

October 2019

180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents

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Recommended Citation

DeBlase, Gina (2019) "180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 52: Iss. 1, Article 13.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol52/iss1/13>

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180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents

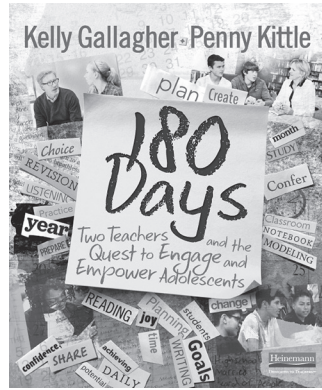
by Gina DeBlase, Ph.D.

Gallagher, K. & Kittle, P. (2018). *180 days: Two teachers and the quest to engage and empower adolescents*.

Portsmouth, NH:

Heinemann.

ISBN 978-0-325-08113-7



Kelly Gallagher and Penny Kittle are each well-established authors of books on adolescent literacy as well as highly regarded for their professional development workshops on the teaching of reading and writing. This book represents their collaborative effort to plan, teach, and reflect on both their own, as well as one another's, classrooms over the course of an academic year. The authors' intent in this collaborative project is to closely examine and share their decision-making processes about what to teach and when in the school year to teach it, as well as decisions about what to leave out and what will be re-taught later in the year. They begin their planning process by prioritizing what their students need most, paying close attention to students' needs and interests. Then, over the course of the academic year—often on a day-to-day and week-to-week basis—they continuously reassess and shift instructional practices and decisions in order to meet students where they are.

In their open and candid discussion, Gallagher and Kittle intend to provide teachers with a means to create their own teaching and to be guided by a focus on empowering the students we teach *now* as readers, writers, listeners, and speakers. The book begins by asking teachers to closely consider what they believe about teaching and learning and to clearly identify the core values and beliefs which provide the underpinning of one's own teaching. For example, one of the 10 core beliefs Gallagher and Kittle identify for their own practices is the value of using talk as a mode of



communication to deepen thinking and learning. Consequently, across all units of study in both reading and writing (p. 16), they plan opportunities for students to talk one-on-one with their teacher, talk to one another, talk to bigger audiences, and practice their listening skills.

The first half of the book focuses on establishing five essential daily classroom practices that actively engage students in thinking and writing:

- Reading—book talks, book clubs, reading conferences
- Writing—quick writes and revisions
- Studying—passage and mentor text study
- Creating—teacher modeling, writing conferences
- Share—sharing “beautiful words”

Although many teachers will have varying degrees of familiarity with these practices, what readers are likely to find most helpful is the level of detail they provide regarding decisions about how and why to organize and structure class time around these practices. Within the two classroom structures they present (each of their classrooms, respectively), they leave a wide berth for teachers to be guided by the individual choices and options that best meet their students' needs, given the wide range of teaching conditions, as well as the daily and ever-changing realities of teaching to a diverse student population. A nice bonus is that readers have access to teaching videos around these five essential practices as well as conversation videos between Galla-

gher and Kittle where they discuss both their pre- and post-teaching processes. In these videos, we see the authors attend to everyday teaching situations. For instance, what decisions should a teacher make when students are uninterested in reading? Should that teacher spend more time on read-alouds and book talks? Would a whole-class novel unit provide necessary structure? Perhaps introducing a multimedia composition project would be best suited for engaging reluctant readers.

The second half of the text details the planning and teaching of what they consider to be four essential writing genres: narrative, informational, argument, and multi-genre. As with reading, Gallagher and Kittle present a curriculum map with the objective of assisting students to be independent and empowered writers (p. 85). To this end, the structure they present and the planning that they do allows for students to create “a series of texts using a progression of [writing] skills” (p. 131), rather than the more traditional approach of writing one essay in each of the genres. They refer to this approach as “taking laps around the track” (p. 131) because each time that they circle back around

to a series of students’ written texts, they increase the complexity of skills germane to that particular discourse. In each of the four genres, the importance of constantly assessing student work through notebooks, drafts, and conferences is a critical means for learning what students already know to do and what they do not yet know.

Overall, this book is a worthwhile read for middle and high school English language arts teachers. For new teachers, Gallagher and Kittle’s text can serve as a foundation for building a student-centered language arts curriculum that takes into account the practical implications of time and fitting it all in. For the more experienced teacher, the book provides compelling insights into the decision-making process of two veteran teachers.

Author Biography

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