (Giorgis & Hartman, 2000; Giorgis & Pollak, 1998; Lindquist & Selwyn, 2000; Marshall, 1999; Vacca & Vacca, 2004). These types of books are not only amusing and entertaining to middle level students, but they can also assist them in their learning and help to develop skills in relation to the content area being studied (Villano, 2005). In addition, they help to support older students in their ongoing literacy development. Children's literature can also provide insight into human behavior, develop students' imaginations, and provide a sense of enjoyment that may not be experienced by textbooks. They employ and facilitate language development and can in turn increase students' comprehension of social studies concepts (Seda et al., 1999). Through these books, students are able to apply divergent thinking skills by elaborating on new ideas and producing alternative interpretations of the given information. This in turn allows students to increase factual knowledge and helps to create higher levels of retention when compared to traditional teacher-directed learning (Freeman & Person, 1998).

Why should we utilize children's literature within the social studies curriculum? Jean Fritz, a popular author of numerous biographies and historical books for children, argues that: "A great deal of history may have been taught from the point of view of an outsider looking back, but I believe that children can find little meaning in history unless they are helped to attain the point of view of a participant; in other words, unless they are given the chance to climb inside history and look out" (audiotape, n.d.). Children's literature helped my students enhance their understanding of a historical period by looking into a character's world and through various perspectives. They became excited and engaged in discussing topics through the books that we experienced together.

### **Incorporating Literature into My Classroom**

Children need to have social studies concepts come alive in addition to having their curiosity piqued about the world around them. Literature was a natural way to

involve children in this process. Children's literature became my hook to introduce an issue, bring to light a time period or lifestyle, or to take a topic or perspective further than the basic information presented in the textbook. Literature also helped to extend students' knowledge of the past and then relate this knowledge to present-day concepts. I chose stories that caught students' interests and curiosity or that presented a topic from a different perspective. They become eager to research predictions, confirm ideas, and expand their own understandings of the world by studying the past. An example of one of my literature study units is presented as follows:

### **Using Literature to Understand Lewis and Clark's Expedition**

Our social studies textbook presented the expedition of Lewis and Clark in one paragraph with four short sentences. Sacajawea merited one brief mention tucked within the short paragraph. I was shocked that there was such little coverage for such an important and extraordinary historical expedition. Therefore I decided to utilize children's literature to help students understand the various perspectives of those members involved with the expedition west during our week-long unit. We first began attempting to understand Lewis and Clark's perspectives by reading the book: *Lewis and Clark: Explorers of the American West* by Steven Kroll (1996). This book reads almost like an adventure story and highlights the major facts and important dates throughout the journey; it also provides students with illustrations that detail the landscapes and hardships, clothing, and cultural differences with those who they met along the journey. During this time, students created an illustrated/annotated timeline that detailed the main points and dates of Lewis and Clark's expedition to understand the journey through the eyes of Lewis and Clark. This timeline was created by the whole class and was displayed and referred to throughout the remainder of the unit.

### **Steps for creating an illustrated/annotated timeline**

1. Students organized the important dates/experiences chronologically in a timeline. The first point on the timeline represented the year the journey started.
2. Students used note cards to add in important dates and experiences (using explanations, quotes, charts, sketches, maps, etc., for entries) that Lewis and Clark experienced on the expedition. For each note card added, students also completed an illustration detailing what the card summarized.

Many students questioned that Sacajawea's voice was often not heard in the previous book we had read. It was at this point that I brought in the book *I am Sacajawea, I am York: Our Journey West with Lewis and Clark* by Claire Rudolf Murphy (2005). After reading this book, students became very aware that while Lewis and Clark had actually chosen to go on the voyage, Sacajawea and York were both *forced* to become part of the journey in their own ways: Sacajawea being considered as "property" of her husband Charbonneau, and York in being Clark's slave. Students were amazed and continually commented on the fact that both Sacajawea and York brought skills to the group that helped to make the success of this journey possible. They often commented on the illustrations which frequently portrayed Lewis and Clark in a different light from the initial book we read. This is very evident to students since Lewis and Clark are always in the background and the focus and perspectives are always portrayed through York and Sacajawea. It was at this point that students were asked to create a character dialogue journal from the perspective of either York or Sacajawea. Students had to pay attention to historical facts and dates to create journal entries that detailed what the adventure may have been like and issues or experiences that the traveler may have encountered.

#### **Steps for creating a character dialogue journal**

1. Students had a worksheet consisting of two tables divided into three columns: dates, events and feelings that we filled in together as a class while listening to a story about Sacajawea and York.
2. After listening to the story and discussing dates, events, and feelings, students assumed the identity of York or Sacajawea and created a journal entry for that character using the information we filled out in the tables. This entry detailed the events that the person experienced and included opinions or emotions that the character might be feeling about these events. They wrote this entry from the character's perspective as though it were actually happening to them. Students needed to pay particular attention to quotes that were directly stated or how that person would have felt based on that person's perspective.
3. These journals were then shared whole class and students discussed the similarities and differences of the experiences and perspectives of York and Sacajawea as compared to Lewis and Clark.
4. The class then added more annotations/illustrations to the timeline from York's or Sacajawea's perspective.

Students at this point often commented about Lewis's dog, Seaman, who had journeyed on the expedition as well. As a class, we would then read various excerpts from Laurie Myer's book *Lewis and Clark and Me: A Dog's Tale* (2002). This book details the journey through the eyes of the dog and describes funny and unusual incidents' such as the dog being mistaken for a bear as well as the interesting new people, animals, and smells he encountered along the way. Not only did this book enable students to experience the journey through a very different perspective, it also provided students direct quotes from the actual journals written by Meriwether Lewis. After hearing the story excerpts, students created their own journal entry of a portion of the expedition as experienced through the eyes of Seaman.

#### **Steps for creating a journal entry through the perspective of an animal**

1. Students were assigned one of the events posted on the annotated/illustrated timeline.
2. They needed to write a short (note card) journal entry from the perspective of Seaman the dog in relation to this event.
3. Students shared the event with the whole class and these journal entry note cards were then posted on the annotated/illustrated timeline.

Finally I wanted students to understand what this journey meant from a very different perspective, those that were native to the land that the Corps of Discovery was exploring. Students listened to the book *Bad River Boys: A Meeting of the Lakota Sioux with Lewis and Clark* by Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve (2005). This fictional story is based on a narrative account written by William Clark and details three young Lakota boys who witnessed the Corps of Discovery landing on their shore and the misunderstanding and crises that ensued because of this. Through this book, students learned that not everyone saw the expedition through the same eyes. To demonstrate their understanding of the various perspectives, students created open-mind portraits that portrayed the expedition through Lewis and Clark and then an additional open-mind portrait that depicted the expedition through the eyes of one of the Lakota Sioux boys. Students detailed the similarities and differences between the two perspectives of the journey westward.

#### **Steps for creating an open-mind portrait**

1. Students drew and colored a large portrait of head and neck of Lewis or Clark on one side of the paper and then on the opposite side of the paper they created another one for a member of the Lakota Sioux tribe.

2. Students then filled the open heads with thoughts, quotes, important dates, pictures and feelings as experienced through the character's eyes.
3. Students shared these portraits with the whole class and talked about words and pictures they chose to include in the minds of each of the characters.
4. As a whole class we created a Venn diagram detailing the similarities and differences of viewpoints of the journey as experienced by the numerous perspectives we learned about through this unit.

### **“Can We Hear That Story Again?”**

Through the exploration of the children's literature, I found that students easily put themselves in the place of the characters and saw similarities and differences between the stories and the various perspectives presented. They were able to respond to, experience, and connect with the literature in ways they never would with the textbook. These connections are what helped social studies come alive in my classroom. It also combated one of the most nagging problems associated with textbook-driven instruction, in that it put an end to brief and simple explanations of complex topics and perspectives.

In my classroom, picture books, graphic novels, and personal narratives served as resources to enhance students' comprehension and understanding of historical periods or events, and worked to promote interest and awareness of various social studies concepts. This was necessary so that students were not left “with recitation of remembered facts” but instead inquired about and began to more fully understand people or perspectives that were different from themselves (Culclasure, 1999 p. 23). Ultimately, incorporating children's literature into the social studies curriculum proved to be a beneficial resource for the students and their understanding of multiple perspectives. Connections were drawn between facts learned about people and events in texts, and fictional and non-fictional characters were brought to life through the children's literature. Anytime I hear the words “Can we hear that story again?” or “Please read us another book about this time period,” I know that my students are engaged and interested in social studies.

In conclusion, infusing children's literature into my middle grades social studies curriculum proved to be valuable for promoting students' comprehension and understanding of historical time periods and multiple-perspectives of participants. Textbooks alone simply do not convey all needed information to our students. Furthermore, students need to become actively involved with their textbook. I advocate that

incorporating children's literature into the social studies classroom enables teachers to assist students with their learning and also helps students develop skills in relation to the content being studied. Furthermore, responding through literature can be of assistance to those teachers seeking imaginative, enjoyable, and innovative ways to motivate and inspire their students.

### **Additional Recommended Children's Literature Titles**

#### ***American Revolution***

Ammon, Richard. (2004). *Valley Forge*. Illus. Bill Farnsworth. Holiday House

Cheney, Lynne. (2004). *When Washington Crossed the Delaware*. Illus. Pater M. Fiore. Simon & Schuster.

#### ***Lewis and Clark, Sacajawea***

Edwards, Judith. (2003). *The Great Expedition of Lewis and Clark By Private Reubin Field, Member of the Corps of Discovery*. Illus. Sally Wern Comport. Farrar Straus Giroux.

#### ***Civil War***

Brill, Marlene Targ. (1998). *Diary of a Drummer Boy*. Illus. Michael Garland. Millbrook Press.

Morrison, Taylor. (1999). *Civil War Artist*. Houghton Mifflin.

#### ***Westward Movement***

Hopkinson, Deborah. (2004). *Apples to Oregon: Being the (slightly) True Narrative of How a Brave Pioneer Brought Apples, Peaches, Pear, Plums Grapes, and Cherries (and children) Across the Plains*. Illus. Nancy Carpenter. Atheneum

Moss, Marissa. (1999). *True Heart*. Illus. C. F. Payne. Harcourt.

Stanley, Diane. (2000). *Roughing it on the Oregon Trail*. Illus. Holly Berry. Harper Collins

#### ***World War II***

Dyes, Tomoko Tsuchiya. (1988). *Faithful Elephants: A True Story of Animals, People and War*. Illus. Ted Lewin. Houghton Mifflin Company.

Mochizuki, Ken. (1993). *Baseball Saved Us*. Illus. Dom Lee. Scholastic.

## **Holocaust**

Bunting, Eve. (1993). *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust*. Illus. Stephen Gammell. Jewish Publication Society.

Hesse, Karen. (2004). *The Cats in Krasinski Square*. Illus. Wendy Watson. Scholastic.

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Fantin, L. (2004, March 25). Dull texts can turn history into bedtime stories. *The Salt Lake Tribune*, pp. B1, B3.

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Freeman, E. B., & Person, D. G. (1998). *Connecting informational books with content area learning*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Fritz, J. (n.d.). American history through fiction (Audiotape). New York: Children's Book Council.

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Giorgis, C., & Pollak, J. (1998). The role of picture books in middle level classrooms. *New Advocate*, 11, 12-22.

Kroll, S. (1996). *Lewis and Clark: Explorers of the American west*. (Illus. Richard Williams). New York: Holiday House.

Levstick, L. S., & Barton, K. C. (2005). *Doing history: Investigating with children in elementary and middle schools*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Loewen, J. W. (2007). *Lies my teacher told me: Everything your American history textbook got wrong*. New York: New Press.

