



# Teacher Leader Stories

VOLUME THREE

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James Boutin  
Alissa Farias  
Mark Gardner  
Claire Hallinan  
Samantha Huckabee  
Janet L. Kragen  
Mandy Manning  
Megan Megaard  
Linda Myrick  
Shannon Francisco-Papcun  
Danielle Puhl  
Carla Reynolds  
Mary Sharp  
Rachel Wiley





## Introduction

Nasue Nishida  
Executive Director, CSTP

CSTP's Writers' Retreat is a unique experience for teacher-writers to engage in a writing process that is all about them. It was started years ago by CSTP Founding Director Jeanne Harmon, who understood the importance of providing the time and space for teachers to write. She along with writing expert Sylvia Soholt perfected the design of the Writers' Retreat with the teacher-writer at the forefront. The foundational premise of the Writers' Retreat is that teacher voice matters, teacher voices should be heard and the voices of accomplished teachers can positively impact education from the classroom to the Capitol and beyond.

Now the Writers' Retreat is part of a larger professional learning opportunity over the summer that we affectionately call Camp CSTP. Camp CSTP provides the time, space and support for teachers to explore and develop their leadership knowledge and skills and discuss and reflect upon their leadership journey.

In the summer of 2016, situated in a beautiful wooded setting coached by an expert writer and supported by a caring facilitator, a group of teacher-writers got to work. In this compilation of Teacher Stories Volume 3, their writing tells stories from the classroom and of students who changed their personal and professional lives. Their writing relays their worries, fears and hopes for education. Their writing imparts professional wisdom – lessons learned, ideas tried and kept, ideas tried and scrapped and ideas for the future.

Thank you to the National Board's Network to Transform Teaching Grant (NT3) for its support of the 2016 Writers' Retreat.

Grab a cup of coffee or a glass of wine, perhaps a tissue. Pull up a seat and enjoy the read.



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## The Heart of Education

James Boutin

Scanning my ninth-grade language arts classroom as she speaks, curious Janet with black curls in her hair and a half-smile of interest on her face says to me in a quiet voice about her good friend, “Mr. Boutin, I think Jessica smells like tortillas this morning!”

“Now that is an interesting observation, Janet. Why do you think that is?”

Taking a moment to gaze at the ceiling with a crinkle in her brow before responding, Janet becomes bug-eyed as she eventually blurts, “Maybe she had tortillas for breakfast!”

“I bet she did! Thank you for that information, Janet. I love how attentive to detail you are!”

Looking at me over the top of the notebook that she’s raised in front of her face to obscure her excitement, Janet smiles at me with her eyes and nods succinctly as if she has just completed a very important mission before walking confidently back to her seat.

Many of my friends wrongly believe that the best thing about being an educator is that I get the summers off. Little do they know that I spend much of my summer daydreaming about the real perks of teaching, one of which is the joy that comes in witnessing the profound curiosity that young people like Janet have for things that adults long ago dismissed as unimportant.

While adults often concern themselves with doing taxes, doing their jobs, or doing the laundry, young people are far more inclined to wonder. They wonder why people speak English. They wonder how we got here. They wonder why their friends smell like tortillas. There is nothing more beautiful than a mind that is still immensely curious, that has not yet lost the courage to ask the most basic questions. And there are few things more depressing than when someone squashes that curiosity with an answer.

In schools, there is often a culture among educators of ironically giving to students things they should be finding themselves, like answers, and yet simultaneously making them work hard for things that don’t seem to serve them in any meaningful way. We lecture students about the way the world is in history and science, but then expect them to labor over which multiple choice answers to eliminate. And we very often do so unconscious of the tremendous adult privilege that allows us to pass off our world view to young people as

objective or true, and then test students on whether they’ve learned to agree with us or not. However well intentioned, the appropriate word for this process is indoctrination, not education, and it subverts students’ natural inclination to wonder and grow themselves.

My favorite definition for education is the process by which a person becomes her or himself. This notion is different from the more popular perspective that sees schools as places intended to fill students’ brains with knowledge and understandings developed by other people (always adults), that we think they will need to exist in the world as we have known it. The problem is that students will very soon exist in the world as we don’t know it. And it is there, in our future, that the innate gifts of curiosity, collaboration, imagination, and passion for discovery will be invaluable.

In his 1976 book, *Beyond Culture*, anthropologist Edward T. Hall opens by citing two great crises facing humanity. The first of these is the crisis of relationships we maintain with ourselves. Can we find purpose and meaning in the modern world and transcend social diseases like racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression? The second crisis Hall notes is our relationship with the earth. Climate change, the trash epidemic, and the destruction of fragile and life-sustaining ecosystems across our globe are causes for incredible concern. Indeed, these crises are not mutually exclusive. We will not solve one without simultaneously addressing the other.

What, you might ask, do either of these problems have to do with a girl who wonders about the smell of tortillas? The answer, I would say, is absolutely everything.

As a teacher and citizen, I have spent over a decade advocating for humane education policy. In that time, I’ve come to realize that a great many policy initiatives and ideas that dominate popular conversation around education still suffer from the refusal to move away from antiquated notions of the mind as a blank slate, with the function of education being to fill it so that students can conform to society. This view persists despite the fact that leading experts in the field of epistemology—the study of how we know what we know—have long held that to be an outdated model for thinking about learning and knowing.

Meanwhile, various indigenous perspectives on education have long emphasized the acquisition of knowledge as a process



of experiencing, questioning, and reflecting. When shared, the wisdom of elders is often framed with language that honors the possibility of alternative perspectives. “You’ll need to know that for the test,” is alternatively said, “My experience with that has been...”

This dichotomy helps us understand our own system of education very much as a cultural artifact that is unique to Western modes of being and knowing. The fact that we use the word “standard” to describe a learning outcome is further evidence of our belief in a notion of knowledge as an objective, quantifiable reality to be gained from “out there.”

The word “standard” is far more appropriate to the field of weights and measures. When a government agency needs to provide a sense of consistency across a given industry, they set a standard weight or measure that is defined as a quantity that can be compared to something being used in the field in order to ensure consistency. Take a moment to think about the implications of public education co-opting that word to refer to learning. It implies that we believe that knowledge can be experienced the same in all learners’ brains when it cannot.

The metaphor we continue to operate with for school is that of a factory, where standards are meant to be produced with consistency over and over again, when the metaphor of a garden, a place that supports life and vitality, would be a far healthier frame through which to imagine schools.

None of this means that learning targets or structured learning isn’t valuable. It’s that we’ve framed them poorly. Our current overemphasis on a narrow strand of knowledge and skills is unhealthy and counterproductive. Especially in schools under tremendous pressure to perform, it squashes individuality and emphasizes a deficit perspective, in which educators spend far more time thinking about how students are deficient rather than building on their strengths. Much of what’s offered in the factory is valuable, albeit delivered ineffectively. But it’s so incomplete without the complement of what the garden will produce. We cannot allow ourselves to get off the hook by choosing one over the other. Students deserve both challenging learning outcomes that grow them for societal participation and opportunities to find and become themselves. Each supports the other.

Many educators, born and raised in this culture, have a difficult time understanding that the standards are culturally normative, and do not do a good job honoring both aspects of human growth that many other subcultures in our society would choose as paramount, such as the ability to relate with others, to take initiative and be inventive, or to critically

question and reflect on information presented.

There exists within our culture a curious fear of human variation. That variation exists is natural and should be celebrated. Accepting this variation is fundamental to the possibility of a bright future for our species. Diverse perspectives are actually the whole point of working in groups to begin with. Homogenous groups do not behave as intelligently as well-functioning diverse groups. As such, we should be wary of when, why, and in what ways we demand that people in our society be the same.

Since the advent of the industrial revolution and the incredible increase in immigration and cultural exchange that has accompanied it, people have often pontificated over whether such a thing as a harmonious pluralist democracy, where people from incredibly diverse cultures live and work as neighbors, was a real possibility. While pundits may have the luxury of debating this question, educators in America’s public schools do not. The only answer is yes. A harmonious pluralist democracy is our only option. This is where we find the real sense of urgency in our world. And public school educators must be among those who discover how to make it work.

The problems of the future will never be solved by those who’ve been taught to function in a world of the past. It will neither be solved by those who have been limited by a given culture’s prescription for how to be, know, and think; most certainly not in a pluralist democracy like the United States. To be sure, the problems facing our world are immense. They require tenacity, problem-solving, courage, imagination, collaboration, and tremendous hope. There is good reason to believe that we can rise to meet the challenges facing life on earth with a force worthy of the human spirit, but it won’t be because we’ve trained our young people to think as we think and do as we do. It will be because we were brave enough to enact policy and curate spaces in and out of schools that allow them to become themselves.



James Boutin is an National Board Certified Teacher who teaches language arts and social studies at the Academy of Citizenship and Empowerment in SeaTac, WA.





## How Six, Second Chances Can Change a Life

Alissa Farias

“Do you believe in six, second chances?” he asked me. I sat across from the principal dumbfounded on how best to answer. I had never been asked a question like that before in an interview. I wondered what the question was getting at. I debated my response. I knew that in my life I’ve needed several second chances. Heck, my whole adolescence through the beginning of my college experience required a second chance. But six? Isn’t that excessive? I finally responded with “Yes, of course.” That seemed the safe, and humane response.

Well, my response was either the right answer or I checked off enough of their requirements, as I got the job. I was officially a high school Spanish teacher about to begin my first full time job with a real pay check. I began decorating my room, setting up lessons and highlighting notes from Wong’s First Days of School. I was unaware that I was beginning an experience learning the beauty and struggle of six, second chances.

It was my third year of teaching when I finally met him. I don’t remember first meeting him, or even the first few months with him. I had so many new kids and he was just one of the pack. However, his personality began to rise above the rest, and not for the best reasons. He was stubborn, sarcastic and focused more on those around him than on his education. He drove me nuts. He wouldn’t follow my instructions, was disruptive and argumentative. He was also part of a program I taught where we were together an extra 2.5 hours four days a week; He was in my Spanish class and my advisory class. We saw a lot of each other.

As time went on, my nerves were getting to the breaking point. I went to my administrator asking for the student to be out of the program, and left instead with ideas on how to help him. This continued for two years. I would ask for him to be out and my admin would find a way to convince me to keep him in. I simply was compliant. I didn’t hate the student or

believe ill will of him, I was just tired of trying.

What I didn’t expect was that things *would* change. This student, upon entering his junior year, began to shift his focus from distracting his peers with humor and defying me, to academics. He would sit for longer periods of time working on his homework. He began asking his peers for support and showing interest in colleges. Eventually, he became the one his peers would go to for support and even

began tutoring students in an after school chemistry study hall. He began to open up to me more and more about his life, his struggles, and his dreams. He shared about how his father was in jail, his family was homeless and sleeping on the living room floor of his grandmother’s house, and how the SWAT team recently busted into their home and arrested his younger brother. He saw his life as a split path with two different destinations; the gang life, or education as his salvation from the other. I was heartbroken. Here was this child

who was drowning from the world around him and I, the person who was there to help him, had wanted to give up on him. I cared for him and his future but had begun to believe he would never change. However, *his* will was stronger and he was able to break past the cycle of gang-related poverty. I had witnessed the process of him drowning, to treading water and finally swimming in the race to college. He even began taking the city bus at 5:30 am to arrive to school at 6 am to work on his art projects because his teacher had lost his assignments. He couldn’t imagine his art grade dropping his GPA and eliminating the possibility of being accepted to his dream school.

This student taught me what six, second chances truly means and is my muse for every one of the students I feel at a loss with and at a point of wanting to give up. I think about him and the potential that lies in every one of my students,

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even if it entails multiple re-starts. Sadly, we live in a world where the choices and mistakes many black students make are more often viewed as their fault, their parent's fault and logical consequences to the cycle they live in. This causes the belief that they won't change so just discipline them or kick them out of a program. This is what I believed. I'm grateful to an inspiring administrative and teaching staff that helped me see the value in second chances, how privilege means some have a different starting point than others and effects how I see the world as a white female and why we can never give up on our students.

This student was accepted to his dream college and is now pre-law. When he recently visited me, I asked him what type of law he wanted to practice, and he said the kind that helps people who need it the most even though he knew it wouldn't be a lucrative career. When I first met him, he dreamed of big houses, tons of cars and endless money.

Six, second chances can change a life. Not just his, but mine. My teaching craft has improved, I mentor teachers and facilitate monthly professional development for world language teachers. I believe that the strong and competent teacher I am today is due in large part to him and all my students. I am who I am and I teach the way I teach because of all the kids needing another chance who have crossed my door step.



Alissa Farias is a National Board certified Spanish teacher at Lincoln High School in Tacoma, WA, #abelife. She is passionate about teaching and planting a seed in her students for the love of language and traveling.

She herself loves to travel and go where "the streets have no names". She is active in the world language community as she is the president of AATSP Juan de Fuca and a board member of WAFLT. She facilitates monthly world language professional development and values the need for educators to collaborate, reflect and improve their craft. She is also a mother of two young daughters and finds absolute joy in experiencing life with them.





## Broadening Our Definition of Equity

Mark Gardner

I grew up in a small town in central Oregon and was witness to the overt racism against our large migrant population and our Native American population. My early teaching work was in schools that were linguistically, culturally, and economically even more diverse than the Pacific Northwest population at large. While none of this made me an expert in issues of equity, being immersed in linguistic, cultural, and economic diversity became my normal.

A few years into teaching, I found myself working in a different district than where my career began, with a decidedly different “normal.” Now in a predominantly white school, I’d often hear that we didn’t have a “diversity problem” or “equity issues.” Just look at the data, I’d hear: The gap in achievement isn’t there for our students. Our students of color were performing within a statistically appropriate range as the white students. In fact, some ethnic groups outperformed our white majority academically. Our valedictorians and merit scholars were as often students of color as not. Our ASB and student leadership were largely students of color. The data don’t lie: Nope, no “equity problem,” and the reactionaries would even attempt to claim that it was the white kids getting the short end of the stick. It was too easy for me and my very white community to point at all of this evidence, sigh through the discomfort of recognized privilege, and settle back into doing things how we have always done them.

