



## *The 6Rs Approach: Developing “Critical” Writers Among Poor, Urban Students in a Summer Literacy Program*

*Brett Elizabeth Blake and Richard Sinatra*

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper describes the implementation of the 6Rs writing approach into a summer literacy program offered to poor, urban children in New York City. Taking a cue from Rosenblatt (2004) the authors believe that readers and writers add onto their understandings and extensions of language as they engage in and transact with new readings, new writing formats, and new learning environments. Further, through presenting actual student samples of writing, the authors show that these children, as readers and writers, can also learn to think and respond more critically to the texts they read and write, questioning, for example, stories and meanings that surround gender, race, and class, while meeting all-important state and city standards.

### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

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I wish I were a chill slimmy monster  
Yo Yo Daniel  
He is a bad monster so Daniel  
Crawled to the Monster and  
The bug ate him and  
The cock-a- roach ate him too  
(Carlos, Age 9, 2003).

“How did you get your kids write this?” “What does it mean?” “How does it meet the standards?” and “My kids say they have nothing to write about” are among the many comments we have heard over the last several years among teachers in New York City and the surrounding suburbs when presented with the above “Wish” poem modeled on the late Kenneth Koch’s writing models/prompts from the early 1970s (Koch, 1970; 1973).

Together, both authors have conducted countless workshops among 100s of teachers on “best practices” for helping students to learn to write (and to learn to write “critically”) and to learn how to connect students’ writing with their reading, and vice versa. Interestingly, it has been *among teachers* that we first learned (and learned the most) about the current state of teaching writing in our schools today, leading us to seriously rethink our notions of what writing programs *can* look like in classrooms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Specifically, we found that among the teachers with whom we worked, most of them said that they did *little or no* writing at all with their students in their classrooms. In fact, in most cases, we found



only 2 to 3 teachers in each in-service workshop who felt she or he completely understood, had time for, and therefore could justify introducing the varied writing approaches presented to them today, especially considering the pressure placed on them by their districts and by state standards and high-stakes testing. And yet, when we introduced the “6Rs approach to writing” into a summer literacy program among urban, poor children (who also reported that they did not typically write much during the school year) we heard both students and teachers exclaiming, “wow,” or “it’s amazing,” and, “I can see how it could work!”

Providing extended educational opportunities for poor, urban children during out-of-school time when parents often need to work or to care for other siblings, has become a major concern of educators, government and community organizations, and parents themselves. One intent of the federal Twenty-First Century grant initiative is to support school-based academic and recreational programs when traditional schooling is not in session, such as during after school, weekends, holidays, and summers (US Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, 2003). Furthermore, during the long summer “off time,” the resources of learning and schooling are “turned off” for economically “disadvantaged” children limiting their capability for academic gains while the same is not true for their middle-class counterparts according to Entwisle, Alexander, & Steffel Olson (2001). However, the “summer slide” can be avoided while state standard requirements are supported (Borman, 2001; King & Kobak, 2000). Such good out-of-school programs should include a wide range of options, provide hands-on activities related to a thematic interest, and have an academic focus aligned with the work being done in the classroom (Pardini, 2001).

This paper describes the rationale, design components, and program results of a summer literacy program called the “6Rs approach” offered to thousands of urban, poor (The summer literacy program is part of a larger comprehensive summer project, CampUs, described below). Other practitioners and providers may wish to use the structure of this approach to achieve an integrated and coordinated way to increase children’s overall literacy development during out-of-school time while connecting to state English Language Arts standards and impacting positively on their lives. Inherent in this approach is the belief that what one reads can influence what and how one writes. Taking a cue from Rosenblatt (2004) we believe that readers and writers add onto their understandings and extensions of language as they engage in and transact with new readings, new writing formats, and new learning environments. Further, children, as readers and writers, can learn to think and respond more critically to the texts they both read and write, questioning, for example, stories and meanings that surround gender, race, and class (See Blake, 1995, 1997).

## **The 6Rs Program Rationale**

Two major considerations guided the structure and literacy implementation of the 6Rs approach. The first was forged by a sense of mission of its four major program sponsors – the After-School All-Stars (formerly the Inner City Games Foundation), The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), The New York City Board of Education, and St. John’s University. Their common mission goal was to provide opportunities for urban, poor youth during off-school time by engaging them in educational, athletic, recreational, and community enrichment programs while, at the same time, disengaging them from the potential “pitfalls” of inner-city life witnessed in substance abuse, poverty, littering, and “socially deviant” behavior.

In three 45-minute periods over a ten-day period, in support of the common purpose we focused on three themes: (1) beware of the dangers of substance abuse (say NO to drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes);



(2) show respect for the community and environment (don't litter and pollute); and (3) strive to be a good person and citizen (be of good character at home, at school, and on the playing fields). In the children's trade books and literature used in small group settings we followed what Rudman (1995) likened to an "issues approach", in which problem situations found in stories mirror what actually occurs for peoples in society. Often known as the practice of "bibliotherapy", an issues approach offers a way to provide guidance and protection through reading. Such a thematic focus also helps both teachers and students think about meaning while promoting positive attitudes towards the very acts of reading and writing (Burns, Roe, & Ross, 1999). Furthermore, where students write about what they read, the engagement of the process of writing enhances their ability to learn to write (Cohen & Spenciner, 2005). The writing plan accomplished with pens, pencils, and keyboard asked children to reflect upon these issues and consider the meanings found in the trade book readings.