Lindquist, T., & Selwyn, D. (2000). *Social studies at the center: Integrating kids, content and literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Marshall, C. S. (1999). Highlighting commonalities, differences, and diversity with picture books. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 11, 18-21.

Murphy, C. R. (2005). *I am Sacajawea, I am York. Our journey west with Lewis and Clark*. (Illus. Higgins Bond). New York: Walker & Company.

Myer, L. (2002). *Lewis and Clark and me: A dog's tale*. (Illus. Michael Dooling). New York: Scholastic.

Perez-Stable, M. A., & Cordier, M. H. (2000). *Understanding American history through children's literature: Instructional units and activities for grades K-8*. Phoenix, AZ : Oryx.

Seda, M. M., Liguori, O. Z., & Seda, C. M., (1999). Bridging literacy and social studies: Engaging prior knowledge through children's books. *TESOL Journal*, 8, 34-38.

Sneve, V. D. H. (2005). *Bad river boys: A meeting of the Lakota Sioux with Lewis and Clark*. (Illus. Bill Farnsworth). New York: Holiday House.

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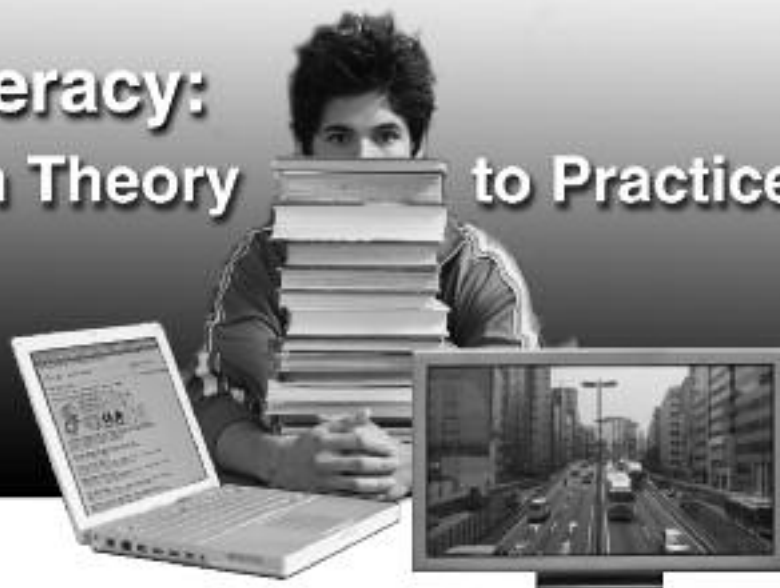
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Vacca, R. T., & Vacca, J. L. (2004). *Content area reading: Literacy and learning across the curriculum* (8th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

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# Critical Literacy: From Theory to Practice

BY KATIE SIMON KURUMADA



## Literacy instruction for today's world

As an educator, I have always had a passion for teaching students diverse in their language, culture, and socio-economic status. Beginning with my pre-service teacher education, and continuing now with my graduate studies, my goal was to learn all that I could about teaching literacy so that I could reach each of my students. My belief was that by teaching them to read and write, they could become and do anything they wished, regardless of their economic or cultural background. Through a variety of experiences with students in urban schools and a deeper understanding of the systemic and historical inequities that exist for students who are linguistically or culturally diverse, I began to question if teaching my students to read and write was going to be enough to allow them to achieve in a system that continues to hold them back (Shannon, 1995). Research continues to show that because schools receive different levels of funding and resources, this creates different opportunities for students who attend schools in low socio-economic neighborhoods. Even when educational opportunities are adequate, the realities of the current global economy and systemic racism affect life opportunities of poor and minority students (Gee, 2008; Nieto, 2001).

It is now my belief that teaching reading and writing needs to be more than helping students to decode words on a page and even more than comprehending these words, but that literacy should be a means for students to problematize issues in their world. A critical literacy curriculum seeks to develop students who can use literacy to navigate the complex and unjust world they face. As Patrick Shannon, a scholar in critical literacy states, "If we acknowledge the savage

inequalities in schools and our lives, our point is to engage the world actively in order to change it" (Shannon, 1995, p. 35). Critical literacy asks teachers and students to examine, explore, and then take action on the issues that impact their world. This article will explore the tenants of critical literacy and then present how these can and are currently put into practice in K-12 classrooms.

## What is critical literacy?

Critical literacy has its traditions in Critical Theory, which suggests that all citizens should be involved in taking action and ownership of the political and social issues within their community and world (Freire, 1987; McLaren, 1995). This theory helped to crystallize the movement in literacy towards critical literacy practices, using a critical lens to prepare students for a dynamic world where language and literacy are not static. Critical literacy theorists advocate for a wider definition of literacy, where the academic and political worlds honor the many different forms of literacy that exist around the world, such as local languages and writing systems (Gee, 2008; Street, 1993). This perspective also says that literacy does not exist in one mode, such as the written word, but is multimodal and evident in symbols, signs, and messages that surround us (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008). It is essential that students today be taught how to negotiate these signs, symbols, and images (Kress, 2001). Critical literacy practices also value the many literate practices that students are involved in and outside of the classroom, such as popular music, movies, comic books, video games, and online resources (Bell, 2001).

By expanding what is valued and taught, critical literacy practices purposefully shake up the standard curriculum and epistemology of schooling. Exploring and analyzing language is an important aspect of critical literacy that illuminates many of the inequities in society by investigating what language variety is promoted as correct (Gee, 2008; Rogers, 2002). Incorporating different viewpoints into curriculum and encouraging students to take action to solve problems are also crucial in critical literacy practices. Shannon (1995) sees critical literacy as expanding what a normal literacy lesson may be, where students will read and use multiple types of texts to uncover how they are being positioned through the processes of question-asking and problem-posing. The following section will further explain how these theories of critical literacy are put into practice in K-12 classrooms.

### **Critical literacy in K-12 classrooms**

While theory should be the basis for any teaching practice, it is helpful for educators to have classroom-based examples of pedagogical practices based on theory that they can incorporate into their daily teaching. Research on critical literacy has found successful ways to develop a critical literacy curriculum.

Lewisson, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) found that using children's literature, particularly books that address social issues, are a valuable entry point for teachers when beginning to use critical literacy practices. One device that a teacher may use to guide students in questioning and taking action on important issues is reading aloud texts that explore difficult or sensitive themes and topics. Teachers can have students write a new ending or take on the viewpoints of alternate characters in the text to examine the many perspectives and views involved in any situation (Lewisson, Leland, & Harste, 2008). For example, the book *Baseball saved us* by Ken Mochizuki is written from the perspective of a young Japanese-American boy living in the internment camps that U.S. residents of Japanese descent were forced to live in during World War II. The text may be read aloud by the teacher or independently in small groups. After reading and discussing the background and the events of the book, students could work in small groups or individually to rewrite, orally retell, or participate in a Reader's Theatre of the story from the perspectives of other characters in the book such as the nameless guard who watches over the residents as they played baseball, the narrator's older brother Teddy, or an elder Japanese-American living in the camp. There are many cross-curricular opportunities when using social issues texts such as *Baseball saved us*, which could be integrated with a study of World War II and

connected to decisions and laws made by the U.S. government throughout history. America's past and current military involvements could be a source of comparison with students, where the teacher invites students to think about the different perspectives involved in any situation such as war. Students' life experiences, such as immigration, discrimination, or government action during war can be used to make this topic personal and immediate, inviting critical discussion and action on these topics.

Vasquez, Ruise, Adamson, Heffernan, Chiola-Nakai, and Shear (2003) have had success using critical literacy practices to address issues in popular culture and then engage in problem solving on these topics. For example, one sixth-grade teacher explored the issue of sports by capitalizing on his students' interests to explore issues of advertising, global economics, and labor policies related to Nike, uncovering inequities that were unknown to students. His students took action by conducting surveys at their school to see the impact of Nike on their schoolmates and to learn if they knew about some of the problematic labor practices they learned about. Students then created posters to hang up in school, wrote letters to Nike, and conducted presentations to other classes to share issues of child laborers and sweat shops (Vasquez et al., 2003). These activities allowed students to see the political and social effects of the many symbols and messages they encounter and then challenge these.

In Australia, Comber, Thompson, and Wells (2001) worked with elementary students and utilized the low socioeconomic area in which they live to question the types of services and privileges that they are not offered in comparison to their middle and upper class peers attending other schools. Because many students brought up the lack of recreational space and landscaping in their neighborhoods, the researchers used the absence of trees in this impoverished area to investigate the political and social norms affecting the quality of the students' lives, as outdoor activity was more difficult in the intense Australian heat as compared to more affluent areas with more trees. The students subsequently took action by taking photographs, drawing pictures, and writing letters to local leaders to make their concerns heard. Students were scaffolded to consider the injustices in their world and then they were given assistance to take action on these issues. This type of teacher guidance to help bring up issues and perspectives that directly affect or impact young children is essential.

Use of critical literacy practices is not limited to reading and writing teachers or elementary classrooms. A high

school history teacher, Christensen (1999), used the theme of immigration to explore with students the way that textbooks and other media have portrayed and left out important parts of history. Students were asked to do what Christensen called 'real' research, to have them uncover multiple perspectives on immigration in the United States through the lens of different immigrant groups. Christensen found that students were able to use personal and cultural resources to understand how history has positioned certain immigrant groups and to connect their own experiences as recent immigrants. Importantly, from a critical literacy view which values multimodal forms of demonstrating learning, students were asked to demonstrate what they learned through media, technology, written, and oral literacy (Christensen, 1999). Enacting critical literacy practices can be challenging for teachers who encounter many pressures and mandates in today's schools and may feel that their schedule does not allow for room for anything else. A model such as the Four Resource Model (Luke & Freebody, 1999) can be used as a framework for teachers to organize their literacy instruction.

### **A Model for critical literacy**

The Four Resource Model, developed by Alan Luke and Peter Freebody (1999) asks teachers to utilize the backgrounds, unique knowledge, and life experiences of their students to develop rich literacy teaching and learning opportunities. The four components of this model are "Code Breaking, Text User, Text Participant, and Critical Practices" (Flint, 2008, pp. 105-106). Code breaking as part of reading and writing is learning how we decipher the symbols of letters to decode words. Teaching students to be a text participant means valuing the student as one who brings their own schema and knowledge to a literacy event and can respond personally to what they have read. A text user is a reader and writer who can navigate different types of texts for multiple purposes and understand what the author is trying to say (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Lastly, this model includes critical practices as an essential part of literacy (Flint, 2008).

According to The Four Resource Model, critical practices invite students to ask questions and engage with texts that offer differing viewpoints on issues, including challenging the author, the text, and the curriculum itself (Flint, 2008; Luke & Freebody, 1999). This model gives due attention to skills long recognized as important in literacy development such as decoding, comprehension, and understanding how to read a variety of types of text structures and genres. However, critical practices are one fourth of this model,

reminding teachers and educators that students of all ages must be given the opportunity to develop critical literacy through opportunities such as reading social issue texts, examining the sociopolitical forces in curriculum, texts, and global events that affect one's world. Including critical practices such as these are essential in developing truly literate students of diverse backgrounds, experiences, and resources that can take part in changing unequal and unjust practices that impact their communities and their world.

### **Critical literacy: Instruction for all students**

Those involved with critical literacy believe that schools and classrooms must include critically literate practices not as occasional or additional activities, but as the core of the literacy curriculum. Within the context of critical literacy, teachers teach skills readers need to know, such as code breaking and comprehension, but these practices include a critical twist on everything that is experienced (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008). Students are actively invited to question, explore, and take action on issues that impact them.