Then, fourteen years into my career and in a new job as a mentor for first-year teachers in my same predominantly-white district, I attended a conference sponsored by Washington State’s Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) around equity.

At that OSPI equity conference, each district in attendance was handed a packet of data related to the rates of exclusionary discipline (suspensions or expulsions) that students received in the previous year. The very real truth in many larger districts was that this data revealed dramatic disproportionality between the exclusion of children of color

versus white kids—even for the exact same offenses. In our data, the n for our racial subgroups was so small that the packet didn’t even include that information because it didn’t meet the threshold to be statistically significant.

What it did include, though, was data that revealed an otherwise hidden inequity. Perhaps the vast majority of our students ostensibly looked the same, but they certainly didn’t live the same. It turned out that our students in poverty were receiving exclusionary discipline at a rate roughly double the rate of those not living in poverty. Exclude kids from school, they lose access to learning: Inequity. Our “equity problem” did not fit the common definition of “equity problem” employed when such ideas were so quickly dismissed. Our system wasn’t overtly mistreating kids of myriad color or accent: Our problem was within the group of kids *who all looked alike*.

It is very easy to say, “We all look the same, and we all sound the same, so we all are the same.” That was the root of the claims that there existed no “equity problem.” Add the data showing subgroups of students performing on par with white students, and in eduspeak it was an airtight case that talk of equity was for *other districts*, not us. It is in some ways easier to call for equitable practices and policies when demographic differences can be spotted in a track team picture. Conversations about equity are all too easily pushed aside if the system can’t look at a school full of kids and place them throughout the color wheel. Yet the realization that finally hit me was this: Equity is not only about shade, hue and accent.

I look at my school through a slightly different lens as I have grown more aware of how systems and practices foster, fight, or perpetuate inequity. Adding the layer of data revealing the gross disparities in exclusionary discipline between affluent and low-income students has meant that examining equitable policy and practice must include, but

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must also go beyond, thinking of equity only in terms of color and language.

I want to start with the things that are within my control.

How kids end up receiving the kind of discipline that gets them excluded from school almost always starts in the classroom with the teacher and the teacher's response to a student's transgression:

Joel shows up to English class without his homework. Again. Teacher huffs and verbally points this out, *You gotta get your act together Joel, I'm tired of you arriving unprepared.* Joel rolls his eyes and mutters under his breath. Teacher bristles, *Step into the hallway Joel.* Joel slams his book on the desk, storms out. Through the wall we hear a fist dent a locker.

Referrals are written: Insubordination. Disrespect to staff. Damage to school property. Not Joel's first ride on the discipline train so he ends up out for a week. When he does return, he knows he's behind: He feels it, it makes him anxious. He knows the work has only piled on, the treadmill has sped up. He is paralyzed, without the skills to cope. Frustration builds. A tense moment slips the classroom into silence once more, he rolls his eyes once more and it's *Step into the hallway, Joel.*

Instead, this:

*Joel, when I'm done here let's talk for a sec about what we can do about homework. You're not in trouble, I just care about you learning this stuff.*

*Joel, whether you know it or not, you just rolled your eyes at me. Lots of teachers will react to that, but I don't think you meant to be disrespectful. Let's start over.*

*Joel, tell me about where you usually do your homework...*

*No, I didn't know you're living in your brother's car.*

*No, I didn't know you hadn't been home in two weeks.*

No referrals. No lockers punched. Joel keeps coming to class. Hopefully, Joel learns I'm here because I want him here as well—that I'm watching him for ways to help him stay, not reasons he should go.

In my current role as a new-teacher mentor, I am trying to bring attention to equity by framing it not in terms of

demographic cell, but instead by making equity about those moments of reaction. Classroom management is a notorious need for first-year teachers. Management can be interpreted as "control," and "control" can be interpreted as "discipline," which by some definitions is the overt use of punishment to compel compliance. Rather than control, classroom management should be rooted in a curiosity: What do I need to know about this kid in order to understand his behavior? What do I need to understand about this kid in order to craft a constructive, not just a controlling, response to his behavior? I try to help my new teachers see that classroom management is less about control and more about *patterns of teacher reaction.*

At the classroom level, equity is achieved in the consistency of those patterns of reaction from student to student. Achieving consistency is rooted in some self-awareness on the part of the teacher: self-awareness about bias, and self-awareness about what we do or do not expect from kids.

Sitting in staff meeting and looking at achievement data about our low income students is far different from coaching teachers through practices that draw their attention to the consistency—or inconsistency—

in their own patterns of reaction to student behavior. It matters what we do, not what data we look at. How we build common language around what equity means when nearly everyone looks the same is a challenge I'm still sorting out how to address.

Until then, my sphere of influence is what it is. I work with first-year teachers, teacher leaders, and our union leadership. We talk about the small moves teachers make: the gestures, the pats on the shoulder, the words, the tones. How close we stand. How often we laugh together. Whether we choose to escalate or to just *listen.* These are where equity begins.

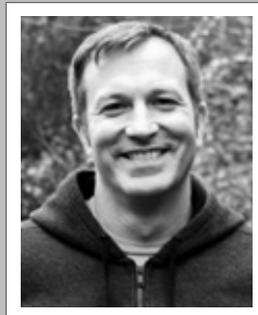
Does my school need to focus on equity? Yes. Racial and ethnic equity despite our low *n*? That *n* doesn't get us off the hook: We live in a divided America and the fact that schools in my community are so white is all the more reason to broach

*Rather than control, classroom management should be rooted in a curiosity: What do I need to know about this kid in order to understand his behavior? What do I need to understand about this kid in order to craft a constructive, not just a controlling, response to his behavior?*



honest conversations about race, systems, and the dangerous but unconscious biases that emerge however innocently from growing up in what seems to be a homogenous world of “us” living here, and “them” over there.

We cannot allow ourselves to heave a sigh and claim no “equity problem” just because the differences that precipitate our inequities aren’t the obvious differences of hue, shade and accent. We must define equity to include *all ways* where differences exist, and all situations where individuals react to other individuals through a filter of bias. It is critical that equity isn’t about data and demographic cells on an OSPI report, but it is about the *consistency in the patterns of reaction each teacher employs with students*. It begins when we give each child the chance to have us to listen to their story.



Mark Gardner is a National Board Certified high school English teacher currently released from the classroom to mentor new teachers (half time) and serve as the local union president (half time). He also writes for the CSTP group blog *Stories from School* as well as *The Standard*, the teacher blog for National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.





## Mindfulness in Education

Claire Hallinan

I am always grateful for the summer and I wonder why. I then take a few breaths, and I remember. In the summer, I have time to feel my breath, coming in and out. As soon as the last school bus leaves, teachers are faced, for the first time in 180 days, with the emptiness and the absence from constant busyness. That's when teachers can truly feel breathing in; taking in energy, instead of only remembering the exhausted sighs out; energy leaving our bodies. We often don't take the time to notice such a simple yet critical activity like breathing. I have recently come to understand how practicing mindfulness of breath can have a positive impact on education.

This simple awareness of each breath is a big part of the concept in "mindfulness." Mindfulness is to be aware of the present moment. The mindfulness study started about 30 years ago with chronic physical pain reduction and management. After several positive results were proven, mindfulness practices have been implemented in the mental health field as an effective strategy for coping with stress and anxiety. This success has caught the attention of educators. Now, many advocate for practicing mindfulness in our classrooms as a tool to help teachers and students deal with the social, emotional, and cognitive challenges that impact many of our students and families.

Over the past few years, I read research and testimonials on mindfulness. I became curious. What is this really all about? What am I supposed to feel when I am mindful? To satisfy my curiosity, I enrolled in the Mindfulness Fundamental online course (<http://www.mindfulschools.org>) in summer 2015. I learned that mindfulness is the act of bringing awareness to any experience just as it is. I was becoming more aware, paying more attention to what I was doing during my new fitness challenge. It was my first experience of mindfulness—to be aware of the present moment, not past nor future. Gradually I became better at noticing my emotion and physical sensations. I realized I had a fear of being judged. Accepting negative emotions like this was difficult at times. (<http://thinkaloud-mathlessonplans.blogspot.com/2015/07/audacious-attitude.html>)

Emotion and thoughts are like clouds. Clouds can hover over me at times, though I know they will eventually float

away. I began to wonder, what if my students understood this concept? What if my students could accept their emotions and manage them one at a time? What if they learned to be kind to themselves? Would their learning be improved?

I started visualizing what this might look like in my classroom. My own experience with mindfulness practice built my confidence of sharing mindfulness with my students for the upcoming school year. At the end of the summer, I decided to implement mindfulness in my classroom. I took in a big breath, and started to plan.

On the first day of school, brand new second grade students excitedly and nervously entered their classroom. "OK, class, this year you will learn something you have never learned before. It will stick with you from today on. It is called Mindfulness." I had some students that year who had been identified as having behavioral concerns. I knew I had some challenges. I was curious about how these students would respond to the practice of mindfulness. I knew I had to help them understand.

In front of the class, I held up a clear water bottle filled three-fourths full of water and sparkling glitter on the bottom. "It is your mind." I shook the bottle. Students' eyes were glued on the shining glitter all over the place inside of the bottle. "It is still your mind. But it is called 'monkey mind.' Let's watch it settle." This visual tool itself clearly explained to my students about the difference between focused and unfocused minds on the first day of their second grade year. It was the first lesson in mindfulness.

From then on, I implemented five minutes of daily mindfulness practice and several weekly mini lessons (MindUP <http://thehawnfoundation.org/mindup>) to cultivate my second graders' mindfulness. Some of the mini lessons included the scientific study of the brain, like what part of brain would respond through mindfulness. Gradually, my students started recognizing it as a tool for self-regulation. They began to recognize when they had strong emotions, and how to focus when they were surrounded by distraction. Especially, noticing their own emotion cultivated their compassion among themselves and others. Towards the end of the year, I heard my students engaged in meaningful conversations using sophisticated vocabulary like "prefrontal

cortex” and “neuroplasticity”.

As a routine, my students listened to a five -minute daily guided mindfulness practice program (SmilingMind <http://smilingmind.com.au/>) as soon as the school bell rang each morning. During the five minutes, students’ hands were on their bellies to feel their breath coming and going. The practice ended with the tranquil sound of bell.

I witnessed several occasions when students’ made intentional breathing attempts, in many cases closing their eyes so they could block out distractions. The most surprising fact was that the students identified as having behavioral concerns paid attention to their breaths during daily mindfulness practice. Many students wanted to share their success story in the circle time. “I was angry when my friend didn’t play with me. Then I used mindfulness.” “I used mindfulness before math fact practice. I did well.” Using their own words to explain their mindful experiences was a huge accomplishment for second grade students. Students know when they are experiencing strong emotions, they cannot make good choices.

As the year went by, as students recognized their frustration more quickly in doing complicated academic tasks, they took some breaths. As they found calmness, they talked to themselves, not to pout but to try the challenging tasks again. There was significant growth data in my math class from September to May, based on the district mandated trimester assessments. Interestingly, compared to last year’s high academic group without mindfulness reinforcement, this year’s group showed more growth than the previous year’s group.

So why don’t we implement mindfulness in our learning community?

*Mindful Schools’* trainers have developed K-12 mindfulness curriculum that focuses on its benefit. They have visuals that show two wings of a bird, one as focus and another self-regulation. This curriculum guide is rather simple to implement for the classroom and shows how it is not just one more thing to do or a burden.

When every teacher and staff intentionally applies

mindfulness in their practice, we cultivate a safe and pleasant school culture. A mindful learning community strengthens students’ critical thinking and observation skills. It is also true that teachers with mindfulness convey effective messages in the current social emotional skills programs, such as *Love and Logic* ([loveandlogic.com](http://loveandlogic.com)) and *Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS)*. A structural training in Professional Development must happen in order to create the mindful school community.

Families can benefit from learning about mindfulness. It can be a tool for growing positive social emotional skills at home. We can invite parents to a mindfulness workshop with a *Love and Logic* parenting class. Mindful parents utilize *Love and Logic* strategies more effectively. School staff must collaborate with families to create and share clear knowledge about mindfulness. We can ask Parent-Teacher Associations for sponsorship when we invite a mindfulness speaker. As they gain their knowledge of mindfulness, they, too, can become aware of the present moment.

It doesn’t have to be summer time for you to notice your breath. As soon as you are aware of exhaustion, breathe in. And out. Enjoy one moment at a time. When students find out that they are capable of being aware of present moment, they will start using mindfulness as a tool to manage themselves and focus. Learning will become their joy.



Claire Hallinan, a National Board Certified Teacher, has been a K-12 educator in the U.S. and Japan. She enjoys classical music and Korean BBQ.





## Creating Integrated and Equitable Schools

Samantha Huckabee

Imagine you are a middle school student. Elementary school was not necessarily easy for you and everyone—parents, teachers, other students—noticed that you didn’t quite fit in with the “normal” kids. There were meetings about you between your parents, teachers, and specialists. Then there were several tests you had to take. Suddenly, they put you in a separate class, one that moved more at your pace. Now you are in middle school and you’ve been with the same group of students since third grade. You know these people so well—they are the only ones you see in class, they are the ones you eat lunch with, and typically they are the only other kids you regularly socialize with. There are many other students in your school, but you very rarely interact with them and in large part feel isolated within your group.

Now, did you imagine that student was a special education student or an advanced learner? It typically describes the experience of students at both ends of the academic spectrum.

Within a comprehensive secondary school, it isn’t uncommon to have separate groups within the school environment. The pattern follows a typical bell curve. The largest group includes the typically developing students on a general education path. But, at either end, are smaller groups of students who are either achieving well above the standards or well below. These groups are often tracked into certain classes and have little opportunity to mingle with their general education peers and even less of an opportunity with their far end counterparts.

I had this same experience when I was a child. I was tested into an advanced program when I entered 6th grade. In middle school, there were about thirty of us who were taking honors level classes. Since there were only enough students in all of 7th grade to have one class of each subject, we had nearly identical schedules. We would all start in 1st period Pre-Algebra together, then as a group, walk down the hall to Honors Language Arts. Geography and Science followed, and the end of the day depended on which electives you took. Since many of us were in band, there were probably

about a dozen students with whom I attended all six classes daily. There were so many people in my school I never had the opportunity to know. It bothered me then and bothers me even more now. The tracking that occurs in our schools is inequitable and damaging to all students. Every student deserves to have a high quality education with access to a wide variety of peers and experiences.