The second rationale was to firmly support the major components of the English language arts and technology standards of the state and city by: (1) the engagement of children in wide and varied readings; (2) the production of discussion, written papers, and computer projects about issues or topics in which they had to produce evidence of understandings; and by (3) creation of a multi-media computer project in which they had to write, format, gather, and organize information (Board of Education of the City of New York, 1997). In New York City, the dropout rate for completion of schooling had increased for all students categorized by gender, native language, race/ethnicity, and immigrant status with the greatest increases for Hispanic, African American, and immigrant students. Research had clearly indicated to the department that the higher dropout rates were related to the increasing standards for promotion and graduation. These standards required an accomplished ability to write.

New York State like most states across the nation has begun to institute (and re-institute) various writing tasks as part of their state assessment requirements. For instance, students at fourth and eighth grade levels were introduced to "benchmark standards" in the English Language Arts by which, in large part, students could achieve success by writing acceptable papers based on responses made to textual readings. (This integrated reading/writing act was evaluated by the use of rubrics or scoring scales ranging from a level "1" as being inadequate writing to a level "4," defined as being "advanced writing proficiency." A level "3" indicated acceptable standards for writing). For differing writing tasks, students address the writing criteria of meaning, organization, development, language use, and mechanics.

In New York City, however, students have fared dismally on these assessments: 4<sup>th</sup> grade students performed "poorly" over the last four-year period with students achieving a level "2," or "below acceptable language arts standards" with scores at 67%, 58%, 56%, and 53.5%, while eighth grade middle school students performed even more poorly with 65%, 67%, 67%, and 70%, achieving "below writing competency" in the same four-year span. As a result, the state commissioner of education has urged that urban middle school students in particular concentrate their studies heavily on reading and writing, recommending that students reading at least 25 books a year and write at least 1,000 words a month (New York State Education Department, 2001b).

According to the National Commission on Writing (2003) writing is believed to be a crucial strategic skill for students since it is, "the mechanism by which they learn to connect the pieces and details of [all] their knowledge." And yet, recently the Commission has reported that the practice of writing among our nation's schoolchildren is both dismal and woefully ignored. The Commission noted that while many effective models of how to teach writing remain prevalent in the American school culture, the practice of applying these in the classroom is minimized. The Commission recommended that the time devoted to student writing should be doubled, that writing should occur across the curriculum, and that writing should occur during out-of-school time (2003).



This neglect of the power of writing, especially among at-risk, urban students was not always the case. Beginning in the late 1960s through the mid-1990s, research on the writing process approach was prolific (Atwell, 1987; Blake, 1992, 1995; Calkins, 1983, 1986; Dyson, 1992, 1993; Gere & Abbott, 1985; Graves, 1983, 1986, Murray, 1968). This research showed quite clearly that children can and do write, and they can and do write well. Further, research found, children from varied linguistic backgrounds and from diverse homes, for example, through the writing process approach, were more motivated to write, improved their spelling and grammar usage, and developed a greater sense of community, voice, and self through writing at all grade levels and across all ability and socio-economic groupings.

In the classroom, too, the tenets of the writing process approach were applied to the practices of the writing workshop, where students found themselves orchestrating their own writing from beginning to end: brainstorming or prewriting, drafting, revising, editing (often with peers in peer conferencing settings, or with the teacher in a one-on-one conference), and publishing and/or sharing in author's chair; ready to revise, edit, and read aloud again. Reports that teachers and students were flourishing in writing abounded.

And yet, by the early 1990s, there had befallen a curious silence about the future state of the writing workshop as reports of its success virtually disappeared. Dyson (1992) believed it was because of the rigidity that had taken over classrooms, where the writing workshop had become a "lock-step" method for students to follow. (This, of course, was in direct contrast to Calkins' original notion of "recursive, overlapping" steps where students brainstormed, drafted, edited, published, and repeated the cycle again and again). Other writing researchers like Blake (1995) believed that too much emphasis had been put on the process, rather than the product, or the "cultural texts" the students subsequently created, coupled with the fact that districts were beginning to de-emphasize writing altogether in favor of reading and math (A fact that the National Commission on Writing (2003) now confirms), while Lensmire (1993) believed that children's writing had simply lost its critical edge, leading both teachers and students to put less emphasis on its importance.

Whatever the exact reasons for the demise of the process approach to writing in classrooms and students' poor performance in writing overall, groups like the National Commission have realized that the lack of writing programs in the schools has and will continue to have, dire consequences on students' abilities to use written language and to communicate effectively at levels, and across all socio-cultural groups.

## **The Sponsors, Setting, and Participants**

Children between the ages of 7 to 13-years old came from a number of housing sites operated by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) that provides affordable housing for low and moderate-income residents throughout the city's five boroughs. According to its 2002 resident characteristics, a total of 174,195 families with approximately 69,000 children in the 7 to 13-year-old range and with an average gross income of \$15,685 lived at its housing project sites. NYCHA's mission, however, is involved in more than just providing living space. Through its Department of Community Operations, NYCHA offers youth an array of educational, cultural, and recreational programs at its 115 community centers citywide. It is also concerned with providing a safe and secure learning environment and embraces programs for its youth that have as their foci ideas to help overcome the ills of inner-city life, such as poverty, drugs, violence, and hopelessness. Because CAMPUS was a program highly favored by



the Department of Community Operations, NYCHA continued to be the major funding source over an eight year period.