According to Shor (1999), movements in education currently represent two perspectives, those who are not concerned about the inequities in our society and those who are committed to making the necessary changes in curriculum, teaching practices, and the structure of schools. At the beginning of my teaching career, I was part of this first group of educators, yet, I did not know how to teach literacy to my students in a way that offered opportunities for disenfranchised students to take part in changing the inequalities for themselves and their communities. Using the frameworks of critical literacy, educators can better prepare all students to participate and negotiate the global and quickly changing world in which they live.

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## Tapping Students' Popular Culture Interests Through an Elementary School Newspaper

BY ANDREW HUDDLESTON

I must admit being more than a little nervous, the first time I turned them loose. I was a first year, sixth-grade teacher at an elementary school in Texas. My students and I were working on the first issue of our school newspaper, the *Whirlwind News*. I had given them their newspaper assignments and explained what types of information they might need to get in order to return to the classroom and begin writing their news stories. Of course, we had talked about the importance of being respectful and responsible, working with other teachers so as not to disturb their classrooms any more than absolutely necessary. Yet, I found myself unable to stall any longer and was forced to turn them loose. I distinctly remember thinking, "This isn't how a 'normal' classroom operates. After all, this is an elementary school. Shouldn't everybody be in a straight line? And, to take such a risk with sixth graders, was I crazy?" I walked out of my classroom and turned the corner, half expecting to see complete turmoil. What I saw instead both surprised me and delighted me. My students, clipboards in hand, were highly engaged interviewing, copying down direct quotes, and snapping digital photos.

Dewey (1938/1963; 1900/1943) was one of the early advocates for increased hands-on learning in school. He noted how the Industrial Revolution profoundly affected the way in which children were educated. Earlier, when family life was centered around the home on the farm, children were apprenticed by their parents in the numerous necessities of daily living such as sewing, cooking, and farming. However, as families began seeking jobs in the city, children were sent to school where they often were provided with an abstract curriculum with few meaningful applications to everyday life. Dewey (1900/1943) argued that education must undergo a Copernican Revolution of sorts in which the children become the center of education rather than an irrelevant curriculum. Such a change was essential, Dewey believed, to prepare

This article examines one teacher's experiences sponsoring an elementary school newspaper, the *Whirlwind News*. The school newspaper provided a means by which the teacher incorporated the student-centered, project-based instruction advocated by educational theorists such as John Dewey. Although the political climate in which the teacher taught focused largely on standards and high-stakes testing, the *Whirlwind News* served as a venue for authentic literacy, tapping students' popular culture interests. The logistics of funding and creating the newspaper are briefly described, and several students' examples of everyday literacies are examined. The relationships formed through students exploring and sharing their interests created a welcoming environment where both personal and academic growth could occur.

students with the deep knowledge and practical skills necessary for an industrial society. Teachers should seek out students' interests and direct those into meaningful learning projects. Dewey (1900/1943) did warn, however, that such meaningful projects might not be highly disciplined and orderly, at least in the traditional sense. In fact, he described a scene that gives the word discipline an entirely new meaning, a scene quite similar to my experience with the *Whirlwind News*:

There is little of one sort of order where things are in process of construction; there is a certain disorder in any busy workshop; there is not silence; persons are not engaged in maintaining certain fixed physical postures; their arms are not folded; they are not holding their books thus and so. They are doing a variety of things, and there is the confusion, the bustle, that results from activity. But out of the occupation, out of doing things that are to produce results, and out of doing these in a social and co-operative way, there is born a discipline of its own kind and type. (p. 17)

As a first-year teacher, I desperately wanted to implement many of the concepts I had learned about in graduate school. Along with Dewey (1900/1943;

1938/1963), I had read several of the great “heavy-weights” of education such as Goodman (1986) and Smith (1988). I had become fascinated by the possibility of incorporating students’ popular culture interests into the classroom (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999). My graduate program had focused on a holistic view of reading that was highly student centered. Effective literacy instruction was one in which students actively engaged in authentic literacy activities. Rather than constant skill-based worksheets and contrived reading passages, student engagement with high-quality literature and real-life problems was encouraged.

However, I was fully aware that incorporating such student-centered strategies could prove challenging (Costigan, 2008; Costigan & Crocco, 2004). Texas schools, much like Georgia schools, were mandated to focus primarily on standards and high-stakes testing. Assessing students with standardized tests to identify deficits and fill gaps often resulted in a curriculum-centered education. How could I possibly incorporate the strategies I had learned in graduate school as a teacher in such a standards-based, testing-centered climate?

In this paper, my purpose is to show how sponsoring a school newspaper did in fact help me achieve several of my student-centered objectives. The *Whirlwind News* provided an opportunity to engage students in an authentic literacy activity and to tap into some of their popular culture interests. By tapping these interests, I was able to encourage my students’ personal growth, expanding their excitement and interests in popular culture, as well as their academic growth as effective readers, writers, and thinkers.

### **The *Whirlwind News* as Authentic Literacy Instruction**

The *Whirlwind News*, named by the sixth graders after our school mascot, was in its third year when I started teaching at my elementary school. What impressed me most about the *Whirlwind News* was how it was created just like a real-life newspaper. The paper was funded entirely through advertisements students sold to local businesses. Students contacted businesses and family members to encourage them to purchase an ad. Many students were excited and a little nervous about calling an actual business, but it turned out to be a highly-effective way to practice their public speaking skills. Each year my students sold between \$800-\$1000 in advertisements. This was more than enough to cover the costs of printing all six issues we produced. We printed 500 copies of each issue in order to provide papers for all the students and teachers at

the school and any businesses who had purchased advertisements. Any profit we earned, we used to purchase various class and newspaper supplies.

At the end of each six weeks, I assigned students specific newspaper jobs. Students would then go throughout the school collecting information. Before sending the students on their way, we would review the basics of good newswriting such as answering the 5Ws (who, what, when, where, why), using the inverted-pyramid style of writing, double-checking spellings of names, and correctly forming direct quotations. Once students collected the information they needed to write their stories, they would begin writing.

When all of the stories had been typed and edited, and needed photos had been taken, we were ready to begin the layout process. The layout process basically consisted of printing the stories, photos, and advertisements and pasting them onto large layout sheets. Sometimes a photo or news story would need to be resized on the computer and printed again so that everything would fit. When all eight pages were completed, I would deliver them to a local printing company, and within a couple of days, they were ready to be passed out to the students and teachers at our school.

Perhaps the most striking evidences of the authenticity of this project were the challenges we experienced. One year the printing company we used went bankrupt. Another year our district reconfigured grade levels and moved sixth grade to middle school. Luckily, I was moved to a fifth grade position at my school, and the fifth graders were eager to take over the project. As energy prices increased, we faced inflated printing prices and had to sell more advertisements to cover our printing costs. My last year teaching we received news from the printing company that all papers would need to be created electronically and emailed to them in the form of a PDF document. This forced us to learn how to create a template within our word processing document and lay out the paper electronically. All of these challenges were crises that businesses face on a daily basis. For our class, they provided excellent learning opportunities.

### **Popular Culture in the *Whirlwind News***

Although a significant portion of the *Whirlwind News* was devoted to the current events occurring throughout the various grade levels of our school, I soon realized that the newspaper provided a useful format for tapping students’ popular culture interests. Popular culture is a challenging concept to define. Alvermann and Xu (2003) and de Certeau (1980/1984) define popular culture broadly as everyday culture and

literacies. This definition rejects the distinction between high and low culture and the notion that popular culture is something children should avoid. It is this broad definition of popular culture that I will use to describe the everyday literacies my students incorporated into their writing for the *Whirlwind News*.

The *Whirlwind News* offered snapshots of students' popular culture interests through recurring sections each six weeks. Student Spotlight stories were always among the most favorite stories students wrote. Each Student Spotlight story provided important information about students, such as their dream career, favorite singer, and favorite movie. Some students dreamed of being a veterinarian, others a professional football player. Favorite singers included everyone from Willy Nelson to Miley Cyrus, and movies varied from Docter and Silverman's (2001) *Monster Inc.* to Jackson's (2001) *Lord of the Rings*. The Student Spotlight stories provided an engaging and interactive opportunity to highlight students' everyday culture interests. Also, students wrote book reviews for the *Whirlwind News* that provided glimpses into their popular culture interests. Many of the books were fantasies such as Rowling's (1998) *Harry Potter*, Snicket's (1999) *A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Bad Beginning*, and Colfer's (2001) *Artemis Fowl*.

Another component of the *Whirlwind News* that allowed students to share popular culture interests was the Whirlwind Contest. The Whirlwind Contest came in many different forms each six weeks. Often it was a wordsearch or puzzle designed around a theme the students would choose. Students throughout the school would complete the puzzles and turn them in to our class for a chance to win a prize. Many students from all grade levels participated in the contest, which provided an interactive component for the newspaper. Popular themes students selected for the Whirlwind Contests included Hillenburg's (1997) *Sponge Bob*, Raimi's (2002) *Spider-Man*, sports, name-brand tennis shoes, famous musicians, and professional wrestling. A final recurring section of the *Whirlwind News* that provided a venue for students' popular culture was the Creative Corner. The Creative Corner routinely appeared on page seven of the newspaper and was a place where students from all grades could publish poems, stories, and drawings. Students interested in publishing in the Creative Corner would submit their work each six weeks, and the students and I would select three or four of our favorite items to print. The entries submitted to the Creative Corner represented a wide range of popular culture. Often we received drawings of various cartoon characters, cars, cheerleaders, animals, and rap artists.

### **Tapping Students' Popular Culture Interests**

Occasionally a student would independently pursue an interest in a particular topic, often relating in some way to popular culture, and ask me about publishing the project in the *Whirlwind News*. These opportunities offered unique glimpses into my students' interests and provided engaging reading material for the newspaper. Such experiences allowed me to learn more about my students and develop a more personal relationship with them.

#### **Dustin**

One of these students was Dustin (all names are pseudonyms). Dustin was one of those students whose reputation preceded him, but not for positive reasons. He was known throughout the school as being a smart, but challenging, student. It was my first year of teaching and before school even started, I had heard numerous stories about his past behavior. The fifth grade teacher had come by my room and told me that Dustin was going to be a student I would never forget. I was not sure what this meant exactly, but needless to say, when at open house a couple of days before school Dustin walked into my room, I was nervous. Dustin had come with his mother and grandmother, and right off, they noticed a reading corral in the corner of my classroom. This was a small corral I had built from the weathered wood of an old barn my parents had taken down. Inside the corral I had placed an antique bathtub with cushions and the saddle I had used as a young boy, giving students a unique and comfortable place to read. As it turned out, Dustin and his family were quite passionate about cowboy history and culture. His mother and grandmother were actively involved in a cowboy symposium that was held locally each year. They told me that the cowboy symposium offered a youth cowboy poetry contest. I had recently heard about this contest and had already planned on beginning the year with a cowboy history project as a way of sharing some of my interests and encouraging the class to be thinking about their interests as well. Seeing this as a golden opportunity to engage Dustin's interest, I asked him if he would like to write a cowboy poem for the contest.

I left open house that night feeling very encouraged to have made such a strong connection with Dustin and his family. Early that school year, we read lots of books about cowboy life and cowboy poetry and even took a class field trip to the cowboy symposium. All the students had an opportunity to try writing a cowboy poem of their own, and any who wished to submit their poems to the contest were encouraged to do so. Dustin wrote the following cowboy poem that was

awarded first place by the symposium judges. We printed his poem, written from the perspective of a young, wild mustang, on the front page of the *Whirlwind News*:

The Not So Wild Mustang  
By Dustin

Everyday the mustangs love to run wild;  
But not me, no, I'm the rebellious child.  
My mother tells me to stay away from man,  
But I would be happy to help if I can.