I teach at a comprehensive middle school in Seattle. This school has a very diverse population, more so than the majority schools in the city. However, when I look at the population of the programs, it disheartens me that we still allow this

*Differentiation is the hallmark of good teaching. We strive to meet each student where they are and move them closer to standard.*

form of tracking to exist in our schools today. Our Highly Capable Cohort (HCC - what the district calls our advanced learners) makes up about 1/8 of our school. These students tend to be white or Asian and from our more affluent families.

Many of these students are from outside our middle school neighborhood and are bused in to be a part of this program. At the other end, the special education students make up another 1/8 of our student population and have a variety of disabilities ranging from autism to learning disabilities to intellectual disabilities. They are overwhelmingly students of color, of a lower socioeconomic background, and many come from families who do not speak English as a first language. Students in either the HCC or in special education classes can go through their whole day without ever interacting with the other group. We, as teachers, need to help provide them with the opportunity to meet a diverse group of students by integrating these programs.

When the idea of integrating these programs is brought up to a staff, the general opinion seems to be one of “Yes, but...” Most teachers acknowledge the benefits of integrating the various programs within a school, but are hesitant due to the challenges they fear.

One such challenge for teachers is how to deal with modifying work so it is accessible for higher needs students at the same time they make the work challenging enough to engage the highest learners. Differentiation is the hallmark of



good teaching. We strive to meet each student where they are and move them closer to standard. With a diverse population of learners, this is more difficult because the starting and ending points can be very different for the various groups. However, good differentiation is not creating multiple lesson plans, it is creating different pathways to meet the same goal. One way to do this is to provide text at different reading levels. Anymore, there are plenty of websites that either offer texts at multiple reading levels or can simplify texts so lower level readers can access it. Another way to achieve solid differentiation is through working together with colleagues who teach the same content. Collaborating with others can lighten some of this burden as well as expand a teacher's repertoire of teaching strategies.

Another concern teachers tend to have is dealing with students they perceive to have behavior problems. While there are some students for whom behavior is a problem and possibly why they receive special services, the majority of special needs students do not have concerning behaviors. They generally want to be in class and be well liked by their teachers and peers. Behavior is a type of communication—typically, a student acts out because a need is not being met. Also, students tend to act out less in a larger class of their peers than they do in a smaller class within their own population. Working with a student's IEP case manager as well as the student can go a long way in alleviating these behaviors and allow the student to be part of the general education classroom.

One thing some veteran teachers especially pushback on is the need to revise lessons they have taught for years. As teachers move further into their career, they are able to recycle lessons as appropriate if they are teaching the same subject from year to year. Integrating all students into the same classroom would force many teachers to revamp their tried and true lesson plans in order to accommodate different learners. However, teachers should look at this as an opportunity to expand on the lessons we have so skillfully crafted and add in new methodology and pedagogy we may not have known when we first developed them. Using our previous work as a framework, we can easily modify for a variety of students.

Parents can often be apprehensive about integrating the various programs. Typically, the parents of the advanced learners are very involved in their child's schooling and have

grave concerns about the quality of education their child would receive in an integrated classroom. Their concerns are valid—it would be easy for a teacher to simply expect the same from the advanced students as the general education students and most students would be compliant. If done well, a differentiated class can challenge all students in the class while still focusing on the same topics.

It would also broaden the viewpoints students are exposed to. In a class where everyone comes from the same background, the opinions tend to be very limited. For example, when Bill Clinton ran against George Bush in the 1992 presidential race, my school ran a mock election. My honors Language Arts class, a very homogenous and sheltered group, was the only class in the entire school who voted for Bush. Instead of seeing this as strange, my classmates used this as a way to confirm their intellectual superiority over the rest of the school. Even then, I saw this attitude as divisive and limiting. Without having other viewpoints within our cohort, we did not have the opportunity to explore other ideas and debate the validity of our beliefs.

One of the biggest advantages of an integrated school population is the diversity in each classroom. Because the school would be consciously placing students of all levels in the same room, you would have a wide variety of ethnicity, socioeconomic backgrounds, and aptitudes in one room, therefore exposing students to other viewpoints and experiences they may have never seen before. Imagine the Language Arts classroom holding a Socratic Seminar with perspectives from many backgrounds. This approach can only help develop empathy and understanding between groups who currently have little interaction currently.

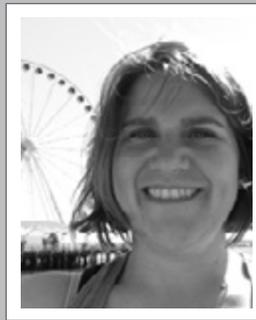
Most accommodations that higher needs students receive are just good teaching strategies. Who hasn't moved a student near the front of the classroom so she can focus better? Who hasn't extended a deadline on a paper when a student just needs a little more time? And who hasn't allowed a student to retake a test when he didn't do well the first time? These are common IEP accommodations that, in truth, should be allowed for every student who needs them. While every once in a while there will be an accommodation which is outside the norm, these are usually easily accommodated within a general education classroom and should not be a reason to exclude anyone from their right to a free and appropriate public education in their least restrictive environment.

One of the biggest advantages of an integrated school is having one school community instead of three. A school that allows separation of its students based on ability is not an equitable school. I also worry about what it teaches our students—is it right to separate students because some may do better in school than others? Does it devalue what our less academically-minded students can bring to the table?

One thing I have witnessed with students who are segregated into special programs is significant isolation. When students are required to be in separate classes due to academic deficits, they tend to have classes with the same small number of students for multiple classes each day. This separation leads to a drastically reduced number of peers they come into contact with each day. Many of these students are lonely and feel disconnected from the school at large. By integrating these students, we can give them the same school experience that their peers have every day.

Another benefit to an integrated school is students would be exposed to higher level content when they are ready. To get into the HCC program, students must pass the demanding entrance exam. Many of our students may not be able to pass this test or may not know that taking the test is an option, so they are shut out of higher learning opportunities. In an integrated school, students would be exposed to more rigorous material frequently. Those students who are ready may also opt to attempt the more difficult work. A student in special education may reach general education level standards and a general education student may attempt advanced standards. This allows more equitable access to all students no matter their level.

The intention behind creating various classes for different learners was not to cause division within our schools, but that is what has happened. I see it every day when I look at my high needs students who continue to be isolated from the general population. I see it when the HCC students only know those students they have been with in their specific set of classes. And I see it when our racial minorities and socioeconomically struggling students can't access higher levels of education because their families don't know how or cannot advocate for them. If we truly want an equitable and diverse school environment, we need to stop tracking our students and create an integrated community.



Samantha Huckabee is in her 11th year of teaching, having taught in Seattle, Mukilteo, and the Bronx, NY. Currently, she works with students with learning disabilities and manages the special education department at Jane Addams Middle School

in NE Seattle. She also serves as the middle school representative on the Special Education Task Force, a group in charge of developing and implementing special education services across the district.



## A Proactive Assault on the Zip Code Barrier

Janet L. Kragen

What’s the biggest difference between kids entering school from rich neighborhoods and poor neighborhoods? 30 million.

Not dollars.

*Words.*

Children in high income families hear 30 million more words than children in low income families by age three.

Obviously, we all—teachers, parents, and legislators—want to give every child a quality education regardless of zip code. However, if we wait until children enter their kindergarten classrooms to begin, too many children arrive already far behind their age peers, and providing that quality education becomes much more difficult. Apparently, intervening in preschool is still too late. Meanwhile, students across America continue to enter kindergarten with the “achievement gap” that schools spend years trying to overcome.

As teachers, we know we need to build quality home-school partnerships with our students and their families. We have to keep doing that—but I believe we need to do more. The truth is, we can no longer afford to wait for our students to arrive at our schools. Schools must be more proactive. Besides reaching out to our current families, we need to reach out to our prospective students and their families years before our children start attending our schools. We need to help families build their babies’ foundational skills so their children don’t arrive at school with the achievement gap already in place.

Some students will need more support than others. Students who grow up in poverty demonstrate a whole list of well-documented *consequences*, including adverse:

- Cognitive ability
- School achievement
- Emotional and behavioral outcomes

The school where I work matches the national average of about half the population on free/reduced lunch, and every year we see multiple examples of the deficits commonly associated with poverty.

Schools can’t solve poverty and all its ills, but schools can educate parents and other caregivers about child development, offering them *tips and tools* designed to give their children more opportunities to succeed. However, if we keep waiting until the five-year-olds arrive at our gates, we will continue to

have many students—maybe more than half the students at our school—who arrive already lagging far behind their age peers. To help all the students who need assistance, it’s time for the school staff to help meet needs as early as we can, in as many ways and places as possible.

We teachers can start within our comfort zone, within the school building, working with the parents of the students we already have. But in order for teachers to work with parents and caregivers, as well as students, we have to break outside the bounds of the normal school day.

Dressler and Hernandez, teachers at my school, hold monthly book clubs for their fifth grade classes. Their goal is to give parents the tools they need to help their children work on reading skills at home. Parents and students come to their classrooms after school for food and a discussion about a book they are all reading together. Those after school meetings are highly popular, and Dressler and Hernandez see their classroom reading scores improve.

What if we extended the program to the earlier grade levels? What if kindergarten and first and second grade teachers did similar meetings? What if every teacher in the school was involved and every parent was invited to attend? What if we held those meetings every week?

We could “pay” for this time by applying for a waiver to the state RCW regarding the school day. If our school started 10 minutes later every day, we could then “buy” 50 minutes for an extended school day on every Tuesday, say, for joint parent/child learning. Parents may not be able to come every week, but they could come as often as possible. Offering the classes every week also means parents could attend classes at different grade levels on different weeks, so they could go to the classrooms of more than one child.

Once we forge stronger parent partnerships within the school, we could start to move outside our school building, beyond our own students and their families. Finding teachers willing to meet with parent groups in an off-campus venue might be more challenging, but I believe there are individuals who will consider the idea exciting.

Probably the easiest option is to hold classes for parents of younger children. Those classes would be off campus. For example, say a Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS) organization

meets in the area each week. We could ask if the mothers would be interested in having one of our teachers come once a month to share insights into fun and easy activities to promote early child development. We could promise that the teacher would keep the remarks to ten minutes or less! In that case, the school would have to arrange for the teacher to be free for enough time to go, make the brief presentation, and return. In my school we can usually find a way to cover a classroom for a short period, making it possible for the teacher to leave briefly for the presentation. Or the teacher could possibly go during a planning period.

In terms of potential costs, I expect we should be able to use some district Tribal Education or Title money to help with food, maybe child care during the after school classes, and pay for teachers who miss planning time.

Another option is to be even more proactive. We could recruit staff members to offer babysitting classes in conjunction with the Parks and Recreation Department. Parks and Rec would be responsible for all the things they already teach, like CPR; school district teachers would add information about how to talk with babies and develop vocabulary, how to engage babies and toddlers in constructive play, how to build better baby brains. After all, if the teens learn to use the childhood development tools in the babysitting class, it won't just help them be better babysitters. They could end up using the skills they learn with their younger siblings. Their parents might see what they are doing and start emulating them. And when the teens grow up and have babies of their own, they will go into childrearing with a better, more informed toolkit.

Finally, we could apply for a tribal grant and then work with the tribe in our area to set up a drop-in center for child care, employing teens that were trained through our babysitting classes. Not only would the drop-in center give the teens an opportunity to practice the skills they had learned, but by involving the tribe, we would strengthen the community relationships that help make our parent-teacher partnerships work. The drop-in center would be such a boon to our parents, leading them to have a positive reaction to the work we were doing. If we could get the funding and coordinate all the pieces, this option would be really effective.

In the end we would have all the teachers in the school teaching not just their students but sharing with their parents how best to help all their children. We would have parents and teens effectively working with infants, babies, toddlers, and preschoolers in ways that would provide for improved cognitive ability, school achievement, and emotional and behavioral outcomes.

We would involve the school, the tribe, local nonprofits, and the Parks and Recreation Department. In short, we would have an entire community working as a whole to improve the lives of our children.

All our children. Starting in our own zip code.



Janet Kragen is a National Board Certified Teacher. She is on the Executive Board of the Washington Association of Educators of Talented and Gifted (WAETAG). She has been a teacher since 1977, in public and private schools, in third through eighth grades, in California,

Colorado, New York, and Washington. In 1983 she started specializing in gifted education. She now works in North Kitsap, teaching a self-contained Highly-Capable 5th grade class. She also teaches gifted teachers. She's written science and social studies curriculum units for her district, resource books for teachers, and educational articles. She's presented at national and state science, social studies, and gifted conferences. And she's done in-service training, both within her district and as a consultant through other districts and her ESD. Many of the things she has written and many of the materials she has developed for her own classroom use are available for free off her website, [kragen.net](http://kragen.net).





## Call in the Building Rep

Mandy Manning

The frantic call came at the end of school on a Friday. “Can I come talk to you? I think I need your help.” A special education teacher in her second year at our school came racing into my classroom moments later. As I watched her pace back and forth in front of me, I thought about her position and the revolving door of new teachers who’d held the position before her, and worried that she might be on her way out too. After more hand wringing, she blurted out, “I think they’re trying to get rid of me.”

“What are you saying?” I asked, although I had a good idea already.

“My evaluator has called a meeting,” she said. “They’re saying I left the class unattended. I think I need a union rep.”

It was the same old story, non-renew instead of support and grow. In other circumstances, if she were a seasoned teacher with many years under her belt, we might sit calmly and discuss the ramifications, the context, why she would leave the class without a teacher. However, in a department with a history of non-renewals, teachers let go before the end of their probationary period, and a lack of an effective support system for new teachers, I knew we had to tread more lightly.

In the five years since I’d started working at our school, I witnessed this department slowly being dismantled, with a constant stream of new teachers being removed and replaced instead of supported to grow in their skills. In a department of 10 certificated staff, with between one and three non-renewals each year, teachers were seeing consistent turn over, with little to no discussion as to cause, or efforts to improve support for new teachers, or build a stronger program. The problem also appeared to extend beyond this department, as each new school year brought in a host of new teachers, making the absent faces that much more apparent.