During the summer of 2000, 1,028 children/clients from 25 housing project sites attended some or all of the 10 days of each cycle (there are a total of 2 cycles; running concurrently); in 2001, 1,094 children from 27 sites attended; in 2002, 1,078 children from 24 sites attended, and in 2003, a record 1,297 students from 26 different sites were in attendance. Each year, from about 110 to 249 children are bilingual in English/Spanish; from 112 to 140 children were in currently or had been in the recent past, special education classes in their respective schools; from 55 to 76 children would enter second grade and from 35 to 50 children would enter eighth grade in the new academic year. The majority, or roughly two-thirds of each summer's students were African-American and would enter grades three through seven in the fall of the corresponding year. Roughly one-quarter to one-third of each year's participants were returnees from a previous year's camp.

### **Role of the Researchers and Data Collection**

We used qualitative inquiry to see how children intertwined their reading and writing as they created "critical" written pieces for two, major, interrelated reasons. First, like Geertz (1973), we sought "thick description" in not only searching for the kinds of strategies that these poor, urban students utilized in becoming "critical," but how they actually *constructed, created with, and presented* these strategies to the researchers. Second, ethnographic inquiry allowed us, as the researchers, the opportunity to describe the children's strategies within the *naturalistic setting* of the classroom itself. Indeed, it is this facet of ethnographic inquiry that has as one of its most important features, the feature of *context*. That is, in examining (and subsequently, analyzing) the strategic approaches that poor, urban students utilized as part of the implementation of the 6Rs writing program, we have taken great care to describe the events as they evolved in the natural setting of the summer school literacy classrooms, shaped, "in particular contexts and [not completely] understood if removed from those contexts" (Kincheloe, 1991, p. 144). Describing these contexts and how the children learned and worked within these contexts becomes useful theoretical and descriptive data needed by others who may wish to undertake similar projects within similar programs.

Data were collected over a period of four summers, however, in this paper, only data from the summer session of 2003, are presented.<sup>1</sup> The authors acted as participant observers, moving from class to class, observing, engaging students in writing activities along with both the mentor and pre-service teachers, working side by side with particular students on revision strategies, for example, and selecting specific pieces to be included in this research project.

### **The Literacy Program Framework**

The CampUs summer school program was a full day program in which the children split their time between sports (swimming, soccer, football, and basketball) and academics, i.e. literacy (reading, writing, and technology). Eight practicing teachers with advanced degrees in Reading/Literacy Education and three certified computer teachers made up the key training and mentoring staff of the literacy component of the project. These mentor teachers had served the project through a number of consecutive summers and were quite knowledgeable in training others to implement the 6Rs approach. The mentor teachers met in planning sessions from April to June of the academic year and reviewed both old and new books



related to the three themes. In addition, the mentor teachers planned initial training lessons for potential new staff members.

A key ingredient aiding the smooth implementation of the 6Rs approach was the establishment of a low and manageable pupil/teacher ratio. This ratio was accomplished by recruitment of from 40 to 45 pre-service teachers from the School of Education each year. The pre-service teachers were trained (a full two weeks prior to the children's arrival) in classroom management techniques, conflict resolution ideas, behavior management strategies, and actual lesson preparation. They spent two days learning the children's software programs and four days with the mentor reading/literacy teachers. They previewed the books to be used by the children, saw demonstrations of and practiced model lessons incorporating the steps of the 6Rs approach, planned concept and story map usage with particular readings, and learned how to assist children with written development by focusing on the qualities of writing as indicated on the New York State writing rubric.

## Program Implementation

The 6Rs approach has six interconnecting, recursive steps, and incorporates many of the best practices of literacy instruction, including, crucially, what we've learned about how the reading and writing processes support and build upon one another. Further, in this age of standards and accountability, the 6Rs approach supports many national and state standards in the English Language Arts, a critical fact that, whether we agree is useful/harmful and/or authentic, is a reality in today's classrooms. We would be doing children a disservice if we did not help them connect their work to the standards, as well as to help children to understand the kinds of rubrics that state exams are using to measure their success. It is only in giving students access and ownership to the standards to which they will be held, that students can truly be free to take control of their learning.

The 6Rs approach follows the "steps" as shown in Figure One; steps that revisit many of the original steps of the writing process. First, students *read*. Next, through an interactive discussion with their peers, they use critical thinking skills to *reason* and brainstorm the text ideas. Next, students *retell* and *reconstruct* the meanings of the reading through the use of an organizational plan with story and concept maps; *(R)write* a narrative account or informational report using their map as a guide; learn of the qualities of writing and scoring weights of a *rubric* system, and *revise* their initial drafts by not only conferencing with their peers, but by close mentoring provided by the teacher. Finally, the students self- and peer-evaluate written pieces against the rubric scale. As in the recursive nature of process writing, students may re-read, re-write, and/or "repeat" any of the steps above.

