Building a Culture of Literacy

Ideas for making literacy the foundation in your school

By **Linda Jacobson**

Several times a week, teachers and students at Broadmor Elementary in Tempe, AZ, head outside to The Learning Patch, a school garden that is teaching students much more than how food is grown.

Reading seed packets and creating poetry related to the flowers, fruits, and vegetables they've cultivated with their own hands are a few ways that students are demonstrating a love of reading and writing inspired by the outdoor classroom. Back inside, bulletin boards are filled with students' reflections on their work in the garden.

"We try to have these creative, informal writing projects that are directly and immediately after they have this experience," says Kelly Hedberg, a master gardener and a cochair of the school's garden committee. She also is one of the leaders for DIG IT! Outdoors, an after-school program in which students not only tend plants and examine worms, but also write in their garden journals and discuss "horticultural heroes."

The garden has "invited less formulaic writing and more observation," says Jessica Early, director of the English Education Department at Arizona State University and director of the Central Arizona Writing Project. Her children attend Broadmor. "I think there is so much pressure for assessment and testing that we forget what real readers and writers do in the world."

When students are writing during lessons on science and reading books inspired by vegetables grown in their garden space, those are good indicators that the school has a culture of literacy—an environment beyond reading instruction in which students, staff, and even parents are engaged in ongoing literacy activities.

"We want to create conditions in which when students leave us and are no longer required to read, they still choose to read," says Andrew Maxey, director of middle school education for the Tuscaloosa City Schools in Alabama, who signs his e-mails with the titles of books he's reading—a simple practice, he says, that can model the habits of lifelong readers.

When literacy is infused into every part of a school's environment, teachers are demonstrating their own connections to books and creating opportunities in and out of the classroom for students to use their skills and expand their interests. Ongoing collaboration among teachers from different disciplines helps create this environment.

Lisa Adams, a science teacher at Thompson Valley High School in Loveland, CO, for example, partners with a 10th-grade English language arts (ELA) teacher to improve students' skills in reading, writing, and science. She selects several novels with scientific themes, which the ELA teacher uses to plan assessments focusing on the curriculum goals in her class.

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"The students then use what they learned in English and through the various assignments to come to my class and discuss and ask questions," Adams says. "The units [are] aligned so they match what she's doing in ELA. It has made a significant impact on vocabulary and comprehension."

Recognizing what a culture of literacy is *not*

In setting the goal of having a culture of literacy, it's important to first recognize what it really is.

"Literacy is not something that occurs during a specific time of day or content area," says Stephanie Laird, an instructional coach at Mitchellville Elementary School in Iowa and a member of the ILA Board of Directors.

A culture of literacy is also not just about reading instruction, says Maxey, who taught secondary English and has been a high school and middle school administrator. "That has its place, but that's not the whole picture," he says. If a school, for example, doubles the time students learn to read from one hour to two, that doesn't mean it created a literacy culture, he says, adding that a focus on literacy driven by a need to increase test scores can lead to "unhealthy practices."

When visitors walk into a school that has created a culture of literacy, they are likely to see students' writing and other creations related to books posted throughout the building along with the types of collaborative efforts used by Adams and her ELA colleague.

"Our students have access to books throughout the building, whether it's in their book boxes, the classroom or school library, or the bins of books in the halls, office, and common areas," Laird says. She also added a Little Free Library in front of her school, making the commitment even more visible.

The role of reading events

Literacy-related events that draw people dressed as characters or bring in dignitaries to read tend to get a lot of local media attention, and they can be exciting for students.

"At a certain level, things aimed at the volume of kids reading have value," Maxey says, but they are most beneficial when they are part of something larger.

The Global Read Aloud (GRA), for example, is an international initiative in which teachers and students read the same book over a six-week period and connect over Skype, Edmodo, Twitter, or other platforms to share their thoughts. Books are chosen for students at all levels, from picture books to YA novels. Founded by Pernille Ripp, a seventh-grade language arts teacher in Oregon, WI, the project has involved more than 2 million students and led to hundreds of connections between classrooms across the world.

The project "fits well into classrooms that believe reading is for a higher purpose," Ripp says, adding that the experience can also be the "spark" that leads to ongoing connections such as creative writing communities, student blogging, communicating with authors, and projects in which teachers collaborate online for an entire year.

Maxey adds that for the excitement to stick, an event must be one of *several* opportunities for students and staff to feel connected through what they're reading, like what GRA does.

"You can do a bunch of events and still have no culture," he says.

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Libraries at school, in class, and at home

District and state leaders, Maxey suggests, should also take a close look at how they are funding libraries if creating a culture of literacy is the goal. In his state of Alabama, prior to 2015–2016, school districts went eight years without any funding for library enhancement.

"When we have no funding for libraries, the nonfiction texts are 10 years old or more," he says. Students rushing to the shelves for a book on the latest mobile game probably won't be interested in a guide to Club Penguin. And while schools in wealthier communities can hold fundraisers to add to their collections, schools in low-income neighborhoods won't have equal access to new materials.

Maxey adds that over the past several years, the attention to providing culturally relevant materials has increased. But if libraries "haven't been buying books, they haven't increased that focus."