The teacher and I sat together and discussed the situation. Two administrators, her primary and secondary evaluators, had requested a meeting because she’d been “caught” leaving her class unattended, with only an assistant to watch over the students. Another administrator had asked her to leave her room to attend a parent meeting. When she told that administrator she had a class, he said she could leave her students briefly with the assistant, as long as another certificated staff member could check in on the class. It

sounded like an open and shut case, but because she was still provisional, we both knew it wasn’t that simple.

Previously, I’d been mainly on the sidelines of these incidents, but over the past three years, I’ve increased my visibility in our school and built relationships with members. This new teacher, unlike her predecessors, came to me for support. In my experience, provisional teachers—those still in their three-year probationary period—rarely seek help or advice from their union representatives. They fear retribution and do not know they have the power of our collective bargaining agreement behind them to help get the support they need to grow in their profession. With this one brave new teacher, willing to reach out, we turned a corner.

We scheduled the meeting at a time when both of us could attend. It was immediately clear that hers would not be a simple open and shut case. While the topic of the meeting focused on this teacher leaving her class unattended, it was clear her evaluator had been collecting data the entire year. The tone of the meeting was negative and both evaluators had a list of aspects of this teacher’s position that she was not fulfilling. Much of what they asserted, however, was brought forth by other teachers in her department. These critiques pointed to a larger issue: lack of trust between peers, most likely as a result of the many non-renewals over the years. Additionally, much of what they said suggested she’d not actually received enough support to be successful in her position, which forced her to navigate a new department model with little to no guidance.

One thing was clear: this practice was not new—it was a process these administrators were used to. They had clearly done this before. The difference this time, was me, the union representative. After the meeting it was clear that the teacher and I had to go back and read the contract. We sat together and went through the language on TPEP, our teacher evaluation system, non-renewals, the necessary steps administrators must make in documentation, and other related language. Once we had our ducks in a row, we requested another meeting and laid out our case that the administrators had not effectively followed protocols and were in violation of contract language.

Through this experience it became clear that many



of these building level decisions around non-renewal of provisional staff members are made because (1) this is the way it has always been done, (2) both staff and administration are unfamiliar with collective bargaining agreement language, (3) administrators don't often know how or have little time to support their new teachers and non-renewal is easier than developing a plan of support, and (4) administrators have limited resources for developing accomplished teachers.

Which brings us to the bigger picture. I started in my district eight years ago. At that time I became involved in our local educator's union, eventually becoming a building rep. Over those eight years I had support and was given the opportunity to learn and grow in each of my roles. Now, in my third year as a building rep, I finally understand my responsibilities and feel confident to jump in with both feet, and truly make myself available to members. This time for growth is generally my expectation in all aspects of being an educator—the assumption that we will improve over time through learning and with support. As I helped this new teacher navigate this difficult experience with her evaluators, I realized she'd not been afforded that same opportunity for growth that I'd been given through the union, and, based on the history of non-renewals in this particular department, it appeared to be a systemic issue.

What this experience suggests about our school's and our district's support for new teachers is sobering. Instead of supporting them and providing them with the tools to improve, their contracts are often non-renewed prior to the close of their three-year probationary period, as if hiring teachers comes with a money-back guarantee. In an era of fewer and fewer teacher candidates and teacher shortages nationwide, this hardly seems like the best course of action. In addition to failing to support the growth of new teachers, consistent non-renewals diminish trust, which seeps into individual classrooms and pits teacher-against-teacher, as no one is sure who will be non-renewed next. Ultimately, the result is poor outcomes for students. All of these things were at the heart of the work we needed to do as we navigated this issue for this provisional teacher.

In the end, instead of non-renewal of this new teacher's contract and possible destruction of her career, we were

able to secure a transfer for her to another school for the following year, so she could continue to grow and learn to be an accomplished teacher. She felt protected, the administration gained new knowledge about the collective bargaining agreement, their rights and responsibilities, and that department witnessed a change in how things are done.

For our school, this is a happy ending. A new teacher will be able to move forward with her career with support. Educators are becoming more familiar with the protections our collective bargaining agreement provides both seasoned and provisional staff alike. And, our administrators have a better understanding of how the contract affects evaluation, that there are specific guidelines they must follow, and specifically, that growth and support are paramount. Moreover, more educators in my building seek out union representation when they have a question or an issue. As that new teacher just starting her career and I, the seasoned union rep, learned, this is the impact of representation and knowing your contract. This is the work we must all do to ensure new staff members get the support they need to become accomplished educators.



Mandy Manning teaches and writes in Spokane, Washington. She is a high school English Language Development teacher in the Newcomer Center, a special program for new English Language Learners. Mandy serves as building rep for her school and recently served on her Uniserv executive board for the Educators' Union. She writes about teaching, union matters, and short stories. Mandy is also the 2017 Washington state recipient of the NEA Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence.





## Cross-Community Project-Based Learning

Megan Megaard

Public school can be one of the places where the opportunity gap is vast for students that are isolated from worlds unlike their own. The structure of districts and curriculum causes this isolation to some degree in every school. However, requiring cross-community project-based learning that involves the exploration of new places, interaction with people different than those one normally encounters, and also work that matters mutually to all students involved can create the conditions for challenging, humanized growth and be a natural equalizer.

Experiences in project-based learning provide students with the opportunity to initiate what they'd like to work on and learn from their own outcomes. The shift toward student choice in their work is especially necessary when students come to full school days while able to independently access a huge proportion of the worlds' collective knowledge online. They need to develop their own ideas into projects and lead them to completion while using opportunities to communicate with others. This way, they can learn as they are assessed on social-emotional skill as well as the quality of their project outcomes. If schools require the work and begin to invest in their students' cross-community involvement, student performance on other standardized requirements will improve. Luckily, a typical public school has the perfect conditions for teachers to guide students to develop engaging and complex academic projects with everything just as it is. Students already want to connect with the world outside.

### **Why students need to do cross-community projects?**

Watching teenagers in the school where I was student-teaching walk out of classes for 2nd and 3rd period to protest the school district's continued neglect of their crumbling high school building, I began to admire how forthright and eloquent students attending school in low-resource neighborhoods often are about the disparities they experience. In listening to the stories of my students' lives, I've learned about poverty forcing families to move almost constantly, gunshot wounds disabling and killing loved ones, and the prohibitive distance of affordable healthy food robbing students and their family members of their health. My students have often asked, in reference to schools they see in the media or that they visit for

extra-curricular activities, "Why do they get to go to school in a place like that and we have this building?" It's a question to which there are really no good answers. Even with school reforms, non-profit organizations, and funding gifts that help low-resource schools, from students' perspectives, going to school where opportunity is less readily available can feel like a disingenuous proposition to a curious, observant student, or downright alienating and futile to a student who lacks skills or adult examples for pursuing opportunity in spite of troubling conditions. For marginalized students, attending school is an experience where everyone around them forms a community they don't feel part of. With teachers painfully aware of these disparities and working diligently to both provide students with opportunities and teach the skills of finding and creating opportunities for oneself, talking about public school with those who don't have an inside lens can quickly become divisive.

To add insult to these injuries, we teach and learn with curricular standards that ask us to isolate the acquisition of specific academic outcomes. Deriving context for these outcomes can be motivating and empowering, but leaves public schools wanting for opportunities to apply acquired knowledge and skill. Instead, the rewards of outcome application are delayed for years— decreasing enormously the amount and quality of live learning opportunities every student is exposed to.

The inherent process of project-based curriculum creates the opportunity for students to participate directly as they learn—by speaking out about inequities or other problems they experience in their own environment, designing something for their community, or by having the exciting experience of engaging with a community outside their own.

When students find opportunities for activism, such as my students who protested the neglect of their building, or when they are asked to develop activism-based projects, they are immediately immersed in responsibility that merges their required school day with the full life of their mind. They often identify and begin transformational work on issues that have directly impacted their lives or communities. They work on these projects with intention and excitement that are distinct from the laborious concentration required to



accomplish prescribed school tasks. Whether it's membership in organizations like DECA, preparation for community outreach activities, or developing awareness-raising messages for others, students seem to attach new weight to their own opinions, as well as think more proactively about connecting current school experiences with their future lives. Even in public schools that on the surface appear to offer students everything they need to succeed, participation in required and meaningful student-designed projects done in community with others will chip away at the often held belief that K-12 learning is about looking straight ahead, outdoing peers and escaping the local community to pursue a life somewhere else. Making a tangible difference in the community or engaging in activism that matters to them, students invest more personally in their work, knowing they will be held accountable to the world outside their teachers and parents. Most excitingly, cross-community projects that share schools' ideas and resources can bring separate communities of students together, informing their projects with multiple perspectives that would otherwise remain unshared and unknown. Project outcomes aside, this type of interaction on its own would benefit the students involved by allowing communities access to each other-- the most powerful educational resource students and teachers have.

Even if students don't make immediate impact with their projects, they go home to tell their parents about what they've lived at school. When public school kids know exactly why they go to school and grow up familiar with the issues and people near them from a young age, communities will be strengthened and it will be more difficult for society to miscommunicate about how environments are impacted by climate change, health and opportunity are limited by economic inequality, and the ways discrimination isolates and degrades quality of life for particular cultures. On the contrary, marginalized experiences can be most effectively pulled in to public awareness when identified and explored by local, increasingly responsible students.

*Making a tangible difference in the community or engaging in activism that matters to them, students invest more personally in their work, knowing they will be held accountable to the world outside their teachers and parents.*

### How and where it already works

A large scale of project-based learning uses are already in action and creating transformational momentum in students' lives. Project-based learning is a popular topic of discussion for teachers and an area of experimentation across many subjects and different types of schools. Though private schools are sometimes not as conducive to student involvement in the community, the AltSchool, run by tech professionals in San Francisco and New York, advertises their brand of education as including both "Community Involvement," and "Interdisciplinary, Project-based Learning" as two of four pillars of personalized learning. Students are involved in communication with the community for field trips and with teachers, use the problems that come up in the outside world to develop their projects and learn relevant academics. The schools' founders and investors are aiming to share material technology with public schools, and to influence the system with innovations they've made in personalizing the school day. A recent New Yorker article quoted AltSchool leaders' criticism of the slow-moving pace of most schools, and of traditional teaching as "artisanal lesson-planning" and "disciplinary babysitting" work. Use of technology to achieve superior personalization through controlled blended-learning environments is already a huge help to public schools in increasing efficiency and scope of available content, but to really improve the quality of students' education, we need to be able to take each schools' specific community and project-based needs into account

In this respect, public school teachers' professional learning and practice are extensive and complex. For many districts, exploration of educational issues like inclusion, social equity, and trauma-informed education are applicable and needed by all students. Without these practices, even public schools which have fully integrated technology for personalized learning may only serve to augment the encouragement of isolation and self-involvement currently caused by our focus on independent development.

Fascination with public schooling in Finland continues in spite of our failure to adopt a similar model. The National

Center on Education and the Economy describes increasing levels of community involvement this way:

*Finnish classrooms emphasize the importance of learning through doing, and place particular emphasis on group work, creativity and problem-solving skills. From primary school onward, students are expected to work collaboratively on interdisciplinary projects. In many cases, students are expected to contribute to the design of these projects as well. In upper secondary school, students are expected to contribute to the design of their course of study.”*

Far from merely preparing a hard-working student for the predicted economic world of their future, this type of work actively strengthens their efficacy in the world they’re evolving with right now. Even without these ideal conditions, seeing just a few student designed projects has been convincing as to the potential students have at school.

- One inspiring cross-community project by an involved student at my school combined her interest in learning psychology and music with a year of service to her schools’ disabled community. When she spoke about her work, it was clear her learning from the project had given her profound insight and compelling new voice as a senior moving on to the adult world. Similarly, the students she worked with experienced a school year of genuine friendship and felt more belonging.
- ELL and refugee students in my school often look for ways to incorporate their after-school work and volunteering with younger ELL students or refugee students and their families into their classwork and projects, and would likely benefit from more chances to create awareness and involve others in their work, during the school day.
- Many teachers have facilitated video and pen pal exchanges that start communication across language, distance and cultural barriers for entire classes. (The standard of creating authentic language learning experiences has led world language teachers to do this, and the same can be required in other subject areas.)
- Elementary school students consider their adult neighbors and create buckets full of orange safety flags to leave at crosswalks as well as paint artwork and games for people to enjoy on bus stops—I like to think these were mostly students’ ideas, but it doesn’t hurt

if the teacher sparked their interest. It is surprising and exciting when the seemingly smallest experiences with this type of work produce immense results for students.

### **Benefits to students**

The potential for systemic change in cross-community, project-based learning is ultimately grounded in its benefits to students. The possibilities are immense as to how students can experience genuine achievement while impacting the most important problems in their communities and social worlds near and far. The work just needs to be required or “standardized” so that teachers can receive the support of a bit of external organization as they give students more freedom. For students to have the conditions to create dynamic collaboration and partnerships, formulate problems, and consistently reflect on their setbacks and successes, they need teachers who are supported by shared curricular practices across subject areas. Those most confounding education issues of inclusion, social equity and trauma-informed practices are the arduous labor of teachers hoping to provide their students with solutions to school injustices they often feel at least partially responsible for. In taking that responsibility, teachers can easily forget to recognize the students they work with as those most directly influenced by their school and local community—as well as acutely aware of the nuances in their issues. Teachers will probably continue to stay awake nights and communities will still benefit from adults that dedicate their work to youth, but students are poised to innovate and be expert advocates of their interests if invited to be. Their ideas and insight fuel teachers’ learning, and their unique existence in public school allows them to draw out discoveries where adult advocates working in isolation from their students’ input may have stagnated. When students are required and carefully pushed to develop projects that call their attention and reflection to people and issues different from them, they acquire advanced human skills for navigating an increasingly novel world. Or better than that, they learn how to seek to see the world that way. With the omission of required cross-community projects, this exchange process doesn’t happen, and isolating self-reliance is effectively mandated. Teachers and students are more limited to the wisdom of their school world, increasingly less able to imagine branching out.