It seems there is something in the wind  
That tells me he could be my friend.  
My mother tells me to run and play;  
But that's not how I want to spend my day.

I want to help round up a cow.  
I know that cow-hand could teach me how.  
The others all think that I'm plumb crazy;  
But I think they're just being lazy.

They think it's better being free.  
I'd like a friend to take care of me.

They think ranch life would be a cage.  
I'd like to help that cow-hand earn his wage.

That new cow-hand, his name is Tim.  
I would love to work with him.  
He's caught the brunt of many jokes,  
But they're really not such bad folks.

Hey! What's that? I heard a noise!  
Oh, look! Here come those cowboys.  
The others are trying to run away,  
But as for me, I'm gonna stay!

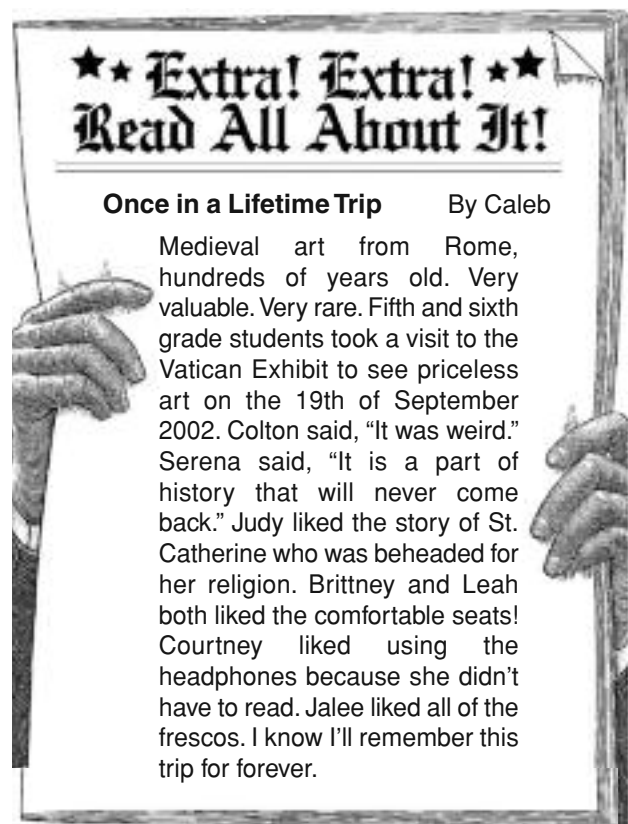
It's over now. We've all been roped.  
It ended just the way I hoped.  
All that talk about being free,  
Now they'll be cow ponies just like me.

Certainly this was a victory for Dustin. Winning first place earned him a belt buckle and an opportunity to read his poem aloud at the cowboy symposium. Perhaps even greater than that was that this shared interest of ours allowed us to get to know and understand each other better. Although there were still challenges, it helped us establish a relationship of learning and respect that resulted in a successful school year for both of us. The fifth grade teacher was right. I will never forget Dustin.

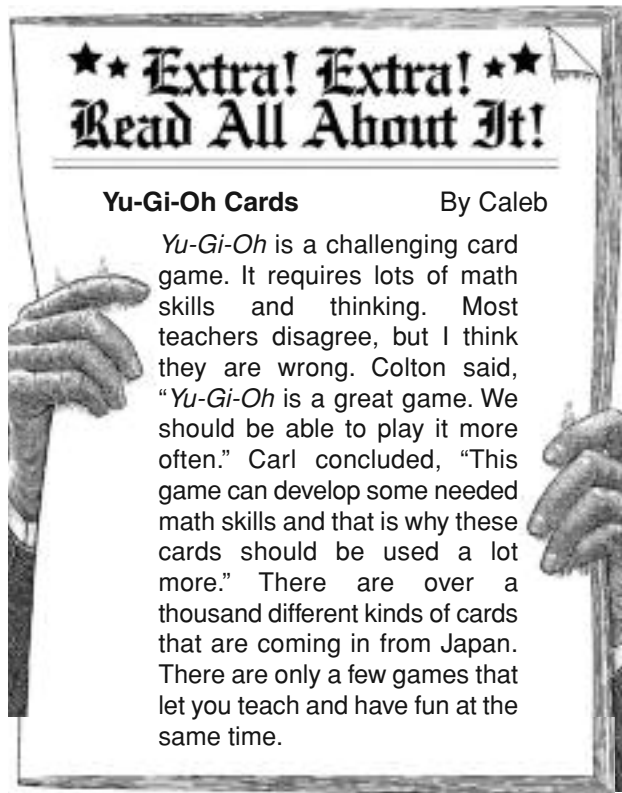
## Caleb

Caleb was an extremely bright student who struggled a great deal with organization. He was quite adept at completing assignments. However, finding those assignments and getting them turned in was an entirely different story. Other times, though fully capable, he would find the routine subjects of school extremely boring and engage in all types of mischievous behavior aimed at disrupting the other students. What I quickly learned about Caleb was that he had a passion for reading nonfiction, especially when reading it on his own terms. He begged and pleaded to sit at the desk nearest our class set of encyclopedias, and I allowed it. Caleb spent numerous days during our independent reading time consuming various volumes from the encyclopedias. I was always amazed by Caleb's ability to get stuck on a volume and read it cover to cover, much like a novel. In fact, he even used a bookmark to keep track of his daily progress.

Caleb developed a love for history, especially the Middle Ages. He was never shy about sharing what he had read, often telling the class about various facts he had learned. Needless to say, when Caleb heard that a special, medieval art exhibit from Rome was coming to town and that we were going to visit it, he was ecstatic. Caleb talked about that fieldtrip all year long, and everyone agreed that he should be the one to write about it in the *Whirlwind News*.



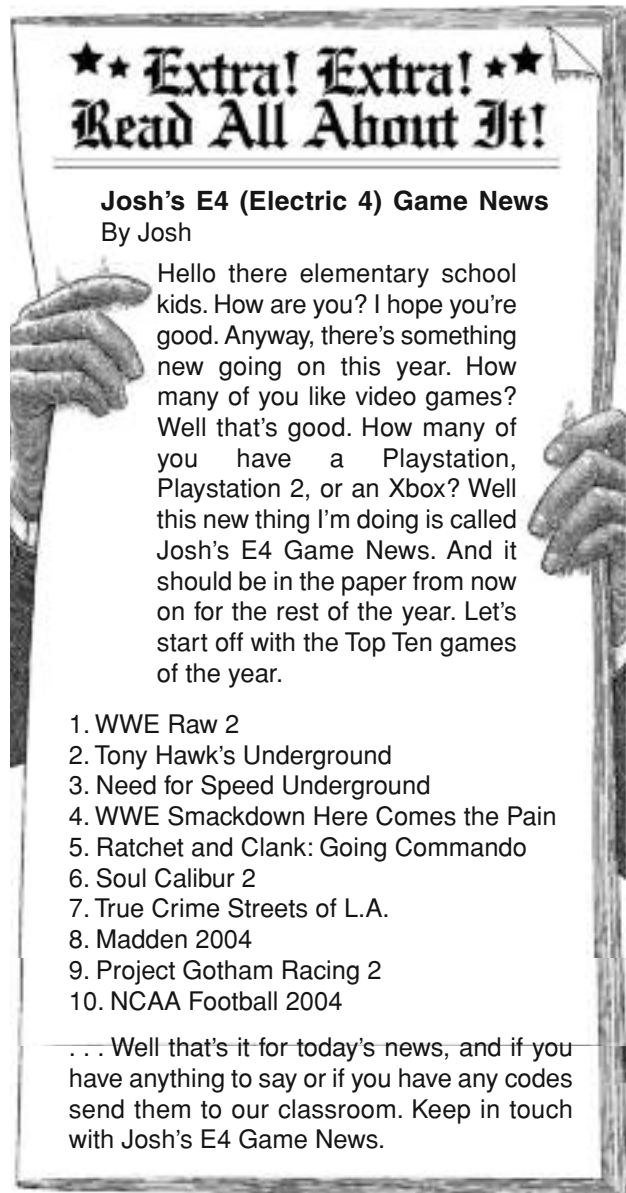
Many of my students, including Caleb, were very interested in Takahashi's (2003) *Yu-Gi-Oh!*. In addition to their interests in the books and television shows, several students enjoyed the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* playing cards. Some of them wrote news stories in the *Whirlwind News* describing how to collect and duel with the cards. Although many students attempted to bring them to school, they were often quickly taken up by teachers. This of course aggravated my students, some of whom thought there was a good deal of reading and math involved in playing with the cards. A few students even published editorials in the paper, trying to convince teachers that they should be allowed to have them at school. Caleb was one of these students. Although he fully admitted the pleasure involved in dueling with *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards, he also explained how they could be educational.



### Josh

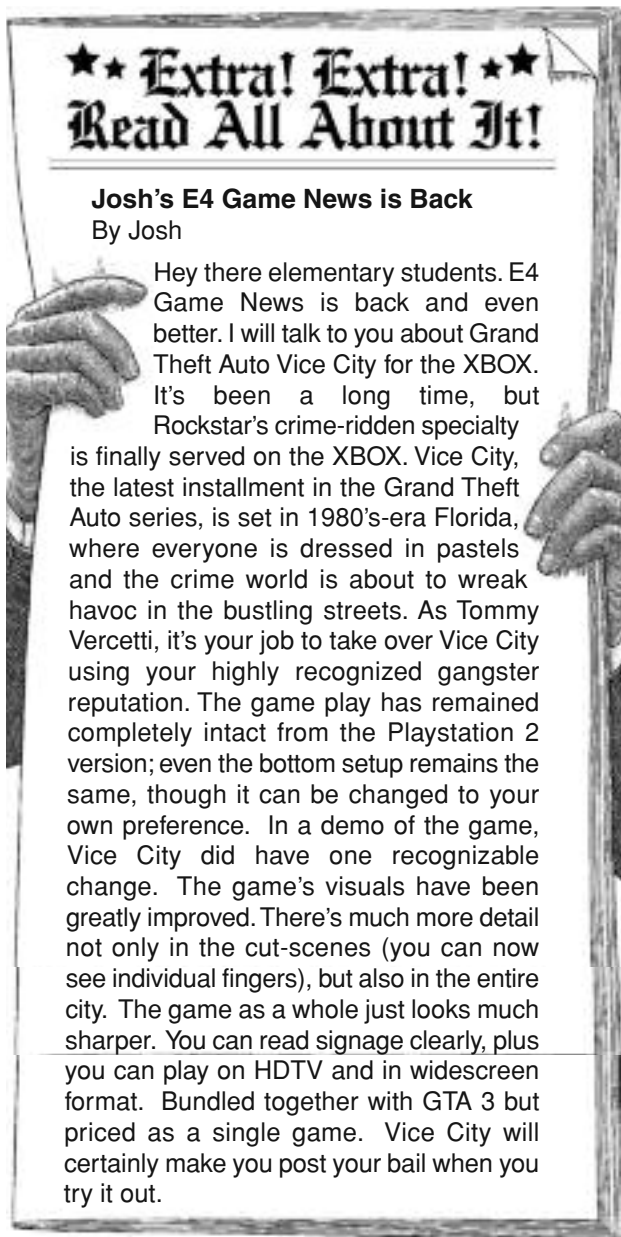
Josh was a very capable student who never seemed to be highly engaged in class. He completed his assignments and would participate when called on, yet his overall motivation and engagement never seemed to be what it could have been. One day though, about half way through the school year, Josh approached me with an original idea. He asked if he could begin writing a column each six weeks for the *Whirlwind News* about video games. The articles would discuss students' favorite video games and offer advice and

codes for playing them. We had never had a recurring columnist in the *Whirlwind News* before. Seeing this as an opportunity to engage Josh in writing about one of his passions, I agreed to let Josh write his column. Here is a portion of his first article:



Unfortunately, Josh got into some trouble later that year and had to spend a few weeks at an alternative school. In a meeting concerning Josh, his father discussed how important writing the column had been for him. Josh had asked to take extra copies of the paper home and had given them to special friends and relatives. His article was certainly something he was proud of. It also provided a leadership role for Josh in our school. Students were depending on him to provide his video game expertise in each issue. I strongly encouraged Josh to get back to our school as

quickly as possible because we needed him to write his articles. Josh did return and was able to continue his column at the end of the year.



