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# Michigan Reading Journal

*A Journal of the  
Michigan Reading Association*

Fall 2020  
Volume 53, No. 1

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- "Go Back to Better": An Interview with Cornelius Minor
- Let's Read a Story!: Collaborative Meaning Making, Student Engagement, and Vocabulary Building Through the Use of Interactive Read-Alouds
- Reflections on a Third Year of Teaching
- An Educator's Response to Michigan's Stay at Home Order
- I Wrote My Way Out
- From a Distance: Teaching, Learning, and Parenting During the COVID-19 Pandemic
- Creating an Online Community of Learners During the COVID-19 Shutdown Using Michigan's Literacy Essentials
- Teaching and Learning Through Shared Grief and Loss During COVID-19
- Inquiry and Counter-Witnessing in COVID-19
- Essential Practices for Disciplinary Literacy Instruction in Secondary Classrooms
- Pandemic Pedagogy: Some Questions About Being "Successful" and Getting it "Right"



# Michigan Reading Journal

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The *Michigan Reading Journal (MRJ)*, ISSN 0047-7125, is published by the Michigan Reading Association (MRA), an intermediate council of the International Literacy Association. The *MRJ*, dedicated to the dissemination of information to improve the teaching of reading, presents articles on a wide spectrum of topics and issues in reading, language arts, and literature, pre-school through adult levels. The *MRJ* incorporates articles that address both theory and practice.

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# From the Editors...

by Meghan Block, Carlin Borsheim-Black, and Troy Hicks

It would seem that, in these unprecedented times, that if we didn't begin our letter with the phrase "in these unprecedented times," we would be missing an opportunity to signal the many, many challenges that our state, nation, and world has faced since the rise of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. As we were collaborating on this letter, a meme hit one of our social media feeds, reminding us that "precendented times" would be nice to return to, and we found a small moment in which we could smile and refocus our work.



**Meghan Block**



**Carlin  
Borsheim-Black**



**Troy Hicks**

Throughout the pages of this issue, then, we will see echoes of these pandemic times. With the stories of educators from Michigan (and beyond), we note that – even in times where new challenges related to health and safety arise each day – we can find new ways to embrace the work, and the students, that we love. Thus, in this “time of tension and transition,” where everyone is wishing one another “continued health and safety,” we share an issue filled with stories of resilience and hope, moving beyond platitudes toward action.

Before we go further, and as we begin our tenure as co-editors of the *Michigan Reading Journal*, we are grateful to the editorial team from Wayne State University – Dr. Kathryn Roberts, Dr. Poonam Arya, and their team, Sarah Schrag and Angela Harris – who have nurtured and grown *MRJ* for the past three years. Their time, talent, and dedication to the journal have been extraordinary, and they have made the transition process both smooth and inviting. With deep thanks to our predecessors in the editorial role, we now share our thoughts on this first issue in our tenure.

In our *Bridging Research to Practice* section, we feature two pieces. The first is an interview with one of the keynote speakers who we would have heard in March, Cornelius Minor. As an educator, author, consultant, and advocate, Minor’s work centers on equitable literacy reform. His mantra that we “go back to better” resonates with all educators at the beginning of each school year, and especially this one.

Then, Shaya Helbig and Dr. Susan Piazza (Western Michigan University) share both a survey of the research on interactive read alouds and [methods for] implementing them into classrooms. As researchers and educators, Helbig and Piazza underscore the importance of read alouds. Recognizing the unique situation of elementary education, the authors offer readers eight practices to effectively include interactive read alouds in both in-person and virtual contexts.

Moving into our *Voices from the Region*, we had asked for you to share your experiences of the COVID-19 shutdown, emergency remote teaching, and all the feelings that these changes brought. Here, we have

a collection of essays from educators across the state including Chelsea Berg (H.H. Dow High School), Melanie Love (Perry Early Learning Center in Ypsilanti), Dr. Sharon Murchie (Okemos High School), Kristin Scherkenbach (Cross Creek Charter Academy in Byron Center), Annie Spear (COOR ISD), Dr. Amanda Thorpe (Portage Northern High School, Cornerstone University), and a co-authored piece by Dr. Erica Hamilton (Grand Valley State University), Dr. Deb Van Duinen (Hope College), and Dr. Gretchen Rumohr (Aquinas College). Their stories speak to the resilience that educators brought to the task of emergency remote teaching in the spring, as well as the uncertain realities of face-to-face, virtual, or a hybrid model of learning that is playing out across the state this fall.

In our *Critical Issues* section, we hear from leaders related to Michigan's Literacy Essentials, both at the elementary and secondary level. Dr. Laura Gabrion (Wayne RESA), Michelle Renna (Muskegon Area ISD), Megan Schrauben (MiSTEM Network), and Jenelle Williams (Oakland Schools) provide us with insights on the work of Michigan's 6-12 Disciplinary Literacy Task Force, a sponsored sub-committee of the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) General Education Leadership Network (GELN). They offer an invitation for educators around the state to become involved in this work as it rolls out over 2020-21. Finally, Troy Hicks and Erica Hamilton consider some questions about "pandemic pedagogy."

In our final section, we round out the issue with our *Must Reads*. Lynette Suckow (Peter White Public Library, Marquette) offers Great Lakes, Great Books recommendations, this time focused on themes of change and adaptations to change. Annie Spear (COOR ISD) shares a review of *No More Teaching Without Positive Relationships*, a book that addresses the importance of relationship-building in student's academic success and offers educators activities for cultivating meaningful relationships with students. Dr. Raven Jones Stanborough reviews *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity and Pedagogy* by Dr. April Baker-Bell, which revolutionizes literacy teaching to challenge common forms of linguistic racism.

One more note... *MRJ* is now online! At our January 2020 meeting, the MRA Executive Board approved the transition to an online, open-access format. Many thanks to librarian Jacklyn Rander and education professor Dr. Erica Hamilton at Grand Valley State University for their collaboration in launching the partnership and building the site. For authors, this online system provides a more user-friendly process for publication through the Scholarworks system. For readers, it provides both single article and whole-issue PDF versions for reading, as well as clickable opportunities to quickly search for and share the work with other readers. For MRA, the online system provides visibility for all of our work with open access and indexing, searchable through tools like Google Scholar. As of the time of this publication, Rander and her team at GVSU Libraries were working to digitize the entire collection of back issues of *MRJ*, dating to Spring of 1967. Soon, all of these will be available, openly accessible, on our website: <[scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj](http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj)>.

With that, as a school year unlike any other begins, we do – at risk of repeating pleasantries from any email you may have received this summer – indeed wish you well. These times are challenging, yet our stories remind us that educators bring a strength of will to work each day, especially during difficult times, that is worth celebrating. This first issue, then, is a celebration of you, and we look forward to continuing *MRJ*'s tradition of excellence in the years ahead.

Sincerely,

Meghan Block, Carlin Borsheim-Black, and Troy Hicks  
Co-Editors, *Michigan Reading Journal*  
[mrj@cmich.edu](mailto:mrj@cmich.edu)



# President's Message...

by Colby Sharp, MRA President 2020-2021

Dear Michigan Reading Association Members,

When you elected me to this position, I spent a lot of time thinking about how I would spend my year as president. I felt honored to lead this amazing organization. I thought about how much fun we'd have together sharing our favorite books, hanging out together at the annual conference, and finding ways to help each other become better educators. It is pretty wild to think about what our "normal" used to look like and all that has happened since we had to cancel our annual gathering last March.

It goes without saying that the 2020-2021 school year is unlike anything we could have ever imagined. Many of us started the year 100% virtual; the thought of teaching kids that we never met face-to-face seemed impossible only nine short months ago. Still, MRA members have found ways to build classroom communities without ever stepping foot in a classroom with students.

Some of you are teaching students in the classroom AND students at home. You are, in effect, doing two jobs. Watching you keep the kids in your classroom safe, while at the same time making learning engaging for your kids learning virtually, is nothing short of heroic.

I could go on and on about the amazing things we are doing in our different situations, but I only get one page. Also, we will hear some of your stories in this issue of *MRJ*, and they are both encouraging and instructive. Let's learn from one another.

Moreover, thank you for all that you do for kids, and for the countless ways that you are supporting other educators. It is inspiring. I am so proud to be a part of the MRA.

My year as president is going to look a lot different than I had ever imagined, but what I do know is that the mission remains the same. The MRA is here for you. We will find ways to support your work, and we will help you find amazing books to guide us on this mission.

More than ever, we need each other. Do not hesitate to reach out. You can reach out on Twitter (@colbysharp) or email me at: colbysharp@gmail.com.

Let's do this!

-Colby Sharp



**Colby Sharp**



# “Go Back to Better”: An Interview with Cornelius Minor

by Cornelius Minor  
with Troy Hicks



*Editor's note: This prologue was written by Cornelius Minor in September 2020 as a way to provide context for changes occurring in remote and face-to-face learning this fall.*

This year, 2020 shifted the very foundations of our profession. That shift was not without some pain. We have mourned the losses of our classrooms—how we used to be. We've lost the giddy proximity of shared books on a rug, the warmth of a writing conference, or the electric thrill of sitting shoulder to shoulder sharing a calculator to solve a difficult problem. The ways that we have traditionally served students have evaporated. There is uncertainty and directionless policy in its residual wake.

In the face of all these losses, all of us (at some point in this journey) have longed for a return to “normal.” This is understandable. But it is not wise.

Our nostalgic reverence for life pre-March 2020 is misplaced... that even though we felt certain about some things, that there were still too many kids, families, and whole communities left at the margins. Those who lament the hardships of our current moment without considering the pre-pandemic, systemically-orchestrated hardships of food insecurity, joblessness, mass incarceration, and



**Cornelius Minor**



**Troy Hicks**

school defunding, as well as inequitable resource distributions that have plagued indigenous communities and communities of color are engaged in an ahistorical retelling of our recent history that robs us of the context required to understand this current moment and to imagine solutions.

Centering whiteness, privileging cis-heteronormativity, and failing to embrace the neurodiversity in our communities is a form of institutional violence that traumatizes.

Our path forward must be defined by individual teachers, school cultures, and pedagogies that work from this understanding. As we move forward, I am more interested in exploring the question, “What if we did not return to normal? What if we returned to BETTER?”

What are the practices, approaches, and habits that we can abandon, and what are the new kid-and-community-centered structures that we can erect in their places?

This is the work that we are called to do right now. We've lost a lot, and we don't have to hold on to the ghosts of the things that we no longer have.

There is life ahead. We can cultivate it.

## Interview with Cornelius Minor, conducted by Troy Hicks (April 8, 2020)

In the wake of the 2020 Michigan Reading Association Annual Conference being canceled due to COVID-19 concerns that fell upon our nation in the beginning of March, the opportunity to connect with one of our keynote speakers, Cornelius Minor, through a more intimate interview presented itself.

Minor is a Brooklyn-based educator. He works with teachers, school leaders, and leaders of community-based organizations to support equitable literacy reform in cities (and sometimes villages) across the globe. Minor is the author of the Heinemann title, *We Got This. Equity, Access, and the Quest to Be Who Our Students Need Us to Be* (Minor, 2018).

Providing him with the same questions that formed the core of our call for proposals for this issue, this article is transcribed from a one-hour interview with keynote speaker Cornelius Minor on April 8, 2020, in which we had a wide-ranging conversation about issues related to educational equity and social justice, the uses of technology, and broader themes related to literacy.

Selections from our interview have been transcribed and edited for clarity and concision.

### **In relation to trauma informed teaching**

*In what ways are students and teachers being affected by the COVID-19 crisis now? What might the long-term effects be? What changes will we need to make in our classrooms, schools, and communities?*

One of the things that I always want to do in all of my work is that I always want to establish a historical perspective. So, when we talk about trauma, the things that we're experiencing right now are not new for specific groups of people. While these things are new to us as a whole population [related to the COVID-19 pandemic]—when we think about our indigenous students, when we think about our students with disabilities,

when we think about are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students, and when we think about our students of color—these things have existed in communities in profound ways, and they've been largely ignored and unaddressed by mainstream schooling.

So, I am always cautious as everyone is rushing out to be “trauma-informed.” I have said quite explicitly that—in both educational research and in my own work that I do in public—unfortunately, we live in America where nothing is a problem until it starts affecting white people. So, I always want to lead with that. When we're talking about “trauma-informed” education, there's a lot that we can learn from communities who have been carrying historical traumas, specifically those historical dramas inflicted by the mechanism of school. There's a lot of learning we can do from indigenous communities. There's a lot of learning that we can do from communities of Black folks. There's a lot of learning that we can do from the LGBTQIA community. So, I don't ever want to talk about trauma-informed education without giving a shout out to people who have been doing this work for generations.

Bringing that forward into this contemporary moment, what can we learn from those communities? First, there is power in being connected to others, and the power of story to connect is real. That said, there's a performative culture associated now with storytelling [through social media]. As a writing teacher, I think one of the things that teachers can do is to really get back to authentic storytelling. That fosters a sense of connection. So, for me, writing workshops have become even more important. Read-alouds have become even more important. The ability for kids to create their own stories, verbally, for them to engage in dramatic play, all of those things have become very, very important right now. They foster authenticity and that fosters the sense of connection.

The second thing that feels really, really important when we think about addressing trauma is understanding that, for many groups of people, school is a perpetrator of the trauma. So, you can't heal in the same place where you got sick. For many people they were made to

feel less than human in school because they were made invisible by the curriculum or in the book choices. For many people, school is a place where the way they learned was not honored. So, when I'm thinking about how we recover from trauma, I'm thinking part of that recovery means identifying that we—in our ignorance at times—are the ones that make kids sick. If we're going to help them get well, that's going to require a different kind of positionality. I cannot use the same tools that I used to poison the kids to cure them.

So, I really got to thinking about things like Universal Design for Learning (Center for Applied Special Technology, n.d.) and how do I make sure that school is a place where all folks can learn. I've really got to think about what it means to be literate, so that writing isn't the only form of literacy, or that reading the books that my teacher likes isn't the only form of literacy. What does it mean to be authentically literate? Because, if we are to heal, we've got to recognize that many of our practices have done incredible harm. For instance, I've been reading lots of the data in New York City about kids who haven't shown up in remote learning. There are students that are not on the grid, and we don't know where they are. They haven't logged in.

So, that's a real thing right now, and often times when we think about what it means to connect to a community, we forget this. Why would I connect to a community, remotely, if I was hurt in that place to begin with, or if my parents were made to feel unwelcome in that place? There was a parent who was shamed, and this was over six years ago, over her son's lunch debt. She couldn't afford to pay her son's lunch money, and the school sent her, essentially, these messages that shamed her. The final message was attached to her son's backpack, and he was a second grader six years ago, and he had to wear that backpack home. The message was on a bright colored sheet of paper that said, "Pay this amount," and that was six years ago. I didn't teach her second grader. I didn't meet him until he came to middle school. But, his mother has harbored that shame for six years in her relationship with the district. Now that she has to connect with schools remotely, she harbors a lot of animosity toward the school. She's like,

"Why would I volunteer into a remote connection with you people when you have never sought to understand my humanity?"

So, if we talk about the trauma of COVID-19 and pretend like it's a new thing, this ignores the struggle of all the people who have endured traumas before. This isn't business as usual, and we aren't trying to recreate exactly what existed four weeks ago in virtual spaces. That's not the point. What existed four weeks ago, again, already left far too many people marginalized. Instead, this gives us a wonderful opportunity to create something new. If we are to address the traumas that come up, it's going to have to come from new thinking. There are no old play books to describe what we're going through.

### **In relation to socio-emotional learning**

*After weeks (or months) of social distancing, what norms and routines might we need to establish in our classrooms, both face-to-face and virtual? What emotional and mental health needs will we need to attend to as part of our teaching practice?*

To begin, we need to be careful again. In contemporary education, socio-emotional learning has become a brand. They have been capitalized and co-opted. So, I'm not talking about socio-emotional learning in the brand sense. I'm talking about the set of beliefs, practices, and skills that center humanity. So, for me, when I think about the set of practices and beliefs we can enact in the fall (or whenever we resume school), I'm brought to experiences from my work as a New York City educator in the wake of 9/11.

I remember those days and I remember what it was like even months, years later. Especially years later, what it meant to show up in school as a New Yorker, as a kid who experienced that in your classroom, with your friends. I didn't know what I didn't know, from the perspectives of my students. For me, it wasn't like the classroom down the hall that was facing The Towers who saw it happen outside their window.

It didn't even really make sense to me until, oddly,



2007-8, when I was teaching a group of kids who were in sixth grade. They were in first grade when *The Towers* fell, and I remember the moment I was in my class. We were doing a personal essay, and one kid finally developed the language to talk about a thing he had been feeling for years. He didn't have the vocabulary to explain it until he was sitting in my class, writing a personal narrative, years later. I remember the moment and he just started weeping, and I didn't know where it was coming from. It's the kind of teacher thing where you're like, "What's wrong, no one's done anything to you? Where's this coming from?" and he told me, "I finally have the words for that feeling I've been having since I watched those Towers fall in first grade."

That really forced me into thinking longitudinally. A lot of times when we think about socio-emotional learning, we think that it's an activity or a game that we can play with kids during Month 1 of school, and then we can get to the real business of school. One of the things that I want to really lean into in this moment is that it is not an activity, it is not a game, and is not a ten-minute module that I can schedule into a class. This needs to be my stance. This needs to be how I do business.

There are two ingredients in a good stance for me. One, I listen to kids and center the things that they say, even if the things that kids are telling me are hurtful to my ears, or don't sound like I want them to sound. Teachers have this way "tone policing" where "I can only hear the kids who talk like me," or "I can only hear the kids who package the message in the way I want it to be heard." But, here it is. I'm the 6th grade English teacher, and I'm watching this kid weep and go ballistic. It's not how I want to hear it. He's disrupting my class, but he's having this moment where he finally now has the language to describe the terror that he felt six years ago.

So, the message didn't sound like I wanted it to, it didn't sound like him saying, "Hi, Mr. Minor, I'm feeling really depressed today because..." So I had to, in that moment—and I didn't do it perfectly—but I had to say to myself that what he's doing right now, he was disruptive to me, but it's 100% true to him. He's

interrupting my class, he's crying, he's weeping. But, centering kids means it won't sound like I want it to sound, and I've still got to listen. That's ingredient one.

Ingredient two is that—based on what I've heard—how does my pedagogy and my curriculum change? A lot of times, we listen to kids, but it's a fake kind of listening, where the listening doesn't inform what we do, or the listening doesn't change what we do. So, if I've listened to a kid, but then my behavior as a teacher hasn't changed, then what was the point? I'm a fraud. So, really, I listen to kids. What I hear from them has to inform what I do, and then I've got to assess how it went. [Minor then references Grant Wiggins and the book *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), and then returns to the story].

I've got to look and see, "Is the kid moving forward in terms of their development?" When we say "assessment," even that word has been co-opted. People think that "assessment" means giving grades or test scores. If I'm thinking about socio-emotional development, that can show up in any number of ways. For that particular kid, he was unapologetically disruptive all the time in class. And then it finally made sense once I'm like, "Wow, as a first grader, this kid watched *The Towers* fall," and no one's addressed that. I had to recognize that I can't do this alone, that I need the guidance counselor's help, I need the principal's help.

Now, that I understand the "why," I've got to think about, "What's the road forward for this kid look like?" It was important for me to understand that the road forward, I couldn't fix it or cure it, but I've got the rest of his sixth grade year to support him. And I'm probably only going to make a little bit of movement, and I've got to hand him to his seventh grade teacher, who was going to make a little bit more movement. And he went from being "unapologetically loud" in my class to being "apologetically loud" [in that class]. That was the growth we made that year.

So, when I think about what socio-emotional learning or growth looks like in the fall (of 2020), it means understanding that this is a process and—that for every

minute that you are harmed—it takes just that much time or more for you to be healed. So, if kids are in a forced social isolation for four to six months, it will take time.

### **In relation to remote learning**

*Whether we are primarily in face-to-face settings or fully online, the shift to virtual education—if it hadn't already begun—is now fully underway. What plans are in place in your classroom, school, and district in relation to the use of technology for supporting learning? How are issues of equity and access being addressed, so all students can be connected to high-leverage learning opportunities?*

I am lucky enough to be one of those people that lives in the community where I work, and the reality of my community (central Brooklyn) is that my kids have computers in their home because I'm their dad, but that's not true for everybody in my daughter's class right now. That's a real thing. There are other parents in my own children's classes whose neighbor might have a router (that they can use for wifi), but that's not always the case.

There's this thing that happens in analog school that I see happening again, and I'm really trying to disrupt it, so my thoughts aren't fully formed. You're getting rough draft thinking here. In an analog school what we call "engagement"—when somebody utters that word—is a singular definition. In most traditional schools when you say "engagement," that means the kid is sitting quietly with their eyes on you listening. If you don't get that, then you feel like somehow the kid is disrespecting you.

So, I worked with a kid who is hearing-impaired, for example. I knew he was hearing-impaired, and he would never look at me, he would look at my mouth because that's what he's been trained to do. I wasn't used to that kind of engagement. For me, his mother and his therapist had told me that he's never going to have his eyes focused on me; he's never going to make eye contact, and he's always going to be watching my lips. I knew that, but I would still be like, "Eyes on me." Whenever people ask me if he was engaged, my

immediate answer would be, "No." I would have to shift my stances to be like, "Oh, yes, he is engaged because he was watching my mouth and my hands."

So, let's think about the kids for whom we don't know how they engage. Then it becomes more problematic. Now that I see learning going to these remote methods, people have these singular ideas of engagement. You're engaged if you logged into the Google Classroom. You're engaged if you submitted your assignment. We failed wholeheartedly, and I am going to use this term intentionally, because we thought the "tech bros" would save us with all their fancy apps. All they're really doing is replicating the same harm that happened in analog school. It's more than "Get on your Google Classroom, or get in your Zoom." We can be more creative than that. There can be multiple ways to engage.

