Common planning process of middle school English language arts teachers

Eighth grade teachers' intentional use of common planning time to create learning experiences that foster students' literacy development demonstrates the importance of collaboration and professional development.

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Introduction

Students must be active participants in the learning process, and a classroom environment that supports the literacy needs of young adolescents may be fostered through collaboration amongst and between a teacher and students. Furthermore, teachers can facilitate active learning by reflecting on how they are incorporating relevant, challenging, and integrative learning experiences and considering student needs as they implement the curriculum. Far too often, particularly in many middle schools, students are disenfranchised by the literacy practices they encounter. Lee (2004) reported that although struggling adolescent readers have broader experiences with language and more content knowledge than younger counterparts, they have difficulty acquiring school-based literacy. Some researchers argue that beneficial literacy practices for adolescents require student engagement (Guthrie & Solomon, 1997; Irwin, 2003) and connection to real life and their out-of-school literacy experiences (Alvermann, 2003; Moje, 2000, 2002).

Although adolescents bring prior knowledge and literacy skills to the classroom, the expectations they face on standardized state tests have skewed educators' perceptions of what it means *to know* and *be* a literate member of the 21st century world. In the current context of high stakes testing, school literacy is often defined by standardized literacy assessments—most state tests require students to demonstrate proficiency on specific kinds of writing tasks and reading material.

Today, where schools and teachers exist in an environment of increased accountability, stakeholders who periodically review educational practices help ensure that teachers and students are meeting standards. In this context, low test scores on state assessments might signal that school-wide reform and restructuring is eminent. This article shares insights gleaned from examining the process of one middle school as they sought to meet the needs and interests of their middle school students. To begin, stakeholders examined, *This We Believe*, (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010) to determine whether or not the middle school was effectively implementing and continually analyzing structures and practices to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents. Using this lens, they asked two specific questions about their past practice: How are eighth grade teachers addressing the literacy needs of young adolescents? and To what extent are the characteristics of *This We Believe* integrated in these middle school English language arts classrooms?

Eighth grade classrooms were selected to examine these two questions because eighth grade students in New York take a high stakes test in English language arts (ELA). Along with addressing the above questions, this article also shows how literacy coaching and common planning helped a group of eighth grade ELA teachers

implement research-based literacy practices, support students' literacy development, and increase student outcomes on the New York State standardized test—the eighth grade ELA exam. By closely examining literacy practice in middle schools, educators may more deeply think about and implement effective curriculum and instructional strategies that support the literacy development of middle level learners.

Background

During the 2004–2005 school year, 525 eighth grade students attended Park Ridge Middle School (all names are pseudonyms to protect privacy). The following demographics represent a typical composition of the student body each year: students with disabilities (9%), Black/African American (49%), Hispanic (23%), Asian or Pacific Islander (26%), White (2%), limited English-proficient students (15%), and economically disadvantaged students (67%).

For this particular year, Park Ridge was in year three of the designation as a "School Requiring Academic Progress," because it did not meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) in the same grade and subject for two consecutive years. The AYP designation indicates that, based on state assessment scores, the school does not meet accountability expectations for students across subgroups as legislated under No Child Left Behind (2001).

In the previous school year, 2003–2004, Park Ridge reconfigured the school-wide literacy program to give teachers and students more structure and support for literacy instruction. The school implemented a double period, block schedule for ELA to provide teachers and students 90 minutes of continuous instructional time. The school used America's Choice (2004), a curriculum reform model distributed by the National Center for Education and the Economy.

America's Choice is a balanced literacy model that uses a workshop approach to literacy instruction, which requires 90 minutes for a Readers and Writers Workshop. Its curriculum and framework allow teachers and students to examine writing through the lens of an author and to examine reading through the lens of "good" readers. The model emphasizes strategic reading instruction whereby the teacher explicitly models reading strategies that students then practice in class. On a daily basis students read, write, and conference with the teacher and peers.

Common planning

To begin the process of revising the curriculum at Park Ridge, eighth grade teachers gathered for a 40-minute meeting each week to determine how to incorporate a variety of instructional techniques into the existing ELA curriculum and how to integrate elements of the America's Choice curriculum across all disciplines. Beginning at the end of September, the teachers began revising the curriculum during these weekly grade-level meetings, which were facilitated by a literacy coach. The coach dedicated some of the meeting time for discussing student assessment data, curriculum materials, and teaching and learning practices—particularly those that differentiate instruction and assessment.