At Detroit School of Arts in Michigan, where almost 100% of the students are African American, media specialist Karen Lemmons often used her own money to purchase books until a local Daughters of the American Revolution chapter donated funds.

"The funds have allowed me to purchase a variety of genres that would appeal to almost all of the students," says Lemmons, who has worked to increase interest in reading among the young men in her school.

The importance of a collection of books also extends to classrooms, Ripp writes in her blog. "Even a beautiful, well-stocked school library is too far away when a child needs a book right then," she writes. "Because our

students need to be enticed by another book the moment they finish or abandon their current one."

Laird says it's important that parents build their at-home libraries as well. She received grant funds that support sending home monthly literacy bags that contain a new book and a reading activity to do at home.

Supporting non-ELA teachers

When teachers of all content areas are deeply engaged in their own literacy activities, either on their own or in collaboration with other teachers, that enthusiasm can spread to students.

Teachers involved in the University of California, Berkeley-based National Writing Project (NWP), for example, are working on publishing their own work, "and through that experiential approach, they're remembering how joyful, how peaceful, how scary that is," says Tanya Baker, NWP's director of National Programs.

In other schools and districts (such as Rowan-Salisbury Schools, featured on page 18), the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC), a template approach to developing standards-based lessons, has been the key to getting non-ELA teachers excited about what their students produce.

"I've been through the different waves of initiatives," says Sheri Blankenship, a literacy coach with

the Rankin County School District in Brandon, MS. "They've all been well-intentioned, but one of the things I never saw was support for how non-ELA teachers were supposed to carry this out in their classroom."

Since the district began implementing LDC in middle and high schools in 2015, ACT scores in reading have increased at all high schools, and social studies teachers have seen evidence of improved student writing. Blankenship visited a seventh-grade classroom recently and listened while students accurately cited sources to back up their opinions on Alexander the Great. "That was a breakthrough moment for me," she says. "At the beginning of the year they were saying, 'This is too hard, we can't do this.'"

Adams, who also uses LDC, says through her collaboration with other teachers, she is seeing growth in her students' ability to organize their thoughts when they write.

"Collaborating with ELA teachers has certainly helped my students become better at researching, investigating good and reliable resources, and [improving] their writing skills," she says.

Lemmons adds that collaboration among administrators and all teachers is also necessary to analyze students' current literacy skills and determine what approaches and resources are needed to address gaps.

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

CLASSROOM TEACHERS

- Create informal writing prompts based on real fieldwork and observation. Assign them immediately after the experience while students are still inspired.
- Connect your students with creative writing communities (e.g., blogging) that lay the groundwork for ongoing, long-term communication.
- Establish a take-home policy for books, or apply for grants that support take-home book packages.

ADMINISTRATORS

- Make books accessible. Pile them in common areas or start a Little Free Library.
- Enhance the library with an emphasis on diverse and culturally relevant materials. Be an advocate for more funding.
- Protect common planning time for teachers to foster an environment of collaboration.

COACHES

- Encourage teachers to incorporate literacy activities into all content areas. Demonstrate how literacy connects to other priorities, such as social and emotional learning.
- Be upfront about the school's literacy goals; involve staff in the conversation and develop a clear mission with action steps.
- Develop a collaborative, community-building, "assets-based approach" to literacy that incorporates social, cultural, and family interests into activities.

—Alina O'Donnell

Literacy outside of school

As with Broadmor, a literacy culture means children, and even family members, are engaged in literacy experiences not just during the school day, but also after school and in the community in ways that don't feel like an assignment.

In Savannah, GA, the Deep Center for Creative Writing runs its Young Author Project in 14 middle schools as an after-school program designed to help youth express themselves. Founded in 2008 to address the harmful effects of poverty on literacy, Deep Center mentors students in writing and publishing and invites them to read their work at Deep Speaks!, events attended by students, parents, and community members.

Recently, young authors and their families brought a favorite dish, made from a treasured family recipe, to communicate the story of how their family arrived in Savannah. The event was part of Deep Center's Block by Block program, a yearlong "participatory action research" project in which students conduct research and write about the city's past and present.

"As they write, document stories, and make art, they are simultaneously putting Savannah under a spotlight, celebrating what's working, identifying what's not, and envisioning change," Dare Dukes, the executive director of Deep Center, wrote in a blog post on the center's website.

He says it's important to take an "assets-based approach" in creating an environment in which children find "joy and celebration in language play, storytelling, and writing."

Everyone plays a part

School leaders recommend being straightforward about what the school is hoping to achieve and creating belief statements about what a culture of literacy would look like. Laird asked staff members to write down their top literacy beliefs. These led to choosing action steps, such as daily read-alouds, publishing students' writing for authentic audiences, and allowing time for students to read a book of their choice.

Like Maxey's e-mail signature, Laird created signs that hang outside teachers' classrooms announcing what they are currently reading.

"This allowed students to see the adults in their lives as readers," she says.

Lemmons points out that schools alone can do only so much to encourage literacy development. Sectors outside of education also play a part in highlighting books, authors, and the role of literacy in everyday life.

"It is expected that educators, librarians, and publishers will promote literacy," she says. "But it takes more people to acknowledge, embrace, and support that literacy is everyone's responsibility." ■

Linda Jacobson (lrj417@yahoo.com) is an education writer and editor based in California.

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