So, I've been a huge fan, again, of Universal Design for Learning, and looking at what CAST has been doing; do you [as a teacher] think about multiple ways of engaging kids in a platform, or in what we call "reading?" Some kids might engage with me through Zoom, some kids might engage by telephone. Some kids might engage with me through texting. Some kids might even engage with me through a traditional letter in US Mail. And, I've really been thinking about all of those multiple means of engagement and, for me, understanding that silence is also a form of engagement means that I need to create space for kids to be silent. How can I teach my colleagues how to make these kinds of decisions consistently, over time?

One of the things that we really had to research—and I'm literally fighting for this right now—is that not everybody in my community has a computer. So, the schools did this rollout of computers, but if you've already been shamed by the school then in some way it can be a real barrier. They say, "My kid owes library books, and the school has been after me for the \$20." If the school is been sending you messages for 14 weeks about the \$20 you owe because your kid lost a book, and you can't afford to pay it, then these parents can't comfortably show up to collect a computer. So, my answer to those parents was, "Of course you can [get

the computer]," but the fear that gets ingrained in people is real. If the institution has sent you eighteen bad notes, then the amount of social energy that it's going to take you to show up there will be too much.

So, I am going to name two big things that have informed my own growth in that arena. I think the first part is recognizing who I am, and then recognizing a hero. So, this is literally my own growth trajectory. I would imagine that I'm a lot like most other teachers, that the people who choose to become teachers, more often than not, are the people who were rewarded by how school happened when they were in school, right? Because I am a compliant person, because I'm relatively affable, I did well in school. So, even when my proficiency didn't give me good grades, my compliance did. That's who most teachers are. Most of us as kids were the compliant ones. School rewarded our compliance and school rewarded our affability.

So, we became teachers. And we are continuing to uphold the things that rewarded us. So, it is against my nature to upend those things because I drew benefit from those things. I do get immense social benefit from being compliant, and so being non-compliant in my adulthood goes against my programming. I think it's recognizing who we are, that we are for the most part a compliant, risk-averse group of people [as teachers] and that any social progress that I want requires conflict. So, I have had to unlearn the tendency to be conflict-averse. My hero in that is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A lot of people know about the idea of civil disobedience. Yet, when we think about what civil disobedience actually is, civil disobedience is looking at an unjust rule or practice and intentionally breaking it.

When people ask me, "Well, how did you become Cornelius Minor?" I am like, "Oh, I studied Dr. Martin Luther King, a hero of mine." He would strategically look at a practice that was unjust and create opportunities to break that rule collectively. So, that's what I do in all my work. I look at the rule that gets us to unjust outcomes and then I organize teachers to break that rule. For the people on the bubble, they need organization. They need to break the rule. We are stra-

tegically identifying the rule and then we're all going to break it together. So, if they come after one of us, they got to come after all of us.

This is what the Montgomery Bus Boycott was. This rule hurts us. But, if I break the rule alone, I'm going to get in trouble. So, we are all going to organize and break the rule at the same time. That's how I've learned you do it. I've grown up a Brooklyn teacher. I grew up with mentors like Kate Roberts, her wife Maggie, Chris Lehman. So I grew up with the kind of older teachers on my team who are already demonstrating this kind of behavior. It was really easy for me to grow up into this kind of behavior because those people were my mentors.

We are going to see a lot of kid-blaming and community-blaming. "You, Black kid, who doesn't have internet access at your home oh, your reading levels didn't go up because of some personal or communal flaw." Or, "you, disabled kid..." or "you, gay kid..." I was in a meeting yesterday evening and one of the things that we're experiencing are the racial disparities in the COVID deaths because of access to healthcare. It's an old adage that my dad used to say: "White people catch a cold, Black folks catch pneumonia." Everything is worse because of the societal infrastructure that continually marginalizes poor folks, African-American folks, disabled folks, gay folks. When we get back to school, the kids who will be consistently blamed for not making progress during the time of remote learning will be our Brown and Black children, our poor children. It will be the kids who suffered the most trauma while they were away, the kids who lost grandparents.

You know, we have years of sci-fi that tells us how this is going to play out. From Asimov to Collins, it is going to go to the poorest who will get it worse. I've been reading a lot of X-Men lately. They're going to be groups of people who are going to be so marginalized—despite the contributions they can make to society—and that's what I'm afraid of. Those are the groups of people who are marginalized already, but just in invisible ways. Now that those ways have been rendered visible, people are going to enter the state of



willful ignorance. You're already seen it on social media, where people are avoiding talking about the real things. The conversations that I'm having in schools or people will say, "Well, Cornelius, what you're bringing up is uncomfortable." And, I'm like, "Yeah, but it exists here." [Note: This interview was conducted in early April, well before the murder of George Floyd and the weeks of global protests that began as a result of his death].

I know this sounds really silly, but I was working with a superintendent and she was saying to me, "I just don't know how to reach certain communities." I was like, "Well, ask them." She asked, "What do you mean?" I said, "Call someone that's a member of that community and ask them. Call more than one someone, call ten someones and ask them." She was like, "I can't do that." And, I asked, "Well, who says?" And she said, "That's not how we make decisions here." Then, I said, "Well, your decision-making mechanism is flawed."

We were talking as her district was three weeks into remote learning, and they'd identified the kids who are off the grid, and, in her district, they were the language learners. I think it was 12% of her district that was the language learning population, and mostly kids who are Hungarian-Polish, Eastern European. "Those kids are off the grid, so reach out." It wasn't a novel idea, but she said she'd never reached out to them before. Then my question became, "Well, how have you been teaching them all these years?"

She replied, "We try to invite them to meetings, and they don't come." I replied, "Probably because they don't speak English." So, all of those things that feel obvious in my mind, I'm learning, aren't obvious. I've really been working with her. She's said, "I don't know how to have these conversations in my circles." I said, "That's because you are in the wrong circles. We can broaden the circle. If your circle doesn't include your Polish immigrant community, then it is a flawed circle." We really had to brainstorm. She asked, "How would I invite them to communicate with me?" And, I said, "Well, you're probably going to need a translator." I thought, secretly, that you probably should have been

having a translator at the PTA potluck before. That would have been helpful. But, it's all of these things that she'd never thought about before. And she kept repeating, "That community just never comes to things we invite them to, so we just got tired of inviting them and not coming."

So, that's the stance of so many districts. Traditional mechanisms. If your potluck only attracts the parents who don't have a night job, then that's not real community engagement. It's fake community engagement for the people that you actually value. We can do it, but it requires a different kind of engagement.

So, now, thinking about what the "new potluck" is—that this mechanism we used to support remote learning may not be working. Even if, you know, it's the first snow day—and hopefully that's the biggest problem we have in the future—and we try remote learning. But what if it's multiple weeks because of another pandemic? Part of it is having the translator, but it also takes a language of genuine invitation, language that is actually meaningful to that community as well.

For that superintendent, we reached out to the local Greek Orthodox Church, a hub of community activity. When we got the pastor and the deacons of that church to support our outreach so we could reach more families, it was a simple fix. Members of the community were still showing up at remote religious observances, so after one call with the pastor he was like, "Oh, I can get all those people on the phone in ten minutes." This thing that had been eluding her for twenty years was solved in ten minutes by making the right phone call. So, I wonder, what was the barrier to making that phone call twenty years ago?

### **In relation to staying connected**

*What systems of support have you and your colleagues put in place for your students, and for yourselves? What technology tools, regularly-scheduled events, and protocols for working together, both synchronously and asynchronously, have emerged for you in this time of crisis?*

What's funny is that it's all the organic stuff. It's been

the random phone call from a kid that misses me, or when I got on Twitter with some kids that I taught many years ago. They asked me for my Animal Crossing friend code!

So, it's been stuff like that. The informal stuff is teaching me to think that I don't want to connect to school just for coming to school, but to make human connections. When I think about remote learning, I think about how I've got a Zoom call soon where I'm going to be talking about hip hop with a colleague. It's a public Zoom, where we're just going to be talking about our favorite hip hop albums, and we've had over 500 people register for that Zoom. A lot of my informal get-togethers have been around *Animal Crossing* or hip hop or the new Jay Electronica album. Then the school stuff happens organically, because we get to this really human place.

I think that in a rush to replicate what at existed four weeks ago, we've ignored the fact that what existed was never really for kids to begin with. When we're talking about school, when we're talking about how kids gather with their friends in the schoolyard, they're not talking about that hot new algebra problem. They're gathering to talk about Pokemon. They're gathering to make plans for tonight. When they got on the subway, it wasn't like "Oh, I can't wait for algebra." It was because they were going to see their friends. So, we need to make remote spaces for that as well.

I've been really cautious to remind people that the thing we had four weeks ago was not normal. That thing we had four weeks ago still left far too many people in the margins. So, this is an opportune moment for us to reinvent ourselves. I don't want to return to normal. I want to return to better. The thing that we had four weeks ago left out too many students of color. That thing that we had four weeks ago left out too many poor kids. That thing that we had four weeks ago left out too many disabled kids. If we were to go back to that thing consciously, that's messed up.

We can go back to a thing that actively works to include disabled kids, that actually works to include

kids who are children of color, or poor kids, or gay kids. So, that's what I want. And that's what I hope that people are striving toward. And we're not going to find that in yesterday's playbook. We've got to write a new playbook.

I really like that I don't get to go back to normal, and that I can go back to better.

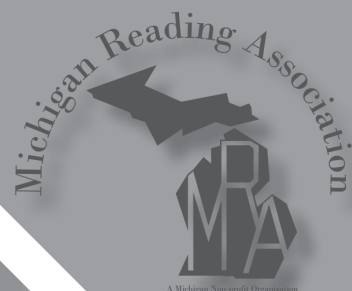
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# Let's Read a Story!: Collaborative Meaning Making, Student Engagement, and Vocabulary Building Through the Use of Interactive Read-Alouds

by Shaya Helbig  
and Susan V. Piazza



Shaya Helbig



Susan V. Piazza

## Abstract

The interactive read-aloud has long been a practice during early literacy instruction in schools and in homes. Reading aloud to children provides a platform for teachers or caregivers to model meaning-making interactions with text. Students are able to collaboratively engage in conversations to create a collective understanding of texts. Interactions during a read-aloud can foster engagement, create meaning, and promote vocabulary acquisition. This article examines current research that supports the use of interactive read alouds to engage learners in meaning-making processes and translates research and theory into practical recommendations for effective interactive read-alouds.

*Keywords:* Interactive read-aloud, read aloud, engagement, reading comprehension, vocabulary, meaning-making process

## Introduction

These are interesting times. As this article was being finalized for review with the *Michigan Reading Journal*, elementary children in the state of Michigan and around the globe were staying safe at home due to

the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. The new normal of educating elementary children included recommendations for reading at home with family members, and teachers were finding themselves reading aloud virtually to students rather than in their classrooms. As literacy educators in an elementary school and at a university, the authors of this article thought it was timely to share research and theory about interactive read-alouds in an effort to support educators and family members during these challenging times.

In traditional face-to-face read-alouds, students play the role of passive participants who listen to an adult read a story. They do not interrupt, ask or answer questions. Research on read-alouds in pre-kindergarten (PK) and kindergarten (K) found that this type of read-aloud with occasional questions promotes one-word answers from students (Deshmukh et al., 2019). Heath's (1983) seminal study of literacy practices in homes and communities also found that working-class families' read alouds often promoted one-word answers. Current research and theory recommend that we move away from these traditional practices to include more interaction and dialogue. Given the context of

literacy education in Michigan, it is timely to review these recommendations for read-alouds at home and virtually.

Interactive read-alouds should be designed specifically to encourage discussion, questions, connections, and support a community of learners to create collective understandings during reading (Braid & Finch, 2015; Hoffman, 2011; Jordan, 2015; McClure & Fullerton, 2017). Participating in interactive read-alouds improves relationships and creates bonds within a community of learners (Wiseman, 2010). At the same time, many are reporting the stay-at-home measures are increasing opportunities to strengthen relationships and spend additional time learning (New York Times Learning Network, 2020). The increased interaction during read-alouds strengthens vocabulary acquisition in ways that independent reading or traditional read-alouds may not (Baker, Chard, Fien, Park, Otterstedt, 2013; Santoro, Chard, Howard & Baker, 2008). It is important that educators, families and caregivers keep the benefits of interaction in mind as they are engaging in read-alouds.

## **The Importance of Interactive Read Alouds**

Reader engagement during collaborative meaning-making is a key component of social and dialogic learning theories. In the social constructivist view of literacy, readers develop new understandings by combining what they already know within the context of reading about new ideas and experiences. Modeled dialogue around what the Institute of Educational Sciences (2016) calls academic language skills, provides experience for students with the academic language used in schools and books. Engagement in discussion that uses academic language helps students learn how to make inferences, retell stories, and acquire new vocabulary (Institute of Educational Sciences, 2016). Keeping readers engaged with academic language and in conversation around text is particularly challenging when we read-aloud virtually and cannot always see our learners as we do in classrooms.

Reznitskaya's (2012) research demonstrates that when

students share in creating meaning, they gain increased reasoning, conceptual understanding, ability to make inferences, and improved quality of argumentative writing (p. 448-449). Social interactions during interactive read-alouds promote authentic dialogue. A teacher or caregiver may guide conversations by asking open-ended questions, providing feedback, and asking follow up questions to help learners extend meaning (Reznitskaya, 2012). Michigan's Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy for grades K-3 (2016) highlight the importance of explicit demonstrations for these interactions during interactive read-alouds. This guide recommends that adult readers model higher order discussions, comprehension strategies, and application of strategies, such as thinking aloud, to recognize unknown words and figure out their meaning (2016).

Students will need guidance as they learn to contribute to an interactive read-aloud, navigate the use of new vocabulary, and construct meaning from text (Baker et al., 2013; Hoffman, 2011; McClure & Fullerton, 2017; Pentimonti & Justice, 2010; Santoro et al., 2008). There are support strategies that teachers and caregivers can employ to support intended learning outcomes both virtually and face-to-face.

Discussion and interactions intended to teach new vocabulary and create common understandings are often modeled through a gradual release of responsibility from the reader to the students (Baker et al., 2013; McClure & Fullerton, 2017; Pentimonti & Justice, 2010; Santoro et al., 2008). Initially, the reader models how to ask questions, make predictions (Baker et al., 2013), verbalize connections within and across other texts (Morrison & Wodarczyk, 2009), and also share personal connections with the story (Jordan, 2015). Gradually, the heavy lifting of these conversations is shifted to students through a process of "validating and acknowledging students' comments, revoicing students' contributions, and labeling meaning-making strategies" (McClure & Fullerton, 2017, p.56).

As is true for many educational practices, teachers and other adults may need to learn how to model these practices effectively (Baker et al., 2013). In addition to

understanding how to scaffold conversations during an interactive read-aloud (Braid & Finch, 2015; Pentimonti & Justice, 2010), it is also helpful to understand the process of language development in young children (Burns et al. cited, Bortnem, 2011). For example, picture books such as *Mama, Do You Love Me?* (Joosse, 1998) use text and illustrations together to increase comprehension of transcendent ideas such as unconditional parental love, while also introducing children to unique settings and potentially unfamiliar cultures. When illustrations are explicitly analyzed and discussed with students, they engage in higher levels of thinking and interactions with texts (Braid & Finch, 2015).

Recent studies provide valuable guidance on which practices are most effective when implementing interactive read alouds with elementary-aged children. Table 1 displays the recommendations that provide helpful advice for families and educators who rely on interactive read-alouds to support learners in schools; but also, these practices will help prevent literacy slide during potential stay-safe-at-home orders and during summers and breaks. The remainder of this article is dedicated to explaining each of these practices along with examples and resources.

Table 1  
*Recommended Interactive Read-Aloud Practices*

- 
1. Make time for interactive read-alouds
  2. Select appropriate text
  3. Plan ahead for content specific interactive read-alouds
  4. Model expectations for student engagement
  5. Explicitly teach new vocabulary words
  6. Form sentence starters and open-ended questions in advance
  7. Use graphic organizers to document discussion and reinforce comprehension
  8. Follow the lead of students when co-constructing meaning

## Make Time for Interactive Read-Alouds

The most essential part of planning an interactive read-aloud is carving out time in the day to introduce, read, and discuss the text (Bortnem, 2011; Hoffman, 2011). In a study of elementary read-aloud practices (Bortnem, 2011), "the amount of time that is spent on reading aloud is small in comparison to the total time spent in the classroom" (2011, p. 38). With so many demands in the school day, finding time to conduct a read-aloud may be the most difficult. Laminack and Wadsworth (2006) recommend making time for interactive read-alouds and thinking about them as an instructional method even during math, science, and social studies. Conducting read-alouds across the curriculum alleviates some of the time constraints educators face, while deepening student understandings across all areas of study.

For read-alouds to be truly interactive in a virtual setting, students need to be participating in a live meeting platform so that interaction can be achieved authentically. Working virtually limits the amount of real-time interactions teachers have with students over platforms such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, or WebEx. With these time constraints all educational content is competing for live instruction, requiring teachers to constantly evaluate and integrate the curriculum.

An alternative for setting aside dedicated time for virtual interactive read-alouds is posting pre-recorded read-alouds with pauses, questions, and interactive components built in to the recording so that students are prompted to share their interactions with ideas in the text in voice or video recorded responses. These prompts may also encourage interactions with family members or caregivers. Pre-recorded read-alouds create an asynchronous learning experience while encouraging active engagement. It is important for teachers to be mindful of time constraints families face when planning pre-recorded read-alouds. The key in making planning decisions is ensuring that time is set aside for this important activity which is a balancing act for anyone supporting instruction in classrooms, online and at-home.

## Select Appropriate Text

Text selection is a critical component of planning an interactive read-aloud (Baker et al., 2013; Bortnem, 2011; Braid & Finch, 2015; Hoffman, 2011; McClure & Fullerton, 2017; Santoro et al., 2008; Wiseman, 2010). Some variables to consider when selecting text are age, sociocultural background, student interest, and opportunities for complex meaning-making. Purpose for reading may determine whether you choose one text, or build a set of texts to reinforce units of study across the curriculum (Laminack & Wadsworth, 2006). Research reminds us that text selection is especially important for learners from traditionally under-served groups such as culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Hall & Piazza, 2008; Wiseman, 2010). Selecting texts that are socially and culturally sustaining is important for diverse learners, but the use of diverse books is important for all learners and is an important part of Michigan's curriculum.

When choosing reading materials, it is important to find texts that are developmentally and instructionally appropriate in both length and content (Bortnem, 2011). Choosing diverse literature (Santoro et al., 2008) and books that provide opportunities for engagement (Wiseman, 2010) helps foster social and cultural responsiveness for students and encourage participation. When selecting picture books, it may also be helpful to find books where the words and illustrations work together to create meaning (Braid & Finch, 2015). Above all else, it is important that the text selected for an interactive read-aloud provides opportunities for complex meaning-making (Hoffman, 2011).

Meaning-making can take different forms for different purposes. Some reading materials may be chosen because they fit with a topic of study (Santoro et al.), or reinforce specific student learning targets (McClure & Fullerton). For example, identifying story sequence is an important early learning target. The simple structure of stories such as *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (Marshall, 1986), *The Three Little Pigs* (Kellogg, 1997), and *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* guide young children to understand how to retell stories in sequence.

Other texts may be selected based on previous and future readings. A series of texts which are variations of the same story may be chosen to compare and contrast (Wiseman, 2012). *Sugar Cane: A Caribbean Rapunzel* (Storace, 2007), is an example of a classic fairy tale told from a Caribbean cultural perspective. This book may be paired with a Eurocentric version of the story as part of a compare-and-contrast activity. Pairing fiction and nonfiction texts with common themes can also be used for text-to-text comparisons (Baker et al., 2013; Bortnem, 2011; Santoro et al., 2008). An example might be a class working on a science unit about the life cycle of butterflies. Educators may pair a nonfiction text such as *The Amazing Life Cycle of Butterflies* (Barnham & Frost, 2018) with Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1983).

Library closures and lack of access to classrooms during the COVID-19 shutdown made it difficult for some teachers and families to obtain the books they needed for read-alouds. There are, however, digital alternatives to using physical books. Epic! is an online library where teachers can access digital copies of books. Scholastic BookFlix is a paid subscription online library which matches fiction and nonfiction books to be read in tandem. There are also many pre-recorded virtual read-alouds of children's books available on YouTube and Storyline Online which features famous actors and actresses reading popular children's books.

## Plan When Teaching Specific Content

The practice of an interactive read-aloud may require various levels of pre-planning, guided by the purpose of reading. Pre-planning an interactive read-aloud is necessary whenever the purpose of reading is to teach specific content or reading skills (McCaffrey & Hirsch, 2017). If the read-aloud is meant to intentionally teach a concept, planning to create before, during, and after-reading activities will be required (Baker, Chard, Fien, Park, Otterstedt, 2013; Santoro, Chard, Howard, Baker, 2008; Morrison & Wodarczyk, 2009). We recommend predictions and activating prior knowledge before reading, emphasizing metacognition and making



connections during reading, and checking predictions and reflection after reading.

Selecting and reading books in advance allows the reader to be more intentional about instruction during the read-aloud. In addition to planning before, during, and after activities, the reader can also identify vocabulary from the text to teach or review (Baker, Chard, Fien, Park, Otterstedt, 2013; Santoro, Chard, Howard, Baker, 2008). Determining pacing for the read-aloud, planning when to stop and discuss, and preparing notes and questions to guide discussions are also benefits of planning with the text in mind (McClure & Fullerton, 2017; Morrison & Wodarczyk, 2009).

