



Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District

Instructional Office Newsletter

Using Literacy Activities to Overcome Cultural and Language Barriers

"Language barriers between teachers and newcomer English learners may pose seemingly insurmountable hurdles to building relationships," say Patricia Flint, Tamra Dollar, and Mary Amanda Stewart (Texas Woman's University) in this *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* article, "but teachers can clear those through engaging literacy activities." The authors describe three: heart maps, in which students write and draw what is nearest and dearest to them within a heart outline; graffiti boards, in which students respond to readings by sketching personal connections and associations on a board; and "All About Me" presentations, in which students use videos, songs, visuals, and translations to tell about themselves. Here are the prompts for the latter:

- ✚ **Your name and age;**
- ✚ **Information about your home country: the flag, a map, and three important facts;**
- ✚ **Sources of joy: What do you like to do, eat, listen to, and read? Who do you like to spend time with?**
- ✚ **Pet peeves: What do you not like to do, eat, listen to? What actions annoy/anger you?**
- ✚ **Your motto: What or who inspires you? Resonant sayings, quotes, song lyrics, people?**
- ✚ **Use 5-10 slides, gearing the presentation to people who aren't familiar with your country**
- ✚ **Students can choose the language used in the slides, but the oral presentation must be in English.**

"Hurdling Over Language Barriers: Building Relationships with Adolescent Newcomers Through Literacy Advancement" by Patricia Flint, Tamra Dollar,

(Continued on page 2)

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IMPORTANT DATES

May 4	Yarmouth Town Meeting
May 7 th	Dennis Town Meeting
May 7 th	National Teacher Appreciation Day
May 8 th	National School Nurse Appreciation Day
May 12 th	Mother's Day
May 18 th	Armed Forces Day
May 23 rd	Red Nose Day to end child poverty
May 27 th	Memorial Day (No School)

IMPORTANT NOTICE:

Central office is a **fragrance-free zone** so please be respectful and plan accordingly when you visit.

Due to one of our members at the CO being highly sensitive to any type of fragrance, we ask that staff visiting/meeting at the Administration building refrain from using any scented products. Fragrances from personal care products, air fresheners, laundry and other cleaning products have been associated with adversely affecting a person's health. We ask that we all work together to make the environment a safe and healthy workplace for everyone.



Thank you very much for your cooperation!





(Continued from page 1)

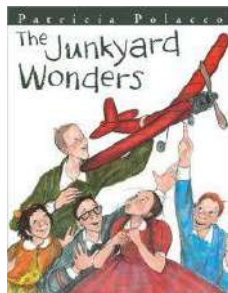
and Mary Amanda Stewart in *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, March/April 2019 (Vol. 62, #5, p. 509-519, <https://bit.ly/2Y9Ojdc>; the authors can be reached at pflint@twu.edu, tdollar@twu.edu, and mstewart7@twu.edu.

Books That Build Empathy in Children



“A well-written story can not only transport the reader into new worlds but also affect how elementary-level readers see and participate in the social world around them,” say Stephanie Kozak and Holly Recchia (Concordia University/Montreal) in this article in *The Reading Teacher*. “Part of what makes human interactions rich is the ability to feel the joy that others feel, to share in sorrow when someone is in need, and to experience a sense of righteous anger when someone is treated unjustly. Equally crucial is the capacity to understand and empathize with others who have very different experiences.” They suggest these storybooks as powerful ways to build empathy in elementary-school children:

- **Miss Nelson Is Missing!** by Harry Allard
- **A Year of Borrowed Men** by Michelle Barker
- **Those Shoes** by Maribeth Boelts
- **The Day the Crayons Quit** by Drew Daywalt
- **Last Stop on Market Street** by Matt de la Peña
- **Du Iz Tak?** by Carson Ellis
- **Red: A Crayon’s Story** by Michael Hall
- **Owen** by Keven Henkes
- **Flora and the Flamingo** by Molly Idle
- **Lost and Found** by Oliver Jeffers
- **The Bad Seed** by Jory John
- **I Want My Hat Back** by Jon Klassen
- **The Stamp Collector** by Jennifer Lanthier
- **Henry’s Freedom Box** by Ellen Levine
- **Virginia Wolf** by Kya Maclear
- **The Junkyard Wonders** by Patricia Polacco
- **After the Fall** (How Humpty Dumpty Got Back Up Again) by Dan Santat
- **The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs!** by Jon Scieszka



- **Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale** by Mo Willems

(Middle-grade novels and young-adult fiction next week)

“Reading and the Development of Social Understanding: Implications for the Literacy Classroom” by Stephanie Kozak and Holly Recchia in *The Reading Teacher*, March/April 2019 (Vol. 72, #5, p. 569-577),

<https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/trtr.1760>; the authors can be reached at stephanie.kozak@concordia.ca and holly.recchia@concordia.ca.

Supporting Below-Level Readers As They Grapple with Difficult Texts

In this *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* article, Sarah Lupo (James Madison University), John Strong (University of Delaware/Newark), and Kristin Conradi Smith (William & Mary) question whether giving struggling adolescents reading material at the instructional level – just above their current reading level (the “zone of proximal development”) – is the best way for them to catch up and become proficient readers. This widespread practice stems from four beliefs:

- A high Lexile level means that a text is difficult to read.
- Readers are more engaged and can learn more from easier versions of texts.
 - Reading easier texts leads to greater gains.
 - Some readers cannot (or will not) read complex texts.

These are all misconceptions; say Lupo, Strong, and Smith: “In our view, literacy educators should adopt the mindset that when it comes to reading, struggle is not necessarily a bad thing. As we prepare students for college and careers, we ought to engage them in texts and tasks with which they will struggle but will learn to be successful with support.... [S]tudents must practice reading difficult texts, with support, in order to improve their comprehension ability.” Here are the authors’ recommendations, addressing the misconceptions one by one:





- **Consider what makes a text difficult.**

Readability formulas (like Lexile) don't take into account a number of factors that make texts more challenging. When deciding on classroom texts, teachers should consider Lexile level, but also: students' familiarity with vocabulary; the amount of academic vocabulary; how frequently words are used; concreteness versus abstraction; sentence length; syntactic complexity (modifiers and dependent clauses); cohesiveness (connections between sentences and ideas); and how formal the language is.

- **Motivate students to read difficult**

texts. "Providing easier versions of texts does not necessarily improve learning or comprehension," say Lupo, Strong, and Smith. A study of students who used the website Newsela to access easier versions of challenging texts showed that this strategy didn't boost comprehension. As for graphic novels, the authors don't agree that they make texts easier to comprehend or build important reading skills and motivation (reading a graphic novel version of *Romeo and Juliet* cannot compare to reading the original play with support). "Instead of turning to an easier version of a text to engage students," say the authors, "we recommend focusing on the facilitative role of motivation: what might move a student to read." They recommend: giving students some choice in what they read; maximizing classroom interaction with peers about texts; making connections with students' prior knowledge of the topic; and filling in knowledge gaps with videos, visuals, and other material.

- **Provide more opportunities for students to read.**

Reading easier texts may improve fluency, say the authors, but studies have not shown that it improves comprehension. What does help is spending more classroom time reading a variety of texts, including some that are challenging. "Reading experiences need to be rich and engaging," say Lupo, Strong, and Smith, "with opportunities to talk about and choose texts. Teachers should provide readers with an opportunity to develop a sense of agency to persist through texts of varying levels of difficulty because of their own need to make sense of them." The authors are critical of using texts to teach certain

skills (e.g., main idea, key details), which they say is not supported by research. Better to assemble sets of thematically connected texts – for example:

- ❖ A news article about the history of Canterbury (easy vocabulary, well organized);
- ❖ An excerpt from *Paper Towns* by John Green (easy vocabulary, challenging theme);
- ❖ A video trailer of *Into the Wild* (visual, challenging theme);
- ❖ *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (challenging vocabulary, sentences, themes).