Schools where inclusion, equitable social integration

and healing from trauma occur can be those where resources, networking and ideas are shared freely, and students are required to initiate collaborative group projects that teachers guide and help develop. This requirement will ensure the student an opportunity to learn from focusing on the social, humanistic parts of the world that are less understood by the student. Luckily, these will usually be found in the students' project blueprint, and will differentiate learning for that student more expertly and personally than any tablet or laptop. Schools that require cross-community, project-based learning foster respect for others as well as many opportunities for students to embrace responsibility for one's impact on their immediate environment. Using the reality of students' lived experience as a school's focus, instead of disproportionately spreading the idea that the significant part of students' lives will be deferred until after graduation, when they go somewhere else, can bring all our attention back to the rich learning habitat of the here and now. Talking about differences in the environments from one campus to another, to two students creating project-based work on gun-regulation can merge perspectives, from the countryside to the inner-city for example, building understanding between them. Requiring this work of students helps them experience the imperfection and vulnerability in doing real-world work.

In doing real-world work, students become more motivated. In the words of education and technology writer Jordan Shapiro, a fan of project based learning, "Critical thinking is rarely about looking for answers. Instead, it involves discovering unique ways of imagining the problem at hand."

The Institute of Design at Stanford makes a "*K-12lab*" available to teachers to use their own class design, or as a framework for creating opportunities to engage students in real-world projects in ways that build students' capacity to make decisions without as much direction by adults. STEM projects use this inquiry-based project learning often, and the importance of non-STEM disciplines is being made more accessible to students through similar contextualized projects. To improve the already great impact of project-based learning is to strive to make these projects social in a way that crosses lines of community and often cultural familiarity.

How the projects are scaffolded, whether they are individual, group or whole class and whether the community work involves field trips, after school work, live video

meetings or pen pal writing depends heavily on the teacher and the school. Transformational projects are not a new idea to many teachers, and they have examples to follow. If we officially recognize projects' value and require them in our public school curriculum, we can honor student growth with feedback and formal assessment of the skills they are developing in live contexts. It would also be valuable for employers and universities to be able to learn of these achievements when considering their applications. Most importantly, requiring cross-community project-based work would create a much-needed entry point for students who are currently disengaged by their schools and the disconnect between their work and their interests. All students will benefit from required cross-community project-based work, able to better shape their own success by identifying and showcasing their strengths, as well as making meaningful mistakes while still under the guidance of a school.

Since geography, demographics of cities and our public school system often isolate communities of students with low resources, they can benefit from purposeful opportunities to collaborate with more resourced communities. Even if schools have equal access to technology, internships and guidance counseling, collaboration provides a time to interact with peers in social environments they otherwise may not encounter until after graduation. Community awareness can be raised in both schools and connections among families of students at both schools may form. Students can then have the explicit opportunity to talk about their community-based project experiences and if needed, process their impressions of unfamiliar communities. Large schools will benefit from more humanized education, as well as a connection to other project participants. Marginalized students can feel empowered by experiences outside the scope of their school, or validated by the exposure brought by a project that focuses on an issue that is overlooked or misrepresented in the curriculum. Working with another community, students and teachers can discuss their work with a wider range of peers and professionals, learning from different perspectives and practices.

### **How to make cross-community, project-based learning required work**

Even without a directive from our government, or the technical and financial support of investors, our public school



system can achieve beneficial outcomes for our students in project-based learning, while building community with those around us. Across our enormous country, we have a network of thousands of public schools and districts with their own distinct experiences and limitations to share. At just three schools where I have been lucky to work, many teachers have created project-based learning opportunities where students have taken the lead. Both relatively new and experienced teachers have been successful with projects, and many have collaborated on projects with groups of students. The projects have been engaging for everyone involved, and their outcomes are particularly inspiring in schools with great diversity of ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds that bring multiple perspectives together. In schools with a lack of resources, connecting with the surrounding community and with communities nearby is a way to bring the issues that matter most to students to the forefront of their studies. It will probably take adopting the right mentality rather than spending more money to really spread these practices, and teachers have a lot of insight to share. Education policymakers, researchers and unions should help cross-community project-based learning grow by focusing their learning on the projects teachers and students do now, and use data to help schools measure and refine their community involvement and impact.

In my world language and sometimes biology or social studies, there is great cultural value placed on study abroad and sometimes, completing service learning projects. Many students and families have great curiosity about the faraway places where their second language is spoken, or a desire driven by compassion to travel and take part in problem-solving with distant neighbors. These experiences can also be organized closer to home. What it means to experience a new culture or to learn from service can be cultivated in cross-community projects that don't have to—but could—involve a highly-resourced group working with another in some kind of need. They could also be very different. When students define the issues in their communities together, they collaborate innovatively, and their creation of projects may

look different from traditional models of service learning. The teacher(s) can guide students to communicate with outside communities, form ideas with them, and consider proposals received from other communities before carrying out the work.

When required to work with different communities, students can decide what's important to pursue and be influenced by others in ways that teachers and parents cannot provide for them. Students can decide whether they will go somewhere or invite someone, and where they'll go and who to invite. Students from several schools can collaborate on acquiring funding for an outing they research together and create a rationale that connects their community with the one they are visiting. Travel and field trips are instant motivation for most students, and when they choose this type of project their rewards can be high and their learning can shift their paradigms in either positive or negative ways. Currently, many educational travel companies offer custom-designed trips, but their fundraising methods might be exorbitant in their target amounts or so time-consuming that busy, often working teenagers have to rule them out immediately. As students struggle to negotiate ways to fund their outings, they may end up finding creative ways to allow all their peers to attend.

Many of the beautiful places near our schools are overlooked as cross-community learning sites. Being required to pursue exploration with students, teachers can be supported to create refreshing, relevant contexts for our students-- which is what so many of us want to do anyway. It is motivating and invigorating for us to make the near and everyday as culturally complex as distant travel with our students.

If required to facilitate at least one project a year, and expected to develop others as often as possible, our public schools can evolve helping students adapt more quickly to the world. With a requirement to intentionally work on projects that explore community issues identified by students, teachers will need to continue to respectfully push them to consider what they're avoiding and inform themselves when they are unaware. Teachers will also need to continue to learn from

*When required to work with different communities, students can decide what's important to pursue and be influenced by others in ways that teachers and parents cannot provide for them.*



students in those same ways. As natural obstacles present themselves, students take the difficult steps of continuing to work with others toward mutually beneficial objectives. Creating goals across separated communities can make resources available for sharing that will open doors for students to learn new ways of thinking, new ways of experiencing the world, and even for the potential for one school's material or socio-emotional abundance to be experienced by students attending a school without it.

Teachers can be open to student ideas by advising them on whatever projects arise from their distinct perspectives and curiosities. This openness allows teachers to contribute their particular expertise and students to consistently generate unique discoveries that reflect who they are. Using these discoveries as our guides makes us better able to listen to and learn from students. A thirty student classroom has so much to say about what would make a place better, or how to bridge gulfs between communities' perceptions of each other.

Finally, required project-based learning can be complemented by other methods of learning schools use. Teachers know when their classes are collectively engaged by a controversy, or when they might become interested in creating something together to contribute to their or another community. Teachers already recognize when these things happen naturally, and often wish they had the support, time and tools to be able to follow their students' lead. In public schools that allow students to participate in the world outright, rather than preparing them in apprehension for years on end, students will still be engaged by the social observations, political intrigue and innovation that captivate them now.

As students become more deeply involved in the community, teachers can ask refining questions and have the responsibility of pushing projects toward facilitating cross-community learning as appropriate for our students. Our students know themselves, we know our students, and we can and should require a similar baseline or foundation of work as Finland's public schools. Students can be assigned the responsibility and freedom of initiating the design of their

learning and seeing projects through to completion, while teachers incorporate academics.

The support teachers need mostly involves redefining the purpose of our students' work at school. Since we have already been redefining with standards based learning and Common Core, it seems that recognizing the fundamental value of project based learning and community exchange work would only be the next logical step in providing a school experience

that acclimates students to the world instead of coldly preparing them to compete for an individual living.

Since every teacher, school and subject area is different, facilitation by the teacher is the primary determinant in the success of student projects. With a helpful guiding framework for projects and standards to help recognize

and teach important skills, teachers can have support and flexibility to enable them to effectively serve each of their unique groups of students.

### **Hurdles and warnings**

Some districts may hesitate to require project-based work because the traditional curriculum and testing schedules in place are already difficult to manage and feel impossible to pause. It is possible for teachers to continue to teach their curriculum, while also involving students in "anchor projects" that last the length of a term or a year and provide motivation for related classwork. This type of project can be conceived of, proposed, developed, and completed by students over some time, giving them more autonomy and authority. Teachers can then guide their students through real-world skills such as messaging interests, pitching their ideas effectively and following through on commitments. This can increase the joy of teaching and empower students to effect change in areas they care most about.

It may seem that if comprehensive, cross-community project-based learning can't be done without accountability or requirement, then it shouldn't be done. Some people think teachers already have little time and too much to do. Others would say that if teachers felt it was so important,

*As students become more deeply involved in the community, teachers can ask refining questions and have the responsibility of pushing projects toward facilitating cross-community learning as appropriate for our students.*

they'd already base their classes on it. This is untrue. Teachers have ideals and then they have contextual and evaluative limits to what they can accomplish in their classrooms. Just as the standardization of outcomes for students has helped many teachers better structure their own curriculum, requiring and standardizing project-based learning will support its use. Without assistance in the development of standards, systematic thinking by our districts and education policymakers, and project-based learning in our professional development, time, funding and the habitual priorities of traditional schoolwork will limit teachers' ability to innovate with their students.

There are potential pitfalls to working across communities in our classrooms. From criticism of service learning work, we know we don't want to create situations where student work done creates thoughtless or unsustainable change, only involves some students, or lacks clarity of purpose that would ensure everyone's time and interest are honored. Developing cross-community project based learning also requires thoughtful communication from teachers. We need to understand our students' thinking before the projects, negotiate the guidelines of the work with students and sometimes parents, and to help urge meaningful cross-community work that challenges our school community's sense of normalcy and familiarity. Administrators and districts could support this work by providing forms and exchange guidelines. If teachers working together with their classes discuss possible roadblocks and misunderstandings between different students, the project can be planned to assist collaboration and group problem-solving.

The risk of allowing students to stay isolated from the lives and problems of those different from them is far greater than the inevitable hurdles that will arise in cross-community project-based learning. If students don't have this opportunity, our public schools will continue to perpetuate a gap in perception of reality between people who live close to each other. Whether in the same school coming from tracked or otherwise separated classrooms, attending two different schools in the same district, two different districts in the same city, county, state, or country, students engaging in live cross-community learning can strengthen our communities

and help influence how we approach the social problems we face hourly in fields like education.

## Conclusion

We have so many relatively new ways of cultivating knowledge and skill in students and ourselves as teachers that we cannot ignore how well they set us up to find ways to share our resources and engage with communities. Inter-community projects happen from time to time, and the only reason they are not happening at a pace where we see their benefits more quickly is that the work is not required in our schools. We can still go through an entire school year without leaving the classroom or textbook. We have standardized everything except the idea that people must learn with others different than they are on the problems that impact their own lives. Instead we delay their exposure to these things, which are the very nature of adult work. To more fully unleash public school students' potential and heighten their own engagement, retention of learning, and experiences of success that build confidence, we need to take the opportunity to work and learn with our nearby communities. It may be as beneficial to educators and working professionals as it is to students, as students in school so often have wise ideas and make prudent choices about the people and situations that utterly perplex adult society.



Megan Megaard teaches Spanish 1, AP Spanish for Heritage Learners, and a literacy strengthening class called Expression and Empowerment at Global Connections High School in SeaTac, Washington. She was raised in Colbert, WA, a half hour north of downtown Spokane, lived in Costa Rica for a year and three months, and now lives in North Seattle.





## Time to Play!

Linda Myrick

Remember when a child's "job" was to play for hours on end? To build forts and sand castles, to imagine stories with dolls and action figures, to solve problems with their playmates? We used to understand that play was the "work" of childhood. As Sam and Holly built with blocks, they created, communicated, discovered principles of math and physics, made decisions, resolved conflicts, and solved problems collaboratively. Have we forgotten that play is the foundation of authentic learning?

We educators are used to the swinging pendulum. Kindergarten classes used to be outfitted with dress-up areas, play kitchens, blocks, and sand boxes. Little by little, these props for imaginative play have given way to tables and desks, pencils, worksheets, and packets. Little by little, we have brought academic angst to younger and younger children until finally, kindergarten is now the new first grade. And then, we decided that pre-school had to be about being "ready" for kindergarten, and, voila! We are now seeing worksheets – maybe with bigger letters, but still, worksheets—in preschool! Kindergarten is the new first grade and preschool is the new kindergarten, and neither are providing enough time for the best, most effective, highest quality learning experience available: simple, unstructured play.

The trend toward more academic instruction in Kindergarten had already begun in the late 1990s when I was assigned to teach a K-1 class in Bellevue, Washington. The academic focus of early literacy and math skills had already led to repurposing of classroom space. There was no longer room for a dramatic play area, a building area, Tinker Toys or Legos. We did have a writing table, a classroom library (though now with "leveled" books), math manipulatives, and a science discovery area. These were good. New curriculum, though, required lots of sitting and listening to the teacher, writing about reading, and connecting sounds at the beginning, middle, and end of words to the written letters. Some children, of course, were ready for these challenges. Others were not. Some 5-year-olds were not ready for reading the leveled books that were designated as "standard" for kindergarteners. These perfectly normal children would become painfully aware of their inadequacy as they compared themselves to their friends who were already reading in the

"D" tub in the leveled reading area.

Many kids, naturally, would "wobble" during circle time or become discouraged and give up during writing time. Well-meaning administrators, looking at increasingly "rigorous" academic expectations, would counsel me with ways to help: give them chances to get up and move, go to the water fountain for a "break," give them fatter pencils or pencil grips or unlined paper if they weren't quite ready for lines. Looking back, I can't help but wonder if, in our enthusiasm for new approaches to early literacy and academic pushes for ensuring success for all kids, we weren't missing the obvious messages that our wiggly kids were sending us: "We need more time to play!"