Planning for a virtual interactive read-aloud includes identifying vocabulary, developing questions, and planning pacing as well. However, there are special considerations to address in a virtual setting. When planning virtual read-alouds, the first decision is whether the read-aloud will be conducted live or pre-recorded. The format for delivering the read-aloud will affect to what degree students will be able to participate, which will affect explicit vocabulary instruction, the ability of students to discuss with partners or small groups, which questions will be asked and how they will be delivered to students, and the pacing for reading.

## Model Expectations for Engagement

An interactive read-aloud is, by nature, active. Students are encouraged to speak freely during purposeful discussions to create meaning around the text. Types of discussion may include whole group think alouds, small group discussions, paired turn-and-talk responses, or some combination of these. Before conducting an interactive read-aloud, students should become familiar with routines for engaging in these types of discussions (Hoffman, 2011; Morrison & Wodarczyk, 2009). Teacher or adult modeling of respectful interactions demonstrating how to turn and talk, how to participate in whole group discussions, and how to listen and respond to others is vital (McClure & Fullerton, 2017). These skills aid in constructing a culture of respectful student participation (Hoffman, 2011), which will encourage engagement during interactive read-alouds.

When adult readers are open, accepting, and encouraging of students' perspectives, they help to create a culture conducive to meaningful and respectful interactions around books and ideas (Hoffman, 2011). In building a collaborative community of learners, adults may need to refocus the conversation, prevent children from talking over one another (Hoffman, 2011), and model respectful ways to disagree with the views of others (Morrison & Wodarczyk, 2009). Sentence stems such as, "I respectfully disagree with you because..." supply students with respectful ways to share their views. Providing students with skills needed to respectfully collaborate, empower them to participate in productive whole group, paired and small group in-person or virtual conversations.

Paired and small group interactions during an interactive read-aloud promote engagement of all students as each has more opportunities to participate. In a study by Braid and Finch (2015), an average of 200 conversational turns were counted during small group read-aloud discussions. To be implemented effectively, paired and small group discussions require scaffolding on the part of the teacher. After initial modeling of expectations for these activities, it is helpful to listen in to small group and paired turn and talk conversations to guide, and encourage further discussion between partners (McClure & Fullerton, 2017). Small group interactions also present a valuable opportunity to observe and assess student understanding and perhaps even use newly acquired vocabulary.

Teaching in a virtual classroom creates some barriers for students to actively engage in read-alouds. Students can get lost in the shuffle when trying to voice their thoughts, questions, or opinions over a virtual meeting. Too many students trying to talk at once, internet connectivity issues, and disruptive background noise can all prevent students from being heard. As a preventative step, teachers should create a plan for when and how students will participate. To prevent disturbance from background noise students could be asked to turn off their microphone. Using the reaction buttons in Zoom to signal when they would like to speak will prevent students from talking over one

another. Requiring students to use the chat option of live meetings is another, albeit less interactive, way for students to actively engage during virtual interactive read-alouds.

### **Explicitly Teach New Vocabulary**

Struggling with reading can create a barrier to access vocabulary. Presenting vocabulary in context as part of a read-aloud removes this barrier, and helps children acquire vocabulary which they would not have access to independently (Santoro et al., 2008). According to Vygotsky (1978), as cited in Bortnem (2011), hearing words in context is necessary for children to understand their meaning. However, simply hearing the words in context is not enough. Explicit instruction, child friendly definitions, and practice over time is necessary to build academic vocabulary according to Michigan's Early Literacy Essentials for K-3 (2016).

The use of during and after read-aloud activities to explicitly teach vocabulary, in conjunction with presenting and using words in context, fosters vocabulary acquisition for students (Baker et al., 2013, Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2006). Effective vocabulary instruction requires planning on the part of the teacher to identify vocabulary words in the text, and form extension exercises or questions to expand understanding and use of the new words. Interesting, meaningful, and functional words that are important to comprehend the text should be chosen for vocabulary instruction (Santoro et al., 2008). Vocabulary instruction should be reinforced by providing students with several opportunities to encounter and use newly acquired vocabulary (Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2006).

Modeling and strategic questioning are ways in which vocabulary can be explicitly taught in context during an interactive read-aloud. During reading, students can learn to use clues from the text and/or illustrations to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words or ideas (Baker et al., 2013; Santoro et al., 2008). With guided practice, students take on more responsibility to identify the meaning of unknown words during read-alouds and independent reading and writing activities.

Conducting read-alouds in a virtual classroom, either as a live or pre-recorded activity, limits the interactions around new vocabulary before and during reading. To accommodate for these limited interactions, additional activities providing opportunities for students to interact with new words may need to be created. Additional activities may include separate vocabulary lessons before the read aloud, or more in-depth vocabulary instruction during the virtual read-aloud. Partnering with parents by providing vocabulary activities they can do with their child may also be helpful. Discussion prompts such as, "do you see anything in the picture that would give you a hint about what \_\_\_\_\_ means?" are a simple activity parents can talk through with their child.

Post-reading small group or independent activities help to deepen students' understanding of the meaning of vocabulary words. In a study by Morrison and Wodarczyk (2009), students used alphaboxes to solidify their understanding of new vocabulary. Alphaboxes are used to write down newly acquired vocabulary words in an alphabet grid along with a written or illustrated meaning of the word (Morrison & Wodarczyk, 2009). Students later used the alphaboxes to include the new words in their own writing. In a virtual classroom, alphaboxes could be shared easily with students using an interactive template in an online learning platform such as SeeSaw, or as a Google Document if using Google Classroom.

Strategic questioning can also be used to reinforce word meanings. In a study conducted by Santoro, Chard, Howard & Baker (2008), the teacher reintroduced a new vocabulary word, used it in sentences, then asked if these sentences used the word correctly. In one example, a teacher used this strategy to clarify the meaning of the word *slumbering*. After reading and discussing the word in context as examples and counter-examples, the teacher reintroduced the word and then asked students, "If you are running are you slumbering? How do you know?" (Santoro et al., 2008, p.404). This is a simple exercise which deepens the understanding of the word meaning for the students, by clarifying what it does and does not mean. The interactive nature of the discussion elicited from these questions gives

the teacher insight into students' overall comprehension. When conducting a pre-recorded read-aloud this exercise can be used as a check for understanding activity. Online activities could include interactive sorts matching examples with vocabulary words in an online learning platform like SeeSaw, or quizzes when using a Google Classroom format.

## **Form Sentence Starters and Open-ended Questions**

Asking open-ended questions is a way to encourage student participation in creating meaning. There is no right or wrong answer to these kinds of questions, but rather they guide students to make predictions, form connections, and to think more critically about the texts they read (Jordan, 2015; McClure & Fullerton, 2017; Morrison & Wodarczyk, 2009; Wiseman, 2010; Wiseman, 2012). Pre-reading of the text is necessary to plan these types of questions along with sentence starters for students to use during discussions (Hoffman, 2011). Planning for an open-ended discussion in advance can also help determine the level of scaffolding required for these activities based on the needs and abilities of students (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010).

A higher level of scaffolding will be necessary for live or pre-recorded virtual read-alouds. For very young children it may be helpful for the teacher to provide families with the list of questions and sentence starters in advance, and indicate in pre-recorded virtual read-alouds when caregivers should pause the video and talk through these with their child. In most cases these would be the same questions which would be used during a classroom interactive read-aloud such as:

- How do you think \_\_\_\_\_ feels on page \_\_\_\_\_?
- Can you think of a time you felt the way \_\_\_\_\_ feels?
- What do you think is going to happen now?
- What makes you think that?

## **Use Graphic Organizers to Reinforce Comprehension**

Pre-reading activities allow students to make predictions about the text, and also aid in generating

excitement and interest in what will be read. These activities can be as simple as voicing wonderings about the text to model making predictions (Jordan, 2015). More structured activities, such as graphic organizers, can also be used to make and document predictions.

A KWL chart is a graphic organizer which explicitly documents the interactive nature of reading and consists of recording what students know, want to know, and have learned from reading (Ogle, 1986). Responses from all students are added to each section of the chart before, during, and after reading (Santoro et al., 2008). After introducing the book, students take turns sharing what they know about this subject, author, series of books, etc. These contributions are written in the K column of the chart.

Students also share their wonderings of what they want to know about the text. These wonderings are added to the W column of the chart (Santoro et al., 2008). Students then use their collective knowledge in the K column paired with their combined wonderings in the W column to make predictions about what they will encounter in the text. While reading, students may add more wonderings to the W column of the KWL chart, and add new information they have learned in the L column (Santoro et al., 2008). Sharing of knowledge and wonderings will initially be heavily modeled by the teacher. However, with practice, the responsibility of creating this chart and making predictions will shift to the students.

Other graphic organizers, such as discussion webs can also document student ideas and connections while reading (Morrison & Wodarczyk, 2009). Discussion webs are graphic organizers that can take different forms for different purposes, and can be used to help students focus on a specific topic or question during an interactive read aloud. A discussion web used to compare and contrast different versions of the same story, and a discussion web detailing character traits would differ in form and function while still working toward the same goal of collective meaning making. Discussion webs can be used when reading fiction or nonfiction text, and create a platform for the class to; list or illustrate

story elements such as characters and setting, use a story ladder or S.W.B.S.T (someone, wanted, but, so, then) to sequence events of a story, demonstrate the link between problems and solutions, use Venn diagrams to compare and contrast more than one text, create a flow-chart to detail the steps in a process such as a life cycle, create illustrations such as labeled diagrams, identify main ideas and list their accompanying details, etc.

Information from KWL charts and discussion webs provide a visual representation of the common understanding created from discussing the text. They can be used to solidify concepts during independent post-reading activities. Post-reading activities are the most valuable in allowing time for students to practice what they learned during the interactive read-aloud (Baker et al., 2013). Small or whole group discussions after reading can summarize and reinforce the common understandings developed by children during reading. These conversations can also correct misconceptions or help students develop or expand on their ideas (Baker et al., 2013). Individual student activities such as journal writing (Wiseman, 2010), and retell prompting (Santoro et al., 2008) engage students in a personal reflection of the text. All charts or webs created during an interactive read-aloud should be available for student reference during small group and independent post-reading activities.

Moving these types of before, during, and after activities online could come with barriers based on the age of the children participating, and the level of virtual interaction. If the interactive read-aloud is being conducted live with students over a platform such as Zoom, the teacher could create a graphic organizer containing input from younger students. The graphic organizer could then be shared with the students for use completing post-reading activities.

Older students can be granted higher levels of participation in virtual interactive read-alouds through the use of Zoom features such as whiteboard and groups. The whiteboard feature would provide a platform for students to actively engage in group creation of graphic organizers during virtual interactive read-alouds. The

group feature provides the host of a Zoom meeting with the ability to send small groups of participants to separate rooms creating a space for students to participate in small group discussions.

If live Zoom meetings are not feasible, another alternative is for teachers to record themselves conducting the read-aloud or choose from the many pre-recorded read-alouds currently available online. The benefit to creating your own interactive read-aloud video is that you can pose noticings and wonderings specific to the purpose for reading. The work of creating graphic organizers then becomes more student driven. Providing a skeleton of a graphic organizer for students to fill in will help them verbalize their individual understandings of the text. Teachers could share an editable template students can complete and submit using the virtual learning platform SeeSaw. Similarly, templates can be shared as Google Documents that one or many students can edit. As many families will be helping to instruct children at home it would be helpful to provide instructions for completing the graphic organizer.

## **Let Students Lead the Meaning Making Process**

Co-construction of meaning is achieved through "capitalizing on student-initiated responses and the use of follow-up questioning to guide the meaning-making process across multiple participants' contributions" (Hoffman, 2011, p. 190). During an interactive read-aloud, all parties are constructing meaning together through conversation (Wiseman, 2010). Just as in creating engagement and developing new vocabulary, this can also be achieved through a gradual release of responsibility of meaning-making from the teacher to the students (McClure & Fullerton, 2017). Teachers can model this for students through a process of confirming and sometimes restating their responses (Wiseman, 2010). Then, prompting and further open-ended questioning helps students move past simple ideas and responses to more critical understandings while making connections with the perspectives of others (Braid & Finch, 2015; Hall & Piazza, 2008; McClure & Fullerton, 2017). With practice, what should take



shape is a student-led conversation with guidance and support from the teacher (Jordan, 2015).

While reading the text, the teacher may frequently stop to facilitate conversations which confirm or deny predictions (Baker et al., 2013; Santoro et al., 2008; Wiseman, 2010), introduce new vocabulary, answer student-created questions (Santoro et al., 2008), form opinions (Jordan, 2015), or make text-to-text, text-to-self, or text-to-world connections (Morrison & Wodarczyk, 2009; Wiseman, 2012). During these interactions, the teacher may also model how to support these ideas with evidence from the text (McClure & Fullerton, 2017). It is important during this process to follow the lead of students. Using what students have proposed to create follow up questions, and then asking if others agree or disagree helps students build on the ideas of others to create a collective understanding (Hoffman, 2011).

In a study by Hoffman (2011), teachers were encouraged to reflect on their interactive read-aloud practices. One teacher recognized that when students voiced misconceptions about meaning, her instinct was to move on to other students in an attempt to find the "right" answer. After coaching, the teacher realized that talking through misconceptions with students to help them reconcile their understanding was more effective than fishing for the correct answer. The teacher also learned she needed to relinquish control of what she thought was correct to allow the ideas of students to shine through (Hoffman, 2011).

Highlighting student ideas looks very different in a virtual environment. During a live virtual read-aloud all participants have the opportunity to interact with each other, to create a collective meaning. In addition to talking with one another, students also have the ability to send chat messages to the whole group or in private chats with a turn and talk partner. Children who are not writing yet, however, will be limited to talking as a way to co-construct meaning.

## Conclusion

Given the recommendations to increase the use of read-alouds in classrooms by many researchers, and also

noting the increase in the use of read-alouds during the stay-at-home policies this year, this is a timely review of research and theory that supports educators' and families' efforts across the state of Michigan. These practices can be incorporated in classrooms and in-home settings to help engage with texts, build academic vocabulary and increase readers' comprehension during interactive read-alouds. The act of co-constructing meaning in socially and culturally responsive ways has a community-building component that encourages active participation on the part of the learner. Through modeling and sharing respectful discussions, questioning, making predictions, and determining the meaning of unknown words, interactive read-alouds provide valuable teaching and learning opportunities regardless of the environmental context.

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## Author Biographies

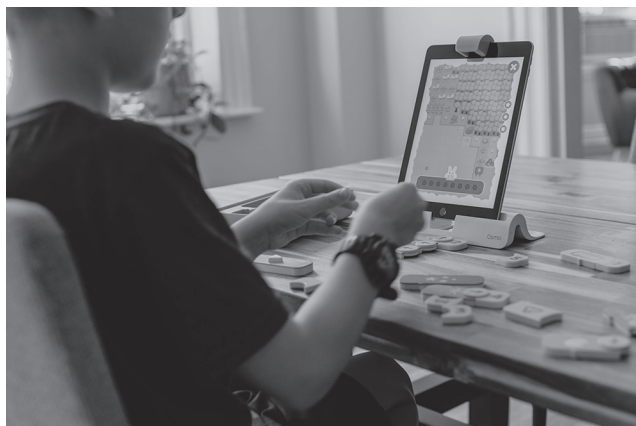
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# Reflections on a Third Year of Teaching

by Chelsea Berg



**Chelsea Berg**

The first year of my teaching career ended with the following advice from the building administrator who had served as my evaluator: “During your first year, you will learn more than your students. In your second year, it might be an equal balance between what you learn and what they learn. By the end of your third year, your students will finally learn more than you.” I feel that there is often a myth that once you exit your teacher preparation program and get your own classroom, things just fall into place.

My first year in the job field was difficult to say the least; finding a position was challenging and then when I did, it was not the right fit. I love learning and value the growth I’ve had as an educator over the last three years in my “right fit” position, but I’ve also been anxiously waiting to see if the advice I had been given proved true. To hopefully have found my teaching “groove.”

If this year had ended normally, I think it might have. However, the final months of this school year have been anything but normal. Instead of ending my third year in my classroom with my students, the year is ending with me posting assignments online and hosting weekly video calls from the sofa in my makeshift classroom while many of my students struggle to recover from an unprecedented act of nature and infrastructure failure—all things I never imaged facing as a teacher.

Without a doubt, online learning changes the very definition of teaching. It was obvious from the start that relationships with students that were well-established months into the school year needed to start over. Students needed to know that I was still there for them even if it was from afar. I achieved this as best as I could largely through being open to communication. One of my first “official” online learning tasks was a survey checking in with my students. This writing might not have been formal, but it gave me insight on how my students were feeling and what they might have been struggling with. Through this activity I was able to pinpoint which students might need a little extra attention from me to help them get through the unexpected changes. The process involved many hours of sending emails to students who indicated that they needed some help, but I don’t regret any of it. It may not have been in person, but I was able to let students know that I was there for them when they needed me.

Discussions with my colleagues have confirmed that there was almost an immediate shift to focusing on the socio-emotional well-being of students while content took a backseat. According to Zakrzewski (2013), the concept of including socio-emotional learning the classroom is a fairly new concept. In her study published in UC Berkely’s *Greater Good Magazine*, Zakrzewski argues that embracing socio-emotional learning skills is equally important for teachers as it is students. The

COVID-19 pandemic has aided in bringing awareness to this issue. As teachers, we were thrust into an environment where our students needed our help with socio-emotional learning more than ever, but we didn't always feel competent in how to help them and ourselves. Zakrzewski (2013) adds the following about the impact of socio-emotional learning on the classroom environment:

“Educators with SEC also create warm and safe classroom climates, fostered by strong classroom management skills. In these kinds of classrooms, the teacher and students practice respectful communication and problem-solving; transitions from one activity to another run smoothly; and lessons are designed to encourage student engagement and love-of-learning—all of which promote academic achievement and create a positive feedback loop for teachers...”

In my personal teaching experience, I may not feel that I have a complete grasp on incorporating socio-emotional learning into my classroom, but I do feel that I have established a positive classroom environment. All of that hard work was essentially lost when the classroom became a screen filled with tiny boxes. It will be interesting to see how easy it is for me to establish that classroom environment when school resumes given that our face-to-face time with students might be unpredictable.

Since we first left the classroom, I have been encouraging my students to use writing as a way to both document and cope with how they are feeling about what is happening in the world around them. A study in *Healthbeat*, a Harvard University publication, focusing on the work of Dr. James W. Pennebaker, from the University of Texas, Austin, cites that “writing about thoughts and feelings that arise from a traumatic or stressful life experience—called expressive writing—may help some people cope with the emotional fallout of such events.” The unexpected nature of the COVID-19 situation has, without a doubt, caused students to experience an unplanned trauma in their lives. I have not asked to see this writing, and I don't know if any

students are doing it. There is so much value in asking students to write about events that may cause trauma in their lives, but it is not something that can be forced. The Harvard study also argues that this type of writing is not for everyone and that individuals who had existing mental health struggles might benefit from writing about their experiences. I hope my students took advantage of the opportunity, but I will never truly know and I am okay with that. It feels odd, as a teacher, to admit that I am okay with not knowing if my students are doing something that I asked them to, but with emotional well-being at the forefront I knew I couldn't force them to write about what might upset them and those that did write might not have felt comfortable sharing their feelings. The Harvard *Healthbeat* study does suggest that when students write privately about trauma it can aid them in opening up to in-person communication; the study states that “writing [potentially] leads indirectly to reaching out for social support that can aid healing.”

Informal, ungraded writing has benefits beyond aiding students in coping with trauma they might be experiencing. Because of that, I plan on making an effort to incorporate more informal writing in my classroom in the future. Information from the Eberly Center at Carnegie Mellon University states:

“Informal writing assignments can reduce the tension students associate with writing, help them get their ideas down on paper clearly, increase their confidence, and eventually pave the way for more formal writing assignments. It may even convince reluctant writers that they like writing after all.”

One assignment that I used during online learning that received positive feedback from students was a “Fun Friday” Writing Prompt. These prompts included questions ranging from the best advice a student had received to what five people they would invite to dinner and what they would make them. These assignments always had strong participation levels and, as the teacher, it was fun to read the responses. I always posted my own response with the prompt and through the process I feel that my students and I had the



opportunity to learn new things about each other even though we were apart. This activity is something that I will bring into my classroom, in-person or online, for the upcoming school year.

I stressed the importance of recording their thoughts in writing, but I have also known that it is important for me to use my own writing to reflect on what I'm feeling. However, I've found it difficult to sit down and put my thoughts about the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning on paper. The work of Dr. Pennebaker in *Healthbeat* suggests the timing of trauma-based writing does matter. If done too soon, he argues that it can actually make the writer feel worse. It has taken sixty-nine days, slightly out of the one to two-month timeframe suggested by Dr. Pennebaker, for me to feel the pull to write down my thoughts and feelings. My desire to share my thoughts was not generated by a moment of great realization, rather it was prompted by my school community of Midland, Michigan facing another unprecedented event. When the Wixom and Sanford Lake dams breached, the course of distance learning changed again. In the end, my motivation to write about my experience with online learning was generated by additional trauma facing my students.

Sixty-eight days after I walked out of my classroom anticipating a return in three weeks, I watched the news following the failure of the Wixom Lake dam and wondering what would happen in Sanford. As a teacher it is habit to want to help your students however you can, but this was a time I didn't know how. As the town of Sanford was forced to evacuate, I received a phone call from one of my graduating seniors. I was able to talk to her for a little bit while her family was trying to make a game plan. I felt guilty that I couldn't help more, but I know I was able to help just by taking time to talk to her. The day after the dam breached, I sat in my living room watching drone videos and looking at photos of flood waters surrounding my school. As a teacher at Herbert Henry Dow High School, it was not immediately known if water made was actually in the school. What I did know was Thousands of students in our district who were already struggling to adapt to online learning were now potentially displaced temporarily

or permanently as a result of the historic flooding. In the end, our school building was lucky. Our newly remodeled library and several surrounding classes were affected, but easily fixable. The same can't be said for the homes directly around the school. Homes directly across the street have been condemned and will be demolished. It will take years for all of the damage to be repaired, but I hope that I was able to support my students in the best way I could from a distance. For a second time, the emotional well-being of students and their families became the focus of my attention.