The teachers in the group spent much of their planning time determining how they could align texts across genres and reading levels, and establishing what lessons must be taught for the ELA curriculum. During meetings, participants also focused on how to effectively and efficiently use the 90-minute block to engage students in meaningful learning and support the needs of the diverse students in the classroom.

The teachers at Park Ridge worked together to implement the balanced literacy framework from America's Choice into their classrooms, a framework that included the Readers and Writers Workshop. They agreed to split the 90-minute block into 45 minutes for Readers Workshop and 45 minutes for Writers Workshop; both workshops would mirror each other and allow enough time for lessons and student practice.

The teachers worked together, along with the literacy coach, to develop unit and learning plans. The new curriculum included concepts such as author study, memoir, autobiography, folktale, short story, biography, and test preparation. For example, they developed a narrative unit to provide a strong foundation for students who lacked a strong sense of narrative while challenging students with a background in the genre. During the narrative unit the teachers facilitated learning experiences on reading and writing content as well as procedures for the Workshop to help students develop an understanding of the routines expected in the class (see Figure 1).

By focusing on particular reading strategies, the teachers connected lessons and activities to the Readers and Writers Workshops. Students could then explore literature as critical readers and gain insights into the

Figure 1 Examples of reading and writing lessons and procedures

Content Lessons	• How to use active reading strategies such as the seven habits of a good reader • How to identify the elements of a story—theme, character, setting, plot, problem • How to jot down ideas on sticky notes (using Post-it notes) • How to quote lines from text • How to write a good introduction
Procedural Lessons	• Habits of good group discussions • Roles within a literature circle • Setting expectations of the group • Behaviors that should not be seen during group work • How to ask good questions • Starting a discussion with controversy • Review procedures as needed

genre structure by examining the text of various forms. Then the students created their own text.

In Readers Workshop experiences, teachers elected strategies that introduced students to different kinds of texts. Such strategies included teacher read aloud, partner reading, daily independent reading, and explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies and vocabulary. Teachers showed students ways to comprehend text while reading so students could become more metacognitive readers during the explicit strategy lessons. For example, students were asked to decipher unknown words they encountered while reading during a vocabulary lesson. The lesson introduced students to three methods for figuring out unknown words: (a) using context clues (looking for the meaning of words within the context of the passage); (b) structural analysis (looking for word families such as prefixes); and (c) activating prior knowledge about words they already know (breaking apart multisyllabic words to locate smaller words they might know).

Figure 2 Instructional strategies and student activities during Readers Workshop lesson on note-taking

Activities	Teacher responsibilities	Student responsibilities
• Identify elements of a genre	• Teacher reads texts in same genre and helps students understand elements of genre	• Students analyze text, record *noticings*, and create artifacts that preserve their findings
• Note-taking during read aloud	• Teacher demonstrates fluent reading. Teacher also focuses on a strategy/skill	• Students use graphic organizers (e.g., T-charts, Venn diagram, character webs, double entry journals) and note-taking strategy to take effective notes
• Practice the 7 habits of a proficient reader – active reading strategies (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997)	• Teacher specifies graphic organizers to use for various texts. (e.g., for essay that compares/ contrasts two things, students must use Venn diagram	• Students look at what good readers do with important information
• Test simulations	• Teacher models strategy through think aloud.	Students answer 25 multiple choice questions in 45 minutes. (During this exercise students feel the pressure of testing—Students have later shared that this relieved stress on the day of the examination)
• Skill Wheel Exercise—focus on reading comprehension skills	• Teacher asks questions through interactive read aloud • Teacher acts as proctor • Teacher reminds students of skills used on the examination • Teacher asks questions about a particular skill, such as, "What kind of question do you think is being asked?" and "How do you know that?"	Students try to identify types of questions by identifying signal words

For the Writers Workshop, the teachers asked students to closely examine the works of different authors to characterize the author's craft or style of writing. Then students responded to what they read through different activities, working on tasks that gradually grew more rigorous and that challenged them to develop a more critical analysis of text. For example, in the literature section students had to answer questions (e.g., comprehension, open-ended, response to a writing prompt), write book reviews, create story boards, write a letter to the author, interview the author, write a critical lens essay, and interact with peers in literature circles or book clubs. The open-ended assessments students completed focused more on the processes students used to increase text comprehension.