"Providing opportunities for students to read related texts," say the authors, "allows them to garner interest in the topic, draw connections between ideas, and be exposed to vocabulary used in different contexts."

- **Scaffold students' reading of quality texts.**

"We recommend abandoning the notion that some readers need easy texts," say Lupo, Strong, and Smith. "Doing so robs them of quality time in quality texts and hardly cultivates a love of reading... Instead of defining a student's zone of proximal development as a text level, we have found it productive to think about differentiating the instructional supports provided by the teacher instead." Reading texts aloud can help with motivation, engagement, and a love of reading, but it should be combined with lots of minds-on work with texts. Here are scaffolding ideas for texts that have unfamiliar words, abstract language, lack of cohesion, and difficult concepts and themes:

Before reading:

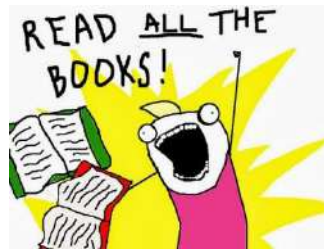
- Preview unfamiliar vocabulary with definitions, visuals, examples, and non-examples.
- Build knowledge by watching an engaging video or reading easier, related texts.
- Involve students in a discussion about key concepts related to the topic.

During reading:

- Have students read a short section of text followed by a question.
- Use a think-aloud to model comprehension, or a reading guide to help support knowledge and connections.
- Provide a specific purpose for reading short sections of the text.

After reading:

- Have a discussion using the new vocabulary.





- Use a graphic organizer.
- Discuss the text's purpose.

“Struggle Is Not a Bad Word: Misconceptions and Recommendations About Readers Struggling with Difficult Texts” by Sarah Lupo, John Strong, and Kristin Conradi Smith in *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, March/April 2019 (Vol. 62, #5, p. 551-560), <https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jaal.926>; the authors can be reached at luposm@jmu.edu, jzstrong@udel.edu, and keconradi@wm.edu.

Building Literacy Skills in Secondary Content Classrooms

(Originally titled “Instructional Leadership for Disciplinary Literacy”)

“Secondary-school leaders are uniquely positioned to support teachers in creating the next generation of artists, authors, historians, mathematicians, and scientists,” say Jacy Ippolito (Salem State University) and Douglas Fisher (Health Sciences High and Middle College) in this article in *Educational Leadership*. “But they need to shift away from the well-intentioned (but sometimes harmful) instructional rhetoric of ‘every teacher is a teacher of reading.’” Instead, say Ippolito and Fisher, school leaders should focus on the discipline-specific literacy work of each subject area, ask good questions, provide shared and differentiated PD opportunities, support teacher leaders, and observe perceptively in classrooms. Here are some questions for teachers in four key areas of literacy:



Reading:

In your classroom, what does it mean to read like a historian/literary critic/ mathematician /scientist? Have you made this explicit to your students?

- Which texts might students read that mirror what professionals in this field read?
- What supports might students need to read such texts?
- What real-world problems, tensions, phenomena, or discoveries might these texts address?



- What’s the best balance between easy, challenging, and complex texts to help students improve their reading skills in this field?

Writing:

In your classroom, what does it mean to write like a historian/literary critic/ mathematician/scientist? What kinds of writing are common in this discipline? Have you made this explicit to students?

- What are some good mentor texts for students to study – for example, argumentative essays, infographics, writing from sources, technical reports?
- How might what students are reading inspire their writing?

Oral communication:

In your classroom, what does it mean to speak and present like a historian/literary critic/mathematician/scientist?

- What types of public presentations are common in this discipline?
- What exemplars might students watch – for example, TED Talks?
- How is vocabulary used in oral communication in this field?