Did I get the result I was hoping for at the end of my third year? Simply put, no. Have my students learned a lot this year? Absolutely. They learned from me in the classroom, but they have also had the unique opportunity to learn outside the walls of the school. They've had a crash course in adapting, resiliency, and bravery that none of them ever expected. My students still learned content, but they also learned how to be self-motivated, how to put themselves first and ask for help when they need it, and how a community can come together in amazing ways to bounce back from a tragic event. I'm so proud as their teacher to have had the opportunity to see many of my students embrace distance learning and thrive. I've also had to watch many of them struggling while I wasn't able to help them as easily as I could in person. The truth of the matter is, I will likely never know how my students fared because of online learning. I will not teach the same students next year, so I will personally be unable to help them move forward for the impact of this year. It is frustrating, but the messiness and uncertainty of the conclusion of the 2019-2020 school year was out of everyone's control. I have confidence that as a school community, we will all be able to band together in the fall to ensure that students who struggle during online learning can regain their footing and students who thrived in the online setting are able to incorporate that into a more traditional classroom environment.

The main part of the advice my evaluator gave me that was proven wrong was that my students would finally learn more than me in year three. My students have learned, but I've done an awful lot of learning that I

never imagined. I've learned how to adapt my lessons to online formats with minimal time and training, I've learned how to teach with my cat walking all over me, and I've almost learned how to get a good angle on the webcam. But, in all seriousness, I have also learned to reevaluate what the most important part of teaching is. The content I am assigned to teach will always be important, but this time away from the traditional classroom has only emphasized the importance of creating and placing value on connecting with students. In the classroom, students will only learn if they feel respected and valued by their teacher and I think that is even more important in a successful distance learning environment. Even when I return to the "normal" classroom, I will never take for granted the importance of being conscious of students' emotional wellbeing.

On a personal level, the most valuable thing that this unprecedented time has taught me is that I love what I do even more than I already thought. One doesn't realize how much a job they love defines their identity until it is torn away. I miss seeing my students in person and I miss my classroom, which is like my second home. I miss actually seeing the moments of realization on my students' faces when they "get" something, and I miss the silly off-topic conversations in the hallway. Frankly, I miss everything about being a "normal"

classroom teacher and I will never take another day in my classroom for granted (even the most "Monday" of Mondays). What I've learned during this time will stick with me for the rest of my career. It will take time to grieve what was lost at the end of this school year, but I know that the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the historic flooding in Midland County have changed me for the better.

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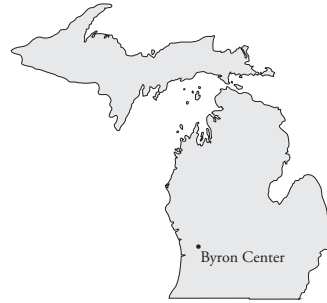
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# An Educator's Response to Michigan's Stay at Home Order

by Kristin Scherkenbach



**Kristin Scherkenbach**

## Abstract

This article examines the educational impact of the stay-at-home order issued in the spring of 2020. It explores methods the author used to connect with students during this time, such as YouTube videos, book drop offs, parent education PowerPoints, and online teaching. It concludes with the understanding that a passion for literacy can be ignited in students even in challenging situations.

*Keywords:* Virtual learning, Reading instruction, Parent Education

## The Beginning of it All

We still had so much planned. We were in the middle of March book madness, we were eagerly planning our first ever literacy night, and we were looking forward to upcoming authors' visits. I was spending my days working with my first, second, and third graders, hoping and praying that their reading would improve so they would be ready for the following grade. We had so much work yet to do.

Thursday night, March 12, I was lying in bed trying to sleep while my husband was watching the news. Several times he nudged me, trying to inform me of our governor's announcements. I grumpily told him not to bother me and rolled over back to sleep. I need my sleep,

I thought. The next day was Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, a full moon, and heavens knows what kind of mayhem that would bring. I was awoken to a text message the next morning informing me that we were off school for the next 3 weeks.

Fast forward to today, several weeks after the governor announced that we will not be returning to our school buildings this school year. My heart is heavy. I am disappointed about missed field trips and concerts for my own two children and about all the other events we were eagerly anticipating. Suddenly our spring calendar has been swiped clean. But mostly I am worried for my students. I am worried for their emotional health and their physical well-being. And I am worried about their growth as readers.

My mind has been spinning, trying to think of ways to reach my students. How can I enter their world? How can I connect with them when I cannot physically interact with them? Is there any way to motivate them to continue their work as readers when we are no longer meeting face-to-face?

## YouTube Videos

My attempt to connect with my students began when I created a YouTube channel titled "At Home with Mrs. Scherkenbach." I have written blogs in the past, and have

posted pictures on Facebook, but a YouTube channel? It felt so vulnerable. I mustered up the courage to record an introduction to my first and second graders and clicked “share.” Then I recorded a couple of videos to help students practice reading high frequency words. I started receiving feedback from parents, even parents of students I did not work with, who were loving the videos. They gave me the boost to continue. Now, several weeks later, I have recorded numerous word videos, phonics videos, and comprehension videos. Yes, there have been some bloopers along the way. I played one video back and discovered that my son had snuck up behind me and entertained the viewers with his rendition of the floss. And there was the time when a student told me she could not stop laughing when my husband, shirtless, kept appearing in the background. I still feel vulnerable, but teaching children to read while bringing them into my world as a wife and mother has created a new level of authenticity that I could not achieve in the classroom.

### **Book Drop Offs**

The creation of the YouTube channel began very early into our time of quarantine. At the time, I thought we would be back in school once April arrived. When it became clear that would not be the case, I started to think more about my students. I knew that many of them came from homes without many books, or at least without books that were accessible to them as beginning readers. So, I began collecting books. I sent out a plea to my neighbors for book donations. I scrounged my own children's bookshelves for books they had outgrown. And then, to my delight, our principal said we could have a half hour to go into our classrooms and gather what we might need for the weeks ahead. As the building's reading specialist, my classroom is packed to the brim with books. On the day I could reenter the building for that short time, I came with a plan. I listed all the students needing books and started pulling books from my cabinets at a feverish pace. Hundreds of books were piled into the back of my van. I worked quickly because I knew my time was limited, but mostly because I did not want anyone to see me. You guessed it—I did not ask permission to take these books out of my classroom. Many were purchased with school money, so I was just betting on the hope that students would return the

school-owned books in the fall. I told myself that I could always ask for forgiveness later.

Dividing up all those books, packing them into bags, writing notes to all the children, and then driving many miles all around greater Grand Rapids was a ton of work. But it brought me so much joy. The happiness I felt when I saw those sweet faces smiling at me through living room windows, when I read the thank you notes, and when I saw pictures and videos of the children reading the books, made it all worth it.

### **Parent Education**

Many of my students were now equipped with a large library of books to use, and they had my practice videos to watch, but what about parents? I was attempting to homeschool my own children and was quickly realizing what a struggle that can be, especially when also trying to juggle the demands of a job. I am a teacher with over 20 years in education and have children who are typical learners. What about the parents of my students—loving parents who want what is best for their children but who have been suddenly thrown into the role of teacher, trying to teach a child who is not reading at grade level. How are they going to know what to prioritize in order to help their child progress in reading? Are these children going to be able to complete the reading assignments their teachers are giving them, or will parents have to figure out how to adapt the work? All these questions kept swirling around in my mind. I held one live Zoom meeting with a small number of parents, but I knew I needed to reach more. I thought through all I had learned during my study of how children learn to read, thought about resources that may be available to parents at home, and gave special consideration to the reality of trying to juggle working from home with homeschooling several children. And from all this thinking, my PowerPoint presentation was born.

I created a PowerPoint to educate parents on how to best help their young children progress as readers. I narrated the PowerPoint and then shared it with all the parents in the school. Like the videos, the PowerPoint was not perfect. I heard some dishes clanking around in the background. I stumbled over some words. And even

after it was shared with all parents, the feedback was negligible. But the thinking that went into the creation of that PowerPoint—thinking about what is essential for children when learning to read—will be with me forever. Never have I sat down and thought about all the components that go into a child's reading growth in such depth. Never before had I stripped down the process of learning to read to its bare essentials. All that thinking will help me become a better reading teacher when we return to our building again.

## Online Lessons

As the weeks passed, I fought the idea of conducting virtual reading lessons. I did not think it could work. I could not imagine trying to teach a small group of young readers who were not directly in front of me. And the biggest wild card of all was my own children. I was worried they would come running up in the middle of a lesson with some urgent problem that needed immediate attention. It all seemed impossible. But as the weeks passed, I slowly accepted that I needed to give it a try. How could I know how my students were progressing without hearing them read? How could I record more YouTube videos if I did not know what my students currently needed? And the biggest reason, of course, was that I missed seeing those precious faces. The day for the first lesson arrived and I felt very prepared. My own children were sufficiently threatened to not interrupt, my lesson was well thought out and planned, and all of my materials were close at hand. I was ready. I sent out the link, waited for the children to join, and watched my screen fill up with those sweet faces. But then my chat box started to fill with messages from parents: "We can't hear you," "Your face is frozen," "We hate Google Meet. Just switch to Zoom!" My worst nightmare had come true. I was talking, louder and louder all the time, but no one could hear me. Everyone started talking to each other, but no one paid any attention to me. I finally ended the call, emailed my apologies to the parents, and burst into tears. In that moment, I hated the quarantine more than I ever had. I wanted everything to just go back to normal. I was sick of being stuck at home. Sick of not seeing my students. Sick of trying to figure out new technology. Sick of homeschooling my children. Just sick of it all.

## Conclusion

Thankfully, that is not the end of the story. I figured out a way to make virtual teaching work. Using my husband's office when I was teaching was a lifesaver, along with doing more teaching in the form of videos. Students began setting up appointments with me, joining sessions early, and staying on sessions longer just to be able to read to me. I was opened up to the lives of my students in a way that had never been possible before. Watching a child proudly read a well-loved book to me in the comfort of his living room with his favorite stuffed animal and blanket by his side created a warm, intimate experience that could never be replicated in the classroom. Hearing a mother lovingly help her child figure out a challenging word from her book touched my heart in a way that no parent-teacher conference has ever done. And I learned some important lessons along the way. Human beings are resilient creatures. I love my job. And when the passion and desire are strong enough, it is never impossible to open a child up to the joy and wonder of reading.

## Author Biography

**Kristin Scherkenbach** is an Academic Specialist at Cross Creek Charter Academy in Byron Center, Michigan. She works as a reading interventionist for students in grades K-5 and also spends part of her time as a literacy coach.



# I Wrote My Way Out

by Sharon Murchie



Sharon Murchie

When schools shuttered in March, I issued a challenge to one of my independent study seniors.

We would “NaCoWriMo” for the next 30 days, modeled after the 30-day challenge of NaNoWriMo.

NaNoWriMo stands for “national novel writing month” and takes place in November every year. Participants pledge to write a 50,000 word novel in that time, or approximately 1,667 words per day. Our NaCoWriMo rules were simple: it would take place during the Coronavirus lockdown; we would both write a blog post every day and post it, no matter how bad it was; we would text each other the link to the new post every night; and we would use this strange situation to build some writing stamina and just see what would happen.

We both naively thought that 30 days would be enough to see this pandemic through. I called my entries “The Coronacation Diaries.”

From entry #1: *“Let’s be honest: for a teacher and for her kids, an unexpected 3-week vacation is like manna from heaven at the end of a dull, grey winter: a gift of precious days of sleep and recovery direct from the gods of teenage hormones and eye-rolling wars.”*

Months later, we were still writing, still posting, still trying to figure it all out.

From entry #81: *“When I started this journey, I naively thought that it would be just a few weeks. A nanowrimo of sorts, blogging throughout the pandemic, trying to entertain the masses with the annoyances of it all. Instead, it became something bigger, a force that has driven me throughout these past 12 weeks, forcing me to reflect and to put into words what it all has meant to me and to those I love.”*

I ended up with 100 posts in all, 100 days of reflecting and ranting about the big things and the little things and the things that made me roll my eyes and the things that made me smile. And, I realized a few things, too.

From entry #68: *“It’s okay to acknowledge the beauty around us and simultaneously see the devastation. It’s okay to stand in the center of destruction and be awed by the gorgeous power of it all. And it’s okay to wish we were anywhere but here, even though here is actually not that bad of a place to be.”*

I can’t begin to explain everything that happened during our NaCoWriMo(s). But these are some of the things that I realized—about me, about my student(s), about my family, about my profession, about our state, about our country—as I wrote.

From entry #46: *“I want to bury my head in the sand and pretend that—if we all just stay home and*



*wash our hands—soon, things will start to go back to normal and we can start to get our lives back.”*

## **I realized that I am not Ma Ingalls**

One of the recurring threads in my series of blog posts was the ups and downs of being home with family, of trying to navigate their and my anxieties, of trying to navigate school, of trying to come up with something for dinner that everyone would eat. I love my kids, I love my partner, I love our pets, and I adore our home.

But I am not cut out to only see these faces and no others for months straight. I am a teacher at heart, but I would never willingly jump on the homeschool bandwagon. I love to cook, but I have realized that cooking for these same faces and these same palates day after day after day... this does not bring me joy. And as much as I love having my kids around, sometimes I just really want them to stop talking.

*From entry #61: “Today should have been a great day. And mostly, it was. And yet, our fuses are so short; we are snapping and overreacting and taking it out on each other, on the only people we know who will take it, on the people who don't deserve it, on the ones within striking distance.”*

I do, however, kind of like the fact that the world slowed down. We had not had a family meal together, Monday through Thursday, in years, because of sports, scouts, and music. I had not managed to get a garden planted before July in the last several years. We were still living in boxes from a house remodel we did back in 2018.

Suddenly, every night was a family dinner, the garden was planted mid-May, and the boxes, although still present, are much fewer in number. The world slowed down and the important things bubbled to the surface. I got much closer with my kids. I realized that my relationship with my partner, although not perfect, could withstand being together 24/7 for months on end. I realized that, when this is all over, there are aspects of this slower life that I hope to hold on to. I realized that, in the day-to-day scramble, I had forgotten to breathe. I don't want to forget to breathe anymore.

*From entry #52: “I wonder—when this is all over—if our lives will be changed, a slight tangent from the trajectory we had been on. I wonder if we will be any different. I wonder if any of this will stick.”*

## **I realized that our kids and our teachers need to be in school**

*From entry #38: “Virtual learning in my household is slowly destroying my will to live.”*

There are no easy answers, no ways to solve this crisis in education until we can solve this international health crisis. But unless we somehow completely restructure our society so that parents don't need to work and completely restructure childrens' brains so that they desperately want to do school work instead of playing Fortnite, we really won't be able to effectively reach and teach our students through a computer screen.

Online education is so much more than just putting our lessons online, and our schools provide so much more for our communities than simply teaching reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. Not only do teachers need extensive training and time to learn how to effectively teach online, but students need substantial support systems and intrinsic motivation in order to be successful online. Instead, we were and still are triage teaching, trying to stop the hemorrhaging without solving the underlying issues.

*From entry #58: “This is not what our students have signed up for. This is not what their parents have signed up for. This is definitely not what we signed up for. And although there are ways to provide thoughtful and thought-provoking education in online settings, it only works if everyone is on board, not if everyone is just treading water in the near vicinity.”*

I realized that I am quite often disappointed by my fellow citizens. The brazen insistence that the economy was more important than human lives really struck a chord with me, and with my readers. Because I did develop a small following of loyal readers, and several of my posts about the anti-lockdown protests and the

anti-maskers were shared widely on social media. As I stared at news articles about armed men storming the capitol and screaming in the face of law enforcement, brandishing guns in legislative halls, I wrote. I wrote about my anger at their selfishness, I wrote about their blatant inhumanity, I wrote about their misplaced rage. And as I wrote, I realized that these people in our country who will put the economy above humanity: they do not represent me. These people who refuse to mask up in order to protect others: they are not my family. These people who don't believe in science because the virus hasn't affected them? They are not my community.

From entry #31: *Most of us, when faced with the choice between taking on a little discomfort to ourselves versus potentially exposing others to great harm would choose the former with very little hesitation. Most of us believe in freedom, and we freely choose to conduct our lives with empathy and understanding towards those who may be in harm's way. Most of us will do our best to continue to act in ways that will not cause harm to others. Most of us care about more than ourselves. We are most of us.*

## **I realized that writing brings us together**

My independent study student wrote along with me, sometimes keeping pace day after day, and sometimes taking a few days off. But she wrote about the losses of being a graduating member of the class of 2020, left with no graduation, no prom, no closure. She wrote about the protests. She wrote about struggles with family, about being let down by friends, about crippling anxiety. She wrote about the people in her apartment complex, a cast of characters rich with oddities and poverty and drug abuse and beauty.

She published two of her posts on BuzzFeed, and they were shared hundreds of times. She found her voice, and voiced the thoughts of a pandemic graduate, isolated, together with hundreds of thousands of high school seniors nationwide.

From one of her BuzzFeed posts: *"Look, I know it's not about me. I know that the anxiety that my fellow teens and I are feeling is super irrelevant compared to the big picture. But if you have a student in your life, please, offer them support. Because right now, the only thing scarier than what's happening out there is not knowing what's going to happen next"* (Dunlap, 2020).

## **I realized that being an ally is not enough**

As the Black Lives Matter protests flooded the country speaking out against police violence, the usual backlash and talking points echoed. But this time, something was different. There was an energy present that wasn't here before. There was a white movement towards acknowledging that our country has a problem. There was a youth movement that had power and momentum that wasn't here before. But more importantly, as I wrote, I realized that being an ally was not enough. I had not realized that before.

From entry #83: *It's not enough to recognize the storm, be awed by it, and sit a safe distance away from it, whilst claiming to be an ally. It's not enough to tweet, or post a meme, or repost an article, and then go on with our day. It's up to us to use our privilege—the audiences we have, the safety we have—to get in there and fight with the tools that we have: with our words, with our dollars, in our communities, with our bodies. Otherwise, we're just taking and reposting videos of the power of the storm, but doing nothing to actually aid those who are constantly out in it. It's up to us. We have to be the change. We can't just watch from a distance.*

## **I realized that I am a writer**

I have taught writing for 20 years, but I have never really identified with being a writer until now. But challenging myself to write every day for 100 days, figuring out how to put each day into words, how to find something meaningful in each day helped me process

the moments in this completely unique situation. And I wasn't just writing for myself. By the end, I had a small but loyal following, who thanked me for putting into words what they had been feeling, for helping them process it all, for writing us all through the pandemic. Because writing does that: it builds bridges and it helps us grow as human beings, and grow as a community. We read because we want to learn the stories of others, because we want to put ourselves in those stories, because we see ourselves in the mirrors that great writing provides.

And I have gifted the series to the National Women's History Museum, to be included in *Women Writing History: A Coronavirus Journaling Project*, "a living archive of women's lives during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as for online and physical exhibits, articles and stories" (Women Writing History...n.d., para. 7).

*From entry #94: Finding a way to put each day into words, and finding something unique in each day gives meaning to the mundane. And the realization that others are using these words to also process this strange time has been empowering, frightening, awe-inspiring. The fact that you are reading this, by choice, helps me to realize that I am not alone. We are all in this together. Together, yet apart. Apart, yet together. This has been the common thread.*

And these are lessons that I will bring to my classroom in the fall, no matter what that classroom looks like. My NaCoWriMo experiment reminded me that writing is so much more than an author's craft. Writing is the author's soul. And through writing, we can help our students face and frame the present and the future, whatever it may hold.

*From entry #100: Like a great British tv show, it's important to end a thing before you run out of things to say, before you jump the shark. You shouldn't write 7 seasons if you can figure out how to end somewhere in the middle, maybe at the end of season 2.*

*Maybe at Coronation Diaries post 100.*

*I've thought a lot about endings, about famous final lines, about how to end a thing that has become, literally, a part of my daily life, a part of who I am as a person. As Holden said, "It's funny. Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody." By putting a part of my heart and soul out there on the Internet, by building a small but loyal following of readers, I have accidentally tapped into something much bigger than me, much bigger than my thoughts or words.*

*Because, it turns out that the cliché was right: we are all in this together. Well, maybe not all of us. I'm not going to even pretend that I can connect with the "historical statues matter" folks, or the "never maskers" or the "barbershop or die" crowd, or even the "all lives matter" folks. I'm not even sure that I want to. But I can see the community out there of people like me: people who are trying to do the right thing. People who fail, but then get back up, apologize, and promise to do better. People who care passionately about our country and recognize that "I don't do politics" is a road we will never walk. People who sometimes struggle to get out of bed or accomplish anything of meaning...and who recognize that tomorrow is a chance to get up and try again. People who struggle to connect with the ones they love, who struggle being together, who struggle being alone.*

*Tonight, I am alone for \*I think\* the very first time in 100 days. Michael is out running. The kids are at their dad's. Daughter from another mother is out for the evening. It's just me and the dog, hanging out in my home office/front yard, watching the battery tick down on my Chromebook. It is peaceful, but strange, to be alone after so many days of forced togetherness.*

*There is so much yet to be done. There is so much to do. And if I have learned one thing—one singular thing throughout this whole pandemic—it is that our words have impact, not only in how we frame our message for others to hear, but in how we characterize our days and our moments. The words that we use frame our lives, frame our relationships with others, frame every moment. These words, no matter*

*how poetic or succinct, have the power to change our world.*

But these so many days of forced togetherness and so many days of having to put my thoughts into words has helped me to make meaning of it all and to find meaning in each day. And my final thoughts are not final, of course. I will still write, I will still blog, and I will still search and find something in each day that is worth writing about. Even though the pandemic is not over, this particular series has ended—but only to make room for other things that need to be unpacked, that need to be said.