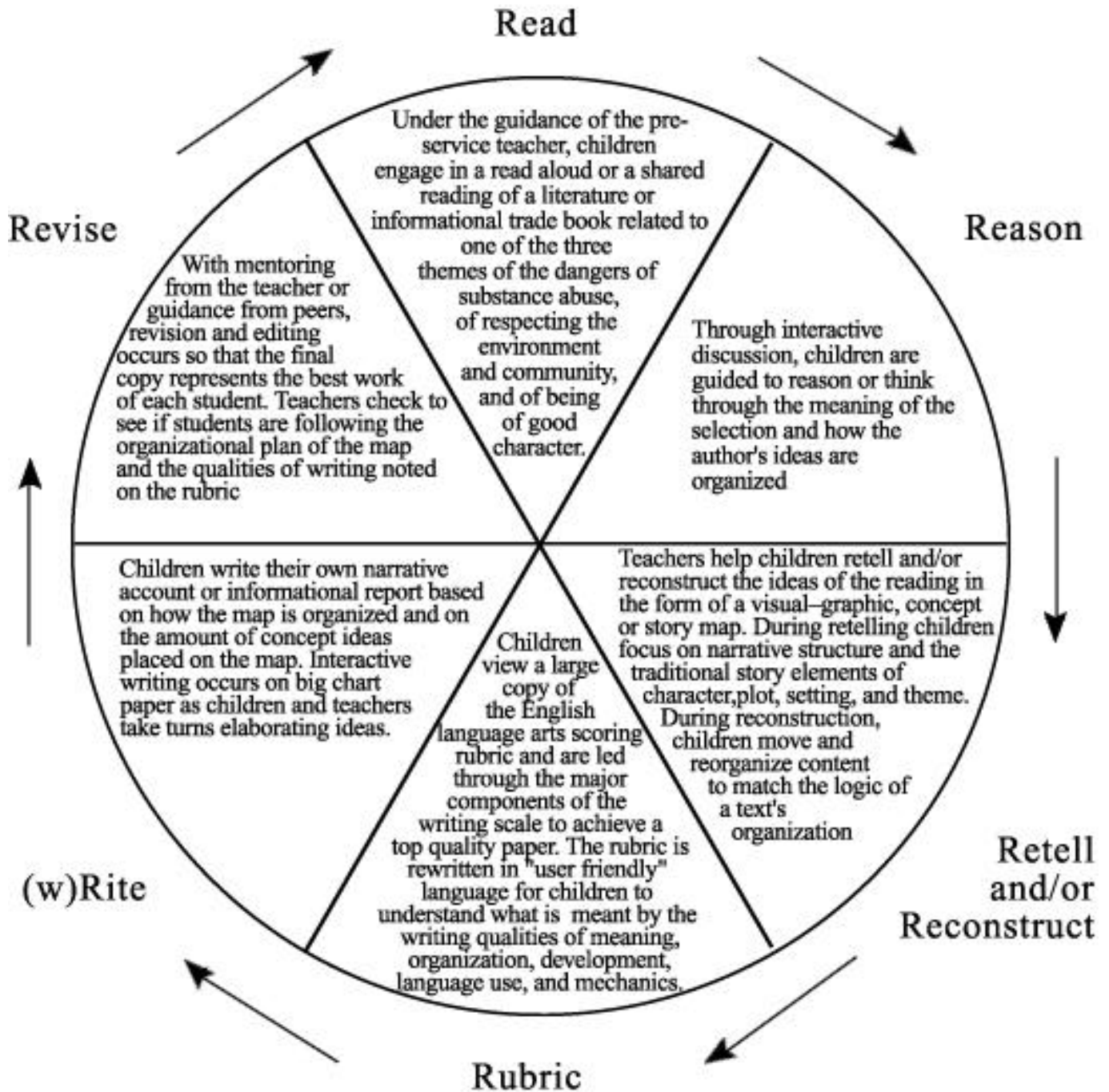
## Background Support for the 6Rs Approach

Writing and planning for writing after reading are the central features of the approach. As students learn the big ideas associated with the writing process, they learn to control structure through writing and learn how writers organize their information to help readers understand what they wish to tell. This is a crucial component of the writing workshop for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where standards, test tasks, and rubrics often reign supreme.

The thinking and literacy processes involved in the "reconstructing" and "retelling" aspects of the plan make use of the idea of visual representation of ideas through "maps". Concept and story maps, also



Figure 1: The 6Rs Approach



known as semantic maps, webs, clusters, and graphic organizers, serve as a major program strategy to help children formulate and organize their ideas before, during, and after an initial writing. Information based on the reading of a trade book is written either by the teacher who elicited the information during



the verbal discussion stage of “reasoning” or by the children themselves as they puzzled out the concepts and ideas of the text.

Researchers have reported that all students can improve in reading comprehension and planning for writing when they have been shown how text ideas are structured in narrative and expository readings and when they have been provided with visual models of text organization (Davis, 1994; Vallecorsa & deBettencourt, 1997; Wong, 1997). Many of the studies in the literature have also reported positive effects of concept map use for vocabulary and reading comprehension development when small groups of children and youth were taught in controlled settings (Boyle 1996; Englert & Mariage 1991). Furthermore, providing writers with visual frameworks of text organization gives them a framework for producing, organizing, and editing compositions and has a positive influence on writing overall (Englert, Raphael, Anderson, Anthony, & Stevens, 1991; Wong, 1997). With mental plans of how stories and informational readings are organized, children can form mindsets or mental schemata of how text is organized to assist them in future comprehending and composing processes and can approach texts in more predictable ways (Meyer, 2003).

## Daily Process

Reading – the first “R” in the “6Rs” approach – was supported by the use of trade books. Small collections of trade books, often known as “text sets,” were strategically used by teachers as they reinforced the major themes of the program. Research has shown that the addition of trade books to the writing workshop helps in the development of oral language and reading ability, assists in vocabulary acquisition, and increases children’s motivation to read and to write in school settings and at home (Galda & Cullinan, 1991). Harvey and Goudvis (2000) mention that short texts such as picture books are more accessible than full-length novels and textbooks. Trade books are also packaged in attractive formats that make them easy and “user friendly” to offer children in a summer educational climate, for example. Our use of fiction and non-fiction trade books served as the “magnifying glass” vehicle to enlarge and enhance the children’s interactions with the messages of the three themes (Vacca & Vacca, 2005). The books were categorized by both theme and reading level/content for younger children (7 to 9 year olds), older children (10 to 13 year olds), and for students from other cultures learning a second language. The “character development” books were all children’s literature and picture books in the narrative story tradition, while informational books as well as storybooks were found in the other two thematic groupings: the dangers of substance abuse and respect for the environment.

