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Developing a Literacy Curriculum:
When Planning Resembled a Tennis Match

By Jodi L. Falk and Virginia McNamara

Who better than their teachers and administrators to develop curriculum for our deaf and hard of hearing students? At St. Joseph's School for the Deaf (SJSD) in New York, communities of practice were evident as teachers worked together toward the common goal of developing and implementing an English Language Arts curriculum—a reading and writing workshop spiraling curriculum at SJSD. Today this curriculum allows each teacher to build on skills that students developed in earlier classes, and our students appear to love it.

It all began 10 years ago, when SJSD teachers and administrators decided to develop a new curriculum to support our students in reading and writing. Prior to that time, our teachers made individual choices about the content in their classes, guided only by state standards and each student's Individualized Education Program. We wanted to create a curriculum that would allow each teacher to build on the knowledge and skills that students had developed in earlier classes, to revisit the same topics, and to explore them more deeply.

However, to create what educators call "a spiraling curriculum" takes time, and this meant the use of professional development to allow teachers to leave the classroom to work. In addition, we recognized ourselves as members of a community of practice, and we instituted the community of practice tenet of collaboration; and collaboration marked every step of our planning and every aspect of our work. Teams of teachers, administrators, and consultants sat down to work and write together. Teachers planned and co-taught units together, and students learned together in peer-to-peer models. Conversations regarding best practices in workshop methods, unit planning, curricula planning, and deaf education occurred whenever the teams met. Planning sessions resembled tennis matches, with ideas volleyed back and forth at breakneck speed.

In a collaborative decision, we developed our instruction following the literacy workshop model described by Calkins in Pearson & Gallagher (1983), in which students begin with a high degree of teacher support that is gradually released as they progress. This included mini-lessons, guided practice, and independent practice in every lesson. Consultants from LitLife, an

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Figure 1: Day-to-day steps guide teachers in their lessons.

LitLife / st. joseph's

Grades 6-8 Year 2 Calendar – revised 8/11/17

Reading		Writing
	September	Book Blurbs
Historical Fiction	October	
		earch and Interviews
		g Poems with
		and Metaphors

Grade 6-8 Year 1
September 22, 2016

| Identification

Guided Practice | Step Six
Readers identify typical characters represented in horror especially horrific villains and victims.

ML: Teacher reads aloud *The Cask of the Amontillado* modeling your own thinking about characters in horror.

IP: Students choose a character from the story to provide text evidence for why they are a villain or a victim. | Step Seven
Readers identify foreshadowing in horror stories.

ML: Teacher reads aloud *The Telltale Heart* modeling your own thinking about foreshadowing and using the language of features of the genre.

IP: Students provide evidence of foreshadowing in the text of *The Telltale Heart*. If possible they refer back to previously read/viewed stories and provide examples of foreshadowing. | Step Eight
Readers identify how foreshadowing builds suspense.

ML: Teacher shares the video of *The Pit and the Pendulum*.

IP: Students will provide evidence of all features of the genre previously studied, with a focus on foreshadowing and suspense. | Step Nine
Readers compare and contrast horror stories by the same author.

ML: With teacher guidance, in a large group setting, students compare and contrast two or three previously studied stories by Edgar Allan Poe

IP: Students (independently or in pairs) will compare two or three different previously studied stories by Edgar Allan Poe.

(Including but not limited to: presence or absence of blood, presence or absence of insanity, presence or absence of a murder, presence or absence of hidden body, etc.) | Step Ten
Readers closely read for a specific feature in a horror story.

ML: Teacher will read aloud to a small group from *Scary Stories, More Scary Stories, Short and Shivery Tales*, etc.) Teachers rotate tables, re___ to about t___ per day

IP: Stude___ their thi___ excerpt___ story lab___ features___ OR Stud___ name a___ explain ___ feature ___ that the ___ the story ___ hallmark___ |

	Writing
	Biographical Research and Power Point Presentations

educational staff consultation agency, provided the foundational knowledge of the workshop model as designed by Allyn (2007). Classroom teachers and educational supervisors provided the expertise of best practices in the education of deaf and hard of hearing students. Together, we worked on generating a reading and writing workshop curriculum.

