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Never Too Old for a Field Trip: Exploring Community Assets for Middle Grades Literacy Integration

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We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Abstract

Middle Grades teacher candidates participated in a “field trip” in an Integrated Reading course to model best practices in culturally responsive teaching. The college students visited their downtown city including a regional art museum and memorial sculpture garden commemorating local Black history to experience and contemplate possibilities for literacy integration in their pedagogy. Teacher candidates were encouraged to explore and understand community culture, history, and assets with respect to their students’ lives, identities, interests, and experiences, and how these considerations should motivate their instructional decision making with literacy applications. A follow-up discussion was facilitated by the course professor along with a final project and presentation to combine key takeaways from the field trip with coursework objectives. Recommendations are made for both middle grades teachers and teacher educators on opportunities for leveraging community assets with culturally relevant pedagogy and literacy integration as combined lenses for middle grades best practice.

It may seem unorthodox to hold a middle grades undergraduate course in a local art museum and memorial sculpture garden. However, on a bright fall morning, middle grades teacher candidates in an Integrated Reading course traded their laptops and classroom for their phones and downtown streets to investigate and explore art, culture, community, history, and ultimately, best practices for teaching. Our aim was to actively model and demonstrate the three principles of middle level education (Association for Middle Level Education, AMLE, 2020) including how:

- Instruction fosters learning that is active, purposeful, and democratic;
- Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse;
- Schools collaborate with community and business partners.

More specifically, we hoped teacher candidates would develop understandings of literacy integration in middle grades as more than reading and writing; rather, that it encompasses how diverse, developing adolescents communicate and represent meaning while reading their world and making sense of cultural and social experiences (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Throughout this article, the teacher candidates will be described interchangeably as students to intentionally acknowledge their dual roles, and arguably, any educator's combined positionality as a lifelong learner. The students enrolled in this fall 2022 course were seeking certification in some combination of two middle grades content areas including science, mathematics, social studies, and language arts. Over the course of a two-hour session, they walked multiple downtown city blocks of our university in the southeastern United States. They toured a local art museum, strolled the Riverwalk, explored a historic memorial garden, and concluded with candid discussion questions and reflection sitting outdoors (Appendix A). Following the trip, these students would incorporate these discussion questions and experiences into a lesson seed and presentation for their coursework (Appendix B).

Theoretical Perspectives for Leveraging Literacy

This immersive course experience was designed as a means of exposing teacher candidates to community-based assets for implementing culturally relevant literacy instruction in middle grades classrooms. Recent research in literacy best practices suggest various combinations of place-based literacy, critical literacy, multimodal literacy (representations that involve multiple modes like images, signs, symbols, gestures, text, sound), and interdisciplinary literacy. Other research and theoretical perspectives also point to multiple opportunities for leveraging literacy. For example, Ladson-Billings (2014) asserts that for pedagogy to be culturally relevant, instruction should emphasize three tenets of academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, the last of which is often left out of instructional implementations.

Additionally, there are consistent calls for quality middle grades curriculum to be challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse while fostering active, purposeful, and democratic instruction (AMLE, 2020). Introducing teacher candidates to the opportunities for place-based education and integrating literacy across content areas meets each of these characteristics. The “field trip” was a uniquely blended opportunity for teacher candidates to discover and identify natural connections between these theoretical perspectives in literacy, cultural relevance, and middle grades education in a dynamic, interactive way.

Accordingly, we detail these four theoretical perspectives for integrating literacy into instruction including place-based literacy, critical literacy, multimodal literacy, and (inter)disciplinary literacy. Though organized as separate sections, the discussions, applications, and practical ways these were addressed through the field trip—and generally during any instruction—are rarely mutually exclusive.