Teachers used differing concept map structures that represented how various reading and writings were organized. Some of the more popular maps used by teachers to help students both comprehend and connect story elements and expository information while providing a structural plan for the reconstruction through writing have been described in the literature (See especially: Harp & Brewer, 2005; Reutzel & Cooter, 1999; Sinatra, 2000) and include:

- a number of maps which represented stories by plot episodes and which contained question prompts for story grammar elements;
- a map which represented stories that featured a character’s problem and how the character solved and learned from that problem;
- a map which enumerated the steps-of-a-process such as what occurs to the body when a harmful substance is used;





- a map which described a central topic as in a “spider map” which develops from the central topic to the surrounding details;
- a cause and effect map which was often used with the substance abuse and littering topics; and
- a compare and contrast map, used when two book characters or two harmful substances were developed in detail.

The mapping step was often followed by a discussion about writing and about how reading can provide a number of ideas to develop in writing. Children were then presented with the qualities of writing and weighting scale noted in the project scoring rubric. (The components of the rubric were written in a more “user friendly” way for children, and 20 large copies of the children’s rubric were made and hung in each of the project’s classrooms). Teachers and students discussed what features of writing would make a good paper as they viewed the rubric, and children would return to look at the rubric as they engaged in the on-going drafting, revision, or editing process.

Children wrote their own individual papers while viewing either a group-constructed map or their own filled-in map as they were reminded of the qualities of writing noted in the displayed rubric. Project teachers interacted freely with the children as they wrote often answering questions posed by the children about their writing, such as “does it sound good?” or “is this correct?” After teacher and peer interaction and suggestions, a rewriting was accomplished. Once revision and editing were completed, children would share their reading of their papers to a buddy or the whole group with the final “polished” piece finally being displayed on the classroom wall under the appropriate theme title.

### **Program Success: Revealing Thoughtful Writing**

In the next section, we present samples of the students’ writing that revolve around the particular themes emphasized in the summer school program. Each theme evoked different levels of enthusiasm from the children, but each, were explored by the children, using the 6Rs approach, in new ways. (Students’ pieces are presented in the original, unedited form so as to preserve their voices, except where meaning would be lost).

#### *Theme of Substance Abuse: Making good or bad choices*

***My favorite experience was when my group read a book called, “The House that Crack Built.” I enjoyed when we wrote about the book. The book had a message to never do drugs and to always make the right choices. If you don’t make the right choices there will be consequences and sometime there not good!***

(Tiffany, Age 12, 2002).

Like Tiffany, for many of the students in the summer camp program, the theme of “substance abuse” necessarily meant writing about making good and bad choices around drug use; written pieces that one might expect to be extremely scripted considering the countless drug prevention seminars like the popular “Just Say No” program that these children were required to attend in and out-of- school. And yet,



by introducing this theme through the 6Rs approach, using various trade books, children's literature, and mapping to organize one's thoughts, the substance abuse theme was presented in a fresh way, and was reflected in the students' written pieces.

Anastasia completed the following piece after she had engaged in the first 3 steps of the 6R's approach: *reading* the book, "The House that Crack Built" (Taylor, 1992) using *reason* and critical thinking to have a discussion about the book with her peers, and *reconstructing* the meaning of the book and her own experiences and understandings into her own words onto a "Classification Map" (See Figure 2):

### *Choices*

***Making choices are very important. The choices are important because these choices rule your life. Good choices lead to a good life. You can become a hero by saving someone or just Doing the right thing. Bad choices are the wrong choices. When you do drugs it messes up your life and if you have a child it messes them up. So Right!***

*(Anastasia, Age 11, 2003).*

Anastasia's piece not only met the New York State Education Department's (2001a) English Language Arts Standards 1 and 3, for example (students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding, and, students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation, respectively), but also for Standard 2: students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression. Anastasia enthusiastically informs us how drugs cannot only mess up one's life, but a child's as well. Instead, she suggests (as seen in the Classification Map), people will be "smart and regular," as well as "not cry" and "not hurt each other" by making the choice not to do drugs; a response in direct contrast, we believe, to what any other "typical" writing task may have required. Here, using the 6R's approach, she has been afforded the opportunity to express herself within the context of the issue at hand. In other words, she is offering us a peek into who she is; how she feels about drug abuse, and how she believes other people should act when faced with making good and bad choices.