Because I refuse to walk back to the hotel in the rain. I refuse to lay down my brush in extreme fatigue, having had my vision. I will always beat on, boats against the current. But I refuse to be borne back ceaselessly into the past. There is no room for defeat, for getting stuck into the what ifs, for attempting to live and relive the past over and over again, for throwing my hands up in the air and declaring my work here to be done.

There is so much yet to be done. There is so much to do. And if I have learned one thing—one singular thing throughout this whole pandemic—it is that our words

have impact, not only in how we frame our message for others to hear, but in how we characterize our days and our moments. The words that we use frame our lives, frame our relationships with others, frame every moment. These words, no matter how poetic or succinct, have the power to change our world.

I realized, on this 100 day journey, that we can literally write our way out. We just have to start.

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# From a Distance: Teaching, Learning, and Parenting During the COVID-19 Pandemic

by Melanie Love

On March 13, 2020, schools closed.

Since then, as a busy wife, mother, and first grade teacher, I've gone through the motions; however, I honestly haven't known exactly how to react or what to do. I felt like this ugly pandemic made me out to be a liar to my young students. I promised I'd keep them safe, I told them I'd be there for them. I said I'd help them have access to the same resources our more affluent neighboring schools have. I promised to advocate for them when their own voices needed a boost.

## As a Teacher

As a teacher at a Title I school, I had already worked on building trust and resiliency. For example, using Becky Bailey's *"Conscious Discipline"* approach (2015), I created a safe space in one corner of our classroom called the "Quiet Cube." My students quickly learned they could use our calming corner if they were feeling overwhelmed, angry, or simply needed a few minutes to be alone. We memorized meaningful community building rituals, such as the partnering activity where I taught them new words to the familiar tune of, "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star."

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,  
What a beautiful child you are.  
With your big, bright eyes and your cute little nose,  
You're the best, from your head to your toes.

My students would sing with a partner, sitting face-to-face and knee-to-knee, adding inflection to the tone of their voices and using eye contact, so their partner would feel valued. This – along with so many other activities – occurred on the large, oval carpet at the front of the classroom. My students understood this was our safe place for daily news to share, classroom discussions, read alouds, brain breaks, problem solving, social emotional connection activities, and many other familiar classroom routines.



Melanie Love

The reality is, first graders can't be handled well from a distance. Teaching amid a global pandemic is uncharted and unsettling territory for me. The uncomfortable truth is that I still have far more questions than there are answers, as I strive to be an educator who teaches with the whole child in mind.

How will I be able to stay true to who I am for my students from a distance? Even when we do go back to in-person teaching, how will I comfort a crying six-year-old from six feet away? How will I help the budding author as she learns to proofread her own writing? How will I assist the little one who can't yet tie his own shoes, or the one who simply feels sad for no reason at all and needs an extra hug?

My brain has been reeling, trying to pick up all of the pieces and fit them into some sort of "new normal" that actually makes sense for my life. My first impetus was to continue. The first week away from my students, I reached out constantly. I wrote them daily "News to Share" messages, I recorded daily YouTube videos of me reading familiar stories. These were my best, yet highly vulnerable attempts to be as close to the teacher my students knew and loved.

Many of my students or their families called and sent notes to let me know they enjoyed the stories I was reading. This made me happy because with everything having been suddenly yanked out from under my

first graders, I wanted to give them whatever sense of normalcy I could. I wanted and needed them to feel safe and to remember I still loved them, even though I wasn't able to be with them.

Our district was not yet enabled with 1:1 technology, so remote teaching was a daunting undertaking, to say the least. There was no colorful, quadrilateral carpet on our Zoom calls. There were so many unknowns wracking my brain. Many families I serve now have to figure out where they will get their next meal. Fortunately, my district has been steadfast in providing the continuity of school food for families, which is a huge coordinated effort by many of my concerned and also reeling colleagues.

### **As a Parent**

As worried as I was about my students during those initial vulnerable days, I was also immediately faced with the daunting task of educating my own children: second and fifth graders. Much like I did for my school students, I tried to impart the security of continuity for my boys. This was a difficult adjustment for all of us. We are fairly accustomed to being in “home mode” when we are here, and this transition into doing “distance learning” required a tremendous amount of flexibility and patience. While we are fortunate enough to have a reasonable internet connection and devices for both of them, they do not have any prior knowledge with *digital learning*, especially not while socially distanced from their friends and teachers. In that sense, this may be the first technology-related undertaking we've attempted where I inherently know more than they do.

Although our pandemic lifestyle has been full of lots of changes and intense feelings, I've also had our many blessings forefront in my mind. We have a kitchen so full of food, those we know who are affected by COVID-19 are not within our closest circle. We are not “essential workers” who must don masks and go out into this new and very scary world each day.

Given all of this, my strategy is to slow things down, take it all as it comes. I try to navigate this new, murky normal and use coping skills such as those found on

*Brain Gym*, including motion and deep breathing exercises, daily journaling, staying connected with friends and colleagues, and to “keep on keeping on” as best I can. I do this and try to stay calm for my children. I also sometimes hide in the bathroom for a few extra minutes. I take a break so my kids won't see the worry seeping through my expressions.

Like my own routine journal writing, I ask my sons to do the same. I tell them we are living through extraordinary times they may someday want to share with *their* children. In this way, I build in a sense of hope and resiliency for them so they don't get scared. We make responsible choices about which and how much news to consume. Each morning we watch a kid-friendly news segment together and talk about what we learned. On late nights when sleep eludes me, my mind runs in circles to the tune of background TV and the sleeping sounds of my family. At least I can rest in that knowledge for now. At least they are safe.

### **As Teacher and Parent**

With my strong desire to provide normalcy and routine for all of the children in my care, I've decided a plan and tried to stick to it as much as possible. I worked hard to transform our dining room table into a make-shift classroom, and I carved out space where learning could be nurtured. I spent close to two hours one day thinking of all the components needed for a healthy daily home-learning routine. Much like I had done in my classroom, I labeled these activity blocks onto card stock and affixed pictures to add interest.

When I first showed these to my 5th grader, he scoffed at me and rolled his eyes. Groaning, he said, “Mom, you're treating this like it's your classroom!”

Although I didn't share my thoughts with him at the time, it occurred to me that I have no other lens through which to look at all of this. The teacher – and mom – in me both understand the importance of daily routines in creating a sense of security. In my classroom, I devoted weeks to explaining, coaching and practicing our classroom routines with my young students. I used the Responsive *Classroom* methods from

the book, *"The First Six Weeks of School"* (2015) to help my students understand our routines so well they could run through our day from muscle memory, without much conscious thought at all.

Even though I knew our home routine wouldn't be as firm as my classroom, I wanted to make sure my children knew what I expected of them and that they had a safe, well-organized space to work. The initial negativity I received from my son when I showed him our schedule did eventually lessen. He gave me the gift of his cooperation and encouraged his little brother to do the same. They even posed for this picture, for a moment.

We have no choice but to blunder on through this darkness, doing our best to stay grounded. I am comforted by the thought that I do know my kids best. While I'm not a proponent of rigidity and overbooking kids, mine, like most, thrive on some form of a routine. As the Council on Early Childhood suggests, children need to read or be read to and spend quality time away from screens (2014). They do need to have clear, factual age-appropriate information about what is going on, while not getting too bogged down in news and world events.

In this same vein, I continue as a teacher by encouraging and supporting the families of my first graders as they too find their own versions of a routine amongst this new digital landscape. To my way of thinking, we all have only one choice during these times and that is to continue moving forward. I will do my part by pointing out, even searching for the good of these slower mornings at home. The found time with my family, the increase in our shared mealtimes and the blessing of this unexpected, additional time together.

Perhaps what matters most is not what they learn or what gaps still remain when this is all behind us but how our children will remember these times. What legacy will we leave? What lessons will we inadvertently teach them about survival and perseverance? What are the greater lessons here are about kindness, grace and finding joy in the simple moments of life?

As much as I would be comforted by having all the



Figure 1. Love's children, learning from home during the COVID-19 quarantine. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

answers now, I think we all will have to be content with slowing down and taking the world as it comes for now. Even if I treat my home like a classroom, time will tell what ultimate detriment – or maybe even delight – comes from all of this.

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# Creating an Online Community of Learners During the COVID-19 Shutdown Using Michigan's *Literacy Essentials*

by Annie P. Spear

If all humans, regardless of age, have fundamental needs of relatedness, autonomy, and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2000), what happens when everything our society is built upon is suddenly turned up-side-down? How do we meet fundamental needs for ourselves, our families, our students, and our colleagues? COVID-19 was an unexpected, unprecedented challenge for everyone, but presented a particular upheaval for educators, children, and families.

My first thought after hearing schools would be closed went to relatedness. *How will we keep children collaborating, conversing, and socially connected?* My next thought was, *Michigan is in a literacy crisis! How can I support the field and families in this time? How can I teach my own children and yet support those in my districts?* In response, I set up a Google site, a Facebook page, and created a series of free online classes. Each offering had a description with an outline for the “class” including goals, age ranges targeted, and a schedule. Registration was linked to class offerings using Google Forms. Once logistics were complete, I sifted through my instructional materials, my children and I rearranged a space to create a classroom, and we were off.

## A Structure for Success Involved Purposeful Considerations and Planning Sanity for Parents and Easy Access to Materials

Talking to many parents, it soon became clear that there was a lot of panic surrounding the end of in-person learning for the year and the lack of “school” materials around the home. I knew to be successful, I would have to address that concern. To join my groups, children simply needed a device that could connect via Zoom. Other than that, they needed only scrap



Annie P. Spear



paper, something to write with, or an object with print (any book, junk mail, magazine, etc.) to participate. I designed my classes connected to our state-wide *Literacy Essentials* initiative to be high-quality, accessible, and easy. Using practices from *PreK and K to 3 Literacy Essential* 10 (2016), I strived for open, ongoing communication and information sharing that would help family members know how to support children at home. I also offered two free *Coffee with the Coach* Zoom meetings on topics that I felt might be useful to families: *Reimagined Read Alouds* and *What makes a “sight word” a “sight word?”* In each of these sessions I outlined actionable ways for families to support children through easy, authentic, everyday interactions.

### Student Choice

From my experience, I’ve learned that students more eagerly engage in activities when they have choice. As a literacy coach, I am committed to providing choice in learning and creating environments that are purpose-



ful, authentic, and grounded in collaboration. In my online instruction, I maintained that commitment and noticed that the students I worked with fully engaged at all different entry points. Within my classes, I built in choice whenever I could, even if it was limited (i.e., draw a picture versus write a word or use the “chat” feature versus “raise your hand” to speak). Student appreciated the choice and, in turn, designed projects that reflected their individuality yet simultaneously engaged in important literacy activities.

## Grounded in Research

### Connecting Classes to Michigan's *Literacy Essentials*

With the cancellation of school, I knew I wanted to maintain some of the rigor and instructional activities that students would have received in school. Since I would be working with students from all districts, I designed offerings based on MAISA-GELN's (2016) *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy Pre-kindergarten* (hereafter *PreK Literacy Essentials*) and MAISA-GELN's (2016) *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy Grades K to 3* (hereafter *K-3 Literacy Essentials*). I chose areas I've witnessed as an ISD Early Literacy Coach to be challenging, yet critical, instructional practices. Understanding theory and pedagogy is necessary, but being able to combine that knowledge into daily instructional practice is the greater challenge. I hoped I would teach children and model for teachers who might implement these practices as they planned their own online instruction. Classes (see Figures 1 and 2) were designed to meet a variety of ages and areas of literacy development aligned to Michigan's ELA Standards.

Figure 1. Prekindergarten to Grade 2 Offerings

Figure 2. Grades 2-5 Offerings

## Inside a Few of the Offerings

### ABC Superhero

Beginning with the youngest learners in mind, I developed an offering focused on building and reinforcing letter-sound knowledge. I called the course ABC Superhero. It was based on the Enhanced Alphabet Knowledge (EAK) protocol by Jones, Reutzel, and Clark (2012). This instructional strategy supports alphabet knowledge through letter recognition, letter naming, sound/symbol association, letter discrimination, categorization and authentic application (See *PreK* and *K to 3 Literacy Essentials* 4, 5, and 6) introduced children to a different letter each time we met. They were taught the letter, the letter sound(s) (and how to produce it), and how to form the letter. They also searched for the letter in context something with print (magazine, cereal box, mail flyer) and a pencil, crayon, or marker. This class was designed for any child needing additional instruction in letter names and sounds. See Figure 3 for the class outline.

Figure 3. ABC Superhero Agenda

Word Study

Word study is a highly supported research practice with a specific pedagogical approach intended to teach children spelling, phonological awareness, phonics, and vocabulary. Word study has connections to both *PreK* and *K to 3 Literacy Essentials 4, 5, and 6*. Leveraging my teaching experience and prior research with word study, I chose to use *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2016; Johnston, Invernizzi, Helman, Bear, and Templeton, 2015) different I had materials that I had successfully used with children in the classroom, but needed to discover how to implement sound sorting, picture sorting, and word sorting in an effective, engaging way in an online format. My goal was to make the session engaging and requiring minimal materials. In the end, students needed only a piece of paper and pencil/pen/marker to participate. I carefully selected short texts (e.g., poems, songs) for students to apply learning through word hunting. I later shifted from offering word study alone to blending it with another practice that was easier to implement online in a class called Mystery Word.

Mystery Word  
(aka Making Words or Building Words)

Literacy learning is enhanced when teachers provide opportunities to simultaneously engage in phonological awareness and phonics activities (e.g., Cunningham & Hall, 1994). *Making Words* (Cunningham & Cunningham, 1992; Cunningham & Hall, 1994) supports phonological awareness and phonics together. It requires students to manipulate sounds, attach letter symbols to sounds, and apply patterns of spelling. By starting with smaller words and building from there, children are scaffolded in this lesson format. The ways in which students engage in a Making Words lesson supports *PreK* and *K to 3 Literacy Essentials 4, 5, and 6*. Children that participated were in Grades K to 4. While I ensured a variety of words to support all levels, the scaffolded lesson structure helped meet this span of ages and needs.

At the beginning of each session, I introduced the letters needed and asked children to write them on scrap paper. I had a pocket chart on display with the letters

necessary for building words. I built words on the big chart (with their help), and they built them individually in their setting. After building words on day one, we sorted words by pattern on day 2. We also played games such as *Guess My Rule* with the words, sorting them into patterns and having others guess the categories (e.g., words with long a, short a, and oddball). Children were also invited to create a “rule” for the class to guess. I chose mystery words purposefully for age-appropriate spelling patterns and connected them to something happening in the world (See Figure 4). Feedback from the children demonstrated they enjoyed class and particularly liked the challenge to figure out the “mystery word” each week.

The Mystery Word is conservation

2 letters	3 letters	4 letters	5 letters	6 letters	7 letters
is	usa	visa	<del>visa</del>	corona	ovation
at	not	tona	<del>tona</del>	ration	
on	nut	snat	<del>snat</del>	nation	
us	use	rate	vine	gaster	
to	too	run			
	ton	lost			
	tan	corn			
	can	cone			
	cot	nest			
	our	vest			
	eat	soar			
	rat	vin	eat	last	
	not	vin	eat	into	

Figure 4. Student Recording Sheet

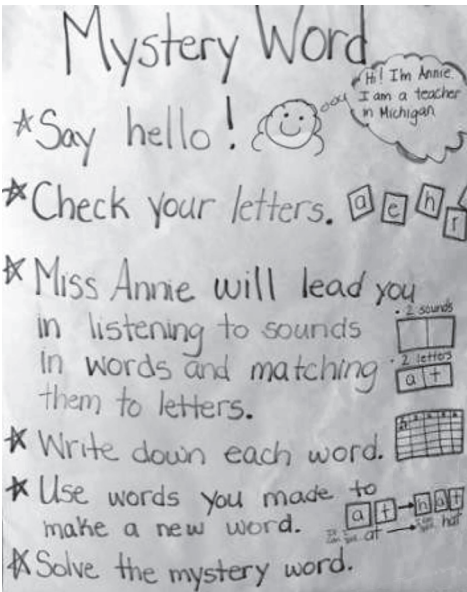


Figure 5. Class “agenda”

Finally, I knew I wanted to offer an opportunity for elementary students to engage in meaningful and authentic reading and writing experiences grounded in choice so I developed a Project-Based Research Club. This class consisted of students in Grades 2-6. I set the stage outlining the class goals and letting children know what to expect (See Figure 6). I needed a relevant topic of interest to teach the children about the process of researching so they would carry over the research process when engaging in their own research project in a topic of their choice.

### **Project Based Research Club (Grades 2-5)**

**Mondays and Wednesdays 1:00pm**

Researching and writing about what we learn is an important part of day-to-day living.

If you would like to join this group, you will:

- have a short mini-lesson with Annie
- choose a topic you would like to study
- have an opportunity to work with other kids on the same topic
- read informational text about your topic
- write about your topic in different ways you choose
- present what you learned to our group

Figure 6. Online Description and Registration Sample

Figure 7. Google Form Example Google Form Registration Sample

Together, in our conversations, we discovered students were fond of animals and concerned about how COVID-19 may affect them, so we chose *How*

*is COVID-19 affecting animals?* We defined ourselves as the collective audience with hopes that we would share this with a greater group. The students knew my purpose was to teach them researching skills in our process to answer our research question. We generated questions, I provided articles for research, and we completed a simple Fact/Question/Response organizer. This led to further research and the need to back up our “facts” with evidence from credible sources. Students used the facts we gathered to generate some sentences as we began to draft our text. Then my own two children took the draft our group started and continued to co-author a draft. This draft was presented to the group for feedback. We revised and edited it as a group, creating a final draft. I supported this work with resources that I shared in class and with families.

The next phase was to use our new learning to persuade people to take action. The children decided they wanted to persuade people to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Each child was asked to choose a way to persuade and present it to the group. I created a model infographic as an example and students made theirs (See Figures 8 and 9).



Figure 8. Model Infographic

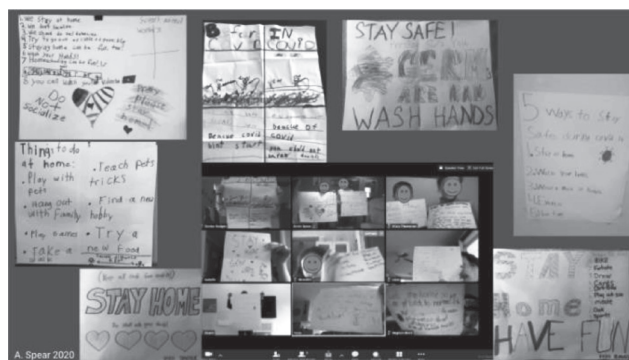


Figure 9. Samples of Students' Persuasive Posters



Meanwhile, students began their own independent research on topics they chose, which included topics such as Google Doodlers, Navy Seals, How Burt's Bees Started, Dogs, John Cena, and Kids' Paintball. I assumed the role of facilitator as I worked to support the independent research of each student. One student was interested in planes, specifically Boeing. I was able to connect with a distant family member who works for Boeing and secure a video interview via Zoom. Students all had a chance to send questions ahead of time to our guest. Each student read a question during our interview, and additional opportunities to ask questions arose. The student used this interview to launch his project and included additional research he found.

Another student chose to write about dogs. She interviewed a retired law enforcement officer (with his dog) about being a K-9 handler during our class Zoom meeting one day. Students also had a chance to ask questions and engage in this interview as well.



*Figure 10. Title Pages of Student Presentations*

Though I did not require students to use a particular medium to share their work, Google Slides became the chosen way after one student's presentation. I was clear to tell families this was not required and offered help as needed (See Figure 10).

### **Unexpected Gifts**

Admittedly, this was an extremely ambitious undertaking but rewarding in so many ways. The potentially difficult time of isolation became an opportunity for me (and my own children) to connect with children across the state. As an early literacy coach, I service 8 elementary

schools across 2,400 square miles. My daily work with adults is important because what we accomplish together improves the educational experience for children. This experience of teaching my own classes online enabled me to meet children and families from communities within the area I service that I would not normally encounter in the field. Engaging with children and teachers throughout the state of Michigan (and Ohio, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts) was a gift. The opportunity to teach students again in my own "class" gave me a joy I can't describe. In a short time, we created our own community of learners within the different classes and looked forward to seeing each other. Despite these positive outcomes, there were challenges and limitations in this process.

## **Limitations**

### **Time**

Initially, some teachers attended to get ideas about how to teach remotely. I began teaching 5 days a week, but as schools and teachers became more prepared to teach in a distance setting and Zoom meeting demands grew for children, everyone became busier, so I combined offerings and reduced the days I taught. After five weeks it was evident that children and families had too much to manage, so I stopped offering classes, but continued to post on my Facebook page to connect and share updates and useful resources.

### **Student data and prior rapport**

I did not know all the children or their families that participated in the classes and needed to establish that from scratch online. I also did not have specific data in front of me to inform my instruction or know where children were in their school curriculum. As such, my course offerings weren't able to meet the individual needs of children in the way I had hoped; however, as I quickly began learning about each child, I was able to adapt my instruction to meet the collective needs of the groups I taught.