Fast forward 20 years. Discussions with my colleagues now teaching Kindergarten and visits to their classrooms reveal that, if anything, Kindergarten is now even more academic than ever before. It is difficult for teachers to find time for unstructured play in the schedule, given academic expectations. Common Core State Standards for Kindergarten, adjusted by districts to reflect mid-year benchmarks, have raised reading and math expectations for mid-Kindergarten to levels that were formerly set for the end of first grade. Clearly, there are students who will read at high levels in kindergarten, but to identify this expectation as "standard" is part of a policy that may be inadvertently damaging the development of many of our students, according to research on early childhood development.

And so, the pressure cooker that has become a metaphor for school now begins with our very youngest learners, children at their most malleable and vulnerable stage of development. Teachers at all levels are noticing the continuing impacts of the increased academic focus of early childhood education.

As a fourth grade teacher, I see the continued need for choice time and play time in school. I am in good company in these observations. Much has been written in recent years about the critical importance of play in child development at all levels. In their 2007 clinical report, *The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development*, the American Academy of Pediatrics notes that "Play (or ample free time, for older children) is essential to development because it



contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth.” The report notes that:

*Benefits of play include: allowing children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength; enhancing healthy brain development, development of confidence and resiliency, learning how to work in groups, share, negotiate, resolve conflicts, and develop self-advocacy skills; developing decision-making skills, and discovering interests and passions.*

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/119/1/182>

Additionally, the report notes that, though much of play could involve adults, there are consequences to play that is controlled by adults. These consequences include the child’s acquiescence to adult rules and concerns, negating many of the benefits offered by free play. This is a very important distinction, especially in light of the over-scheduling of our kids’ available “free” time. For play to provide its highest function, it is important that it be child-initiated, imagined, and executed rather than adult-designed and controlled.

The reality, though, is that opportunities for play and physical activity, however, have been systematically reduced in recent years. The report points out that “many school districts responded to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 by reducing time committed to recess, the creative arts, and even physical education in an effort to focus on reading and mathematics. This change may have implications on children’s ability to store new information because children’s cognitive capacity is enhanced by a clear-cut and significant change in activity.”

Another study, this one by psychologists at the University of Colorado and the University of Denver, studied the schedules of 70 six-year-olds. These researchers found that children who spent more time in less-structured activities had more highly-developed self-directed executive function. [http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching\\_now/2014/07/study\\_too\\_many\\_structured\\_activities\\_hinder\\_childrens\\_executive\\_functioning.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching_now/2014/07/study_too_many_structured_activities_hinder_childrens_executive_functioning.html)

Executive function, as many of us may have heard during team meetings to discuss our students with special needs, includes “any mental processes that help us work toward achieving goals; planning decision making, manipulating information, switching between tasks, and inhibiting unwanted thoughts and feelings.” The report notes that “children with

higher executive function will be healthier, wealthier, and more socially stable throughout their lives.” These researchers hypothesize that the child who has more control over how she spends her time gets more practice working toward her goals and planning what to do next. She will learn more than another child doing the same activities, but who received explicit instructions from an adult. This very important skill is at risk as children’s opportunities for unstructured free play continue to diminish, both inside and outside of school.

As to consequences of this trend, the research of Dr. Peter Gray illustrates the very serious mental health risks linked to inadequate time for play for children. Dr. Gray, author of *Free to Learn* and columnist for *Psychology Today*, has connected the documented sharp rise in young people’s mental disorders over the past 50 years with the decline in play over the same period of time. His article, “The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents,” was published in *The American Journal of Play*, 2011. <http://www.journalofplay.org/sites/www.journalofplay.org/files/pdf-articles/3-4-article-gray-decline-of-play.pdf>

In this article, Dr. Gray graphically illustrates increases in unhealthy levels of stress, diagnosed anxiety, depression, and higher rates of child suicide. Given research that shows the beneficial impacts of unstructured play on human development, Dr. Gray argues that a causal link is a logical conclusion in the correlation between the decline in play and the rise in psychopathology in children and youth. He states, “By depriving children of opportunities to play on their own, away from direct adult supervision and control, we are depriving them of opportunities to learn how to take control of their own lives. We may think we are protecting them, but in fact we are diminishing their joy, diminishing their sense of self-control, preventing them from discovering and exploring the endeavors they would most love, and increasing the odds that they will suffer from anxiety, depression, and other disorders.”

In my own classroom experience, each year has brought more students exhibiting, if not diagnosed anxiety or depression, behaviors that indicate less confidence in making their own decisions, even about little things. As we brainstorm our Class Charter each fall, deciding on agreements about how we will conduct ourselves and rules we will establish and live by, I am noticing more reluctance on the part of my students to think for themselves. They seem, as a whole, compliant, or,



conversely, extremely rebellious. Having the space to think, create, and speak for themselves seems difficult for them to navigate. I am realizing that what I am seeing may be the consequences of time for play squeezed out of their lives, and so much of their young lives being programmed by adults.

Given the important benefits of unstructured play, and the terrible impacts we are seeing in society as a result of its decline, it seems obvious that inclusion of play/choice/project time in our daily schedules for students at all levels should be a high priority for all teachers and parents.

In support of this conclusion, many of these points were brought to the attention of the National Education Association at its annual meeting in July, 2016. A new resolution was added to the NEA Resolutions document, a document that states the guiding beliefs of the nation's largest teachers' union.

**New Resolution: Learning Through Play**

- The National Education Association believes that ample time for student-driven, unstructured play must be included among the essential learning experiences in the education of our students. Beyond physical activity, these experiences include imaginative play, creative/constructive play, and games with rules. Students' engagement in undirected, freely chosen activities is an essential component of healthy human development as well as a necessity for social/emotional, physical, and cognitive growth of children.
- The Association further believes that play increases student abilities in the areas of critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, executive functioning, communication skills, empathy, and self-regulation.
- The Association also believes that a lack of ample time for undirected, self-chosen play/activities contributes to mental health problems such as rising rates of stress, anxiety, depression, and child suicide, and therefore should be treated as an important provision in the scheduling of student time.
- The Association believes that ample amounts of time for play and/or freely chosen activities are necessary for healthy development and should be provided during the school day. (2016)

My fourth graders are drawn to our bookcase of board games, the decks of playing cards, jigsaw puzzles, and games they make themselves for math and reading extensions. We are now making time in our schedule that reflects the fact that time playing is valuable in their growth and development. It gives me great joy to watch them, to see them interacting with each other, playing together, resolving conflicts with each other. Occasionally, I will mentally take note that these children are of different ethnicities, perhaps different races, perhaps different faiths. And I will wonder if time playing together, in addition to enhancing their own personal development, could in fact impact their attitude toward the possibility for love and peace in the world. And I wonder, could more time for play hold the possibility for preventing some of the difficulties we are seeing in schools and society today? Could stress, depression, and anxiety be reduced? Could executive function improve? These are all current concerns we are observing and for which we are requesting additional resources in our schools.

The pendulum is swinging back. Some districts are bringing back the little kitchen appliances and big blocks to kindergarten classrooms. Districts that had restricted recess time in some schools are now guaranteeing equity in recess time for students in all schools. With the research we now have, perhaps these changes will gain momentum. I hope you will join me in this movement to recognize the importance of time for play for all children and to restore its rightful place in classrooms everywhere.



Linda Myrick is currently a fourth grade teacher in Bellevue, Washington, where she has taught for more than 20 years. She is a National Board Certified Teacher in the area of Early and Middle Childhood Literacy. Outside of school, Linda advocates for public education at the local, state, and national levels through the Washington Education Association, the PTA, and in local and state politics.



## First Things First

Shannon Francisco-Papcun

Danielson, the framework that is used in the Sumner School District to evaluate teachers, is broken down into specific components. Each month I will provide a narrative for one to two of these components in the hope of helping you create a mental image of what they look like in your classroom. This month is found in Domain 2 “Classroom Environment”, specifically 2c Managing Classroom Procedures and 2d Managing Student Behavior. This tool is intended to be broken down into manageable bites.

My hope is it will then become clear that what we are striving for is not checking a box on an evaluative tool, but understanding that best practice allows us to be successful in our daily lives as teachers. In September, be looking for practical use of 1b Demonstrating Knowledge of Students and 2a Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport.



It's August. The hopes and dreams of your first day of school are floating around in your head. In a perfect world, students will enter your classroom and immediately fall in love with you. They will want to listen and be prepared all day. You won't even need routines and procedures. However, let's take a realistic look at a first day of school: Students are walking in, you are introducing yourself and showing each student where they will sit and where their supplies go. Once seated, they have a task to complete. While more students are entering, you are feeling a bit of *stress* at not getting to everyone quickly enough for introductions or directions. While the first students into the class are done and now starting to talk to their neighbors, you are feeling more and more out of control of your classroom.

Understanding the possibilities of what lies ahead in your school day and planning for this, especially your first

two weeks of school, will set you up for a successful year. Throughout this narrative, you will see many questions which may need to be thought about in *chunks* rather than one *big bite*. You have a wonderful opportunity before students come to school in September to ask these of yourself: “What do I plan on saying to each student coming into my class for the first time?”, “What will I have them doing first, second, third, etc. when they enter the room?”, “What noise level am I comfortable with?” Never take for granted the power of planning—even if that means you are planning that your students will be in charge of what they can do in the classroom with regards to routines and procedures.

As a new teacher you may have ideas from your university, from a veteran teacher, or from books/websites you have read on what activities will need routines/procedures and what classroom management looks like in your class. To begin the process of planning, you may want to begin with a mental or an actual physical walk through your day in your classroom, taking notes on all the small pieces of your day that will require a routine or procedure to be taught.

Thoughts to ponder: When your students walk in, where will you be standing? In Sumner, many teachers stand at the door to greet students with a smile. Students know from day one that each day is a fresh start and teachers are happy they are there. What do students do after they have entered your room? They will have coats, backpacks, supplies, and notes for you. Will they know what to do with it all? How will they know this? Once this is done, what do they do next and how do you tell them? You will have transitions throughout your day. How will you move your students from one task to the next? The end of your day is another important time for routines and procedures. Will you leave time for student reflection? How will that look? Did you allow time for cleaning up the room? How do they pack up? How do they line up? Always keep in mind that your occupation is a reflective one. *Reflection* is a daily tool and if something didn't click, try something else, your students are forgiving, you need to be forgiving of yourself as well!

Once you have completed your list of activities needing routines/procedures, a tried and true protocol of working through them is *CHAMPS*, an acronym for clearly defining

routines and procedures.

**“C”onversation**—When students walk into the room each morning, do you want them to have a chance to chat and share? Or is it a quiet time with soft music playing? What does conversation look like during other times of your day?

**“H”elp**—How do students get your attention? Do you walk around the room to quiet raised hands? If they do need to wait for you, what should they be doing during that time? Do they need to “ask three before me”? Do you teach them to look around and focus on what others are doing?

**“A”ctivity**—What will this activity produce? When students come in, or line up, or walk the halls, what will this look like and sound like? How many times do you have in your plans to practice this?

**“M”ovement**—During the day, think of typical areas for movement. What do students do to get a pencil sharpened? Go to the bathroom? Get a drink of water? Move from one activity to another? How much movement is acceptable in your classroom?

**“P”articipation**—What does it look like and sound like to be following the routine and/or procedure in the class without the teacher’s influence? Does participation entail talking to neighbors? How do students show they are done with a task? If some complete early, do students know what to do while they are waiting?

**“S”uccess**—This is a chance to high five and let all know what a great learning experience the students have had. Give specifics! Who and what?

In addition to routines and procedures, you will need to be prepared with your classroom management plan. How will students know they are successful in any routine or procedure? What rules will be established in your classroom? Are there building rules that apply to all classrooms? Many Sumner schools are *Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)* schools and have *pre established rules*. Others use standards from Project Glad. How and when will you teach your rules? Will you tell students what they are or will you give them a chance to tell you? How will they know what rewards and consequences there are? How will parents know? There are a myriad of plans you probably have heard about: “The card

system”, “Class Dojo”, “Fill your Bucket”, “Clip up, Clip down”.

**I have seen all show success keeping in mind two factors: always ensure that Positive behavior is rewarded far above any consequences given and find a system that works for you.** You need to be able to be consistent enough for it to be effective.

Being mindful in preparing for your day will reap great benefits to you during the year. TPEP is a reality for us, but taken in small doses, shifting our thinking to how each piece benefits ourselves and our students will have impact on how we tackle it. Here is a tool to use to capture any Danielson elements you are ready to practice in your classroom as well as any you want to plan practicing.



Shannon Francisco-Papcun has been a teacher of 2nd and 4th grade students for 12 years and currently teaches and serves as a mentor teacher in the Sumner School District. She is Nationally Board Certified and was a Washington State Fellow in English Language

Arts for three years. She has been involved with the Gates Foundation’s Elevating and Celebrating Effective Teachers and Teaching program both regionally and nationally. This past year she taught a close reading session at the regional Washington Library Media Association conference and was part of a panel on the Common Core State Standards, for the Association of American University Women. Most recently she spoke at the annual Gates Foundation meeting about LDC (Literacy Design Collaborative) for which she has a unit published on their site. Shannon has a passion for helping students to envision all they can be.





## Special Education vs. Mental Health: Blurred Lines

Danielle Puhl

“Boom, boom, bang, bang,” accompanied by screams, is what you hear each night as the national news reports on schools or community shootings. Often times, the lives of suspects are reviewed and we learn that as youths they were troubled or experienced a mental health crisis. Sometimes these individuals had IEPs (Individual Education Plans) and received specialized education services, but once they resort to violence, it’s clear that schools were not able to do enough to help.

We live in a diverse world with children who have varying needs and situations. The umbrella of special education covers students who have neurological disorders such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia, and dyscalculia, and mental health disorders including emotional disabilities. The problem these days is that special education encompasses a whole world of disorders, many of which we do not usually associate with children who have a learning handicap. Students can be in special education because they are not categorized correctly or their schools do not have the tools to serve mentally ill students and place them on IEPs.