### **Faith**

About midway through my last year of teaching, a student came to our school from Swaziland. Faith had just arrived to the United States to live with her father and stepmother. She was a couple of years older than most of my students, but her parents and my principal felt that fifth grade would be a good placement for her because she had missed some school while living with her mother and grandmother in Swaziland.

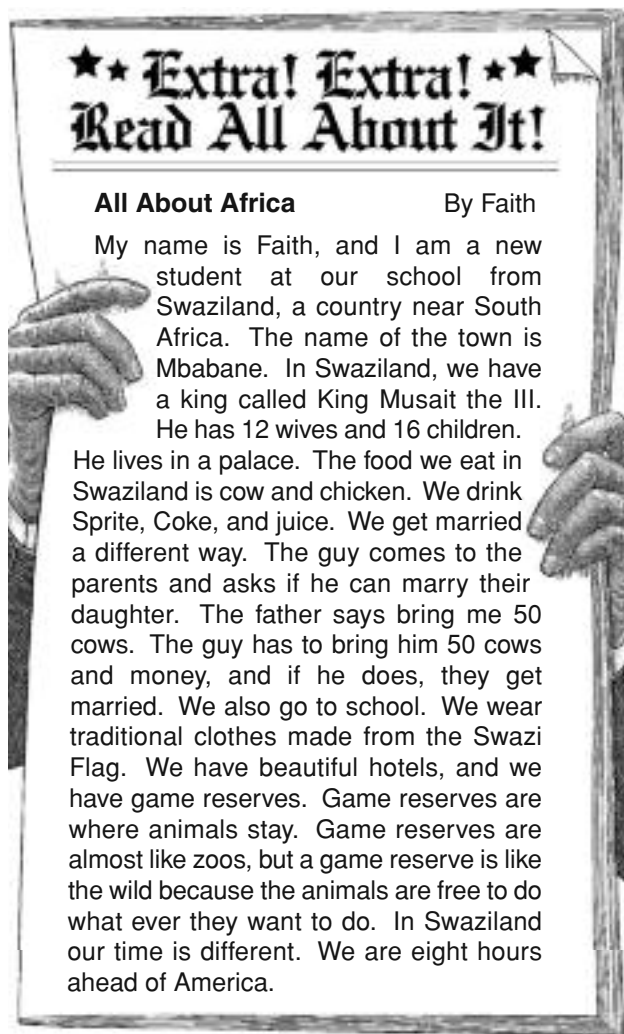
Unfortunately, Faith's first day of school in the United States just so happened to be the day our school

district was giving one of the State's released standardized tests for benchmarking purposes. I felt that this was somewhat of a rough initiation into the American education system, but on the other hand, it did provide me with some insight into her skills for completing a standardized reading test. Faith only got half of the questions correct. Knowing that this was the end of November and the first State reading test would be given in March made me uneasy. To make matters more urgent, Faith would be required to pass that test by July in order to be promoted to sixth grade. Much like Georgia, fifth grade in Texas is one of a handful of school years in which students are required to pass the reading and math standardized tests for promotion.

I quickly placed Faith in a small tutoring group after school and spent a great deal of time discussing with her the educational experiences she had in Swaziland. She told me that she had missed some school in Swaziland and that English was one of her classes at school, although she also spoke several other languages. Faith was extremely bright and serious about her education. She enjoyed learning and had a natural talent for public speaking. She had a deep love for her home country and was eager to tell her American classmates about it. Although Faith spoke and wrote well, her English vocabulary was limited. Often she would ask me what certain words meant that I used in class. For example, on one occasion, she stopped me and asked, "Sir, what is an author?" There were other academic areas that she had not yet been exposed to a great deal, one of which was such a strong emphasis on standardized testing.

I felt that the key to helping Faith be successful in school was to immerse her in numerous reading, writing, and speaking opportunities. Her parents, both fluent English speakers, agreed to engage her in a great deal of English conversation at home and assist her with her studies. After Faith brought some photos of her life in Swaziland, I asked if she would be interested in sharing them with the class. She happily agreed, and it resulted in a semester-long research project. Faith eventually gave several lengthy presentations to my class about life in Swaziland. She created a poster-board backdrop in which she pasted photos and facts about Swaziland. She read books and searched the Internet to collect her information. Presenting this information to the class and answering students' questions gave her numerous opportunities to develop her vocabulary. Her reading and writing skills also developed extremely quickly, and it did not take long for her to catch on to the kind of thinking the State was looking for on their standardized tests. Faith

ended up passing the reading test on her first attempt, just a few short months after she arrived in the United States. Her Swaziland research culminated in the following article she wrote for the *Whirlwind News*:



These students whose contributions I have shared, like many of my students, appeared to be struggling with various issues. Some struggled with classroom behavior or a lack of engagement in school, and others struggled to obtain the skills needed to succeed. Also, these students were quite passionate about various forms of everyday culture. Like Alvermann (2008) and Gee (2007), I hoped to gain some insight through their interests in popular culture to more effectively help them in school.

#### **Discussion: Personal and Academic Growth**

Alvermann and Xu (2003) described the current debate concerning if and how popular culture should be used in the classroom. Some teachers completely oppose popular culture use in schools, viewing it as a low form of entertainment that can be harmful to young

children's development. Other teachers do see a place for using popular culture in the classroom, if students are taught how to critically analyze it for commercial and political messages. Still, some teachers argue that a critical approach can ruin the pleasure it provides for children and that teachers should simply celebrate students' interests in it.

By encouraging students to share their popular culture interests in the *Whirlwind News*, I hoped to maintain a balanced approach to incorporating popular culture (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Alvermann & Xu, 2003). I wanted to spotlight and celebrate students' personal passions for everyday culture. Students chose to bring their popular culture into the school setting, primarily on their own terms and for their own purposes (Hull & Schultz, 2002). As a result, I discovered, much like Marsh (2000) and Arthur (2001), that my students' engagement in school greatly increased. Moreover, the *Whirlwind News* served as an excellent venue for doing this. Its authenticity, it was funded and operated just like a real-life newspaper, seemed to be a natural vehicle for sharing students' everyday literacies.

However, I wanted to do more than simply celebrate my students' personal interests. I wanted my students to develop academically as readers and writers as well. I wanted to teach them that reading and writing are about finding things in life that you are passionate about and that reading and writing can be tools for learning about and sharing those passions. Encouraging my students to read and write about topics of keen interest to them appeared to serve them well in their literacy development. In fact, like Stone (2007) and Merchant (2001), I was amazed by the complexity of the learning they were already engaged in through their popular culture interests. Students were eager to write and publish stories in the *Whirlwind News* that they found interesting and meaningful. Also, writing about their passions for a school-wide audience seemed to increase the time and care they put into their work.

I remember when I first realized that my students were creating a paper, not just for themselves, but for the entire school. It was brought home to me in the late spring when our school offered PONY Day (Preview of Next Year). Each spring on PONY Day, students moved up to the next grade level for one class period to get a glimpse of what to expect the next fall. I would routinely spend some of the time telling students about the *Whirlwind News*. I always enjoyed asking how many of them had been reading the paper. Each year I asked this question, all the students raised their

hands. This was a pleasant reminder to me of the impact my students' writing was having. The *Whirlwind News* offered my students a real reason to write and the entire school a good reason to read.

Although Dewey (1938/1963; 1900/1943) advocated authentic, hands-on learning years ago, his message remains highly relevant and applicable. Students must be engaged in a practical and pertinent curriculum to develop the skills needed to succeed in a rapidly changing society. There is great power and potential to be found in tapping students' interests and guiding them into meaningful learning projects. Dewey (1900/1943) was a strong supporter of tapping students' interests in everyday culture. However, finding students' interests was not enough. He also encouraged teachers to guide and develop students' interests into educational activities as well. Such teaching encouraged me to get to know my students better and become more aware of their interests. For many of my students, valuing and incorporating their interests was key in establishing closer relationships with them, relationships that created a welcoming environment where both personal and academic growth could take place.

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BY BRENT DAIGLE AND  
MARGARET-MARY SULENTIC DOWELL

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a term used to describe a set of closely related exceptionalities along the developmental disability continuum. Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), Rett's Syndrome, Asperger Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and Autism are generally associated with ASD (Dunlap & Bunton-Pierce, 1999). While a broad range of academic, social, and behavioral functioning exists within this population, the core features of ASD often include repetitive patterns of behavior, delays in verbal and nonverbal communication, and difficulty with social interactions and relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Autism diagnosis has increased sharply over the past fifty years. Recent prevalence rate estimates indicate that one in every 150 children born in the United States has Autism (Dunlap & Bunton-Pierce, 1999; Fombonne, 2003). In Europe, research efforts continue

#### *Abstract*

*The goal of this investigation was to determine how Digital Storytelling impacted the academic performance and social interactions of a sixth grade female student with high-functioning Autism. This study was conducted over a three-week period in the Gulf Coast region of the United States. Qualitative methodology, using an inductive approach informed by grounded theory, was employed throughout this exploratory case study. This paper concentrates on academic learning, literacy acquisition, and social skills associated with this holistic intervention. Active participation, increased engagement, and critical reflection were identified as the most important factors that contributed to the success of Digital Storytelling within the context of this investigation. Guidelines for classroom implementation are considered, with recommendations offered for future research and practice.*

#### *Keywords:*

*Digital Storytelling, Literacy, Autism, Social Interactions*

to address challenges associated with the diagnosis, treatment, and education of students in this population. Williams, Mellis, and Peat (2005) explain, "In recent years there has been greater interest in emotional, social and psychological health issues in countries like the UK, US, Australia and Europe, which may have increased identification of affected children" (p. 38).

Ongoing research efforts seek to enhance our knowledge of ASD; however, the reason for this increase remains controversial and unresolved. Competing theories on the rise of ASD relate to the expanded diagnostic criteria for identification (Wing & Potter, 2002) and a better understanding of biological factors associated with this group of developmental disorders (Ozonoff, Rogers, & Hendren, 2003). While agreement may not yet exist to provide satisfactory reasons for this increase, there is little dispute that the academic, social, and emotional needs of this population remain ongoing and critical. The number of

students today identified with ASD underscores the urgency for effective instructional approaches for this population.

### **Literacy**

A significant number of individuals with Autism do not possess the literacy or communication skills needed to function on an independent level (Foley & Staples, 2003). Nation, Clarke, Wright, and Williams (2006) argue that a pervasive struggle with language and communication skills places this group at risk for ongoing failure in literacy related areas. The effectiveness of literacy interventions have been difficult to assess because of the variability in academic, social, and behavioral functioning of this student population (Nation, Clarke, Wright, & Williams, 2006).

The tremendous challenge with assessment and identification of literacy rates is an ongoing and evolving struggle. Mirenda (2003) emphasizes the pressing need to identify literacy-based strategies, interventions, and practices that contribute to positive outcomes for this population. Too often, "those who prove themselves to be unable to master the 'necessary' prerequisite skills are thus considered ineligible for further literacy instruction" (p. 272).