Group work:

In your classroom, what does it mean to collaborate in ways similar to professionals in the discipline?

- What language structures and communication norms are common in the field?
 - What roles do members of this discipline play when working with others?

“Instructional Leadership for Disciplinary Literacy” by Jacy Ippolito and Douglas Fisher in *Educational Leadership*, March 2019 (Vol. 76, #6, p. 50-56), available for ASCD members, or for purchase, at <https://bit.ly/2uklP1J>; the authors are at jippolito@salemstate.edu and dfisher@sdsu.edu.

Effective Interaction Strategies for Students with Mental Health Issues

In this article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, special educator and behavior analyst Jessica Minahan says





that a surprisingly high percentage of students “struggle with a mental health disorder that may impair their ability to perceive people’s actions accurately, stay regulated when stressed, or cope with typical classroom interactions.” But because these disabilities are often undiagnosed and not visible, it’s easy for teachers to perceive disrespect, non-compliance, or unwillingness to participate where none is intended. And teachers’ reactions or tone of voice can also set off a fight-or-flight reaction, with the student escalating or shutting down.

“To succeed in school,” says Minahan, “students with mental health challenges tend to need a steady diet of positive interactions with their teachers. Otherwise, they may become uncomfortable, uncooperative, or withdrawn and may not be able to access the curriculum, sustain effort, engage in tasks, or even attend school at all.” Some teachers have an instinctive knack for working with troubled students – their tone of voice, proximity, use of humor, tricks for de-escalating defiant behavior, and gentle ways of giving constructive feedback.

An example: A seventh grader with post-traumatic stress disorder and generalized anxiety disorder enters his math class and sits at the back. The teacher tells him to take off his hood, and the boy doesn’t respond, looking blankly at the teacher, who repeats the order twice in a louder voice, moving closer to the boy. Still no response, at which point the teacher sends him to the office. This student’s English teacher uses a different strategy: when she sees him with his hood on, she moves into his line of sight and silently mimics taking off a hood, and he always does so right away. A private, non-verbal request elicits compliance while a public demand in front of his peers triggers defiance and a disciplinary incident. Sadly, the English teacher had never shared this strategy with her colleague.

“Unfortunately,” says Minahan, “we are not used to thinking of interaction strategies as accommodations to be written, taught, and implemented.” She believes schools need to be systematic about defining the accommodations certain students need and training all educators in specific moves that help students with mental health issues succeed in school without depending on the luck of



getting certain teachers. Here are some of those skills:

- **Relationship building** – It’s helpful to ask previous teachers for students’ top three interests (perhaps college basketball, superhero comic books, marine biology) and be able to greet a student at the classroom door with a question about one of those topics. Minahan suggests that teachers fit in quick one-on-one conversations with students over lunch, while making copies, or when a colleague covers the class. “Students will remember these random examples of kindness,” she says. “Building relationships in this way not only helps students feel more comfortable; it also makes it easier for teachers to read a student’s cues.”

- **Praise** – Public recognition from a teacher is often counterproductive with students who have low self-concept and social anxiety. A nonverbal thumbs-up or a note with specific comments works better (“I’m still laughing at the essay you wrote last month. That was so humorous and well-written.”). A teacher might also pull a student aside and ask, “When I’m proud of you, how should I let you know?”

- **Giving directions** – “It can be extremely precarious to give directions to a student who tends to be oppositional or noncompliant,” says Minahan. With these students, a stern command can lead to a power struggle. Instead of “Line up,” the teacher might offer a choice: “Do you want to be in the front of the line or the back of the line?” And instead of “Pick that up!” explain, “I would hate to trip on your bag and hurt myself, so could you please pick that up?” A command to lower their voices is heard by some students as being “yelled at.” An alternative is to cushion a critique with positive language: “I love how much you’re enjoying and participating in this activity. Could you lower your voice, though? Keep up those reflective comments you are making to the group.”