Place-Based Literacy

Proponents of place-based literacy practices argue for the instructional advantages of elevating existing community assets, funds of knowledge, and situated literacy practices that make instruction engaging and relevant for students (Lesley & Matthews, 2009; Mendoza, 2018; Moll, 1992). Specifically, teachers and students can effectively communicate and relate to learning in meaningful ways through literacy practices by exploring local culture with community walks, driving tours, service projects, mentoring, and relationship building (Bennett, 2008; Boyle-Baise, 2005; Brayko, 2013). Through this field trip, students gained knowledge of

local artists, schools, architecture, churches, court cases, and history by reading and seeing art pieces, glass sculptures, buildings, carvings, museum placards, Riverwalk plaques, historic street markers, and photos placed along a timeline of events throughout the memorial sculpture garden. At the same time, students also experienced the authentic aspect of homelessness in their city when they encountered individuals and evidence of others living and sleeping in the surrounding area.

By modeling and emphasizing place-based literacies, teacher candidates could understand more about the community and culture in which their students might grow up, while also creatively anticipating ways they could incorporate multiple aspects of this rich history, cultural capital, and literacy artifacts into a future project, lesson, or unit that would involve multiple aspects of literacy. In our discussion at the end of the trip, students noted facts they had newly learned of history and school segregation in the area, which they had not known even though some had lived locally for years. Additionally, though the sad reality of homelessness came to light in our community walk, students did not see this as a deterrent for exploring local places; rather, they recognized this as an opportunity to educate themselves and their future students on opportunities for civic engagement and community service. AMLE (2020) posits successful middle schools collaborate with community partners. Field trips like these open doors for partnerships to form.

A discussion that emerged from our post-trip reflection session involved *belonging*. Students contemplated what it means to belong to a geographical area, to history, and to a group of peers in a learning community. In the most recent position paper by AMLE, Bishop and Harrison (2020) assert educators must be aware students' multiple and intersecting identities influence their experiences, opportunities, and perspectives. Through these considerations of belonging and intersectionality, instructional practices and policies can be just and equitable. Although research on equity in middle grades teacher education is advancing, significant gaps in this area remain (Smith & Falbe, 2021).

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy pedagogy includes developing opportunities for students to feel ownership, empowerment, agency, and awareness in communicating. For teachers, this could mean providing students with critical thinking prompts and chances for challenging them to relate a concept, lesson, or unit to current events or relevant issues. Additionally, critical literacy practices may give students a voice for, or new knowledge surrounding, a particular problem of social justice by connecting and validating identities as part of their classrooms. Pushing boundaries from cultural competence to critical consciousness can be as simple as allowing reading, writing, composing, and producing in assignments that incorporate (and sometimes interrogate) content standards within students' daily lives (Ladson-Billings, 2014). These opportunities can be cultivated in content classes through both arts and literacy integration (Barry, 2012; Mendoza, 2018). Similarly, discipline-specific strategies for critically exploring multiple historical texts heighten middle level students' ability to participate in a community and culture while providing them with curriculum that is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse (Bennett & Sanders, 2016).

Specifically, on our trip the teacher candidates viewed artwork and participated in discussions over artists' intentions and messages. In doing so, they engaged in critical conversations and reflections. They also were encouraged to contemplate how they could inspire

and design similar activities or explorations for their future students at other museums (or in classwork assignments). Additionally, students critically contemplated their identities and place in time as they navigated the memorial park; the park is designed to take an observer as they “travel” upward through historic challenges along a gradually inclined ramp. The ramp is a life-sized timeline with dates, facts, and imagery detailing local Black history that ends in a triumphant, modern sculpture created by a Black artist. In discussions and assignments, students were encouraged to consider how this exploration related to both them and their students, as well as creative options for integrating and replicating similar expressions or reflections of time, imagery, culture, and history in their future classrooms.

Multimodal Literacy

Multimodal literacies can be a natural bridge from out-of-school literacies to academic ones (Craddock, 2022; Taylor, 2018). This is because in everyday life, individuals communicate with combined modes such as signs, symbols, images, tone, gesture, videos, music, text, etc. (Kress, 2010). Middle level students in today’s classrooms are accustomed to a multimodal world as they absorb stories and information through multiple sensory inputs (Barker et al., 2021). As contemporary examples consider the multiple modes present in video games, TikTok, or those used in learning how to drive a car. Likewise, museums, art, historical tours, and community signage are other fitting examples of ways literacy is multimodal and social, while also providing opportunities for academic engagement and representation (Barry, 2012; Mendoza, 2018). To learn and discover when walking through spaces while reading, seeing, and feeling is to experience multimodal literacy in its truest sense.