There is a difference between a student with a learning disability (LD) and one with mental health concerns. LD students have neurological disorders. Being diagnosed with a learning disability simply means one uses and processes information differently. Most learning-disabled students can be remedied with learning tools to assist them in grasping concepts, based on factors such as learning styles. The majority of learning disabled children have average IQs, but are performing below their IQ. Others can even have high IQs, but are performing at an average level, also qualifying them for services due to this unexpected gap in learning.

A student with mental illness may not need differentiated instruction or accommodations, but may have an entirely different set of needs and issues that create problems for teachers and other students regarding safety. These students cannot satisfactorily adjust to a school environment due to inability to think, feel, and act socially or emotionally when in crisis. Students with mental health issues are the number one subgroup least likely to have an on-time graduation rate or graduate at all. Students with behavioral needs often face other challenges that could lead them into the juvenile

justice system.

Sometimes these two worlds of learning disabilities and mental illness intersect. It takes a really good team to see the difference. My special education team worked with an 18-year-old credit deficient, autistic senior who also had an extremely high IQ accompanied by destructive behaviors, like cutting things in the home and hurting his sister. He was adamant that he would not take his medication and no one would be able to control the voices in his head because he enjoyed what they told him to do, even if it was to hurt others, especially his sister. He knew he wouldn’t graduate on time, and was determined to make life a nightmare for the others in his class. He also prided himself on the fact that he knew more of the subject matter content than his educators. Distracting the female students was fun for him. To get their attention he would rub Kleenex on them and duck under the tables and roll around on the floor, and often times touched their legs.

Our team worked on providing social skills training based on the teachings by Michelle Garcia Winner on expected and unexpected behaviors for autistic students. We reviewed job opportunities and post-secondary training. We had regular wrap-around meetings with vested stakeholders. We also held a school threat assessment to address safety concerns. We were limited in the tools we had at the school to ensure his safety or that of his sister or others within our building. At the school level, consequences seemed unimportant to him. We needed additional supports from the community for his foster family, consultation from mental health providers, and law enforcement’s assistance in discussing consequences of his sexual harassment and aggressive behavior.

A good team can change the outcomes for all students through their practice. The team needs to include the student’s teacher(s), special education case manager, school psychologist, parents, school administrator, and other specialists working with the child. Without a good team and appropriate services, the creation of an IEP for a student with mental health issues has done only one thing—identified the child as having a need.

Without more community based services and additional funding for district supports and specialists, these students



do not grow and do not overcome, as compared to students who are just truly learning disabled. Placing them in special education waters down the program and causes a lot of resources to be taken away from students who are thriving and developing with the aid of an IEP team.

Most schools do not hire 1:1 team members to work directly with mental health students. For that matter, mental health specialists are not available to ensure the child is in line of sight vision each day, nor are they trained enough to ensure safety of the student, or the entire student body if things go awry. The absence of support can cause a public safety concern for the health and well-being of mentally ill students who may harm themselves or others.

A transfer student entered my pre-algebra intervention class of 35 students. She had a label of learning disability in writing and math, and it was clear within the first week that she was hearing voices, was angry, distant, and unable to control herself. Kids were worried to sit next to her. I placed a call home and her father informed me she was going through some mental health challenges and was just returning home to him from a year of being in foster care and that he was new to raising her. He reported that she was not a safety concern. A few days later, police officers entered the class with about three school administrators and asked her to leave with them without a problem. The majority of the students in my room were on IEPs, and they were frightened. She raised her voice, began yelling, and finally slammed her chair to leave. The incident occurred because she had a fascination with swords and posted some samurai swords on Facebook with repeated posts and questions about what it would feel like to insert sharp blades into others. Her adult sister saw it and reported it to the authorities.

This incident again reminded me that my primary job as an educator is to keep my students safe, but I was not handed any tools to prepare me for the possibility that a new student might be a danger to me or to my entire class. Having a confrontation in the middle of a class traumatized some of my students, and they were unable to move past the

experience. They were puzzled about what occurred in front of them, continuing to ask if this student was dangerous. I soon learned she transferred to another local school. I questioned whether or not teachers there were informed of the latest incident.

Lumping mentally ill students into the learning disabled category because of academic deficits is not the solution. When placing mentally ill children on IEPs, the treatment of behaviors that need to be addressed cannot be done by the IEP team.

I had a student a few years back that I'll call D. D was an awkward looking student who had heard voices since he was in elementary school. By the time he entered middle school, he was identified as learning disabled due to his lack of production for reading, writing, and math. He isolated himself from others, staying in a corner of the resource room. He socially disengaged from others even after attempts to teach him direct social skills instruction, and when prompted by an adult or others, would talk about the voices in his head. This behavior pushed his peers further away from him and his teachers were scared to push him. He lived with his siblings and his mother, who had a fear of leaving the house (agoraphobia), suffered from severe anxiety, and rarely bathed, so his house was dark. Once he was home, he would sit in front of the TV playing video games that included shooting people. He took medications periodically if the family had enough money to afford them.

At our middle school, this information about his home environment was not included in the IEP, since it was merely about his academics and "learning disability" in which he qualified. He soon realized that he would have more expectations placed on him due to his needs. He would get very angry when asked to do anything. His behaviors changed and he started throwing things at peers to hurt them, blaming the voices in his head. Many interventions were tried: earning rewards such as watching videos, lunch bought for him by staff, a lunch date with a special friend, and a peer mentor. We set up different jobs for him at the school, isolated his

*Lumping mentally ill students into the learning disabled category because of academic deficits is not the solution. When placing mentally ill children on IEPs the treatment of behaviors that need to be addressed cannot be done by the IEP team.*

desk and work station, offered counseling biweekly with the school counselor, contacted his parent for phone conference, and made referrals to community mental health specialists. There were evaluations to document his at-risk behavior, and calls to Child Protective Services (CPS), but nothing worked or changed for the better. Eventually unsafe behaviors led to suspensions and then to a school expulsion.

After the expulsion, D showed up at the school. He had something sticking out of his pocket and was walking around the building in a threatening manner, attempting to enter locked classrooms. The principal was out of the building that day, and the school counselor called me to ask what she should do. I told her we had made it clear he was not to be on the premises and to call law enforcement. She acted with her heart and went outside to talk to him, encouraging him to go home. Later several teachers asked me what was wrong and expressed their concerns about seeing him lingering around.

We were lucky that he was able to calm down and return to his home; some schools have not been that lucky. D is one of a handful of students I've encountered who should not be considered a "special education student" but rather a student who would best benefit from a school crisis team due to mental health concerns.

There are steps we can take to ensure adequate help for both learning disabled students and mentally ill students. If we have services and teams designed to assist the mentally ill population, we need to have specific guidelines to make sure students are properly identified with one of the 13 handicapping conditions laid out by federal guidelines. One of these conditions is emotional disability, which is similar to oppositional defiant, but mentally ill students like D are being mislabeled as learning disabled students, when that is not their primary issue. About 41% of all students on an IEP have a specific learning disability (SLD), while there are 12 other categories that could be used for a more specific diagnosis.

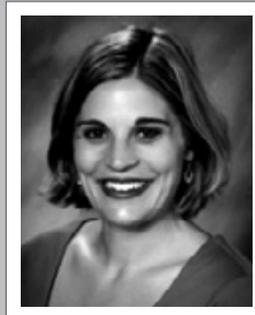
Schools shouldn't increase the number of IEPs for students who don't need them, but instead should increase

funding and help with service interventions that include in-building mental health services, court assistance for families for emergency placement assistance, 1:1 student and family assigned mentors, public safety officers (police or fire), and other social service systems (local mental health counselor) that are available within a minute's call.

We are not fully equipped to handle all of the problems of mental health at the public school level. To avert crisis, schools need to have or have available on-call response teams for mental health student issues. Having a team ready is paramount to ensuring public safety, and would ease the pressure on IEP teams to take on additional students who are mentally ill without having additional school wide supports available.

In doing so, the blurred lines between special education and mental health can be clearly addressed by a Special Education team, Mental Health teams or a combination of both to be used for each student and their specific needs.

Without adequate support at the school level, the student cannot be helped.



Danielle Puhl has worked as a special education teacher for 9 years at the secondary level in both Colorado and Washington state. Prior to entering the public school sector, she worked at a residential treatment facility with mentally ill girls ages 11-21. She holds a BS in Criminal Justice, MA: Education, Curriculum, and Reading Instruction, and is a NBCT (National Board Certified Teacher) for Exceptional Needs students birth-21.





## New Approaches, New Results

Carla Reynolds

*The impact of poverty for some is like a storm and for others it is a hurricane. ~ Investigative journalist*

As Mira, a new student from El Salvador, enters class, I wonder what her plans are for continuing her education after she has her baby. How stable is her home life? How much support does she have for raising her child? Was this pregnancy a choice, accident or other? Another student of mine recently told me that her pregnancy was due to being raped during her journey from El Salvador. The truth is I won't know what trauma, if any, is affecting Mira until I get to know her. No one teacher can take on the responsibility of getting one student caught up after 12 weeks of maternity leave and deliver quality teaching. We already feel like we are standing in a slowly rising river of "to do's."

A few moments later, Oscar, who should be in my class, walks by my window on his cell phone. I haven't seen him for a week and wonder how he is doing. Fifteen minutes pass and he enters class with a smile and in a "It's nice to see you and it's been a while" tone he says, "Hi Ms.," then sits down next to his buddy, Benjamin. Does he have a place to live? Is he still concerned about being deported? I plan to reconnect with him as soon as I can after students start their independent work. Sitting next to him and working with him for a while has helped him feel included. I learned the hard way that if I don't intentionally include him, he will mumble vulgarities under his breath, horse around with his friends, zone out on his phone, refuse to participate in class, sit by himself and slam his hands down saying, "No entiendo nada! No puedo hacer eso!" (I don't understand anything! I can't do this!)

Thirty minutes later, after the class takes a short break outside, students report to me that Nhat has grabbed Carolina's butt for the second time. This is the first time Nhat has come to school in a month. I need to immediately separate them so Carolina feels safe and then follow up with Nhat and the counselor after school. I wonder when I will have time to follow up with him since I'm double booked after school; I have to go to an intervention meeting for a student as well

as work with three students who have recently missed class.

Regardless of the socio-economic status of the student population, social-emotional issues are prevalent in all schools, but not at the same rate as at some high poverty schools. To illustrate, a principal who is currently working at a school with a high socio-economic population told me he had recently met with all of his teachers about their struggling students and most of them had one or none. For teachers at my school, this is hard to imagine as we invest much of our free time after school and on weekends doing the best we can to "close the achievement gap." Each year, 17% to 50% of our

9th grade class enters reading at grade level, yet a 70% graduation rate is not celebrated.

In the past, our staff has met these challenges and we've seen students transform their lives over the course of their

tenure in high school. One example is a student who, as a 9th grader, cut herself regularly and was disengaged at school. With persistent teachers who knew how to work with her, she graduated four years later, with plans to go to college and truly inspired to continue learning and growing.

This staff still had room for growth, especially about working collaboratively, but there were so many signs of progress and students re-inventing themselves as curious and ambitious scholars. While facing challenges, we still had a sense of accomplishment and progress yet were still overwhelmed with the workload, which made us question how sustainable our school was.

After 11 years of teaching in a high poverty school, I've witnessed how a school can work against itself by lowering academic and behavioral expectations for students and therefore undermining students' self-confidence and drive. The culture of high expectations and skillful response to students who have experienced trauma can be created in every school.

To do this in a high-poverty school, teachers need embedded time during the school day in order to do quality work. They need an extra hour each day and a reasonable teaching load, at most two different classes, so they can

*These teachers need embedded time to become experts at working with students who have experienced trauma.*

adequately differentiate for students' skill levels and meet their social-emotional needs. This structure is currently provided at a nearby public school in a high socio economic area.

These teachers need embedded time to become experts at working with students who have experienced trauma. They need embedded time to communicate with families on a regular basis because only calling home with negative news does not build community. On a weekly basis—not every six weeks—teachers need time to collaborate with other teachers about students of concern.

A need I see in many schools is for teachers to develop their expertise at teaching students soft skills, such as how to express their feelings precisely and ask for what they need in a way that others will hear them. Knowing that when people are upset they can't think rationally, students need to learn how to calm themselves down when they are losing it. Teaching students how to problem solve when managing their workloads and deal with personal, interpersonal and class wide issues will empower them and prepare them for life after high school.

After getting quality training on how to teach these skills, through programs such as *Positive Discipline*, teachers could transform their school. They would have an extra hour to problem solve issues that come up during implementation, set measureable goals so they can chart and monitor their progress and make adjustments as needed. They could work together on interventions for students of concern, track those interventions and monitor the progress weekly (instead of every six weeks). Teachers also need time to create the lessons they will use to teach those skills—about two-three hours per week in the beginning.

Since stressed teachers usually call home only if there is a problem, and keep the calls as short as possible so they can

move on to other tasks, teachers need extra embedded time for family engagement. With another hour a week, teachers could call parents and guardians on a regular basis to check in with them, update them on what the class is working on, how they can support their student at home and inform them of school events. Over time, this regular communication would build a stronger community because teachers and parents would come to understand each other on a deeper level and keep lines of communication open—all of which prevents issues from building up.

If we continue to expect teachers at high poverty schools to do twice as much work as those at other schools, they will continue to try their best, but the results will be the same. If we want new results, we need to make time for those determined teachers to do quality work.



After 12 years of working at a high poverty high school, Carla Reynolds now works at the other extreme which she likes to refer to as Bella Vista High School, more commonly known as Bellevue High School. For most of her teaching career she's worked with English Learners teaching a range of content from Algebra to 11th grade Language Arts. In her free time she enjoys doing yoga, hiking, gardening and running.