### **Organization**

Creating the online structure, keeping up with daily registrations through the Google Forms, and creating calendar invitations with secure Zoom links was more time-consuming than I anticipated. In addition, there



was a learning curve to figure out how to set up a Facebook Business Page and integrate other software to keep things organized. Some days I was more successful than others.

### **Student Age Range and Attrition**

Some classes had a wide range of grade levels. Despite this, most students were engaged throughout and joining these classes by choice (as far as I know). I asked for their feedback on classes and aimed to meet their requests. Some students did not continue to come and some parents communicated why, but others left without any communication. The families that did write to me explained their child had more work coming from school and attending classes with me were becoming too difficult. Attrition over time was something I expected and understood as my own children's teachers began to send more work for them to complete.

### **Internet Access**

Not all students or teachers have access to the internet so I could not offer this service to all families. My own household does not have high-speed internet; we use hotspots that have limited data. Even with more data, hotspots can be quirky at times. This interfered with classes a few times. Most times it went fine on my end, though some students had glitches I could not fix. Not being attached to a particular school for the entire group of students was challenging because there were many different types of technology being utilized.

## **Lessons learned**

### **We need to get internet for every family**

I continue to advocate for our students and families for internet service. A lack of internet affects students' access to education; an inequality we can't afford to ignore.

### **Creating community and giving explicit instruction via distance is possible**

While it is not ideal, it is possible to create a community of learners from a distance and build rapport by getting to know our students, being transparent about expectations, clearly outlining the purpose, offering choices, and defining success criteria. This experience

also taught me that we can create community locally, but also within and across states. In order to do this, systems have to be in place and children need to know how to use the technology in front of them. In addition, short and clear communications with families about what children will be doing and what they will need sets everyone up for success.

Implementing practices that foster motivation and engagement is essential to build a learning community. For resources to support planning with this, view the suite of Literacy Essentials at (<https://literacyessentials.org/>), particularly Essential 1. Consider participating in the free online modules through Michigan Virtual (<https://literacyessentials.org/literacyessentials/online-modules/>) which provide research-supported content and videos to foster motivation and engagement (among other literacy areas). In addition, the book *No More Teaching Without Positive Relationships* by Jaleel R. Howard, Tanya Milner-McCall, and Tyrone C. Howard, Ph.D. offers insights on relationship-building with purpose.

I had the privilege of offering these classes with great deal of autonomy using *Literacy Essentials* and Michigan ELA Standards to guide me. Teaching online has challenges that may or may not be in our control. My experience taught me to address as many goals as possible in an authentic, research-supported way to maximize time in an online setting.

## **Conclusion**

We know so much more now than we did when I jumped into this in March of 2020. We also have some support to help us going into next school year; a construct that remains undefined and ever-evolving. Dr. Nell K. Duke created some online video tutorials to support teachers with ideas to teach explicitly via distance in ways that align to research-supported practices which can be found at <https://literacyessentials.org/literacy-essentials/remote-learning-resources/>. In addition, many literacy coaches (myself included) and other instructional leaders are working on ways to support teachers in the upcoming school year with remote learning if needed.

As we continue to go forward, not knowing what education will look like post-pandemic, we will continue to need to be responsive, flexible, and communicative. I am appreciative to the families that allowed me the opportunity to work with their children and am equally grateful to every teacher and administrator for their diligence and commitment to children throughout this challenging time.

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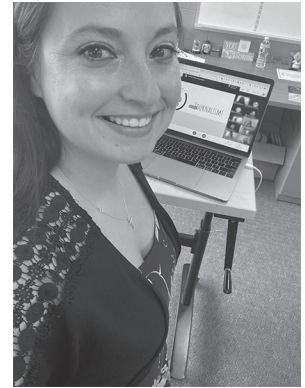
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# Teaching and Learning Through Shared Grief and Loss During COVID-19

by Amanda Thorpe



**Amanda Thorpe**

## Abstract

The closure of Michigan's schools and the emergency learning that followed no doubt kept students and teachers safe during a global pandemic, but the fallout from these transitions is differing amounts of shared grief and loss among students and teachers. Giving staff and students time, space, and resources to process this grief will be essential in any plan for returning to learning in the fall.

When the school year abruptly ended on March 13, my non-teacher friends said things like, "Looks like you get to start summer vacation early," and "I bet you love working from home." Neither of those thoughts actually crossed my mind: I was too busy grieving the loss of my time with my students and processing everything that the closing of schools for the year really meant.

I have two children at home, ages 5 and 8. One never got to finish preschool, to have graduation, to have the confidence that they were kindergarten-ready. The other lost the opportunity to finish second grade with their favorite teacher and missed the dance season competition that they had worked all year for. While trying to process my own family's losses, I grieved the ending of the year in as many different ways as I had students.

My newspaper editor-in-chief was also on the school's defending state championship baseball team. The last time he would wear a Huskie baseball uniform would be last year, hoisting the trophy. He was one of 156 student stories that weighed heavy on my heart. While society as a whole thought teachers had it made working from home, I cried tears for other people's children.

This story is my own, but I found that it is shared in whole or in part by countless others in the profession. We were sad, yes, but we didn't have time to fully process what we felt; we were pivoting quickly to online emergency learning, working with our colleagues to make a curriculum that was designed to be facilitated entirely in person magically accessible online without skipping a beat. At the same time, many of us were facilitating the district-provided learning-at-home coursework for our own children. Instead of having the time and space to work through how we felt, we were on to the next thing—and the kids were, too. They had little time to process what they had lost, from senior proms to spring sports seasons to the simplicity of the daily grind of classes with their friends. They were expected to transition seamlessly to remote learning, which they had a wide range of prior experiences with depending on the teachers that they had had. They were expected to engage at a high level in their coursework, despite the fact that our country was now a part



of a deadly pandemic and regardless of whether their parents or siblings were essential workers or had been quarantined or ill. Teachers and students were expected to be high-functioning in their roles despite the fact that the world around them was on the verge of collapsing into division and fear.

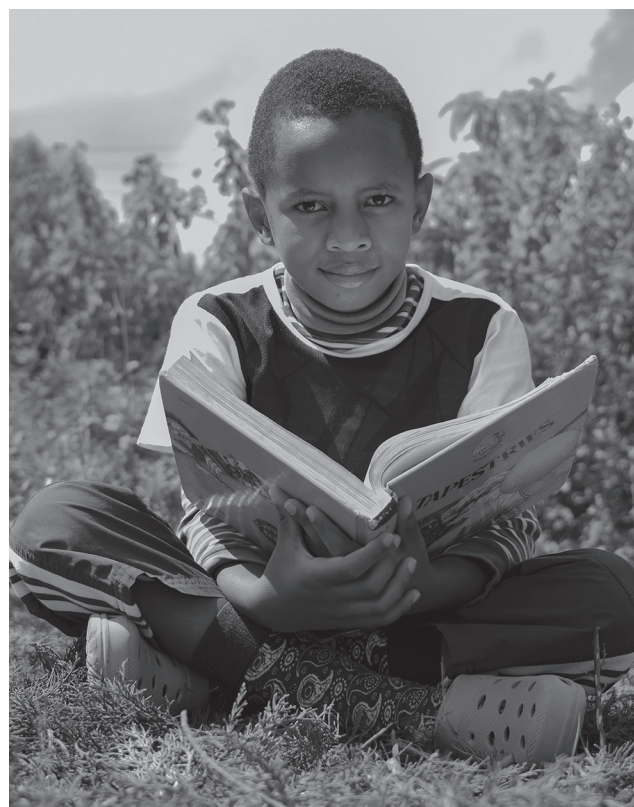
No season lasts forever, and the school year eventually came to an end. As I write this, we are officially midway through what would traditionally be summer break. I had hoped that the time after the official end date on the calendar would bring a sense of normalcy, but it has provided anything but. In any other year, the end of the school year would feel like a welcome and earned respite, and then Fall would feel like the start of something new. This year, I keep waiting to feel like the school year is over. Instead of an ending and a new beginning, it feels like an awkward and anxious transition period. This is the baggage that teachers and students are carrying into the start of the new school year. This is where the Fall will start: with teachers and students having not only experienced differing amounts of a shared grief and loss, but also trying to move forward together amid the disappointment that the return to normalcy that they were hoping for has yet to come to pass.

The pressure to jump back into academics is strong, particularly when there is the fear that students need to “catch up” on missed learning, but schools as institutions have to recognize the shared experiences of their staff and students and start by focusing on the who (teachers, students, families) and the why (what are the many different purposes of school), not only on the what (curriculum). We will be remiss if we jump right into our pretests and standardized test preparation instead of building a supportive, cohesive classroom climate where social and emotional learning is just as much a priority as academic learning. Simultaneously, administrators and institutions need to put teacher well-being at the forefront, allowing them to be major shareholders in the decisions that impact them and their students and giving them space and resources for self-care. When we return, social and emotional support for all is not *something* we have to do, it's *the thing* we have to do. Only once we have acknowledged and

processed the feelings of the past few months will we be able to move forward toward healing and learning together. And this re-centering of schools, teachers, and students could prove to be especially valuable in the event of a second wave resulting in new school closures and virtual learning. We were largely caught unprepared the first time, but we have a considerable upper hand the second time around if we are willing to be intentional—and human—about it.

## Author Biography

**Amanda Thorpe** has led alternative and traditional secondary education English classrooms for the last 12 years as a remedial, core, and International Baccalaureate teacher as well as a scholastic newspaper adviser. She is a former Michigan Journalism Adviser of the Year as well as a Dow Jones News Fund National Distinguished Adviser. She completed her doctoral studies at Johns Hopkins with a focus on diversity, inclusion, justice, and equity in education, and in addition to being a full-time high school teacher, she is also a faculty member within Cornerstone University's Masters in Education program.





# Inquiry and Counter-Witnessing in COVID-19

by Erica R. Hamilton, Deborah Vriend Van Duinen, and Gretchen Rumohr



**Erica R. Hamilton**



**Deborah  
Vriend Van Duinen**



**Gretchen Rumohr**

At its heart, inquiry involves tapping into curiosity and exploring an open-ended question or problem (Dewey, 1902; 1932). Rather than being told *about* a topic or issue, inquiry foregrounds the process of learning. It hinges on taking an open stance towards what we already think and know, challenging us to be open to learning something new or different (Johnston, 2004). Inquiry requires pursuing and being willing to enter unknown spaces that aren't predetermined or linear, and it serves as a powerful invitation to grow as we analyze, synthesize, and evaluate new and developing knowledge. It's also about vulnerability and counter-witnessing (Dutro, 2011) when we share our stories and lived experiences.

By way of introduction, we are former secondary English teachers and currently work as college and university faculty. We've been friends and colleagues for more than ten years and have collaborated on research, engaged in ongoing professional learning, and walked with one another through personal and professional milestones.

In Spring 2020, when COVID-19 disrupted how we worked and lived, we reflected together regarding professional and personal changes. Like others, juggling work and family demands presented unforeseen challenges and unexpected joys. Our time online increased exponentially. For two of us, we shifted our fully face-to-face undergraduate courses to remote instruction. One of us began leading a department virtually, seeking to support colleagues' personal and professional needs. And all of us contemplated a "new" normal that was anything but.

This article is our attempt to counter-witness—to share our own stories about COVID-19 changes. In counter-witnessing, we harness Dutro's (2011) idea of critical witnessing and, with it, the assertion that "to be effective witnesses for the testimonies of our students, we need, in turn, to allow them to be our witnesses—even when it is hard, even when it feels too risky" (p. 194), broadening this idea of counter-witnessing to those we encounter beyond the classroom.

But counter-witnessing is more than just sharing our stories. Throughout our experiences, we've tried (and

continue to try) to maintain an inquiry stance toward COVID-19 changes and our experiences. We share our stories here because we want to remember and reflect on what we've experienced. We don't intend to simplify, romanticize, or vilify our experiences. Rather, we seek to name some of our assumptions, emotions, and knowledge as teachers, colleagues, and parents in COVID-19.

## COVID-19 Shifts

### Deb: Teaching Identity

During those crazy weeks of March when schools and universities announced their decisions to go to remote learning, I remember feeling panicked about the task of transferring the content of my courses online. *How were my preservice teachers going to conduct lessons in their clinical placements? How would I lead engaging course discussions if we weren't face to face? What could replace canceled guest speakers? How would I assess participation? How would I grade in general?*

While world news headlines seemed to update by the hour, focusing on the concrete logistics of remote teaching felt like something I could, at least, *try* to control. As it turned out, some of my course activities and assignments were fairly easy to transfer to our new online context. Adjusting others required more creativity, innovation and a steep learning curve in using Zoom, Loom, and Flipgrid. My students and I fumbled our way to the end of the semester with a smattering of technical issues and some awkward online interactions.

Because of these and other changes to our professional and personal lives during this time of COVID-19, we decided to explore texts together that spoke into and about the changes we were experiencing. We started with Brené Brown's (2020) *Unlocking Us* podcast episode, "the FFT" and from there shared many articles and blog posts via texts and emails. These texts helped to give language for what I found myself experiencing as a professor, especially permission to lament what I missed, and a space to reflect and reframe.

The texts helped me realize that in focusing on the changes in course logistics and content, on things that I could potentially "control," I initially overlooked some

deeper shifts in my teaching identity. I wasn't able to articulate this until I began unpacking and articulating my varying, and often unpredictable, emotions and reactions. Like others, I missed being able to read my students' nonverbal communication during face-to-face classes: the ways they sat, what they brought with them, their facial expressions as I led them through a new idea or concept. I missed being able to gauge the energy level of a class and respond to in-the-moment learning realizations. I didn't realize how often I informally assessed students' misconceptions, prior knowledge, and developing questions during face-to-face interactions. I missed talking with students before and after class and having random touchpoints with them on walks across campus and in my office building. And I was not only exhausted after my Zoom classes, but also frustrated with my own online learning curve.

I also realized that it wasn't just about interacting with students. My teaching identity included my professional conversations with other faculty members. I missed interacting with my colleagues, especially the hallway conversations and stopping by offices to ask a question or clarify a department matter. No longer could we discuss their weekends or families and capitalize on the small moments that energized and strengthened our sense of collegiality and community.

### Gretchen: Vulnerability with Colleagues

As an administrator, I was shielded from many of the COVID-19 teaching disruptions. While I was not forced to move a curricula online, I still felt immobilized by fear, a sudden and significant change in routine, and an inability to fall back on the old coping mechanism standbys (e.g., the gym, a thrift store, coffee with a friend). However, as time wore on, it became apparent that perhaps "moving forward" didn't necessarily mean "administration" in the traditional sense of writing annual reports or allocating departmental funds (though still essential). For me, "moving forward" meant stepping back, listening, and being open to learning – and sharing – in new ways.

Stepping back meant asking how I could actually help others during this time. I recognized that sharing

resources was one way to support my colleagues, yet there were so many unknowns. Nevertheless, as Brown (2015) describes in *Rising Strong*, the disruptions of the pandemic presented an opportunity to be vulnerable—to “[have] the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome” (p. 4). Showing up meant not only sharing teaching resources, but also considering what valuing others looked like from a faculty point of view. In academia, where fortitude translates into high-stakes evaluations and publish-or-perish, I wanted faculty members to boldly identify and articulate their needs—and tell me more (Corrigan, 2018).

A few weeks before COVID-19 changed academia, I met with a colleague who desired curricular guidance. I offered to share samples of textbooks and research-based assignments and then detailed my own experience with a course-embedded book workshop project. The conversation really began, however, when I went off-script and asked, “So...how are things going?” I learned that it hadn’t been a good semester for my colleague on a personal level: small children’s demands were endlessly tiring; a spouse was supportive but also busy; there had been a bipolar episode and a hospitalization, and they weren’t out of the woods yet.

In our conversation, we moved from the professional to the personal: my colleague “telling me more” by sharing struggles with mental wellness, and me validating these struggles and then sharing that I had spent the previous 18 months battling depression and experiencing productivity fallout when my meds worked too well to keep me from caring enough. This conversation allowed me more informed email check-ins with this colleague during the Stay Home, Stay Safe order as well as a commiserating of sorts. After all, we seemed to be processing, struggling, and succeeding in similar ways. In our case, I was grateful for this gift of reciprocity, the assurance that we were not alone.

Other interactions with colleagues did not involve putting on false airs: the inertia, the fears, and the frustrations made an appearance. Conversations such as the one described above were unapologetically frank. On the virtual faculty forum, I was quick to share articles

that normalized the disruptions academics felt due to COVID-19. And, I participated in such identification and articulation myself, thankful that we were still in dialogue—providing support and resources with each other—which encouraged an awareness that grieving, establishing new routines, and taking risks would help me see the world in new ways and embolden me to be innovative and brave (Ahmad, 2020).

### **Erica: Productivity**

I’ve always considered myself a productive person and, if I’m honest, I take great pride in the amount of work I get done. In less-than-healthy ways, though, I’ve used productivity to mark and assign my own value and worth. The more I get done in a day or a week, the better. As a general rule, no matter how much I have going on, I figure out ways to meet my commitments and get everything done.

However, throughout the COVID-19 spring months, I struggled to maintain enough focus and energy to work on and complete tasks. When I first sat down to draft some content for this section, over the span of three hours I started and stopped more times than I can recall. I navigated and peripherally supervised a preschool Zoom call, dealt with a distraught child, responded to students’ emails, sat with a middle schooler to help them with homework, made lunch, dealt with an issue connected to that morning’s heavy rainfall, set up a device for child’s upcoming tele-health appointment, and double-checked a new assessment for an online class I was teaching. Reading this list now leaves me a bit breathless. And, yet, at the time I struggled to see how any of this was productive. By mid-March, much of my work felt mostly reactive, frenetic, and tiring. Gone were the days when I could complete a task and then start another.

However, inquisitiveness about my own and others’ productivity, particularly in the era of COVID-19, forced me to re-examine, re-think, and wrestle—not only with time management but also with ideas and internal messages I repeated to myself. Pre-pandemic, for example, I would have read an article in one sitting, but when we shared and later virtually discussed Minello’s (2020)

article about the maternal wall in higher education and issues female academics were managing in the midst of the pandemic, it took me three attempts to read the full article. I simply couldn't finish it in one sitting due to additional people, needs, and tasks clamoring for my attention. Minello's article also had me questioning my professional trajectory. As a newly-tenured female associate professor, I wondered how I could continue to meet job expectations and maintain the workload needed to justify future advancement while also shouldering additional family responsibilities and navigating new COVID-19 normals.

COVID-19 challenged my preconceived notions of productivity and left me feeling scattered and unable to direct my full attention to much of anything. Metaphorically, I felt like I was living a game of whack-a-mole and no matter how much I did or how hard I worked, there was always something more. At the same time, I found myself being more honest about how my self-perceived value and worth were so closely tied to how much I could get done.

## **Moving Forward: What We Want to Remember & Why**

Months have passed since mid-March and we continue to remain unsure of what will happen in the future. We recognize that we will not be returning to "normal" life, teaching, or learning. Switching to remote teaching, online learning, and virtual administrative tasks continue to challenge and change us.

When we consider our teaching, we are reminded that teaching identity is ultimately found in a common humanity. Our own emotional and mental health are part of who we are as educators and what we bring to others. The course content we choose is and always has been in response to something. This presents opportunities to ask questions about our identities as educators. *How can we keep our humanity and our commitment to being responsive central to our work? What kinds of questions and issues are of most value to our current students? What processes should we foreground? How can we plan for and support students' learning?*

As we think about showing support for others, we are reminded of the importance of using the phrase, "tell me more" before making conclusions. When colleagues inquire how we are doing, perhaps we can be more honest and vulnerable about the messes in our houses as well as recognize and normalize the professional and personal inertia that surfaces during crises. We acknowledge the value of responding honestly when colleagues ask how we are doing; we can detail how many times we've unloaded the dishwasher or how stuck we feel when grading the last batch of projects, planning the next unit, or drafting an article for publication.

Our reflections on productivity remind us of its value among educators and how it often determines our perceived self-worth and esteem. Eurich (2017) notes, "the more stress we are under, the more unrealistic we tend to be about our abilities, characteristics, and behaviors" (p. 249). Even though COVID-19 changed many of our day-to-day realities, we recognize we didn't always do a very good job of adjusting expectations for ourselves. They were still too high and, in many instances, unrealistic. They also caused a good deal of stress. As a result, we are working to identify and name some of the internal messages we've long believed, such as *production is good* and *busy indicates value*. As a result, we wonder what "COVID-19 productivity" might teach us? What other messages and mantras will require revision as we move through and come out on the other side COVID-19?

Finally, we recognize that channeling the power of vulnerability means counter-witnessing. COVID-19 has taught us that we can listen and validate when others counter-witness, telling us that they weren't particularly focused on writing or grading after they broke up a fight over the last bowl of ice cream while attempting a faculty meeting on Zoom. We see power, and safety, in storytelling (Brown, 2017). We see value in counter-telling and validating. It is through these acts that we find, and model, courage and self-acceptance. In our teaching and administrative roles, we—along with other educators—can speak our truths and experiences bravely and hope that in so doing, others will follow suit. After all, when others "tell us more," we become



emboldened to make space for everyone's story. We also become empowered to reflect on others' needs, providing new avenues for professional and personal support.

It would be nice if we could say that COVID-19 made us more balanced, sane, healthy humans. But the truth is, like other educators, we were doing the best we could with the tools we had at the time. We don't yet know the answers to all the questions we're asking but what we do know is that COVID-19 challenged, and still challenges, us to stay curious as we counter-witness with and to one another.

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# Essential Practices for Disciplinary Literacy Instruction in Secondary Classrooms

by Laura Gabrion, Michelle Renna,  
Megan Schrauben, and Jenelle Williams



**Laura Gabrion**



**Michelle Renna**

“Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history” (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). Furthermore, according to the recent *Gary B. et al. v. Whitmer et al.* (2020) settlement, students in Detroit and elsewhere “have a fundamental right to education, including literacy.” Our youth, especially those in grades 6-12, deserve meaningful literacy experiences that will prepare them for their lives beyond the classroom.