### *Theme of Protecting the Environment: Cause and Effect*

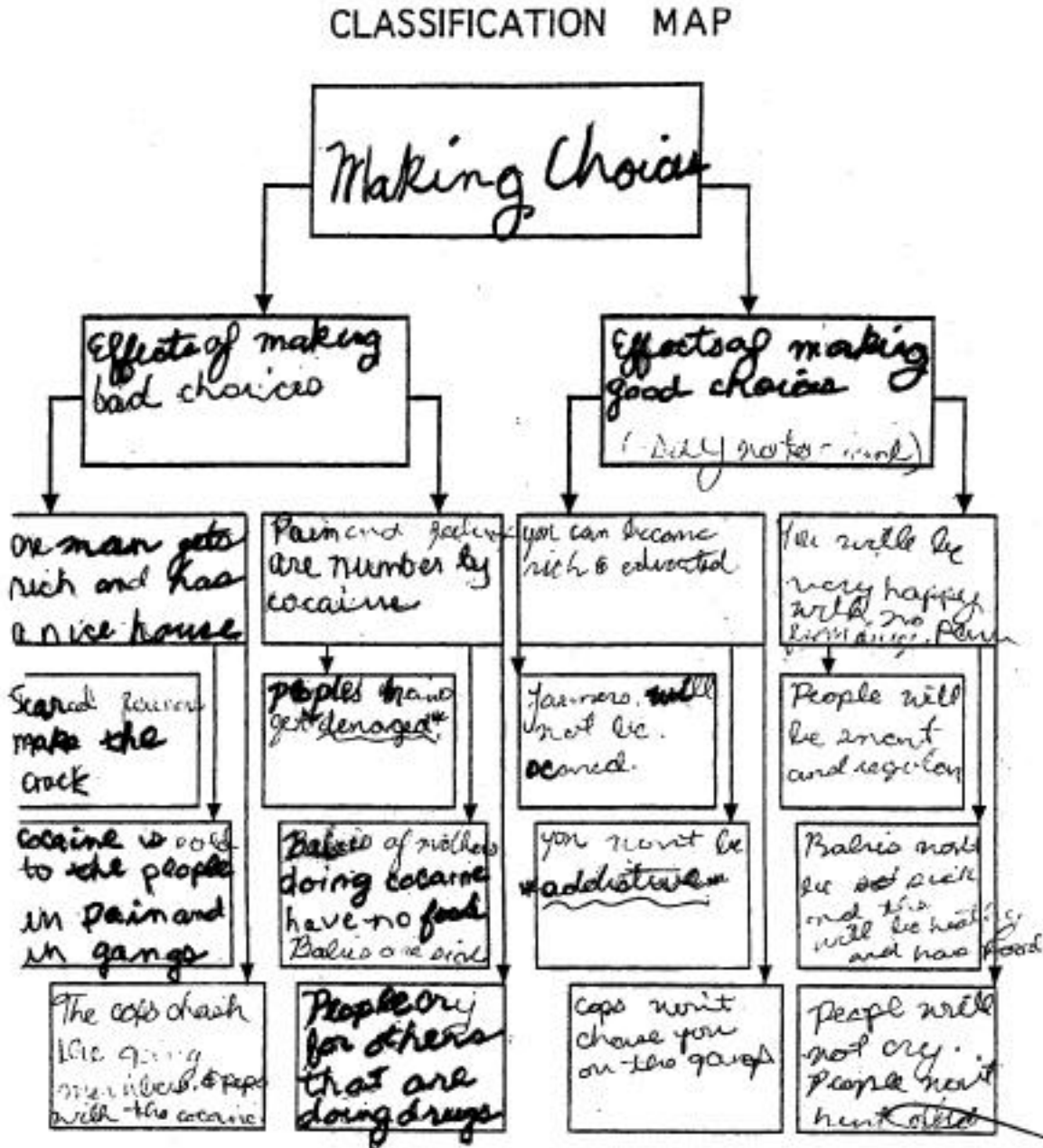
Another of the summer program's major themes was: "Respecting the Environment." Many trade books were chosen to support an exploration of the theme, and the students responded in a variety of ways. Once again, however, by using the 6Rs approach, many of the students were not only able to interpret and better organize the material they were reading and writing, but also were able to relate the salient issues of maintaining a clean environment to their own lives. Here, the students were most interested in talking and writing about garbage and litter in the city streets—a problem many children found far more pressing than oil slicks, recycling, and de-forestation. For example, in Figure 3, Jamal and his class have prepared a "Cause and Effect Map" using the book, "Just a Dream" (Van Allsburg, 1990) in preparation for writing pieces of their own.

### *Theme of Good Character: Challenging Segregation and Racism*

The final theme from which the students produced various written pieces, was "being of good character." Interesting, from these students' points of view, "being of good character" quite often seemed



Figure 2: Classification Map

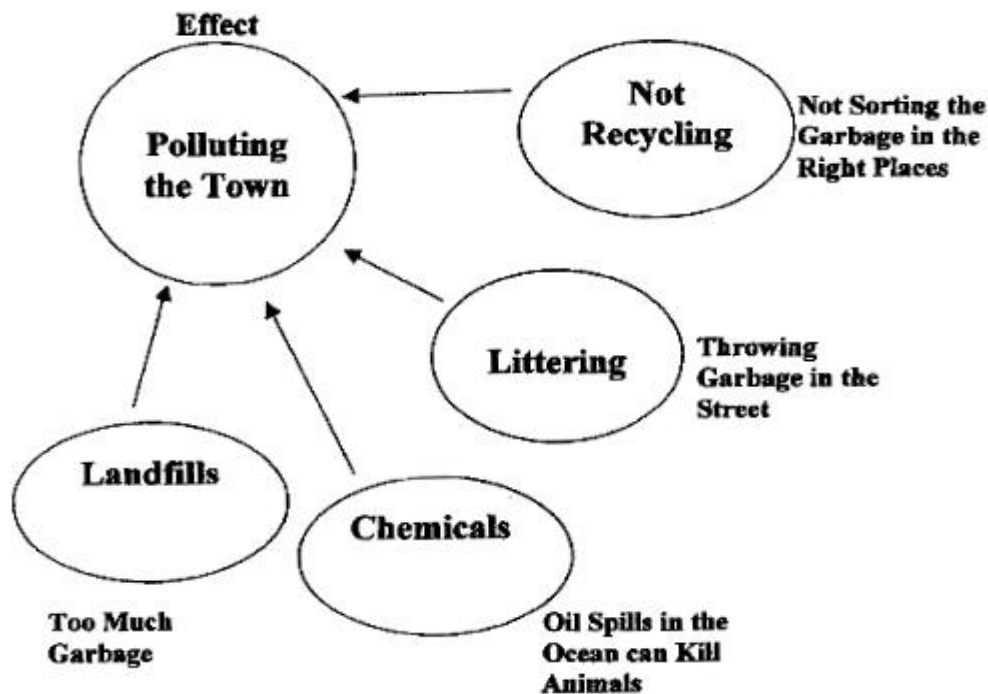


STUDENT \_\_\_\_\_ CLASS / TEACHER \_\_\_\_\_  
 TOPIC NAME OR TITLE The man that made bad DATE \_\_\_\_\_



to gravitate toward a discussion of racism; its causes and effects, its historical roots in sports, like major league baseball, for example, and its place in today's world. Many of the students were very astute about the evils of racism, and most were able to discuss it on a level many of us were amazed to hear.