The teachers found that aligning the ELA curriculum with skills and strategies from America's Choice addressed literacy skills while also exposing students to the literature they were expected to know from the curriculum. During a Readers Workshop lesson on note-taking (see Figure 2), students practiced the skill while discussing genre. Students were also exposed to various test-taking strategies during the Workshop, namely answering multiple-choice questions under timed conditions, throughout the year.

Because Park Ridge students previously performed poorly on the state's ELA exam, the teachers frequently discussed test preparation in their common planning meetings. By November, "the peak test prep season" as one teacher put it, particularly for the eighth grade, the teachers introduced essay writing, and they implemented learning experiences focused on reading skills and strategies and how to analyze literature critically.

During the common planning sessions, the teachers and the literacy coach debated ways to help students, and to give them opportunities to practice. The group brainstormed activities that could engage students while also integrating test preparation, literacy/strategy instruction, and the English curriculum. After group meetings, the literacy coach held individual conferences with each teacher to collaboratively create and devise integrative implementation strategies. The literacy coach worked with the teachers based on individual needs, developing a weekly schedule to work one-on-one to support them in their classrooms.

A closer look at Tara's classroom practice

A conference between the literacy coach, Stella, and an eighth grade teacher, Tara, provides an example of a coaching session. After this conference, Stella worked with Tara to develop workstation tasks, she co-taught lessons in Tara's classroom to introduce students to the procedures, and then she made subsequent visits to observe Tara and the students and give feedback. Stella and Tara also held subsequent planning meetings to refine the learning experiences at the workstations and to offer students ongoing opportunities to practice their writing skills. The excerpt below is a summary of a conversation that occurred between Tara and Stella as recorded in Stella's journal:

> *Tara shared that many of the students are struggling with writing; specifically comparing and contrasting themes and ideas across stories. She acknowledged this is an important component of the eighth-grade standardized test and said she wanted them to focus on writing compare-and-contrast essay writing. They can also use more practice with reading comprehension and short answer responses. I recommended that she use stations to give students in small groups the opportunity to practice these specific skills. I explained that the students can rotate every couple of days to another station after the task is completed.…We worked together to identify what we want them to do at each station. Then we created tasks and activities. These tasks gave students clear expectations of what you want them to do. I explained to Tara that the students can regulate themselves at the stations once you provide them with some kind of checklist to follow. She and I also identified and assembled resources for the students to complete at the station so they can work with little or no support from Tara.…Tara also wanted to have a station that focused directly on the test. I suggested that we create an independent menu. I explained that in this area students can be creative by designing, writing, and producing a presentation on their favorite author or their favorite book. They are still gaining experiences thinking and talking about books but there would be less focus on the test. I pointed out to Tara that while students are working at the station she will be the facilitator. I told her to listen to conversations to ensure accountable talk is going on and take notes about what is being said; guide students and offer help when they have difficulty, but not to dominate because the goal is for them to develop independence; conference with students individually or meet with an entire group if they have trouble with an assigned task. I reminded Tara that this will keep her*

focused on students' needs rather than making general comments to the whole class, especially if other students are able to move on and get the work done without assistance or with minimal assistance from peers.

During a subsequent coaching session, Tara shared that she had researched the types of essays that reoccur on the ELA assessment. She introduced students to these essay formats through an acronym, POACH: *pretend, obstacle, argument, compare and contrast,* and *hero*. During her mini-lessons, Tara deconstructed the state writing standards and taught the students how to engage the reader, how to provide a sense of closure, how to make text connections, and how to answer the question on an extended response. She had previously taught students a wide array of processes to develop and use independently or when working in groups. For example, when students were peer editing they would use the SWAPS process (sentence structure, word choice, agreement, punctuation, and spelling) and when revising their own work they would use STAR (subtract, trade, add, and rearrange). When writing independently students were instructed to use SNOT (show not tell) to describe characters and to use more descriptive and figurative language in their writing.

