



Literacy: It All Connects

Ideal Learning Environment



LAURENT CLERC
NATIONAL DEAF EDUCATION CENTER



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Here is a scenario of an effective classroom.

When you walk into the sophomore team cluster, you are transported to the ancient city of Athens. Parents, students, teachers, and dorm staff have transformed the classroom throughout the quarter-long unit of study. The various classrooms in the sophomore cluster have been decorated like the Acropolis; one resembles the Parthenon, and others are designed like other buildings of ancient Greece.

At the center of the cluster is a well-stocked class library, with more than 1,000 fiction and nonfiction books at a wide range of levels. Soft chairs, a reading lamp, plants, and a braided rug make this area an inviting place to be. A large section of the class library currently features books on ancient Greece. More books are found in each individual classroom.



The classrooms are "littered in literacy." The teachers have posted charts with directions on borrowing books, guidelines for writing in math learning logs, stages of the scientific method to be incorporated in the science class observation log, and advice for classroom visitors. Other charts display information the class has discovered as they learn about the various aspects of ancient Greece. Lists of common words are on display, and near the class library are several recipe boxes for students' individual "word banks," where they record new vocabulary.

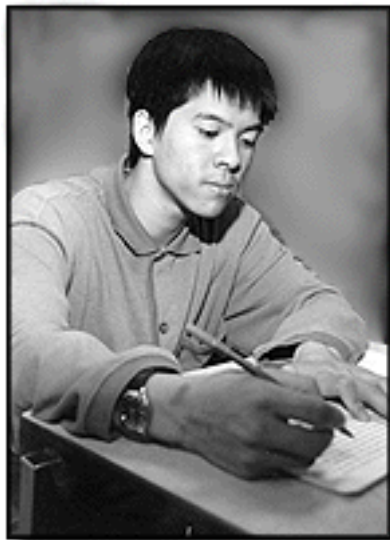
Each student's academic level is evaluated informally at the beginning and end of each school year. Routine checks are made throughout the year, and standardized testing and evaluation are done on a regular basis. Documentation of student growth is recorded and routinely shared with parents.

Students and teachers engage in several types of reading each day: read aloud, where proficient readers read to others; guided reading, in which a teacher guides a group of students through a book, and independent reading, when students select books that they can fully understand on their own.

Multicultural studies are infused into each unit. Students have learned about the lives of deaf people in ancient Greece. They have learned about famous Greek and Greek-American deaf people. Several of the students have been learning Greek Sign Language.

The students, teachers, and staff on this team allow for flexible groupings throughout the morning. At

times, the entire group gathers for events such as reading to the students. More often, the students gather in groups of five, 10, or 20, depending on their work. Across all content areas, the new curriculum calls for much less teacher presentation and control, far more active and experiential student learning, and constantly shifting groupings.



The lines between subject content areas are blurred. At times the humanities teachers group together to teach something, perhaps through reading and writing strategies. At the same time, math and science teachers team up for a meeting where students discuss the topic, share their knowledge about it, generate hypotheses, pose questions, set goals, and make a study plan. Students might, for example, discover for themselves the reasoning of the ancient Greek scientists whose work provides the foundation for the principles of modern mathematics. Roles and tasks are parceled out to the students, based on their curiosities and skills. Then the inquiry proceeds in the small groups, with the team members serving as facilitator and resources along the way. When the investigations are done, the teams reconvene to share and discuss their findings.

Writing happens across all curricular areas throughout the day. Classroom workshops also form an important part of the morning activities, with teacher instruction followed by a work period and individual instruction, and ending with group sharing. Reading and writing workshops have become a mainstay in many classrooms. In this classroom, the workshop model has extended outward to other parts of the curriculum--math, science, and history, for example. Whatever the content, deep immersion is the key to mastery.

During the afternoon, students go to one of five elective classes for the quarter. Drama students study Greek tragedies and comedies, or create a dramatization of Homer's *Iliad*. Students in home economic class sew chitons and peplos, traditional Greek costumes. Later in the quarter, they will learn to make Greek sweetmeats and other foods for a program-wide feast. Another group of students is taking art, where they are studying the "lost wax" method of creating bronze statues. Other students in physical education are preparing for an Olympic competition. Each of these elective courses meets for 100 minutes daily for the quarter.

While the students are in their elective classes, teaching team members are meeting for an hour, reflecting on what happened that day and discussing a couple of students who do not seem to be keeping up. They share observations about individual students' writing strategies in various contexts--the research topic that this team has established for this year. The research coordinator comments on the observations and points out patterns that all team members may wish to watch for in the coming weeks. The lead teacher collects notes from the meeting, which are passed along to the elective teachers for comment.

After the meeting, team members use their time for planning, responding to journals, and writing in their own teacher logs. Instead of spending time assigning and grading lots of busywork such as workbook pages, study questions, and fill-in-the-blank worksheets, teachers use their precious time responding to each student's original reports or stories, perhaps writing a personal note of response that both gives guidance and provides a model of solid adult writing.

On evenings and weekends, residence staff plan activities for students that connect with the theme being studied. On a typical week during the study of ancient Greece, Monday night is movie night and the students watch a film on Greek mythology, followed by small group discussions. On Wednesday afternoon, the residence staff take students-both residential and commuter--to a special Smithsonian exhibit with ancient Greek artifacts. They take notes in observation logs, which they will incorporate into their school research projects.


On Sunday evening, the residence education staff help students complete their homework assignments, a process that is made easier because they have previously helped plan the assignment together with the teaching team. Every evening, students gather in the lounge for a half hour while a proficient reader reads another chapter from a novel set in ancient Greece.

Families are regularly kept updated on their children's progress. At the beginning of the year, the teaching team members become mentors for a few students. The team meets daily to discuss all students' progress, and the family educator calls parents regularly to provide updates. The family educator also prepares a weekly newsletter from the team.

At the end of the unit, students will incorporate what they have learned into an ancient Greek feast, complete with dancing, art, readings, drama, religion, math, science, and various aspects of their studies. They will wear Greek clothing that they have made, will serve their fellow students, parents, and other invited guests the food they have cooked following ancient traditions.

Before moving on the next unit of study, the student and teachers will gather to reflect on what they have learned, what has worked, and what needs to be adjusted to make their learning more successful.

-Jane Fernandes



The Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center is comprised of two federally mandated demonstration schools for students from birth through age 21 who are deaf. Located on the campus of Gallaudet University, these schools work in collaboration with a national network of exemplary programs and professionals to identify, research, develop, evaluate, and disseminate innovative curricula, materials, educational strategies, and technologies for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. The Clerc Center also provides training and technical assistance to families and programs throughout the United States, and serves as a model individualized educational program, working in close partnership with its students and their families.

Working for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children Throughout the United States



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