## Growth Mindset Messaging and Assessment in the ELA Classroom

Mary Sharp

In *Mathematical Mindsets*, Jo Boaler explores the language and pedagogical habits that convey a growth mindset in a mathematics classroom. She also discusses habits and systems, such as tracking, that reinforce fixed mindsets. Carol Dweck, Ph.D., a renowned researcher on motivation who wrote the forward in *Mathematical Mindsets*, explains the difference between a fixed and growth mindset:

*In a fixed mindset students believe their basic abilities, their intelligence, their talents, are just fixed traits. They have a certain amount and that's that, and then their goal becomes to look smart all the time and never look dumb.*

*In a growth mindset students understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching and persistence. They don't necessarily think everyone's the same or anyone can be Einstein, but they believe everyone can get smarter if they work at it (Morehead 3).*

Illuminating how teachers' pedagogical choices send messages that contribute to students' fixed or growth mindsets, Jo Boaler presents research-based strategies that help teachers reinforce growth mindset messaging in the classroom. As I've reflected on the text and how it intersects with my own teaching, I have noted that classrooms where children have the opportunity to develop a growth mindset and habits of the mind such as curiosity and persistence encourage children to become lifelong learners. Carol Dweck hits the nail on the head when she explains how teachers who encourage a growth mindset motivate students: "By motivation, I mean not only the desire to achieve but also the love of learning, the love of challenge, and the ability to thrive on obstacles. These are the greatest gifts we can give our students" (Hopkins 8).

As I read *Mathematical Mindsets*, I began to consider some important questions that helped me determine whether I was conveying a fixed or growth mindset in my classroom:

1. Do I praise a young person's "intelligence" and penalize them for making mistakes, encouraging them to believe that intelligence is a fixed trait or do I praise their hard work and celebrate their willingness to make mistakes that actually create physical brain growth?

2. Is the type of work I assign challenging yet accessible?
3. Have I built an inclusive classroom culture with heterogeneous groupings where I expect and require everyone to learn?
4. Do students have the power to set meaningful goals for themselves and help direct their learning?
5. Am I assessing what is important or what is easy for me to assess?
6. Am I grading student work rather than providing quality feedback?

Assessment is an important part of student learning that I would like to discuss a bit more in depth because it is often challenging to convey growth mindset messaging while we assess student work. Boaler states, "Sadly, when students are given frequent test scores and grades, they start to see themselves as those scores and grades. They do not regard the scores as an indicator of their learning or of what they need to do to achieve; they see them as indicators of who they are as people" (142-143). Researchers have consistently found that grading reduces student achievement and intrinsic motivation. In fact, Ruth Butler's research indicates that when teachers provide *comments only* (as opposed to grades and comments), students learned twice as fast. While these studies were focused on mathematics learning, I can't help but notice how they support my observations of student learning in the English Language Arts classroom. Most teachers would move heaven and earth if it would help them develop students' motivation, love of learning and achievement. I want to provide some concrete ideas that could help English Language Arts teachers assess students' knowledge and while communicating a growth mindset.

First of all, Boaler stresses the importance of assessing less. She asserts, "If teachers replaced weekly grading with diagnostic comments given occasionally, they could spend the same amount of time, eliminate the fixed mindset messages of a grade, and provide students with insights that would propel them onto paths of higher achievement" (143-144). She also explains that we must assess student knowledge that is important, highlighting critical and analytical thinking, not simply what is easy to assess. I realize that, at some point, most of us are required to assign a grade to our students' learning

but perhaps we can find ways to deliver growth mindset messaging along the way. Standards-based grading is one way to ensure that we are designing meaningful assessments. Offering students continuous opportunities throughout the semester to show their growth in the standards, perhaps through the development of a portfolio, rather than administering permanent fixed grades in a grade book, also communicates growth mindset messaging. I would like to explore some ways to develop students' growth mindsets as we assess learning of two Common Core ELA standards for 7th graders. Many teachers have been using these strategies for years.

*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.*

Instead of designing an assessment where you award points for the textual evidence that a student finds on a written assessment, consider assessing students' ability to cite textual evidence in the context of a Socratic Seminar. Choose a text that is challenging yet accessible (for example, students may have engaged in a close reading of the text, so that they have had time to interpret it independently and in small groups). Define and then use the academic language embedded in the standard (such as textual evidence, analysis, explicit, inferences) as you model how to ask relevant questions addressing this standard (citing evidence to support analysis of what the text says). Model questions should require critical thinking and investigative work.

Also, use the academic language when providing written and or verbal feedback (preferably without interrupting the flow of the seminar too much) in order to help students develop a metacognitive understanding of their discourse. Celebrate students' misconceptions as an exciting opportunity for learning rather than a reason to lower a grade. Praise students' flexibility and willingness to change an opinion based on new evidence. For students who did not have a chance to prove that they could meet or exceed standard, allow them a chance to write responses to the

questions raised in the seminar after the seminar. Consider facilitating the seminar over the course of two days, allowing those who did not speak on day one to form an inner fishbowl on day two. Don't choose a text for your seminar that students were supposed to read outside of class. Research from PISA (Program for International Student Assessment), reveals that homework perpetuates inequities in the classroom (Boaler 107).

*This encourages growth mindset* because it helps students develop the intrinsic motivation that lifelong learners require, showing them the relevance of citing evidence from the text. Instead of answering a question in isolation, they are collaboratively extracting and making meaning in a world where this is a crucial skill. Celebrating mistakes is important because this is where the learning actually takes place, and that is a reason for serious celebration!

*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama.*

Consider assessing this standard over the course of a few days (though ideally you would revisit this throughout the entire semester) in the context of a small group, collaborative

digital discussion of a text where you can see the progression of ideas unfold in the comment section of a document that you share with a small group. Offer two to three short, challenging texts for students to choose from in order to assess this standard. Small groups can form around the texts students choose to explore. Within the document you might ask questions

regarding the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, questions about figurative and connotative meanings of words or phrases, and/ or questions asking students to analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds. If you must grade the assignment, consider using a

*Celebrate students' misconceptions as*

*an exciting opportunity for learning*

*rather than a reason to lower a grade.*

*Praise students' flexibility and willingness*

*to change an opinion based on new*

*evidence.*

rubric that evaluates the depth of and support for students' analysis rather than basing the assessment on the number of questions completed. Offer questions and or comments that help students stretch their thinking. Explore ways to celebrate students' misconceptions as an exciting opportunity for learning rather than a reason to lower a grade. Consider integrating this with a writing project so that students have the opportunity to analyze the impact of the language their fellow students have generated. Don't put grades on the shared digital document since it takes the focus away from your helpful, diagnostic feedback.

*This encourages growth mindset because* student choice develops intrinsic motivation, and discourse encourages youth to engage in the respectful dialogue so necessary in the social media world. Student choice is a key component. Collaborative digital discussions can also demonstrate the relevance of deeply exploring author's word choice and the implicit and explicit meaning in text. Instead of answering a question in isolation, students are collaboratively extracting and making meaning in a world where this is a crucial skill. In addition, students who process text more slowly aren't penalized for the time they need to complete the task.

Educators may worry that these kinds of rolling, collaborative assessments will not prepare students to take standardized tests, however Boaler conducted a longitudinal study in England that suggests otherwise. In this study, 13-16 year old students worked on open-ended math projects in math class for three years before taking national standardized exams. Students did not take tests in class, nor did teachers grade their work (Boaler 142). Educators provided short assessment questions only a few weeks prior to the exams. While students were unfamiliar with timed exam questions, their exam scores were significantly higher than a group of students who spent three years practicing test questions and

taking frequent tests. Boaler asserts that the students from the problem-solving school did well because, "they were taught to believe in their own capabilities, they had been given helpful, diagnostic feedback and they had learned that they were mathematical problem solvers" (142). I'm certain that English Language Arts teachers could achieve similar ends if we could learn to communicate the growth mindset that will prepare students to tackle challenges and become lifelong learners.

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Mary Sharp has taught English Language Arts for over 11 years. She currently works as a middle school ELA Specialist in the Olympia School District.





## On Seeing and Knowing

Rachel Wiley

Tolstoy said that while happy families are all alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. As an avid memoir-junkie, I disagree. There are some pretty basic fundamental plot components that make up the stories of unhappy families—typically some sort of drug and/or alcohol use, mental illness, or abuse. My unhappy family was certainly no different than anybody else’s. My family had all three of the usual suspects and they came by way of my father. Sure, the specifics were unique, but the basics were all present and accounted for.

This situation ensured that whenever I was home, I was anxious. I worried that I might say or do something to make my dad upset. Anything I said or did might set him off, so I tried to be quiet and I wished to be invisible. Hiding in my closet with a book became my escape. I couldn’t wait until I was old enough to go to school, to be able to actually escape the chaos of my home for a few hours every day. I thought I would go to school and that all of my problems would disappear. Maybe that might have been true if we didn’t move around so much. Instead, school became another source of my anxiety.

In six years of elementary school, I attended four different schools. As a natural introvert, the frequency of change was incredibly difficult. I always felt alone and didn’t know where to sit, who I should partner with, or how to make friends. Again, I turned to books to alleviate the feelings of isolation and loneliness. Writing in my journal also helped. If I couldn’t talk to anybody else, at least I had a place where I could get everything out.

To add to the disappointment of school not fixing any of my problems as I’d imagined it would, it was also painfully, mind-numbingly boring. Even reading and writing, two activities which I regularly chose to do over anything else in my spare time, felt like torture in school. I felt as though my teachers had taken something I had always loved and turned it into something I loathed.

So there I was: bored, lonely, anxious, insecure, and ten years old. My parents sat me down one day and told me

they were getting a divorce. The relief I felt was immediate. I realized that I would be free of my father’s oppression. I decided right then that no one was ever going to tell me what to do again. With a newfound confidence and a sizeable chip on my shoulder, I decided to become somebody I’d always wanted to be: funny, outgoing, even popular. I had always had to be quiet and now I wanted to be heard. I forced myself to become that person. The funny thing was though, I still always felt alone. Fake it ‘til you make it may work for some, but I just felt misunderstood and unknown. I craved the sense of belonging and acceptance I had never had but because I wasn’t being true to myself, nobody really knew me.

My feelings became too much. Too big. I turned to partying as a way to cope, to forget. In 7th grade I was suspended eleven times for everything from smoking on campus to vandalizing the girls’ bathroom. In 9th grade I skipped class so often that I failed English. I became the party girl, the bad kid, the one who talked back to all of her teachers and didn’t care about anyone or anything.

The reality was that I cared too much. I was acting out because I didn’t know how to deal with all of my hurt, my fear, my insecurity. I felt out of control, and when I was rebelling against authority it made me feel like I had power. My mom tried everything. She would ground me and I would leave anyway. She’d yell and I would scream louder. She’d call the police to bring me home when I ran away and I would leave again. Finally, when my youngest brother was born when I was fifteen, she’d had enough. She kicked me out of the house. I moved in with my older boyfriend and now had free rein to do whatever I wanted, which quickly led to being rushed by ambulance to the emergency room to have my stomach pumped because of alcohol poisoning.

After this incident, my mom asked me to come back home, but she gave up on trying to enforce rules of any kind. The partying didn’t stop, the pain wasn’t over, and my problems were exponentially increasing. I decided to drop out of school.

*The reality was that I cared too much.  
I was acting out because I didn't know  
how to deal with all of my hurt, my fear,  
my insecurity.*

I saw no future for myself. I just couldn't see a point. After much back and forth with my mom, who loved me so much and couldn't stand to see me throw my life away, we came to a compromise. I would enroll in the alternative high school for one semester. If I hated it, then I could drop out.

I decided to give it a chance, fully expecting to put up with it for a few months until I could finally leave. What I got instead became the most significant turning point in my life. For the first time, teachers treated me with respect and encouraged me to do my best without telling me that I had to. As soon as I was presented with a choice, I began to see the value in the work. I had incredible teachers who had experience working with kids like me, so they made sure to try and build relationships with each of us. They never treated us like bad kids; rather they treated us like what we were—kids—a plain and simple truth that seemed to have been lost on other adults.

Most people think of alternative school as a place where students can take the easy way out. That was not at all true of my experience. My teachers set high expectations and pushed me to work harder than I ever had. I began to flourish. I loved listening to lectures, participating in thought-provoking Socratic seminars, questioning the material, arguing my position, and best of all, writing creatively again. Writing once again became my saving grace. Instead of using alcohol to cope, I chose pen and paper. I realized that telling my stories took away their power over me. Telling my own story gave me the power I had so desperately longed for.

I decided to become a writer, so I could tell these stories, and a teacher to help others share theirs. And since that day I have never stopped trying to tell the stories that will heal my heart, save my soul, and help me become the person I want to be in this life—one who helps others find the power and strength they so desperately crave.

I think of all of these past experiences and my own growth as I read my students' journals of depression, of contemplating suicide, of self-loathing, self-sabotaging, and self-medicating. I think of this as I ask them to write of happiness, of beauty, of truth. I think about this as we read literature together and I want to help them build connections, and come to new understandings about humanity. There are big questions I have had to wrestle with in my life, and one of the most significant is this: How can I show these students love, compassion, understanding, and acceptance so that they

might come to love and accept themselves?

My answer: to write and speak my truth and hope they'll learn something about falling, but getting back up. To connect with my students on a personal level, not just as teacher to student but human being to human being, to inspire them, to empower them, to give them hope, to show through all of my words and actions: You matter. You are seen. You are heard. You belong right here, right now. I am so glad that you are sitting in that seat in front of me. I believe we are in this room together for a very specific purpose and that we will change each other's lives for the better. You will do great things both in this classroom and out in the world. You have hope and a future.

How do I know? Because I have been there too. I have been hopeless. I have been unable to see the beauty. I have felt unloved, alone, and worthless. The fact that I am standing in front of these students is nothing short of a miracle. I am in awe of it every day. That's what should give them hope. Though I have suffered, and I have hurt, I have overcome, and they can too. They are so much more than their mistakes or failures.

It's this idea that fuels my passion for teaching. A calling is more than a career—it is a purpose and gives a life meaning. All of my past experiences have made me perfectly qualified to be where I am today. All that is needed is for someone to see not only who we are, but who we might become. To see through the mask of pretending, the walls built to cover shame and regret. To say: I see you. I know you. You are enough.



Rachel Wiley is a High School English Teacher in Puyallup, Washington. A graduate of Pacific Lutheran University's Master of Arts in Education program, a voracious reader, an avid writer, and a person with a passion for using stories to empower, she also writes a

blog about education at <https://wildandfreewiley.wordpress.com>





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