Literacy development for this population remains a core priority. Lanter and Watson (2008) advocate literacy approaches that are student-centered and contextual. However, this vision remains a distant goal. Teachers, however, may not have had formal education specific to the language abilities of their students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)...The differing areas of expertise may help explain why the literacy needs of students with ASD are underserved; teachers and administrators around the United States have concerns about the adequacy of their literacy instruction for students with ASD. (p. 33)

To fully address these needs, literacy-based instructional practices should reflect the diversity of ability levels within the ASD category. As Maughan and Carroll (2006) note, "effective treatments in one domain will not necessarily result in improvements in the other; as a result, each disorder needs separate treatment" (p. 353).

The widening disparity of research-based literacy interventions between individuals in the general and special population serves to underscore the necessity of literacy strategies that target the fundamental needs of students who struggle with reading development, writing skills, and language acquisition. O'Connor and

Klein (2004) contend that existing reading strategies used with students in the general population may be ineffective, and ultimately fail to adequately meet the needs of individuals with ASD. In fact, reading strategies designed to improve the outcomes of students in the general population may have a negative effect for some students with ASD. For example, the use of pre-reading questions appear to lead some children with ASD to a set of responses that do not promote comprehension (Chiang & Lin, 2007).

Sencibaugh (2005) echoes the need for more differentiated instruction, pedagogy, and curricular practices that reflect the unique learning styles of students with special education needs. While individuals with learning disabilities may respond best to literacy instruction that is grounded in explicit instruction, the parity of these benefits are not necessarily cross-categorical to all children with special education needs (Sencibaugh, 2005). Students with ASD seem to respond better to literacy instruction that is systematic and augmented with strong visual supports (Dunlap & Bunton-Pierce, 1999).

Additional research is needed to promote broader literacy skills for the ASD population. While traditional methods of literacy instruction remain effective in some areas, the semantic and linguistic aspects of literacy require more innovative and specialized approaches for this group of students (Nation, Clarke, Wright, & Williams, 2006). Academic interventions for this population should integrate more options and flexibility than what is possible in the general population. In their study of reading ability for students with ASD, Nation, Clarke, Wright, and Williams (2006) found "... considerable variability across the sample with performance on most tests ranging from floor to ceiling levels" (p. 911). More focused and potentially qualitative investigations are needed to better explore, analyze, and develop research-based strategies that target the literacy outcomes of students with ASD.

### **Current interventions**

The range of ASD-related social, behavioral, and academic interventions is expansive. Although some interventions gain widespread popular acceptance by the public (sometimes referred to as fad treatments), many do not have a sound pedagogical foundation to substantiate their claims (Machalicek, O'Reilly, Beretvas, Sigafos, & Lancioni, 2007). Perhaps the unknown etiology of Autism contributes to the popularity of remedies without empirical support (Levy & Hyman, 2005). Seroussi (2000) contributes the proliferation and perceived success of these treatments to the testimonials and anecdotal evidence

often reported by participants of these programs. Using an economic and social status paradigm, Metz, Mulick, and Butter (2004) theorize, "In a number of instances, monetary gains or gains in status may also make professionals prone to unproven fad treatments" (p. 240). While the need for research-based practice is widely accepted, its implementation has been a key challenge for researchers and practitioners alike.

Until recently, educational research, policy, and practice that addressed the needs of students with ASD placed a greater emphasis on interventions designed to reduce the negative behavior and social interactions typically associated with these developmental disorders. Behaviorist learning theory has become a foundational philosophy of Autism therapy and intervention. Contributions from this field, particularly in the area of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), have made a profound impact on the behavioral and social outcomes of individuals with ASD. The acute focus on ameliorating the functional and behavioral deficits that characterize this population may explain the lack of interventions that target specific academic areas of weakness. Academic strategies and methods that exist for students with ASD are seldom without a component for behavioral or social skills improvement. Roberts (2004) asserts, "It is clear that there is insufficient empirically sound research evaluating outcomes of programs for children with autism, despite the range of treatments available to parents and the claims made by the exponents of some of these programs" (p. 7).

### **Digital Storytelling as a literacy intervention**

Individuals with ASD often demonstrate an enhanced response to visual and sensory stimulation (Deruelle, Rondan, Gepner, & Fagot, 2006). Digital Storytelling is one approach that may improve the academic and social outcomes of students with ASD. Digital Storytelling is actuated through the use of emerging digital and information technologies. Garrety and Schmidt (2008) contend, "As technologies have evolved storytelling has changed and morphed with the times to include digital technologies, images and audio that enable a new generation to tell its story" (p.16). This approach to literacy development and social interactions makes use of multimedia platforms that integrate audio, video, and text-based technologies to create a narrative that is personal, unique, and meaningful. This intervention may benefit students with ASD because it promotes multi-sensory experiences through the use of innovative technology and distinctive visual cues.

Well crafted Digital Stories include the following literary characteristics; point of view, dramatic question, emotional content, voice, soundtrack, economy, and pacing (Lambert, 2002). Each story is personal in nature and reflects the background and life experiences of each writer. The content and structure of each narrative is unique and original as it attempts to share a particular problem, need, desire, or experience.

A central dramatic question is ultimately resolved within this heuristic process. Bull and Kajder (2004) emphasize the critical importance of the dramatic question, as it relates to the authenticity and uniqueness of each story. This literary characteristic transforms the story from one of simple documentation to a sophisticated and elaborate platform for imaginative writing and storytelling. A Digital Story is unique because of its individualized treatment and capacity for emotional, social, and intellectual development.

Emotional content forces the audience to identify, empathize, and relate to the shared experiences within each story. This literary tool helps develop and strengthen the story, and in turn provides a subject matter and content that may demonstrate mass appeal. Laughter, tears, anger, and compassion are possible responses to a well-written story that makes effective use of emotional content. Emotions are deeply rooted in the human experience. While vivid descriptions and supporting facts tell the story, the emotional content provides an immediate and visceral appeal to the audience. The emotional content within a Digital Story is one characteristic that differentiates this intervention from other technology-based instructional approaches. A digital story, "...works to pursue, discover, and communicate new understanding that is rooted in who we are as humans" (Bull & Kadjer, 2004, p. 47).

Digital Stories celebrate the unique voice of each writer. Linaza, Eskudero, Lamsfus, and Marcos (2004) describe this as an essential and unique quality because it, "narrates the content of a story in a natural way, expressing the proper emotional state adapted to the progress of the story" (p. 1). The writer's voice invites the audience to identify with the author through a shared and meaningful experience. Alvarez (2005) further clarifies the bifunctional role of this writing technique; "But it is a two-way pact: the writer makes himself heard and the reader listens in - or, more accurately, the writer works to find or create a voice that will stretch out to the reader, make him prick his ears and attend" (p.18).

Image transitions and background music help symbolically reinforce the theme and mood of the story. The final version integrates storytelling with technology to present an entertaining, dynamic, and compelling narrative. Digital Storytelling relies on multisensory instructional approaches to encourage student involvement, creativity, and overall academic success.

The overall structure and sequence of a Digital Story adheres to a predictable and consistent format. Written content for each story should be concise and informative, usually containing less than 250 words (Watkins & Russo, 2005). Image choice and use should provide focus to the theme of the story, generally 25 images or less will suffice. A complete Digital Story is approximately three minutes in length.

### **Empirical basis of Digital Storytelling**

Recent scholarship expands the focus of literacy development to encompass skills that are essential in the current era of rapid technological innovation and advancement. Increased use and reliance on digital communication underscores the critical need for instructional approaches that integrate literacy skills in a way that addresses the challenges and opportunities of this evolving paradigm (Armstrong & Warlick, 2004). Digital Storytelling integrates the traditional goals of literacy with the increasing demands of an information-based society (Barrett, 2006). Digital Storytelling uses collaboration to promote student engagement, reflection for deep learning, technology integration, and project-based learning (Barrett, 2006).

### **Digital Storytelling with secondary school students**

Maier and Fisher (2007) find Digital Storytelling to be an effective tool for literacy development with secondary age students in general classroom settings. This intervention seems to improve social interactions and language outcomes. Advance organization, preferably with visual cues and writing prompts, is a practical approach to introduce this concept to students. Maier and Fisher (2007) suggest that, "Showing student examples helps them visually conceptualize what their end goal will be" (p.189).

### **Digital Storytelling and English as a second language**

Verdugo and Belmonte (2007) report the benefit of Digital Storytelling as an intervention to target the listening comprehension skills of Spanish students learning English as a second or other language. Digital Storytelling with this group led to improved outcomes in the area of listening comprehension and word

recognition. Verdugo and Belmonte (2007) explain: "It is believed in this study that digital stories, if appropriately selected, can prove to be very useful in developing children's listening skills. They tend to be visual, interactive and reiterative" (p. 88).

### **Purpose of study**

The few studies that examine Digital Storytelling with special needs populations document its benefit as an instructional tool for literacy and communication improvement (Ohler, 2007). Technologies required for this intervention are widely available in current classroom settings (Becker, 2000), thus allowing for a seamless integration in these settings. Myers (2006) explains, "It is not a choice we have as teachers of English to decide whether these symbolic tools have value in our classrooms, because they are already integrated into the production of our own as well as students' consciousness" (p. 64).

Digital Storytelling is consistent with the unique learning style of individuals with ASD. This instructional approach encourages choice (Kern, Mantegna, Vorndran, Bailin, & Hilt 2001), video modeling (Neumann, 2004), and computer use (Stromer, Kimball, Kinney, & Taylor, 2006) to reinforce skills that lead to higher academic, social, and behavioral outcomes for this population (Kimball, Kinney, Taylor, & Stromer, 2003).

This investigation attempts to reconcile the lack of empirical data on Digital Storytelling for students in the ASD population. Using an exploratory case study design, this study examined the impact of Digital Storytelling on the academic performance and social functioning outcomes of a thirteen-year-old female student with high-functioning Autism. A qualitative approach with grounded theory data analysis provided the methodological framework to assess the viability and potential use of this intervention for a high-functioning individual with ASD.

### **Methodology**

Protective measures ensured the anonymity and confidentiality of family members, educators, and key informants throughout this investigation. Additional coding steps were necessary to further preserve the privacy of sensitive documents related to psychological, medical, and educational history. The subject of this investigation is known exclusively by the pseudonym "Jessica."

Jessica is a thirteen-year-old female identified with a high level of Autism functioning. Her response to multisensory instructional techniques is generally

receptive and positive. Likewise, she exhibits a wide range of social, behavioral, and academic skills. For example, mathematical aptitude and conceptual pattern recognition are two areas of relative strength for her. Jessica continues to struggle with age-appropriate behaviors and use of appropriate social interaction skills.

Participant selection in this case study was based on the determinants of program access, adequate representation of the larger population, familiarity with computer-based technologies, and the potential to construct meaning through deep analysis. Cuadraz and Uttal (1999) explain that, "it is the quality of the analysis and the extent to which we uncover meanings and processes germane to the qualitative endeavor, not the size of the sample or the presence of comparative categories, that produces theoretically relevant issues and explanations" (p. 166). Patton (1990) adds that the "logic and power behind purposeful selection of information of informants is that the sample should above all be information rich" (p. 169). Jessica represents a desirable case for the purpose of this exploratory investigation. She possesses the necessary computer skills to provide more insight, descriptions, and information on the potential effectiveness of Digital Storytelling as a literacy intervention.

### **Site location**

This study took place in a public library that is centrally located in the community where Jessica lives and attends school. This location was chosen, in part, because (a) the parents did not want the study to interfere with her current class schedule or instructional day, and (b) Jessica was familiar with this library as the location of previous after-school and summer tutoring sessions, important to her regarding acclimation to new settings and situations.