Tara engaged the students in her classroom through creative and interactive reading and writing lessons. She introduced students to texts that connected to the core novels in the ELA curriculum, texts she used to teach and model literacy strategies. Tara used some of the following texts to supplement the ELA curriculum:

Poems

- Carl Sandburg: "Arithmetic"
- Edgar Allen Poe: "Annabel Lee"
- Langston Hughes: "Mother to Son," "A Dream Deferred," "Dreams"
- Robert Frost: "The Road Not Taken"

Books and Short Stories

- Eve Bunting: *Smoky Nights*
- Gary Paulsen: *Hatchet, Woodsong*
- Ernest Hemingway short story: "A Day's Wait"
- Lorraine Hansberry: *A Raisin in the Sun*
- Walter Dean Meyers: *145th Street: Short Stories, Bad Boy: A Memoir, Fallen Angels*

During one visit to the Readers Workshop, Stella observed a mini lesson Tara facilitated regarding, "How to answer different types of questions." Throughout the lesson Tara modeled how to distinguish between different types of comprehension questions, such as those that require literal interpretation from text and those that require inference. Tara completed an example with the students before students worked in small groups. For their practice time, each group received index cards listing reading comprehension strategies. The students then chose a reading strategy to answer the questions on the cards: (a) skim or reread the text; (b) make a prediction; (c) make a connection to something they already know; or (d) make an inference about what the author is trying to communicate. As group members collaborated, they were to identify and explain how their chosen strategy helped them answer the question. During this time Tara held conference sessions with a small group to more closely guide students through the process. She later noted that this group struggled with reading and she used the opportunity to offer more specific assistance and scaffold the process.

For the Writers Workshop, the lesson was focused on "Writing from a Prompt." After showing students how to deconstruct a writing prompt to determine the purpose for writing, Tara directed students to writing stations to draft an essay where they compared and contrasted a poem and a story they previously read and discussed in class: "A Dream Deferred" by Langston Hughes and *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. Students had 20 minutes to draft the introduction in class and then students continued to work on their essay for homework. Later in the week, students had opportunity to peer edit their work in small groups. Prior to generating a final draft, students were able to conference with Tara to share how they used peer feedback to improve their work. Therefore, students had to bring in their writing samples to share and analyze with peers at the writing stations during subsequent class sessions before Tara met with them to review their work.

The Writers Workshop also provided time for students to peer edit work using peer writing and organization tips thus providing each student with specific feedback. Tara held writing conferences to give additional feedback on students' progress. The students in Tara's class also had the chance to complete a range of creative writing projects as independent or group projects. One example of a writing project students

completed was a newspaper. Students had the option of including different sections in their newspaper: Kids, World News, Local News, National News, Health and Fitness, Business, Letters to the Editor, Advice Column, Movies/Entertainment, Sports, Classified Ads, and Visitor Information (Tips for Tourists). During the project the students performed the following tasks:

- wrote news articles/feature stories about events taking place at the school and within the larger community.
- composed announcements and created advertisements for upcoming contests and events (e.g., birthdays, trips, holidays, or graduation wishes);
- created a kids' page with a word search and a crossword puzzle based on several subjects: teachers' names, the names of streets in the neighborhood, athletes, popular clothing and music, etc.;
- generated at least four sections of the newspaper;
- worked in cooperative groups with clearly defined roles and specific tasks;
- worked in groups to share project progress with group members and classmates daily; and
- held individual and group conferences with the teacher.

Supporting young adolescent learners

At Park Ridge, teachers successfully implemented characteristics from *This We Believe* into their teaching and learning experiences with creative strategies that reflected real life projects. Teachers were empowered to change the curriculum. The teachers relied on school culture and organizational structures to facilitate common planning time and to allow coaching for professional development, and they used grade level meetings effectively to collaborate and plan for the future. However, the curricular and instructional practices they incorporated into learning experiences offer the most significant evidence of the preferred characteristics of middle level education. Collaboratively, the teachers of Park Ridge reviewed the curriculum, reorganized content, aligned texts across disciplines and to state standards, and developed meaningful units of study that reflected students' interests, engaged and challenged students, and focused on substantive outcomes.