Now, more than ever, we need to consider ways to engage students in relevant, authentic learning experiences that leverage student choice and voice and build on their existing competencies. Our students come into our classrooms with a multitude of diverse skills and assets. By creating learning communities that allow students to grapple with the complex reality of our world today, we apprentice students into the ways of reading, writing, and thinking across various disciplines (i.e., journalism, engineering, economics, etc.)—allow students to “try on” various career options they may have never considered. We allow for more just, equitable opportunities. Equity refers to an educational asset or right that students need in order to be successful in school and beyond and is achieved through intentional shifts in practice away from just attaining equality



**Megan Schrauben**



**Jenelle Williams**

and towards providing for the individualized needs of everyone. Our role as teachers is to help each student build on his or her assets and to encourage all students to uncover more about themselves and who they want to be in the future.

In response to the call for increased literacy and more equitable learning opportunities across the state of Michigan, the 6-12 Disciplinary Literacy Task Force formed. This group is a sub-committee of the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) General Education Leadership Network (GELN) representing Michigan’s 56 intermediate

school districts, the Michigan Department of Education, Michigan-based professional organizations, and several universities. Our first charge was to draft, revise and publish the *Essential Practices for Disciplinary Literacy Instruction in the Secondary Classroom: Grades 6 to 12*.

This document, which was made available to the public in March 2019, required professional conversations both within and across disciplines. During the 2019-2020 school year, over 500 education consultants and educators from around Michigan participated in the Regional One-Day Institutes held on February 13 and March 10. The institutes served as an introduction to the *Essential Practices for Disciplinary Literacy Instruction in the Secondary Classroom*, and due to COVID-19, Disciplinary Literacy Task Force members have decided to re-run the introductory event in a virtual setting on August 4, 2020.

We all know that the best professional development is ongoing, job-embedded, and social. To keep the conversation (and learning) moving forward among secondary English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Career Tech, Visual/Performing Arts, and World Languages teachers, the Disciplinary Literacy Task Force is excited to offer the Deeper Dive Institute during the 2020-2021 school year. This professional learning series will consist of four synchronous learning sessions with asynchronous learning activities in between each session. The first synchronous session will be held on October 15. During the Deeper Dive Institute, participants will engage in collaborative inquiry cycles to consider framing problems in their discipline, supporting students with gathering knowledge, scaffolding students' meaning-making, creating equitable discussion opportunities, and offering effective feedback to help students reflect and set goals.

#### Key Themes Which Guide Disciplinary Literacy Instruction

- Learning is problem- or question-driven
- Students access, analyze, and create a variety of texts typical of the discipline
- Educators intentionally integrate the disciplinary

literacy instructional practices into each unit of study

- Educators and students connect to their communities and networks as they engage in disciplined inquiry and apply diverse literacy practices
- Educators and students attend to language use within and across the disciplines

As we continue to navigate this uncharted territory in education, we are so excited to leverage the opportunity to re-envision learning for sixth- through twelfth-grade students. When we lift up how students see the world, we provide them with tools to change the world for the better.

Keep in touch. Where are you at in your disciplinary literacy journey? Follow us @GELN612Literacy and contact [jenelle.williams@oakland.k12.mi.us](mailto:jenelle.williams@oakland.k12.mi.us) for more information on joining the Deeper Dive Institute.

## Author Biographies

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**Michelle Renna** is a Secondary Literacy Coach at the Muskegon Area Intermediate School District (MAISD). She is interested in reading and writing workshop, disciplinary literacy, as well as working with developing readers. She can be reached at [mrenna@muskegonisd.org](mailto:mrenna@muskegonisd.org).

**Megan Schrauben** is the Executive Director for the MiSTEM Network at the Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity. She is interested in growing inclusive communities through the use of problem-based learning with direct connections to future careers. She can be reached at [SchraubenM1@michigan.gov](mailto:SchraubenM1@michigan.gov).

**Jenelle Williams** is a Literacy Consultant within the Leadership and School Improvement unit at Oakland

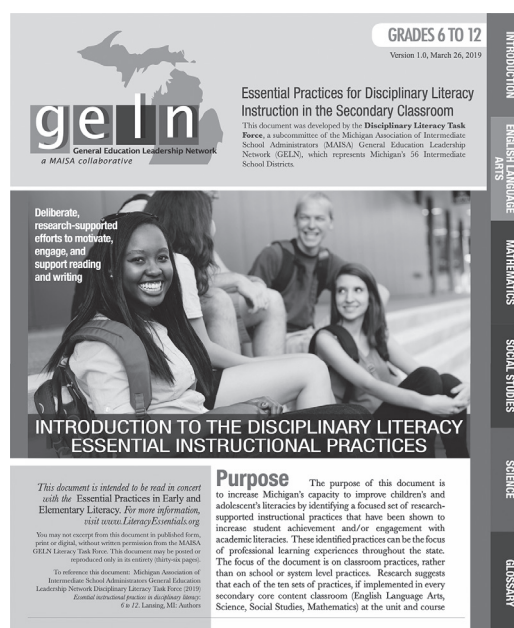
Schools. She joined the organization in 2017 following 18 years of experience in public schools at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. She has served as a classroom teacher, IB Middle Years Programme Coordinator, teacher leader, and educational technology coach. An IB Educator since 2013, Jenelle leads professional development workshops for coordinators and building leaders in IB World Schools. She holds an

Education Specialist in Leadership degree and a Master's degree in Reading and Language Arts through Oakland University. Jenelle is passionate about supporting teachers, building leaders, and central office administrators in the area of secondary literacy, and she is especially excited to be able to support Michigan's work around disciplinary literacy through her role as Co-Chair of the statewide Disciplinary Literacy Task Force.

## Disciplinary Literacy Instruction in the Secondary Classroom: Grades 6 to 12

Available in a complete PDF booklet with further explanations and background research, these 10 instructional practices “can have a positive impact on both literacy development and conceptual learning of content” when used consistently, across content areas and grade levels. For more information, download the entire Essential Practices for *Disciplinary Literacy Instruction in the Secondary Classroom: Grades 6 to 12* booklet from <literacyessentials.org>.

1. Problem-based instruction
2. Diverse texts and abundant reading opportunities in the school
3. Intentional and standards-aligned instruction in disciplinary reading
4. Intentional and standards-aligned instruction in disciplinary writing
5. Higher-order discussion of increasingly complex text across varying participation structures
6. Opportunities for and instruction in speaking and listening
7. Intentional efforts to build vocabulary and conceptual knowledge
8. Ongoing observation and assessment of students' language and literacy development that informs their education
9. Community networking to tap into available funds of knowledge in support of developing students' content knowledge and identities
10. Metadiscursive awareness within and across academic and cultural domains





# Pandemic Pedagogy: Some Questions About Being “Successful” and Getting it “Right”

by Troy Hicks and Erica R. Hamilton



## Introduction

With the 2020-21 school year underway – and many schools in a fully remote model with others toggling back and forth between face-to-face and online learning – we revisit a blog post that we wrote at the end of “emergency remote teaching” this spring and that began in notes we took during a call in early summer. This post originally appeared on Hicks’ blog, *Digital Writing, Digital Teaching*, on July 6, 2020.

As parents and teacher educators, as well as long-time colleagues and friends, the two of us have had many conversations in the past month as educators in the state of Michigan and around the world have moved to “remote learning” in K-12 and higher education.

In thinking about ways we can productively talk about complicated issues, we have been informed by our experiences in the National Writing Project, and the use of protocols, or guided discussion models, for moving forward through difficult conversations. In a recent chat, we used the School Reform Initiative’s “What? So What? Now What?” protocol (Thompson-Grove, 2012) to share our thoughts and feelings related to “pandemic pedagogy,” “getting remote learning ‘right,’” and other phrases that capture the COVID-19 zeitgeist.

This blog post-turned article summarizes our current



Troy Hicks



Erica R. Hamilton

thinking and, we hope, will serve as a time capsule for questions we need to ask in the weeks, months, and years ahead.

## What?

Humans, by nature, want to help others. Our willingness to do so is, most often, well-intentioned. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 and both higher education and K-12 schools moving to “remote” instruction, there have been a number of companies that have offered their products for free (or at reduced cost) so that teachers and students can use them. Moreover, professional organizations have shared K-12 resources through blogs, podcasts, webinars, lesson plans, and countless social media posts. We believe teachers and their students are doing the best they can, given the circumstances. We also trust that parents and guardians are doing the best they can. Humans are navigating uncertain futures and as we do so, we must help ourselves and our children navigate what is, indeed, a brave new world.

That said, in the past few months—and even more so in as we reflect on “remote learning” successes

and failures from the end of the 2019-20 academic year—there have been hundreds, if not thousands, of such resources that have been distributed to support a “continuity of learning.” Again, all well-intentioned, and many useful.

However, when we see headlines like “getting remote learning right” or “successful strategies for online teaching,” we wonder what “right” or “successful” (or, for that matter, “teaching”) even means. While we do have empirical evidence about “what works” for nearly all students in typical school settings (e.g., reports from the Institute of Education What Works Clearinghouse, n.d.), which are still in and of themselves contextual, we don’t yet know what works for all teachers and students when teaching and learning remotely. We also don’t yet know the full impact of social distancing on teachers’ and students’ learning and emotional well-being.

We are left with many questions, few answers, and a great deal of uncertainty.

## So What?

Despite the terrible, tragic circumstances in which we find ourselves, one of the silver linings, perhaps even a gift, of this pandemic for educators—if we dare call it a gift—is the opportunity to re-think what has been considered the standard parts of teaching and learning for decades, if not centuries. As educational professionals, if we want to take advantage of what we’re learning and experiencing in this COVID-19 era, we must be willing to ask (and, eventually, answer) some important questions. So, as we consider the days, months, and years ahead, we believe that it will be imperative to create time and space for conversations about what we’ve experienced and learned.

In other words, as the world is experiencing a pandemic, what is “right” or “successful” for one remote school or class may not actually be “right” or “successful” for another. And, we believe that part of getting it “right”—or achieving “success”—extends well beyond the immediate needs and outcomes of the upcoming 2020-21 academic year.

Indeed, the ways we prepare ourselves for 2020-21 matters in many, many ways. Thus, framing questions for the conversations we have now—both about what we’re experiencing and learning as well as how we can use what we learn to help us move forward in the future—is critical.

## Now What?

As noted above, there are already countless resources available for remote teaching and learning.

We are not dispensing more advice or resources in this post. There are so many of us—individual teachers, entire school faculties, district administrators, teacher educators, policy makers, the business community, and, of course parents and caregivers of our youth—all of whom have questions. And, we’re all trying to figure things out.

Instead, we want to pivot and pose some questions that, right now, can’t be fully answered here as we are still trying to plan for August. Whatever happens in a few weeks, when schools “re-open” for the fall, we know that it will still be an era of pandemic pedagogy.

In fact, we consider this a “time capsule” of sorts, and these questions, we hope, can guide our own thinking as well as our PK-12 and higher education colleagues as we transition into a post-COVID, socially un-distanced world. Whether we are face-to-face, online, or both—and whether we are talking about one day of instruction, one week, one month, or a whole year—we have many questions, outlined below.

### For educators:

- What is essential for your students to learn, in terms of content and skills?
- What is essential for your students to do as they learn to communicate with one another?
- What were the “rhythms” of the school week for each of you? What was the workflow? When did you meet with students? How did you support students’ emotional and academic needs?
- What communication media (text, image, video, audio), methods (through an LMS, via text

message, via email), audiences (one student, small group, whole class), and frequency (hourly, daily, weekly) are effective?

- What content needs to be “delivered,” asynchronously, and what, instead, might need to be “modeled” and “coached,” synchronously?
- What should be the [new] norms of online meetings with students?
- In this time of remote learning, what practices have you developed that could be carried forward, in hybrid or fully online courses?
- What have you learned about yourself, your teaching style, and what you really value as an educator?
- How might this entire experience frame your pedagogy and practice moving forward?
- How much synchronicity is necessary? For full classes? For small groups? For individual tutorials?
- What ways did you see students be creative as they developed their thinking and expressed what they learned? How might they have used “old” and “new” technologies to meet these goals?

#### **For administrators:**

- What worked best for communicating with your staff? For providing feedback and direction? For maintaining relationships and supporting one another?
- What might have worked well in the past for organizing faculty meetings, curriculum, assessments, PLCs, etc.? How did these change and, perhaps, become more [or less] efficient?
- For online meetings with other adults/colleagues, what norms did you establish and how did these facilitate communication and teamwork?
- Based on your experiences supporting teachers during remote teaching and learning, what changes do you hope/expect to make when you return to brick and mortar buildings and classrooms?
- How did you partner with and/or support students and their families?
- What success(es) should be celebrated?

#### **For business and community members:**

- In our efforts to create a 21st-century workforce—and with the changes that have been made in your

places of work over the past two months—what should educators know about what it means to prepare their students for the workforce in months and years ahead? Given potential past efforts connected to volunteerism and mentorship opportunities for employees to work with K-12 students, what might you need to reconsider when planning for future opportunities?

- Even in light of the economic impact that all businesses are sure to face, what role do we all play in providing equitable access to broadband or mobile internet, as well as low-cost laptops or devices for family use, both for K-12 students as well as their caregivers who may be reskilling for a new job?
- What new partnerships could be developed with local K-12 schools to support students’ learning and connect their learning to the community?

#### **For higher education faculty, administrators, and teacher educators:**

- How do we effectively prepare preservice teachers for all the realities of teaching and learning, including future remote teaching and learning?
- How can teacher educators clearly model high-leverage teaching and learning practices for preservice teachers?
- How can colleges/schools and departments of education more directly support our communities’ schools, including their teachers and students as well as parents and caregivers?
- How can we better advocate for and partner with local K-12 districts and schools when integrating technology?
- What new partnerships, programs, and models could be forged to partner universities and K-12 schools (e.g., traditional models of student teaching and field placements, dictating required observation/teaching hours, etc.)?

#### **For parents, guardians, and caregivers:**

- What are your children passionate about? How did you help them follow those passions in this time of staying home and staying safe?
- On the flip side, what led our kids to distraction (and/or ourselves)? What did we do to help them

learn and/or practice self-regulation and to follow their interests?

- What kinds of topics, subject areas and questions did they follow?
- What did you notice about their use of various learning technologies and modalities such as video, audio, and text, as well as virtual interactions with others?
- How did you and/or your child[ren] process the “loss” of the remainder of the school year?
- What do your children need as they head back to a regular school building and schedule, whenever that might be?
- What do you, as a parent/guardian, need as you send your child[ren] back to a regular school building and schedule, whenever that might be?
- What was most helpful, in terms of the way(s) your school/district responded to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What was least helpful, in terms of the way(s) your school/district responded to the COVID-19 pandemic?

**For legislators:**

- What laws perpetuate inequality for public education and how can we change these to ensure all students have access, no matter the location of learning and/or the modes/methods?
- What needs to change, at the state and/or national levels, so that K-12 administrators and educators can quickly and effectively respond to current needs and environments, including the need for remote teaching and learning?
- What role does technology play in providing “equal access for all” K-12 students?
- What do you need/want to learn from K-12 teachers as well as their students and families about their experiences with remote teaching/learning during this crisis?
- Beyond increasing teachers’ pay, how might we recognize the contributions that educators and schools/districts made to students’ learning, both intellectual and socio-emotional, during this difficult time?
- What can we do to recruit new teachers to join/stay in the profession, and prepare them for new modes of instruction?

- What can we do to keep current teachers in the profession and how can we prepare and support them for new modes of instruction?

## **(A Few) Essential Questions as We Move Forward**

These are a lot of questions and necessitate conversations over time. As we conclude, we close with a few questions for us all:

- What might a typical school day (week) look like in the years ahead?
- How might we build remote/online learning into our normal patterns of work?
- How will we maximize synchronous learning times, whether face-to-face or remote?
- What content can be “delivered” asynchronously and what platforms/delivery works best for asynchronous delivery?
- How will we engage all students in substantive learning, inviting them to create—and not just consume—content?

These are more questions, we know, than can be answered right now. However, in addition to responding and reacting to immediate needs and contents, we must also deliberately think about what we’re doing, why we’re doing it, and its impact on students’ learning and development.

We are, indeed, in the midst of a pandemic pedagogy and while we’re all hard at work, our success and ability to “get it right” depends not only on what we do right now but also what we do moving forward.

We hope you’ll consider joining the conversation that these questions invite.

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# Great Lakes, Great Books in a Time of Change

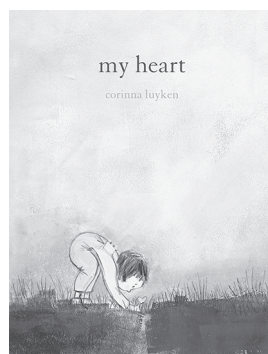
by Lynette Marten Suckow



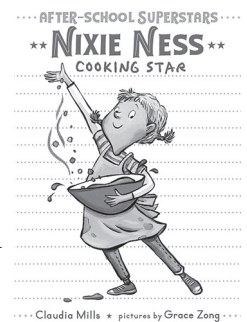
**Lynette  
Marten Suckow**

Who knew that all of our familiar routines, our communities, and our connections with the world would change in the course of a few days last March? The changes imposed by our vigilance against a virus have resulted in an adaptation of what we once considered normal. It was a big change all at once. However, change is ongoing and easier to accept at a slower pace. The following stories are about changes in family structure, changes in relationships, changes in politics, changes caused by the death of someone dear, and how we adapt to change. We discover our roles in the new scenario, while seeking ways to actively participate in making changes for the better. After reading the selections below, treat yourself to all the suggestions on the Great Lakes Great Books list.

***My Heart*** by Corinna Luyken uses the contrast of color in gray, white, and yellow tones to visually depict the same feelings voiced by her words. She enlists drawings of windows to graphically show how "My heart can be closed or opened up wide." Hearts can be found on every page—drawn as leaves, flowers, constellations and the wings of birds. The illustrations truly enhance the sparse text and remind readers that emotions are a part of being human. Readers who sometimes struggle to recognize goodness in the world will relate to this contemplative book.



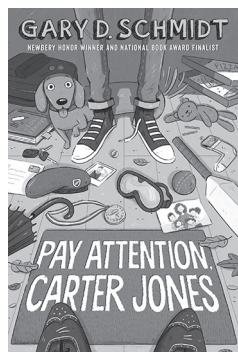
***Nixie Ness: Cooking Star*** by Claudia Mills introduces Nixie Ness and Grace Kenny, best friends since they were toddlers, who look forward to spending their after-school hours at Nixie's house. Daily routines are upturned for the two friends when Nixie's mom goes back to work. Nixie finds herself attending enrichment classes at the after-school program, while Grace finds after-school care at the house of another classmate, Elyse, and begins a friendship with her. Although Nixie enjoys the cooking activities at the after-school program and makes new friends there, she is definitely jealous of the friendship growing between Grace and Elyse. When Nixie says something to hurt Grace's feelings, helpful classmates coach her through the apology and reconciliation process. Black and white illustrations, along with clever chapter markers by Grace Zong, break up the text for struggling readers in this After-School Superstars series. Other books in the series are *Vera Vance: Comic Book Star* (2020) and *Lucy Lopez: Coding Star* (2020), which feature some of the other activities and characters in Nixie's after-school program.



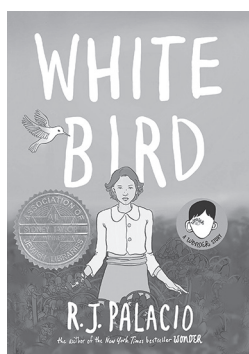
***Pay Attention Carter Jones*** by Gary D. Schmidt, who won the 2008 Newbery Honor Award for *Wednesday*

## Must Read Texts

*Wars* and followed it up with *Okay for Now* (2011), grabs readers by the heartstrings once again as Carter Jones takes center stage in this touching and humorous tale of a family unraveling at the seams. Carter's adventure begins one day, when he opens the front door to find an English butler, Mr. Bowles-Fitzpatrick, who was sent by his deceased grandfather. It reminds readers of *Mary Poppins*, except this butler, besides being "practically perfect" at household management, is an expert at the game of cricket. The Joneses are dealing with the death of Carter's brother, his dad's extended deployment to Germany, and the everyday stresses of school and home in a single parent family. The butler manages to divide up the chores and bring a productive stability to the family. In fact, he knits the whole neighborhood together by forming a cricket team, while teaching the game from the ground up. He also teaches readers about the British game of cricket, as he mends relationships between families and friends. Readers will laugh on one page and cry on the next. Schmidt is known for skillfully writing about the complexity of relationships, especially for middle school audiences.



*White Bird* by R. J. Palacio is a heart-wrenching Holocaust story, passed down from a World War II survivor to her grandson. This graphic novel frames the story through the grandson's video chat request, in order to complete a Humanities project at school. Sara Blum lived a fairy tale existence in 1930's France with parents who were college-educated and gainfully employed. However, her town began to change in 1940, as Nazi guards appeared in the village more frequently, and Jewish families routinely disappeared. On the same school day that guards rounded up the Jewish students at Sara's school, she saved herself by hiding in a deserted tower. Through the kindness of a classmate and his family, Sara was led to safety and



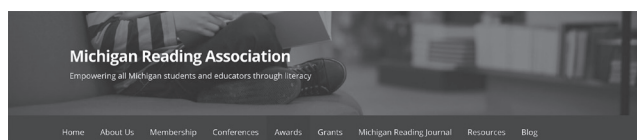
hidden in a barn for four long years. That classmate was Julien, who had crippled legs from polio, making him a Nazi target because of his imperfection. Shortly before the war ended, the Nazis guards caught up with Julien and shot him. Sara, who had been separated from her parents, became part Julien's family, remaining close to them even after she found her father who had also been in hiding for years. In honor of her brave friend Julien, Sara passed on his name to her son and grandson. Revealing that she hadn't told her story to anyone else, she asked her grandson to remember her story and use it to fight injustice in the world. Following the suspenseful main story, readers will find ten additional pages of historical information about World War II and the role of the French Resistance.