Meaningful interactions between the participant and the investigator are essential components to well designed case study investigations. Lincoln and Guba (1985) note, "in order for the human instrument to use all of [his or her] abilities to the fullest extent possible, there must be frequent, continuing, and meaningful interaction between the investigator and the respondents" (p. 107). The framework of this inquiry relied on the iterative processes of flexibility, individualized instruction, and dynamic interactions with key informant groups.

### **Methods of data collection**

Eisenhardt (1989) describes grounded theory as a paradigm that consists of multiple data sources to

build, shape, and extend the knowledge base of a phenomenon or concept. Creswell, Hanson, Clark, and Morales (2007) identify participant observation, key informant interviews, and document analysis as common data collection methods within qualitative research. This study utilized the aforementioned procedures to gain descriptive insight into Digital Storytelling as an educational practice for a student with high functioning Autism.

This study employed a single-case design to investigate the use of Digital Storytelling as a literacy-based intervention for Jessica. Qualitative methods were chosen to evaluate the impact of this intervention on social and academic functioning. Jessica appeared to meet the standard outlined by Patton (1990) as a participant who can provide insight and detailed information to a particular research area. Jessica represented an ideal case for this study as an "information-rich" source for continuous data and insight (Patton, 1990, p. 169).

Creswell (2002) explains that a researcher may carry out the role of participant observer, non-participant observer, or a combination of both. In this study, participant observation was an essential part of the data collection methodology. This approach allowed me to consider each interaction, challenge, and aspect of Digital Storytelling as a potential intervention to impact Jessica's social and academic outcomes. As questions arose, and then were resolved, new ones emerged. This iterative process of observation transpired until each question, issue, and theme reached saturation (Sterk et al., 2006).

### **Participant observation**

Participant observation in this investigation was used to catalogue the continuous waves of incoming data for systematic reflection and critical analysis. Adler and Clark (2003) advocate the use of participant observation when the research area is an emerging phenomenon or when the environmental or social situation changes at a rapid pace. The time spent on this intervention each day lent itself to participant-observation as a valid instrument for documenting the Digital Storytelling intervention as it pertained to Jessica.

### **Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with family members, caregivers, and teachers to provide critical insight into the struggles, frustrations, and dedication associated with caring for a family member with ASD. Additional interviews were carried out with Jessica's former and current speech therapist, school

counsellor, and former teachers. Each interviewee provided a better understanding and fuller knowledge of their personal knowledge and interactions with Jessica. The cumulative data from these interviews generated new insight, perspectives, and ideas related to the implementation of Digital Storytelling with Jessica.

### **Documents**

Subjective meaning and interpretation is central to qualitative epistemologies and methods. For this reason, data collection instruments and must be purposeful, relevant, and deliberate. Documents can provide a source of guidance to determine meaning and build knowledge. Patton (2002) acknowledges the value of documents in a qualitative study, as they "constitute a particularly rich source of information" (p. 293). Broad access was given by the family to review the personal, general, and organizational files regarding Jessica's background as a way gain insight into the implementation and feasibility of this intervention.

### **Coding**

Coding was essential to theory building within this study. Adler and Clark (2003) define coding as, "associating words or labels with passages in one's field notes or transcripts" (p. 503). O'Rourke (2000) explains that coding facilitates with the organization and analysis of the data that is collected. The data analysis used in this study is an adaptation of the three iterative stages suggested by Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002): coding, trends, and theory building.

During the initial stage, codes were assigned to the concurrent themes, patterns, and insights that developed during the study. The second stage of data analysis attempted to explore the themes and trends from the assigned codes. Attempts were made to integrate codes with similar themes, characteristics, and responses. The third stage of analysis attempted to reconcile the meaning from this data as a basis for theory building and extension. Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002) suggest that transparency and openness are study design features that are likely to promote trustworthiness, reliability, and integrity.

### **Findings and discussion**

Walton (1992) suggests that, "case studies are likely to produce the best theory" (p. 129). While the goal of this case study was to extend and build upon the existing theoretical foundation of Digital Storytelling as a multidisciplinary approach to impact the literacy and social outcomes of a student with ASD, the reader should remain aware of the scope and generalizability

from these findings. Jessica represented an ideal case for this investigation. The questions I examined represented an attempt to contribute to the limited research on Digital Storytelling for students with ASD. The research findings, therefore, lend themselves to a specific application of Digital Storytelling as a literacy intervention for a high functioning student with documented ASD. Interpretations and future applications from this case study should be understood within the parameters of moderate generalization (Bryman, 2004). Future studies designed to replicate these findings should include methodological parity with regard to data collection, qualitative analysis, and participant selection. The interpretive nature of this effort does not attempt, "to produce sweeping sociological statements that hold good over long periods of time" (Payne & Williams, 2005, p. 297), but instead provides the framework for future research to either refute or confirm these results, "through further evidence" (p. 297).

Analysis of data revealed three overarching themes related to the academic and social impact of Digital Storytelling with Jessica. Active participation, increased engagement, and critical reflection were found to be the most salient features of this intervention. These interactions were possible because the framework of Digital Storytelling lent itself to Jessica's learning preference for tactile support, strong visual aids, and use of interactive technology. Her kinesthetic, visual, and task-oriented approach to learning represented a characteristic learning style for many students with ASD.

### **Active participation**

The story Jessica selected was carefully chosen and thought out. Her first reaction to Digital Storytelling was reticent and apprehensive. Initially, I explained to her the concept of Digital Storytelling, provided examples of this process, and reiterated that the story choice is hers to make. The second session was similar to the first, her unease and unfamiliarity with Digital Storytelling still continued to prevent her from full participation. She came to the third session with a change in demeanor and excitement to share with me the following:

*[Jessica]: Mr. Daigle, I know what I want to make a movie about.*

*[Brent]: You do? So, what do you want to write about?*

*[Jessica]: The fire and my animals.*

*[Brent]: Why?*

*[Jessica]: Because I want to show about everything I've been through and everything I have and stuff like that.*

She chose to write about the fire that destroyed her home in the summer of 2007. Her family escaped the home; her mother was hospitalized for several days due to smoke inhalation. Unfortunately, none of her animals survived the fire.

Once she chose her story, Jessica was no longer uninterested and passive. Active participation was central to the Digital Storytelling process. This energy and dedication to her story impacted multiple areas of social functioning. Decision making and problem solving, patience with technology, and seeing outside of self are examples of the range of social skills Jessica exhibited through the Digital Storytelling process.

Jessica actively participated throughout each level of the Digital Storytelling process. This intervention functioned in a unique way to accentuate her strengths in a way that helped create a story that was both compelling and aesthetically pleasing. The final version of her story revealed this dynamic interchange of systematic problem solving, decision-making, and revision.

### **Engaged learning**

I observed a deep level of engagement and commitment to the writing process throughout this intervention. Student choice of both the topic and subject matter was a crucial determinant to the success of this intervention. Jessica showed a high level of engagement because the perceived outcome was clear and valuable.

Her story recounted a very emotional and intensely personal event from her life experience. Providing wide parameters for topic choice ultimately led to increased ownership and commitment. The genre she chose, an autobiographical nonfictional account, was particularly insightful, as it confirms observations made by Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) that students who struggle with literacy development seem to prefer literacy interactions from authentic and informational texts.

### **Critical reflection**

The iterative nature of Digital Storytelling emphasized ongoing review and critical reflection. The collaborative and informal aspect of this intervention was ideally suited to address Jessica's academic, social, and behavioral needs. Jessica took an active role in the construction of her own knowledge because her narrative was personal and genuinely heartfelt. The final version of her story demonstrated the reflective and introspective nature of this intervention.

Additionally, this intervention enhanced Jessica's overall literacy development because it allowed her to use an alternative visual and audio format to tell an authentic story that was significant and meaningful to her own life experience. Throughout this study, I observed deep levels of motivation, commitment, and pride associated with the creation of her Digital Story. Literacy outcomes improved for Jessica because this intervention reinforced higher levels of communicative interaction within this responsive and adaptable framework.

### **Conclusion**

Current research efforts on the educational use of Digital Storytelling are primarily limited to the general population of students (Robin, 2008). Prior to this study, there was no direct empirical evidence to support the benefit and use of Digital Storytelling as an instructional approach for high functioning students with ASD. This study extended the literature on Digital Storytelling as an authentic learning experience for an individual in this population as an additional and viable strategy to address literacy efforts in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This study both explored and evaluated the effect of Digital Storytelling in other areas of functioning, such as social and behavioral interactions.

This case study provides exploratory evidence of increased outcomes in literacy, engaged learning, and social skills associated with Digital Storytelling for a high-functioning student with ASD. Jessica and I met over a three-week period at a local public library to write, design, and create a Digital Story. Each session was approximately 45 minutes, or a total of 11.25 hours. This is an important consideration for classroom instruction, as students with ASD demonstrate varying levels of functioning and ability. Also, this intervention can be quickly and easily integrated into existing classroom practices.

This study yielded three significant conclusions. First, Digital Storytelling led to improved outcomes in the areas of social, behavioral, and literacy development. Second, Digital Storytelling demonstrated promise as an instructional strategy for ongoing literacy development and support. Third, prior knowledge of basic multimedia and computer related skills added to the implementation and overall contribution of Digital Storytelling as a meaningful and shared learning experience.



## Future studies

This case study is an initial step towards understanding and describing the potential impact of a Digital Storytelling experience for a sixth grade student with high-functioning ASD. The first recommendation calls for ongoing efforts to critically evaluate and contextualize the findings of this case study to the larger population of individuals with ASD. Consideration to replicate and extend this study may include its use in a classroom setting, increasing the sample size, or examining the sustainability of this intervention over longer periods.

Future studies may also benefit from longitudinal designs that clearly trace the relationship between Digital Storytelling and literacy gains, social skills improvement, and language acquisition for students with ASD. Within the framework of a longitudinal study, the dynamic and interrelated processes of literacy, collaboration, and educational technology could be examined more extensively. This approach may provide more support to the results of this particular exploratory study.

The alarming rate of Autism reported in children has lead to a call for meaningful academic and behavioral interventions that address the complex needs of this population. According to Hyman, Rodier, and Davidson (2001), "there is increasing evidence that behavioral and educational intervention with young children may significantly improve developmental and behavioral outcomes and that basic deficits in play and communication may be therapeutically modified" (p. 3141). Exploring Digital Storytelling as a platform for more inclusive opportunities with the general population may provide insight into the factors that influence successful experiences in a regular classroom setting.

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## **A Win-Win Service Learning Project for College Students and First-Grade Children**

BY MICHELLE HANEY

### *Abstract*

*This study explores a pen pal project in which college students studying human development are matched with first grade students beginning to learn letter-writing skills. Analyses of college student final reports indicate that this project facilitated learning by offering an enjoyable authentic learning experience. Furthermore, teacher reports indicated that the first grade students were highly motivated by the pen pal experience. Recommendations for further developing a pen pal service learning activity are provided.*

### *Keywords:*

*College students, authentic learning, service learning, child development*

Authentic writing experiences are important tools for helping both children (Clay, 1991; Mayer, 2007) and college students (Renzulli, Gentry, & Reis, 2004) personally connect with new skills and concepts. There are many ways to integrate these opportunities into writing instruction. The use of pen pal relationships is one example of an authentic writing activity that allows for skill development over time while also providing natural feedback to engage the child as writer and reader (Barksdale, Watson, & Park, 2007). The effective use of pen pals as an authentic writing experience for beginning young writers has been documented in a number of situations. For instance, research suggests that pen pal relationships of children partnering with senior adults foster meaningful writing opportunities within the context of intergenerational learning. These types of pen pal relationships provide numerous developmental benefits for both the child and the senior pen pal (Bryant, 1989; Kiernan & Mosher-Ashley, 2002). The child benefits with experience writing and internalizing the value of writing within a meaningful context while also developing a relationship with an adult. Relationships with older adults offer living history, stories blended with beloved memories, and dispel cultural myths about the abilities of senior adults in our society. Pen pal relationships offer both the opportunity to mentor and connect to future generations, as well as stimulating activities that may have cognitive benefits.