Literacy skills among eighth grade students improved significantly after teachers implemented workstations as a way to address multiple learning styles and needs. These workstations supported students at different skill levels and actively engaged students in the learning process by ensuring that they had in-class time to practice using strategies introduced in class. During these experiences, students were challenged to generate their own questions and explore interactive, appealing, and novel ways of teaching and learning with peer and teacher support.

Across all of the classrooms at Park Ridge, teachers immediately recognized the benefits of implementing both procedural and content-based mini lessons. They found that spending several weeks early in the school year introducing students to the Workshop model helped establish and solidify routines and procedures, thus using the 90 minutes effectively.

During grade level meetings, teachers shared ideas for content ELA lessons (units of study) and procedural lessons. The teachers implemented such units as journalism, where students wrote a report of information, and author study, where students closely examined a number of works by the same author. Throughout the year teachers revisited some procedural lessons—such as peer conferencing or completing group projects with students. As new strategies were introduced, student expectations increased, and students developed greater levels of autonomy.

The Park Ridge Middle School teachers investigated and then applied strategies that supported students' literacy development and fostered an atmosphere of student-centered learning. Teachers modeled carefully selected strategies for students and created thinking aids that students continued to use as independent learners. The teachers could view evidence of the effectiveness of these new strategies by analyzing student work, also referred to as artifacts. Members of the classroom community co-created their artifacts (Nolen, 2000), and this creation process became part of the routines inherent to the classroom environment. Posters were placed on classroom walls, classroom libraries containing diverse collections of texts were created, and student- and teacher-created materials were exhibited. A plethora of student work appeared on the walls as the students worked through different projects, including student book reviews, published writing pieces, as well as student- and teacher-created charts. For the Readers and Writers Workshop, teachers recorded the supporting mini-lessons on chart paper daily; the mini-lesson gave a definition and an example of the strategy, which students could refer to at a later date. The students also created charts,

brainstorming ideas and using reciprocal teaching strategies to reinforce new concepts.

How the students used the artifacts in the classroom also evolved over time. Teachers found that students relied on these artifacts as reference tools. The artifacts provided visual supports to students as they developed an understanding. In fact, days or even months after the charts were removed, some teachers observed that students continued to search for the artifacts by pointing to a location on the wall to recall information previously discussed in class.

Park Ridge educators placed a great deal of emphasis on strategy instruction, and this approach proved to be successful. An overwhelming number of students started the school year with reading scores at level 1 (more than 50%); in five months of intensive strategy-based instruction, level 1 students moved to level 2 (45%) and some moved from level 1 to level 3 (5%). All of the students with level 3 (more than 40%) moved to upper 3 and level 4.

The students themselves also observed and analyzed their development as readers and writers, with some students offering positive feedback about the new units and strategies. After the journalism unit, one student commented, "I think I might want to pursue writing as a journalist." And after working on an author study unit, one student said, "I want to read more books by this author."

Conclusion

Snow and Biancarosa (2003) claim that literacy approaches are effective when they contain key elements such as teacher guidance, in-class time to read, and an emphasis on strategy instruction. Similarly, Alvermann (2004) believes:

> Effective instruction builds on elements of both formal and informal literacies by taking into account students' interests and needs while at the same time attending to the challenges of living in an information-based economy during a time when the bar has been raised significantly for literacy achievement." (p. 5)

At Park Ridge, educators used America's Choice as the literacy reform framework to guide the restructuring of their ELA curriculum. But teachers and schools can use other research-based practices to support student improvement. This framework was effective at Park Ridge because the teachers' instructional choices directly influenced the literacy practices and experiences of adolescent learners.

Common planning time and in-class coaching proved to be the most valuable experiences at this middle school. Teachers used group meetings to review student outcomes and develop strategic ways of supporting the continual development of students' literacy knowledge, skills, and dispositions. The Park Ridge teachers demonstrated the importance and value of professional development by learning about, creating, and implementing strategies and learning experiences previously unknown to them. Students, the ultimate benefactors of teachers' professional development, demonstrated measurable improvements in their reading and writing.

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