**Figure 3:**  
**Cause and Effect Map: Multiple Causes for One Effect**



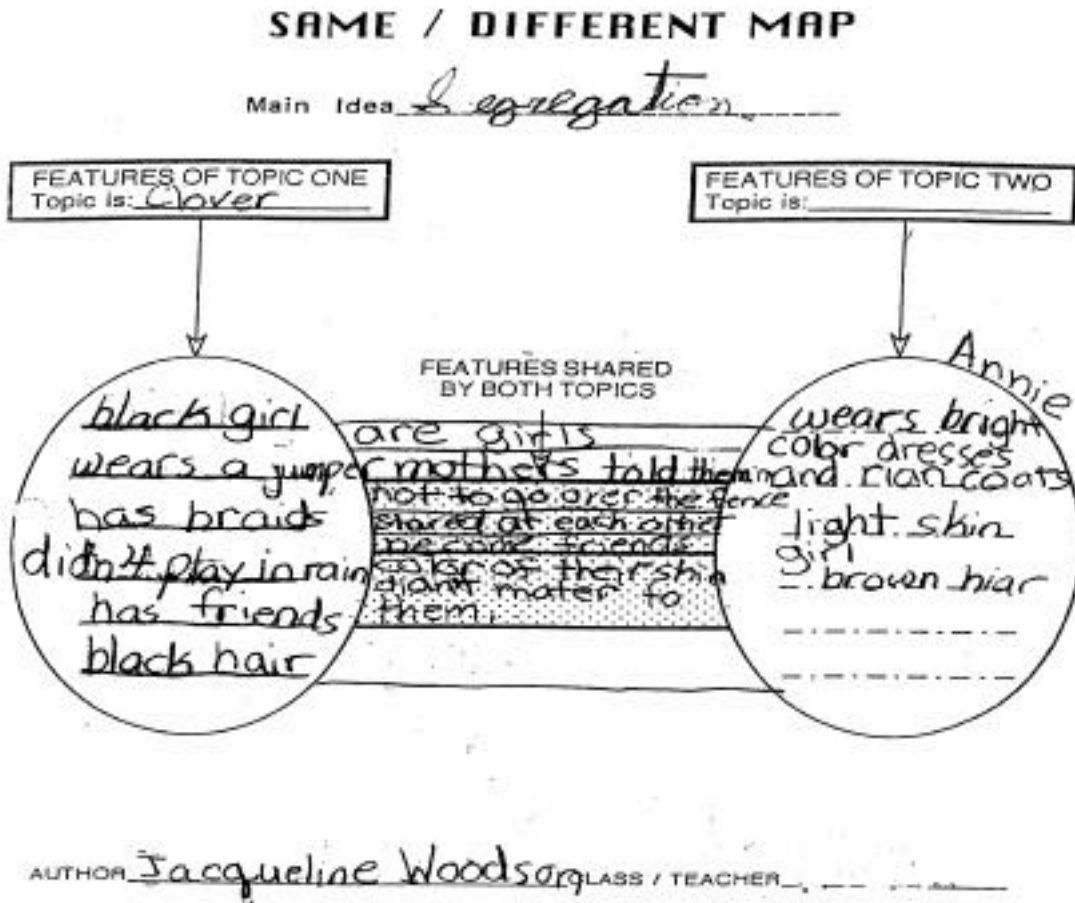
**Topic: Respecting the Environment**  
**Author: Chris Van Allsburg**  
**Title: Just a Dream**

The major trade book that was used to support this theme was, “The Other Side” (Woodson, 2001). This book beautifully describes and explores two school-aged girls’ feelings and reactions to racism in their own community; a theme, once again, that our students understood very well.

In the following piece, 9-year-old Kiara begins the writing component of the 6Rs approach by filling out a “Same/Different Map” listing the main idea as “Segregation.” Here, Kiara organizes the information about the two main characters in the book, highlighting the similar features that each girl shares. (See Figure 4.)



Figure 4: Same/Different Map



Kiara then joined in a lively class discussion about the book through which the class then organized its thoughts onto a large map being constructed at the front of the class. Next, each student began to draft a piece, checking his or her writing against the project rubric and sharing ideas and changes with each other and with the teacher. Finally, Kiara, like the other students, produced written pieces of her own.

### The Other Side

Dear Annie,

I think Segregation is wrong because the color of our skin doesn't matter. I think that Segregation is wrong because we should be able to live together. I feel sad that white skin people and black skin people can't respect all races. I think Annie is of good character because she didn't make fun of Clover's skin color.

Your friend, Kiara  
(9 years old, 2003).



Notice that it is when Kiara is given the opportunity to write a piece of her own, that we are able to hear her voice, a voice distinctive not only by its form (Kiara writes a letter to one of the characters, Annie), but also by its message: respect all races!

Using the metaphor of the fence found in the book, Kiara finished her piece by drawing and cutting out pink pickets, pasting her story panels to the pickets, and displaying it alongside the other students' work on the classroom wall.