Examples of successful pen pal projects that provide authentic writing experiences for young writers include international Internet pen pals with children from other countries (Chauhan, J., 1996; Charro, 2007), preservice teachers and children (Moore, 2000), and a pen pal project with children and sailors at sea and soldiers stationed abroad (Chopra, 2005). The ability of these pen pal projects to procure rich learning opportunities for children is explained by socio-cultural developmental theorist, Lev Vygotsky (1978), who describes cognitive development as occurring within a context of culture and social relationships. Thus, a writing activity nestled within the framework of a developing relationship not only provides an interesting and authentic writing opportunity, but may also be the optimal manner in which children come to understand knowledge and culturally valued skills such as communicating through writing.

### **Pen Pal Project with College Students in Developmental Psychology Course: A win-win learning dynamic**

As I planned to teach a course in *Lifespan Development* for the seventh year, I decided to incorporate a service-learning project into the course.

In other classes, my students benefited from experiential projects that provided authentic learning opportunities that were relevant and personally meaningful. However, rather than create another project involving observation and reflection alone, I decided to find a project that incorporated learning with a service immediate relevant and valuable to the population we were intending to “serve”. The research in service learning suggests that powerful learning opportunities result from service that is truly valued by those being served (Schmidt & Robby, 2002). In other words, the service experience should not be driven by the need to teach a learning objective. Rather, a rich service learning project is created when services offered are something the agency actually values and needs. Thus, the challenge in crafting a service learning opportunity is to identify what is both a learning opportunity for students, achieves learning objectives for the course, and also fulfills (rather than creates) a need in the community.

At the time I was thinking about this project, my daughter’s first grade class was bringing home pretend letters to imaginary audiences. Her teacher was beginning to teach letter writing skills. This is what professionals in education and psychology elegantly identify as an “ah-ha” moment. After securing parental consent, her teacher and I developed a three-month long pen pal project between our respective students. As with other pen pal projects documented in the literature, this project presented a win-win opportunity for both parties involved. Furthermore, the use of intergenerational writing as a learning tool has been underexplored (Katz 1996). A community of writers and readers emerged as my college students paired with my daughter’s first grade classmates. The children accessed a meaningful context to learn letter writing. They expressed delight upon receiving a letter and picture from a real college student who expressed interest in learning about them. In addition, they were given carte blanche to ask college students questions about their lives and the college experience. Many of the children had never been on a college campus and were very interested in learning about this much celebrated experience. Thus, an added bonus of this program was that it provided children a concrete example of and a window into considering college as a viable future goal.

### **The Participants**

Twenty children ages 6-7 were invited to participate in this project. Eleven of the participants were girls, and nine were boys. All parents returned the letter (sent home from school with their child) indicating that they

were willing to have their child participate in the pen-pal project. The children only provided first names. College students and children were not given each other’s home addresses, phone numbers, or email addresses. One child in the class was bi-racial. The rest of the class was European-American. Thirty-four percent of students attending the school receive free lunches. Eligibility for free lunches at public schools is one index for socio-economic status.

The college participants included 23 sophomore, junior, and senior level students with a variety of majors. The majority of the students were psychology majors. However, 5% of the students were in the pre-nursing program or were hoping to attend medical school after graduation. The course was a 200-level course entitled *Lifespan Development*. Students were told that they could choose to write a term paper in place of the service project if they desired. All 23 students chose to participate in the service project. The first-grade teacher selected three children who were particularly strong in writing and reading to be assigned two pen pals.

### **The Assignment**

At the beginning of the semester, students were asked to write an introductory letter to a first grade student. As a class, we discussed the type of vocabulary, themes, tone, and physical aspect of the letter (i.e., color, print, stickers and drawings, clean paper- no ripped notebook pages) developmentally appropriate for first grade students and for a school activity. I worked with the class to critique examples so we could consider what the literature in developmental psychology says about the preoperational-age child within the context of a letter to an actual child. Students pointed out examples where metaphors were used and how the first grader would likely interpret such phrases literally or not at all. We also discussed issues such as humor and points of common interest that would be developmentally appropriate. At times we struggled with certain themes. For instance, as a class we considered how to address questions from children about sensitive issues such as religious affiliation, incidences of bullying, or other sensitive topics. After consulting with the classroom teacher, we decided that both the classroom teacher and myself would read both the college student’s and children’s letters to address any sensitive issues that might arise before returning the letters. For instance, there was one child in the class who had recently lost his father to cancer. The college student assigned to him was encouraged to be sensitive to this loss. He was careful about asking

questions about the child's family, but responded honestly and sincerely to questions the child asked about his own family.

After the first batch of letters was sent to the first grade teacher for review, my students waited eagerly for their response letters. In anticipation of the children's letters, my students were eager to discuss issues regarding developmentally appropriate instruction and pedagogy for young children. They had limited understanding of how long it took a first grader to compose a letter that they wrote in less than five minutes. Further, it offered a chance to discuss the difficulty classroom teachers face as they try to integrate creative learning projects such as pen pal letters into rigid test driven curriculum. We also had a chance to discuss the wide range of skill levels in the classroom. The teacher had informed me that it took the children several drafts of working with the teacher to get the letters ready to send. She noted that there were a few first graders in the class who were just beginning to write sentences, and others with more advanced fine motor and vocabulary skills. As a class we compared these interesting anecdotal comments with the research literature in child development and were delighted to find a great deal of empirical support for our observations and teacher comments.

In the course syllabus, the college students were given the details of a final pen pal letter critique. The assignment involved constructing a 2-3 page essay in which they considered aspects of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development as reflected in the pen pal letters. In addition, they were asked to evaluate changes in cognitive development and writing skill that might be evident over the course of the semester. The Pen Pal Critique Assignment is listed in Appendix A.

## Results

At the end of the semester, the college students were asked to write a 1-2 paper reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of this service project. In particular, they were asked to comment on what they learned from the project and how it might be improved in the future. Their responses fell within three primary categories: Personal response (how much they liked or disliked aspects of the project), learning responses (the degree to which they were able to connect the pen pal project with course material), and suggestions for strengthening this project.

In regards to personal responses, the majority of students reported liking the pen pal project. For instance students wrote, "I think the pen pal

assignment was a very interesting idea for the class because I enjoyed writing to Laura"; "I really enjoyed writing the letters to Kayla because it made me think about how I was in first grade and what was important to me."; "Personally, I really enjoyed this assignment and loved communicating with a first grader and finding out what they are interested in."; "I thought the project was a lot of fun and different from other assignments I have done."; "I think it is better to have projects like this because you actually get to experience in real life the changes in development rather than just read it in a book."

However, not all students felt so positive about the assignment. For instance, one student wrote, "Overall, I feel like this project was more work than it was worth. In a day and age where technology has become so inherent, I don't think physically writing a pen pal is quite what it used to be." Another commented that as the course moved on to address development through the lifespan, the assignment focusing on child development seemed less compelling.

The service aspect of the project resonated for some students. For instance, students wrote, "I think the assignment is a useful service to support children learning to write. It is more enjoyable to write letters to a friend than for a grade and they get real life experience while learning to write"; and "There is no better way to teach children to write."

## Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Pen Pal Projects

Service learning provides opportunities for individuals to understand new concepts within the context of a meaningful experience. These experiences often provide a high motivation for learning and empower students to be responsible for their learning as they come to understand the valued contributions they are making through the learning experience. From a community perspective, service-learning programs encourage young people to be active members of their communities and provide models for how one might extend learning experiences through creative service in areas of need.

This particular pen pal project provided a meaningful service learning experience for both college students enrolled in a Human Development course, and for first grade students learning how to communicate through writing. The college students understood this project as a means of providing a meaningful context for developing writers to practice letter-writing skills. They also critiqued aspects of child development studied in the course from the letters they received. College

students also had to carefully consider issues such as vocabulary level, developmental interests, and writing style when crafting each letter.

First grade students understood themselves to be providing an important service as well. The elementary school students were told that they would be helping college students learn about children through the pen pal project for a college class. They also understood that the project would be a fun way for them to practice their writing skills. Thus, this was a unique project in that both parties understood themselves to be not only recipients of a service project, but also participants engaged in providing a valued service to others. In this way, project pen pal was an empowering experience of helping others for all parties involved. In addition to a powerful service learning opportunity, this project provides an opportunity to analyze the benefits of pen pal writing to increase learning. As noted by Barksdale, Watson, and Park (2007), "There has been little research on pen pal writing; however, the potential benefits of opportunities for authentic and meaningful writing in support of literacy development are well documented (p. 58)."

Katz (1996) describes a similar teaching exercise in a child development class where college students prepare and exchange written questions with students in a fourth grade class. Katz found from anonymous end of the year course evaluations that college students were enthusiastic about the exercise and found them to be a positive learning experience. Katz notes that this exercise can be done with many different age groups, and this study extends her work by an ongoing pen pal relationship with younger children who are emerging letter writers. Consistent with Katz' s findings, my students reported several trends:

- 1) surprise at the high degree of cognitive and language skills demonstrated by children.
- 2) interest and enlightenment in being able to connect theory from the textbook with real-life experience
- 3) motivation to learn more about child development.

An added dimension to this learning activity was revealed in the children's letters. The children expressed much delight in writing to and receiving letters from an interested adult. The classroom teachers reported that the children frequently asked when the next batch of letters would arrive and noted that this was one writing assignment that students didn't mind revising because they wanted to look good for the college students.

However, there was much consensus among the college students that a greater amount of time needed

to be spent with this project to allow for a meaningful number of letters to evaluate. It is suggested that in future pen pal projects, the professor work with the collaborating elementary teacher several months in advance of the course to set dates for letter writing. An additional recommendation is to provide some way to provide closure to this personal activity. Perhaps arranging for a visit to the school or sending a video to the class would be helpful. The teacher reported that the children expressed the desire to actually meet their pen pals. Overall, this service learning activity allowed for both the college students studying child development and the elementary school children learning letter-writing to have a meaningful context for a learning activity while providing a valuable service to one another. Truly, a win-win situation!

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# Curl up with a good group



You live to read. You can hardly wait to get cozy in your favorite spot and crack the pages of a good book. You're also an educator. Why not curl up with a good group, too? Membership in the Georgia Reading Association will connect you to others like you who inspire and teach others about reading.

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# CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

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The Georgia Journal of Reading is published twice yearly in Spring and Fall. The Journal is a refereed journal with national representation on the editorial board and is published by the Georgia Reading Association. We are seeking manuscripts concerning the improvement of reading and language arts instruction at all levels of education.

Manuscripts should be double-spaced and the format should conform to the guidelines presented in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (5th Ed.). The author's name, full address, email address, affiliation, and a brief statement about professional experience should be submitted on a cover sheet. Three copies of the manuscript should be included. All submitted articles undergo blind review by multiple reviewers.

Authors are to process manuscripts in Microsoft Word. If a manuscript is accepted for publication, authors will be expected to send an electronic copy to the editor after revisions are made. Three types of manuscripts are being solicited.

## **Full-length Articles**

These articles should deal with research, current issues, and recent trends in reading or literacy programs. Appropriate topics for the Journal include project descriptions, research reports, theoretical papers and issues in reading education at the local, state, or national level. Preference is given to articles focusing on topics that impact Georgia's students.

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Articles for this column should describe creative teaching ideas and strategies that can be

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