*Start Here* by Trish Doller is a story of loss, of hope, of new beginnings. After their mutual best friend, Finley, succumbed to cancer, Willa and Taylor decide to honor her memory by sailing to Key West, Florida the summer after graduation, just as the three of them had planned to do together. Finley left them a list of clues as to the route they should sail for one last maximum adventure before college. The trouble is that Willa and Taylor are definitely not best friends, although Finley was a best friend to both of them. Each time their rocky relationship begins to gel, Willa and Taylor argue or say something offensive, and end up angry all over again. However, the close proximity of living on a sailboat together and adhering to the same plan for the journey is forcing them to talk out their differences and find similarities instead. As they heal from the loss of their friend, Willa and Taylor tentatively form a new kind of friendship. Doller, author of *Something Like Normal* (2012) and *In a Perfect World* (2017), adds another heartwarming story about modern teens and the problems they encounter to her list of good books.



Each year, the GLGB committee selects 40 books, published within the last two years, to introduce K-12

classrooms to some of the best books available on the market. Teachers and librarians are encouraged to provide students with books from their grade-level lists and allow them to vote on their favorites. Great Lakes Great Books is one of Michigan Reading Association's Student Involvement projects, promoting active participation in the reading process by students. Look for a classroom ballot, student certificate, promotional bookmarks, last year's winning titles, and the opportunity to nominate your favorite new book at [www.michigan-reading.org](http://www.michigan-reading.org) under the Awards and Grants tab.



Great Lakes Great Books



## Author Biography

**Lynette Marten Suckow** works at the Peter White Public Library in Marquette, MI where she provides reference assistance with library resources and digital technology. She holds a master's degree in education from Northern Michigan University, is a Marquette-Alger Reading Council board member, and a committee member for the Great Lakes Great Books Award. She can be reached at [lynette.suckow@gmail.com](mailto:lynette.suckow@gmail.com).

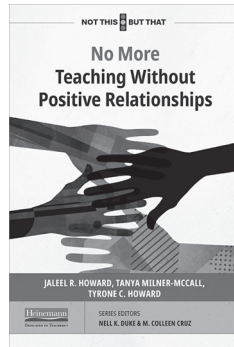




# No More Teaching Without Positive Relationships

by Annie P. Spear

Howard, J., Milner-McCall, T., & Howard, T. (2020). *No more teaching without positive relationships*. N.K. Duke & M.C. Cruz (Series Eds). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Publishers. ISBN 978-0-325- 11813-0



Annie P. Spear

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, relationships and rapport with students are critical. While research and theory in education, instruction, and learning environments constantly evolve and change, relationship-building with students is a cornerstone always deserving of attention. Attending to and nurturing relationships is essential. In fact, research has shown that relationships between students and teachers impact motivation, engagement, and academic success. While some might argue that assessment and routine are the most critical foci in the beginning of the school year, a classroom without a community of learners who share a common understanding, clear and high expectations, and a sense of collaboration, will struggle to succeed and grow. Whether you have always valued relationship-building or perhaps you are seeking to engage in new learning on this topic, the book *No More Teaching Without Positive Relationships* by Jaleel R. Howard, Tanya Milner-McCall, and Tyrone C. Howard, Ph.D. offers a contemporary lens for both seasoned and beginner educators. This book infuses theory, research, and practice as it encourages educators to evaluate their current teaching contexts.

Similar to the structure of all texts in this series, there are three sections. Section 1 discusses what not to do from a practitioner lens. Readers are offered insight into the roots of the problematic practice and the potentially negative impact of the practice. Section 2 is written from a researcher lens. It supports the prior section by

outlining the research against the problematic practice and provides ways to approach the practice more effectively. Section 3 supports Sections 1 and 2 through a practitioner lens. The authors offer actionable solutions to support implementation of their recommendations. As a note, this series has a new design that facilitates the reading and allows readers to easily reference the text through color-coded sections.

The first section is rather short but immerses readers into the importance of attending to relationship-building. This section challenges readers to self-reflect and truly consider how we engage with students. Milner-McCall and J. Howard each provide an example of a student relationship that was particularly challenging, causing them to deeply (and humbly) reflect on their practice. Section 1 concludes with guiding questions the reader can use to self-reflect on their classroom cultures. Literacy educators and literacy coaches, in particular, will appreciate the student-focused activities offered by the authors.

Though most of the sections are co-authored, Dr. Howard is the sole author of Section 2. In this section, Howard addresses the current research on the ways in which community and connection in the classroom positively impact long-term student achievement and overall success beyond school. This section suggests educators should create environments and structures where students and teachers have sufficient and



meaningful time together to foster an environment for positive relationships. However, the relationship-building cannot be limited to just the classroom. Howard challenges educators to provide authentic opportunities to connect with families. Overall, this section is dense but highly informative. Readers are called to engage in deep thinking, reflection, and conversation. Ultimately, the authors conclude that as research continues to emerge, no matter where we live or who we teach, we can and must commit to welcoming all students and to teaching without judgement. This section will undoubtedly challenge all educators to examine how they fully engage with and invest in every student's success.

The final section focuses on educators choosing their words wisely, being metacognitive about their communication, and creating the time and space to connect with every student. As practitioners, the authors recognize that educators have a great deal of content to teach. Therefore, they offer ideas for teaching content with attention to relationship-building. They suggest leveraging a community's cultural capital and attending to students' interests while maintaining open and ongoing communication with students and their families.

Fostering a community of learners is a substantial, but necessary, undertaking. It requires responsiveness and dedication to maintaining relationships within and across the class, while also building relationships with individual students. Whether you are a P-12 teacher, administrator, coach, or other leader within a district or school system, I would recommend reading this book. While the book itself is short, the content within will require readers to be analytical, self-reflective, and curious. Not only does the book offer practical suggestions, the authors use the pages to challenge educators to be vulnerable while maintaining professional boundaries with students. As an educator, this book left me wanting more research exploring this content more broadly across grade levels, populations, and geographical areas of our country (and world) so we can have more information to guide future work for all students and families. While the setting for our upcoming 2020-2021 school year remains unclear, building and maintaining

relationships with and among our students is critical for students' success.

**Note:** For those readers committed to implementation and learning aligned to Michigan's GELN *Literacy Essentials*, there are connections throughout this book to the suite of *Essential Instructional Practices (pre-Kindergrarten, K to 3, 4-5, 6-12)*, as well as system connections with the *Essential School-Wide & Center-Wide Practices in Literacy*. For those in K-5, this Essential 1, connected to fostering motivation and engagement, and Essential 10 which discusses collaboration with families. More information on the Essentials can be found at <https://literacyessentials.org/>.

## Author Biography

**Annie Petrozzelli Spear** has been in the field of education for over 20 years and holds a Master of Education in Reading and a Master of Arts in Elementary Education. She has taught in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Michigan. She is an Early Literacy Coach at C.O.O.R. Intermediate School District, consultant, and co-author of *Let's Talk: Getting Your Baby Ready to Read*. Annie was a Principal Investigator and Reading Clinic Coordinator for The Literacy Center at Central Michigan University where she remains an adjunct faculty member. Annie aims to facilitate learning around literacy development and to provide actionable ways for educators to meet children's needs through research-supported practices. She has a passion for engaging and collaborating with families in authentic ways linked to literacy research. She lives with her family in Northern Michigan and can be reached at [anniespear@gmail.com](mailto:anniespear@gmail.com).



# Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy

by Raven Jones Stanbrough

Baker-Bell, A. (2020). *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*. Routledge: New York, NY. ISBN: 978-1-138-55101-5

My mother still remains my favorite linguistic role model. As a young girl, I would “try-on” my mother’s speech styles in conversations with my siblings, friends, or instances where I needed to protect myself from others.

—Baker-Bell, *Linguistic Justice*

For such a time as this, Detroit native and scholar April Baker-Bell’s *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy* (2020) is more than just a book or publication that should be affixed on your bookshelves or downloaded on your computers. It is an intentional call to action for every individual to take notice that Black folks and the culture we represent, including our language choices and practices, ain’t going anywhere! ‘*Real Talk!*’ It is your favorite Sunday morning sermon or sacred ritual text, in which “Hallelujahs” and “A-she’s” effortlessly fill your lips and spirits. It is thee playlist of playlists—the one you cue up in all seasons for all things. From cover to cover, as a reader and audience member, you can expect to be informed and moved. To be shaken to your literary core. More than that, you can expect to be empowered to do more than what you might already be doing, in your home, (virtual) community, or workplace to address the mainstream antiracist ills and harms that are often committed against Black students and their language and linguistic identities.

*Linguistic Justice* is for the culture and anyone who is concerned with how Black Lives Matter—in all places and contexts, including in education and schools.



Raven Jones Stanbrough



Connected to this, Baker-Bell states, “Indeed, the way a Black child’s language is devalued in school reflects how Black lives are devalued in the world” (p. 2). She does more than offer knowledge and insights from her own teaching experiences and witnessings; Baker-Bell comes thru—straight #Wakanda style—and blesses the world with her timeless #BlackGirlMagic by way of poetic prose. Fully understanding that her own linguistic introductions were and are rooted in family and Black joy, she paints a picturesque canvas—one in which her mother was her foundational language muse and her siblings and other loved ones served as her paintbrushes and brushstrokes. Taken together, they all collectively contributed to *Linguistic Justice*, a work of art worth adorning a sacred space in every class, school, museum, and Institute. As a fellow native Detroiter and Black

Language user, I am beholden to Baker-Bell's succession of Black Language scholarship, realness, activism, and brilliance.

With six chapters inclusive of ethnographic descriptions and analyses, *Linguistic Justice* provides a blueprint that teachers and educators can glean from for their Monday morning teaching. Whether learning from a photo, story, chart, or other artifact, the stories and counterstories of Black youth are illuminated and centered. In Chapters 1 and 2, "Black Language Is Good on Any MLK Boulevard" and "What's Anti-Blackness Got To Do Wit It?" Baker-Bell breaks down Black Language (BL) and White Mainstream English (WME) and unpacks their interconnectedness with language, anti-Black racism, race, and white linguistic supremacy. She also underscores Dr. Geneva Smitherman's groundbreaking BL work and fight towards language and linguistic freedom in Detroit and around the world, which began over 40 years ago. Next, Baker-Bell offers practical implications for educators and outlines her Anti-Black Linguistic framework, which succinctly examines how linguistic oppression can be situated and normalized by people and pedagogical practices.

Akin to this, in Chapters 3 and 4, "Killing Them Softly" and "Scoff No More," stories are told through various artifacts, such as attitudinal assessments, drawings, and conversation language worksheets. Each artifact includes elements of students' reactions to both BL and WME. Drawing from Kirkland and Jackson's (2008) study about the attitudes of Black students, Baker-Bell explains how the attitudinal assessment offered deeper understandings related to the students' pre and post thinking and attitudes. Next, Chapter 5, "Black Linguistic Consciousness," centers the varying and shifting perspectives of her Black youth participants. Baker-Bell coined this shift as, "Black Linguistic Consciousness, "which characterizes how the students are beginning to critically interrogate and consistently resist white linguistic hegemony and Anti-Black Linguistic Racism" (p. 93). With this realization, in Chapter 6, "THUG LIFE": Bonus Chapter: Five Years After Leadership Academy, Baker-Bell includes how *Linguistic Justice* can be used as a framework in English

Teacher Education courses. Specifically, she highlights seven "Black Language Artifacts" that indicate how she has used Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy to prepare preservice English teachers to disrupt Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. Each Black Language Artifact contains a description, activities, and supplementary resources teachers can engage their students in. Here is an example that I will utilize this semester in my teacher education courses.

## Black Language Artifact 1: Black Language and Identity

**Description:** For this artifact, students examine the intersection of language, culture, and identity within the Black community.

### Activities

- Have students explore the linguistic identity of the characters in THUG by performing a linguistic analysis. Have the students examine how, when, and where Starr uses language.
- Have students examine how Black Language reflected the character's ways of knowing, interpreting, and surviving the world.
- Have students examine the relationship between Black Language and Black culture in the novel.
- Have the students examine the tension Starr experienced with language and race throughout the novel.
- Have the students write a linguistic memoir that examines their racial and linguistic identities. For example, students might consider writing about how language is used within their families and communities, their experiences with linguistic racism, etc.

I have already recommended *Linguistic Justice* to colleagues, students, family members, and other community members. My undergraduate pre-service teachers will also be reading it in my teacher education and literacy courses. I highly recommend it to anyone who is ready to affirm the linguistic identities of Black youth, while also disrupting Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. I implore every individual—those ready to provide equitable pathways and opportunities for Black



## Must Read Texts

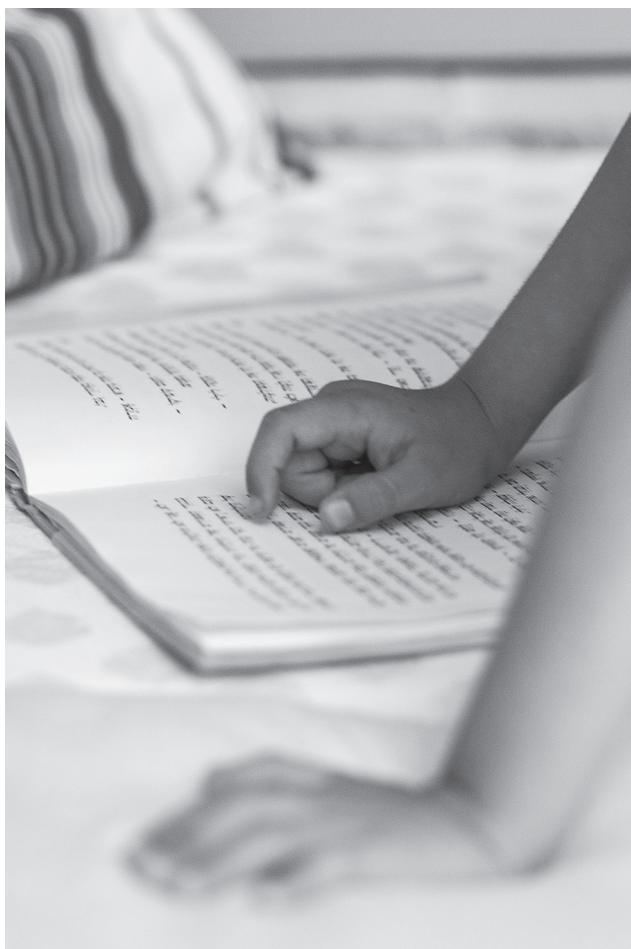
children to thrive and be (linguistically) free—to read this superbly crafted text. Baker-Bell has written a brilliant book. She has used her words as her canvas. As hip hop scholar, Jeezy, suggested, she has “put on for her city” and Detroit is proud. Now, it is up to all of us to experience, feel, and spread the joy of such beautiful literary Black art.

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## Author Biography

**Raven Jones Stanbrough** is an assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Michigan State University. Her teaching, research, and publications focus on literacy, culture, race, equity, and the educational and lived experiences of students of color in urban contexts. Dr. Jones Stanbrough creates and facilitates debate education programs to promote and expand the educative and creative engagement that debate offers. She is also the Co-founder of *The Zuri Reads Initiative (TZRI)*, which provides and organizes literacy-related events and resources for Detroit-area children, students, and families. Dr. Jones Stanbrough is a lover of all things Detroit, Scrabble, and The Clark Sisters, and resides in Detroit with her partner, Darryl Jr., and their daughter, Zuri Hudson. She can be contacted at: [jonesrav@msu.edu](mailto:jonesrav@msu.edu).





# **Michigan Reading Journal**

## **General Call for Manuscripts & Graphics**

The *Michigan Reading Journal* is the peer-reviewed journal of the Michigan Reading Association, which is composed of and serves more than 3,000 classroom teachers, literacy specialists, educational leaders, teacher educators, and university faculty.

The journal publishes on diverse topics related to literacy, including reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, visually representing, technology, and literature for children and young adults. Submissions are invited in any of the categories below, though we are particularly interested in manuscripts that connect literacy and social justice or address new literacies (e.g., technology, graphic novels, podcasts, etc.).

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### **Bridging Research and Practice Articles**

Articles submitted in this category present original descriptions of research-based instruction that improves the literacy learning of students ranging from birth to college age. Articles describing research-based practices in literacy teacher education will also be considered. Manuscripts in this category must include 5-10 practical steps to guide readers in applying the research to their practice. Manuscript submissions should include APA formatted references to the relevant research literature and must not exceed 5,000 words (including tables, figures and appendices; excluding reference list) in 12-point font and left-aligned. Any charts or graphics must be of high-quality and in black and white. These manuscripts undergo blind review by members of the journal's editorial review board.

### **Voices from the Region**

Articles submitted in this category will showcase evidence-based literacy practices being implemented throughout the state and region in such varied spaces as classrooms, districts, libraries, after school programs, online schools, homes, daycares, preschools, ISDs/RESAs. We are specifically interested in submissions from practitioners who can share tips and ideas about what is working in their context, why they are engaging in these ideas, and how others could do this, too. Our goal is to hear from a range of practitioners in and around the state who are interested in literacy. Manuscripts in this category should begin with an introduction to the authors and the context of their work. Please also include APA formatted references to the relevant research literature, if appropriate to the piece. Manuscript submissions should be between 750 and 2500 words (including tables, figures and appendices; excluding reference list), double-spaced, and in 12-point font and left-aligned. Any charts or graphics must be of high-quality and in black and white. These manuscripts undergo blind review by members of the journal's editorial review board.

### **Visual Artifacts and Graphics**

Submissions in this category share visual artifacts of literacy teaching practices through photos of teachers and students engaging in literacy, literacy projects, literacy centers, and artifacts of student learning. Each image should be clear, in focus, of a high resolution/quality, and sent as a full-size jpeg or tiff file attachment, accompanied by a brief, 50-100 word description. Documents must be scanned, not photographed; the latter will not be of high enough quality for publication. By submitting an item in this category, the individual indicates that he/she has obtained consent from the district, school, teacher, parent, and child to use the image for publication. The journal's editorial team reviews submissions in this category.

### **Letters to the Editors**

We invite and encourage your letters in response to what you have read in the Michigan Reading Journal. Did research presented help you better understand teaching and learning? Were you inspired to try a new teaching strategy? Are you still puzzling over a topic recently featured? Is there something you haven't seen in the journal that you want us to address? Let us hear from you, please. Letters may be edited, with author's permission, for publication.

### **Nominations for Professional Books to Review**

We invite and encourage nominations of professional books to review for our Professional Books of Interest column. Please send book titles, author names, and year of publication to us via e-mail with a brief 1-2 sentence description of what the book is about and why it should be reviewed in *MRJ*.

### **Reviews of Children's and Young Adult Books**

Have a great book that you and your students love? We invite teachers of students of all ages to write and submit book reviews of children's and young adult books of any genre that have been published in the last year. Book reviews should be no more than 200 words in length.

### **Manuscript Review Process**

Below are the questions that the journal's Editorial Review Board members use when reviewing submitted research manuscripts and practitioner pieces focused on sharing teaching practices. The questions are intended to guide reviewers and help them shape their written summaries of feedback and recommendations regarding publication. The answers are forwarded to authors, along with the publication decision. The editorial team will provide feedback on spelling, grammar, mechanics, APA format, etc, so reviewers should focus their review and feedback on the more global guiding questions below. The guiding questions can also serve to help authors shape their manuscripts in order to meet standard for publication in *MRJ*.

### **Reviewers' Guiding Questions**

- Does the article address an important or compelling topic for reading practitioners in Michigan? Why or why not?
- Does the manuscript contain an appropriate blend of theory, research and practice? Are there ways to improve this balance?
- Does the article offer practical implications or suggestions, based-in-research, that reading practitioners can implement? Are there additional implications that would improve the manuscript?
- Does the manuscript include enough information on how-to practical steps for classroom or practitioner implementation (i.e., What can teachers do on Monday morning?)?
- Will the article appeal to MRJ's diverse audience? What can be improved?
- What are the revisions that you would recommend to improve this manuscript for our practitioner audience?

### **Submitting Your Work**

To submit your article, you will need to create a Scholarworks account by clicking on the "Submit Article" link at <[scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj](http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj)>. Then, you will follow the instructions to submit a manuscript to the *Michigan Reading Journal*. Shortly afterward, you will receive an email confirming your submission.

The submission process consists of the following steps:

1. Read and accept the Article Submission Agreement
2. Provide information about yourself
3. Provide information about any authors
4. Upload your article and related items

Before you begin, please be sure you have the following items:

1. Article Title
2. An abstract (separate from the article body)
3. Keywords for your article (optional)
4. Article in Microsoft Word (.docx) format.

Also, please note that articles must be submitted without a title page, abstract, or page numbers. These will be provided by the system. This is especially important so that you do not include any identifying information about the authors, as the article you submit will be sent to reviewers. No part of the submission is final until all steps have been completed and you click the final Submit button. The review process begins as soon as *Michigan Reading Journal* receives a readable article, along with the abstract and article title. You will receive further communication from the editors after your submission is accepted into the system and prepared for peer review.

**Deadlines:** The *Michigan Reading Journal* is published three times yearly—fall, winter, and spring. Manuscripts are reviewed with deadlines of July 15 (fall issue), October 15 (winter issue), and February 15 (spring issue) each year.