## **Implications for Practice**

In the previous section, we have presented samples that show how poor, urban students in a summer literacy program through the "6Rs approach" can and do write given the time and the opportunities to do so. Further, their writing can and does match state and national standards, can and does connect to other content areas as they learn to write across the curriculum, and most critically, we believe, can and will continue to help students become "thoughtful" as they also learn to become more tolerant and more understanding human beings in a global, multicultural society. Kiara's piece on segregation may be the most poignant example of students' thoughtful approaches and strategies toward writing.

Specifically, the 6Rs approach not only firmly supported particular New York State standards, as discussed above, but also supported many of the national standards recommended by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (1996). These standards suggest in part that students should: (1) "read a wide range of texts...to acquire information, help society, and for their personal enjoyment; (2) "students should read a variety of literature of different genres...to better understand human experiences; (3) adjust their written, spoken, and visual language to communicate effectively in different situations, and (4) recognize the audience for their writing and use the writing process to communicate effectively with them". All the students did read a wide range of texts and responded to these texts in ways that did, indeed, help them to "acquire information," (e.g. recycling), "help society," (e.g. racism), and for their "personal enjoyment," (e.g. "Writing helped me expand my mind). And, the students also learned to write for different purposes, across the curriculum, as they acquired new information. For example, the theme of "respecting the environment" was an easy fit to other content area topics, especially in math, science, and social studies. This would be critically important for students to understand how to do as, once again, state and national exams are asking students to make these connections explicit.

## **Implications and Conclusions**

In sum, we believe the 6Rs approach to writing may be a success because it:

1. reaches a large number of poor, urban students who need supplemental work on their academics; both in reading and writing
2. is taught by pre-service teachers who will take this knowledge into the field
3. satisfies state and national calls for more emphasis on writing, and,
4. affords students opportunities to add onto their understandings and extensions of language (Rosenblatt, 2004) as they become more engaged, thoughtful, and critical writers.



Both the teachers and the students in the program felt very positive about using the 6Rs approach to writing. Currently, however, there are major changes being implemented (in curriculum, in personnel, in instructional services) in the New York City school system (as in other school districts around the country) giving rise to several questions: First, will teachers be able to make their own decisions about how they would like to best teach writing to their students? Second, will the students feel they have the opportunities and the “permission” to transfer their knowledge of “mapping” or “reasoning,” for example, for use on their writing tasks? In New York City, for example, the Chancellor has just mandated more standardized tests at regular intervals for public school students. These tests are purported to be very short, multiple choice tests that will gauge whether children will be ready for the much more lengthy state exams in math, science, and the language arts. More tests, less time, and fewer choices renders the time needed for the mental engagement necessary for writing even more hard pressed in classrooms today.

While more work may be needed and similar programs implemented to support the authors’ findings here, we believe that the 6Rs approach as described above can be a successful model for teaching writing to poor, urban students for four major reasons. First, it helps them to meet national, state, and local/district standards in writing; an area the National Commission on Writing has called critical. Second, the 6Rs approach affords these students additional opportunities to become more engaged, thoughtful, and critical writers; a feat most researchers (Allington, 2002; Blake, 2004; Blake & Blake, 2005; Cunningham & Allington, 2003; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Sinatra, 2000; Tompkins, 2003) believe will help students to add onto their understandings and extensions of language in their academic learning overall. And third, and perhaps, most importantly, the 6Rs approach may help students to not only raise challenges to stereotyped interpretations of characters (Think of Kiara’s response to the book, “The Other Side”) as they move away from interpretations based solely on expectations of the “mainstream” culture, but also to begin to learn to challenge assumptions around race, gender, and class that pervade their own ideological positions about themselves and the world they live in.

And finally, as in the words of the National Commission on Writing (2003, p. 13) we hope, too, that:

Writing is best understood as a complex intellectual activity that requires students to stretch their minds, sharpen their analytic capabilities, and make valid and accurate distinctions...[but] above all...*they will find that writing is liberating, satisfying, even joyful* (emphases ours).

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## Other Suggested Children's Books

### Character Development

Marzollo, J. (1997). *Soccer cousins: Companeros en el futbol*. NY: Scholastic en Espanola.  
Thomas, P. (2000). *Stop picking on me*. NJ: Barrons Juveniles.

### Substance Abuse

Greene, S. (1981). *The boy who drank too much*. NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell.  
Vigna, J. (1995). *My big sister takes drugs*. Albert Whitman.

### Respect for the Environment

Berenstain, S. & Berenstain, J. (1991). *Berenstain Bears don't pollute anymore*. NY: Random House.  
Leedy, L. (1991). *The great trash bash*. Holiday House.

### Multicultural Literature

Adoff, A. (1994). *My black me*. NY: Dolton.  
Bartoletti, S.C. (2001). *Black potatoes: The story of the great Irish famine, 1845-1850*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.  
Cline-Ransome, L. (2000). *Satchel Paige*. Illustrated by J.E. Ransome. NY: Simon & Schuster.  
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<sup>i</sup> The data collected previous to the summer reported here were analyzed using quantitative methodologies. Students were evaluated on their writing using a four-point scale as prescribed by New York State. 58 to 63 percent of the students as a mean group showed gains in their writing over this three year period (with a .26 to a .30 gain where  $p < .000$ ). The consistency of these gains has been documented. Data presented here are qualitative in nature as the authors decided that the previous quantitative data could not (and did not) capture adequately the contexts in which the students wrote (i.e. within the three major themes) as well as the "critical" nature of their written pieces.