On our field trip, teacher candidates were encouraged to notice the multimodal literacies they were utilizing and consuming to explore and understand the community, culture, history, and art in the spaces we visited. Moreover, this lens toward using multiple modes was something they were learning to adapt to their future instruction for middle grades in multiple content areas. The experience revealed relationships between the multimodal social literacies in students’ cultural communities and multimodal literacy practices used in academic learning. For example, academic content areas can include digital literacies, games, tactile/manipulative representations, timelines, comics, tables, graphs, photos, and music. In conversations following the field trip, teacher candidates articulated ways our tour could not only be replicated, but also used as a springboard for future students to create their own multimodal representations of content through digital videos, posters, comics, skits, or storyboards in content classrooms.

(Inter)Disciplinary Literacy

Advocates for interdisciplinary literacy assignments argue that while different content areas may have some specific terms, concepts, and communication norms, students should be guided in making connections between disciplines (Hill, 2014; Shifflet & Hunt, 2019). Interdisciplinary curriculum has always been a tenet of middle grades philosophy, reiterating AMLE’s (2020) key components of a successful middle school curriculum as challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse. Literacy is a natural bridge for these endeavors since some form of communication and representation happen in all subject areas. Furthermore, the multimodal literacies students experienced on our trip also demonstrated that though science, mathematics, social studies, and language arts may prioritize or emphasize different modes, there are similarities in the multimodal ways reading, writing, and interpreting happens within them (Craddock, 2022).

As students participated in our field trip, they noticed times when content areas were overlapping throughout their experience. In the art museum, they learned not only about art and history, but engaged with environmental pieces depicting landscapes that could be adapted to scientific lessons. Similarly, multiple sculptures and pieces incorporated a large variety and representation of geometric concepts present in middle grades mathematics curriculum. The teacher candidates also noted possibilities for creative and reflective writing surrounding both art and history, and ways this connected to imagery and figurative language instruction for language arts. These organic connections can foster opportunities for purposeful instruction to make learning active and relevant for young adolescents.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

At this point, it seems pertinent to acknowledge a middle school field trip, or even a college-based one, is not a novel innovation. Neither, in fact, are any of the literacy perspectives outlined throughout this article. Further, considerations like place-based literacy, critical literacy, multimodal literacy, and interdisciplinary literacy often overlap in their applications more like a multimodal Venn Diagram, despite the appearance of distinct separation delineated through the organization in previous sections. Each area also, in their own ways, has been affiliated through research with culturally relevant pedagogy and middle grades instruction.

However, with all of this considered, the trip for teacher candidates provides an imaginative approach to merging and considering these practices and contexts together. This blended lens illuminates literacy integration in middle grades content areas as not only plausible, but inevitable, especially when considered within a culturally relevant framework. Moreover, a trip to discover and elevate community assets illustrates how combining multiple perspectives for literacy with culturally relevant pedagogy is again, not just possible, but natural.

Our quest was not specific or exclusive to a city, museum, or subject. A similar trip can be replicated for both middle grades students and middle grades teacher candidates in any location. History, culture, assets, and community are inherently a part of every place and space. We posit, in turn, this means occasions for integrating literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy are just as ubiquitous. In our age of technology, virtual field trips and similar experiences are even accessible from our classrooms if a physical trip is not possible.

Further, our trip directed attention toward new possibilities in partnerships with our university, local schools, and community stakeholders (like local museums and churches) who may already be implementing interdisciplinary afterschool, enrichment, or intervention programs. In subsequent semesters, these experiences have since led us to collaborate with docents from the art museum, a historian from our local Black History Museum, and another colleague, the Children's Literature and Advanced Literacy professor. We have worked together in extended, improved "field trips" and additional course assignments toward these goals. For teachers and teacher educators alike, exploring partnership options and embracing these ideas can create opportunities for us and our students to investigate local funds of knowledge, community identities, and cultural and social capital. Then, we can meaningfully design instruction, assessments, and curriculum that sincerely prioritize these community assets in a culturally relevant way.