“Some students simply need time and space to comply,” says Minahan. “With these students, the teacher can use a nonverbal signal, such as a nod or a gesture, to let them know that they’ve overstepped a boundary, or they can write the direction on a sticky note, hand it to the student, and walk away.” Sometimes not asking for immediate compliance is a good strategy: “Pick that up before lunch.”

“It’s neither difficult nor time-consuming to learn about the reasons behind some common behavior problems,” Minahan concludes. “Nor is it





time-consuming to write up and adopt some interaction strategy accommodations tailored to their needs... By taking out the guesswork, these strategies can make it much easier to build a comfortable learning environment where all students can learn and thrive."

"Building Positive Relationships with Students Struggling with Mental Health" by Jessica Minahan in *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2019 (Vol. 100, #6, p. 56-59), <https://bit.ly/2C8Gawy>; Minahan can be reached at jessica@jessicaminahan.com.

Jennifer Gonzalez on Low-Value Classroom Projects

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez describes how a young student teacher she was supervising taught a five-day curriculum unit on ancient Greece. His seventh graders read a textbook chapter, answered end-of-chapter questions, and took a quiz matching ten vocabulary terms (including comedy, tragedy, urn, Olympics) with definitions. In the second, third, and fourth days of the unit, students created Grecian urns, wrapping balloons with papier-mâché, painting them in the style of the ancient Greeks, and presenting their urns to the class.

Asked about the standards covered by this unit, the student teacher found the relevant part of the curriculum: *Students will demonstrate an understanding of the complexity of culture by exploring cultural elements (e.g., beliefs, customs, traditions, language, skills, literature, and arts) of diverse groups and explain how cultures served to define groups in world civilizations prior to 1500 A.D. and gain unique perspectives.* Aware that the unit barely touched on the standards, the teacher shrugged and said his cooperating teacher had always taught it this way and the kids loved it, especially doing the Grecian urns.

As a teacher, supervisor of student teachers, and parent, Gonzalez has seen lots of Grecian urn-type projects – supposedly hands-on, project-based, integrating arts and technology, but lacking any real substance. Sadly, these classroom activities can look impressive to administrators and others making superficial visits to

classrooms. Worst of all, says Gonzalez, "because these activities are often time-consuming, they take away from other tasks that would give students the chance to wrestle with more-challenging stuff."

To spot "Grecian urn" activities and eliminate or improve them, Gonzalez suggests the following look-fors:

- **Excessive coloring and crafting** – "This doesn't mean you should never ask students to color, cut, paste, sing, act, or draw," says Gonzalez, "but every time you do, ask yourself if that work is contributing to learning. If not, there may be a way to cut down the time it takes." For example, rather than illustrating vocabulary words in color on posterboard, maybe just have students sketch in their notebooks.

- **Excessive tech bells and whistles** – For example, students spending lots of time searching for images, making digital drawings, adding animations or effects, or doing sound effects or special titles. "[W]hen a student burns two hours listening to sound clips so he can make a photo of Langston Hughes zoom into his PowerPoint slide to the sound of screeching brakes," says Gonzalez, "well, he's probably not doing much thinking about the Harlem Renaissance."

- **Low-level thinking** – This is the lowest level of Bloom's taxonomy – rearranging and regurgitating basic facts and definitions. An example: students learning about the food pyramid by cutting out magazine photos of different kinds of food and creating a mobile in the shape of a pyramid. A better alternative: having students write a three-day eating plan that applies the key principles of the pyramid, and then spending ten minutes adding a few embellishments like a border with cool fonts.

- **Big points for "creativity"** – If a significant part of the grade for a project is for creativity or attractiveness, it might qualify as a Grecian urn. "And by the way," says Gonzalez, "I'm a big design snob. I think presentation is important. But if more than 10 percent of a grade is based on these things – and I even think 10 percent is pushing it – we're not measuring learning that's supposed to be taking place."