AMLE (2020) affirms education for young adolescents must include the five essential attributes of being responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging. A well thought “field trip” into local communities can meet each of these characteristics when combined with pre-teaching and reflection. We challenge educators to consider what other types of lessons could hold such promise and pose a final question: where will you take YOUR students?

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Appendix A

End of Place-Based Literacy and Critical Field Trip Reflection/Discussion Questions

- What did you learn from the trip that you did not know before—historically, academically, or socially (about the community)?
- What did you enjoy/not enjoy from the trip?
- Why is/isn't the trip relevant to you as a student/educator?
- Which art piece(s) particularly stuck out to you/did you talk with a classmate about?
- What parts of the trip could be creatively integrated into student learning/instruction and how? (For example, was there a particular art piece that could be integrated into a conceptual lesson? Could students do a scavenger hunt downtown or at the museum? Could different historical or STEM or art aspects correlate to a specific concept?)
- What are some challenges of coordinating a trip like this and/or being creative like this in your instruction with middle-level students, parents, and communities?

Appendix B

Cultural Relevance and Literacy in the Disciplines Presentation Prompt

(for teacher candidates)

Throughout the course so far, we have tried to identify small ways content area lessons can be made culturally relevant through integrating literacy. One of the ways this can happen is by considering the multimodality of disciplines AND multimodal students' literacies and lives around them.

When we go on our trip, I want you to think about ways art, or field trips, or place-based historical lessons/integration (or all of the above) might be creative or innovative “jumping points” for a lesson plan, project-based assessment, inquiry-based assessment, or interdisciplinary assessment. Take pictures and/or videos of places and pieces. Additionally, make an effort to have a critical conversation with one classmate about at least one place or piece you see.

You don't have to create the details of a whole lesson plan or project; however, I want you thinking about which pieces of art or which aspects of the trip/history resonate most with you and think outside the box in terms of how experiences like this affect you not only as an educator and student, but how they could be blended into teaching and learning experiences in your future classroom. What ways can you incorporate different content areas, literacy, and multiple modes for your students to integrate and learn from?

You will have the opportunity to present a “lesson seed” for possible adaptations for incorporating culturally relevant/responsive teaching into your future lessons. Of course, based on what we've learned and realized so far, context means quite a bit in terms of pedagogy. This being said, you may choose to adapt the lesson for the field experience classroom and students you encountered (race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, languages, sexual orientations, student exceptionalities) so that you can be specific. However, for now, you can be flexible in imagining your future classroom, grade and space if you'd like; remember—it is true that “culture” encompasses quite a few things. Just be prepared to justify your decisions throughout the presentation as to why they are culturally relevant for certain audiences. (Like our students, we get to “pretend” and be a little creative with our imaginations for now here if you'd like).

The presentation can take a few approaches but should include:

Any lesson/activity from our course texts and describe at least 3 very specific ways and pedagogical choices you could incorporate/adapt to make sure the activity can integrate literacy and relate to our field trip in ways that are culturally relevant. This might include classroom structure, differentiation strategies, pre-assessments, manipulatives, artifacts, texts, videos, assessment choices, artistic/community connections, extension activities you might incorporate.

Your presentation should make the following things clear:

- *WHAT are your pedagogical choices/adaptations?*

- *WHAT content area or standard will this relate to?*
- *WHY are your choices culturally relevant?*
- *WHAT potential limitations or challenges could you have in implementing these ideas?*
- *WHY did you personally choose them?*

Your presentation should be made (approximately 10 minutes) with a visual aid (poster, video, PhotoStory, iMovie, PowerPoint, Prezi, Handout, Flipgrid, etc.) I'm also very open to other creative presentation ideas such as comics, songs, skits, almost anything! You can do this presentation alone or in pairs.