- **Word search** – These might be marginally defensible to reinforce letter recognition, decoding skill, and language development in the very early grades, says Gonzalez. Otherwise, "Drop the word searches and you just





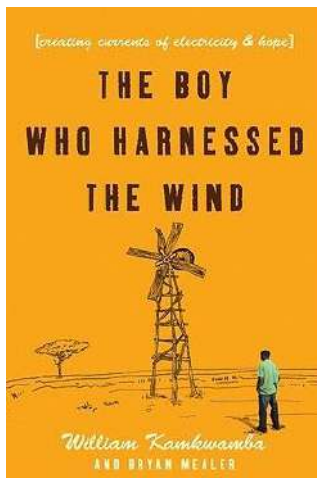
bought yourself and your students at least 30 extra minutes a week.”

All that said, Gonzalez acknowledges that some classroom activities can be just for fun, especially those that build relationships with students, create a family-like atmosphere, and make the classroom a place students love to be in. This might include students playing with the drawing apps on their iPads or creating a collage as a thank-you gift for a departing student. There’s also what she calls the “sanity loophole.” If a teacher is feeling ill, just got some bad news on the phone, or there are just six minutes of class time remaining, or students “have driven you to the absolute brink and you’re about to start throwing things,” then “good old-fashioned busywork is like manna from heaven. That’s when you have them color. That’s when you pull out the word searches.”

“Is Your Lesson a Grecian Urn?” by Jennifer Gonzalez in *The Cult of Pedagogy*, October 30, 2016, <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/grecian-urn-lesson/>

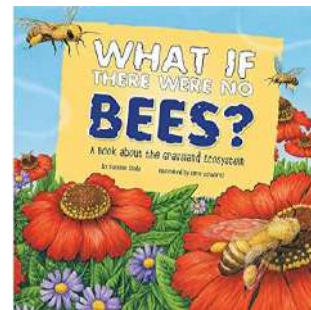
Children’s Books on Environmental Awareness

In this *AMLE Magazine* article, Katie Thomas (University of Tennessee), Deborah Wooten (University of Tennessee/Knoxville), and Jeremiah Clabough (University of Alabama/Birmingham) suggest these books to raise students’ environmental awareness:



- **Seeds of Change: Wangari’s Gift to the World** by Jen Cullerton Johnson and Sonia Lynn Sadler (Lee & Low Books)

- **The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope** by William Kamkwamba (Scholastic)
- **The Elephant Scientist** by Caitlin O’Connell and Donna Jackson (HMH Books for Young Readers)
- **One Plastic Bag: Isatou Ceesay and the Recycling Women of Gambia** by Miranda Paul (Millbrook Press)
- **The Tree Lady: How One Tree-Loving Woman Changed a City Forever** by Joseph Hopkins (Beach Lane Books)
- **Energy Island: How One Community Harnessed the Wind and Changed Their World** by Allan Drummond (Square Fish)



- **What If There Were No Bees? A Book About the Grassland Ecosystem** by Suzanne Slade (Picture Window Books)
- **Ada’s Violin: The Story of the Recycled Orchestra of Paraguay** by Susan Hood (Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers)
- **One Well: The Story of Water on Earth** by Rochelle Strauss (Kids Can Press)
- **A World Without Fish** by Mark Kurlansky (Workman Publishing)
- **Rachel Carson and Her Book That Changed the World** by Laurie Lawlor (Holiday House)
- **Eruption!: Volcanoes and the Science of Saving Lives** by Elizabeth Rusch (HMH Books for Young Readers)

“Students as Change Agents for Environmental Issues” by Katie Thomas, Deborah Wooten, and Jeremiah Clabough in *AMLE Magazine*, April 2019 (Vol. 7, #2, p. 17-20), <https://bit.ly/2ULdKTY>; Wooten can be reached at dwooten1@utk.edu.