Balanced literacy—a philosophy in which several instructional practices, such as guided reading and writing, shared reading and writing, independent reading and writing, read alouds, and word work (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996)—provided the framework for a new SJSD literacy curriculum (Berchin-Weiss, Falk, & Egan Cunningham, 2016). In addition to the genre units of study, we also utilized teaching programs and materials designed specifically for deaf and hard of hearing students. These included Visual Phonics (International Communication Learning Institute, 1982), Fairview Learning (C. S. Schimel, owner and CEO, personal communication, May 10, 2010), Bedrock Literacy (Di Perri, 2013), and a Bilingual Grammar Curriculum (Czubek & Di Perri, 2015), and they were helpful in designing a holistic English Language Arts program that included instruction in reading comprehension, conventions, grammar, and word usage.

Once team members arrived at consensus, the ideas were brought to paper. We wrote each unit plan to provide teachers with framing questions, objectives, estimations for length of time, immersion and identification of the topic, guided practice in the topic, and a celebration of the topic (Allyn, 2007). We began with teacher modeling through mini-lessons, followed by guided practice and then student independent work (Miller, 2002). The independent work could be small group practice or solo practice. Teachers conferred with students during the independent practice of the daily instructional objective (Calkins, 1994, 2000).

Day-to-day steps provided teachers with a guide in which the teaching point, mini-lesson, and independent practice were described (see Figure 1). The final products were yearlong calendars delineated by grade level and unit plans that included goals, teaching points, mini-lessons, and independent practice.

Collaborating Across Grades
Impact on Middle Schoolers

At SJSD, we have a maximum of six students with one teacher and one assistant in each middle school grade. While teachers in grades K-5 and special needs classes taught reading and writing workshop in their individual homerooms and followed a year-long calendar designated for their grade level, we, as middle school teachers, realized that we could combine classes for our sixth through eighth grades and work together to structure a curriculum that unfolded on a three-year cycle. This would yield one large group of 20+ students that we could co-teach across three grade levels.

Above and right: Teaching assistants work with students in small groups and individually during workshops.

Although our students are "typically developing," they may have a variety of learning issues and challenges; they often have language delays due to late immersion in English or American Sign Language (ASL), but psychological testing shows no abnormal disability and their IQs are in the normal range. Like most teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students, we differentiate our teaching—adjusting content, product, and process for each of our students. However, we recognized the importance of exposing our students to the authors and genres that are familiar to students in general education. Without knowledge of writers such as Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe, our students might miss out on common cultural references. Our teachers felt it was important to broaden the students' knowledge base as well as develop their reading and writing skills. Therefore, we decided to eschew units on process, strategy, and conventions, though these are prescribed in most workshop units (Allyn, 2007), and focus primarily on genre. We designed units to be flexible—teachers could use each unit in various ways with different students and different classes. For example, teachers could decide if they would focus on all of the objectives of a unit or only some of the objectives. Teachers could also decide how to pace their instruction. Instead of listing instructions by days, such as "Day 1, Day 2 …," the SJSD curriculum listed instruction by steps: "Step 1, Step 2 …."

Supplemental information and materials were provided—some developed by our teachers and some by the consultants from LitLife. Suggestions of book choices, anchor charts, graphic organizers, and conceptually correct ASL to support instruction were included. The mini-lessons and independent practice included many methods that teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students use, such as visuals, explicit instruction, think alouds, higher-order thinking skills, and mediated learning, and teachers were encouraged to separate their use of ASL and English (Easterbrooks, 2010).

Co-Teaching Planning and Instruction
A Curriculum Evolves in Class

Initially, the sixth through eighth grade teachers met daily and made decisions on who would be the lead teacher, how students would be grouped, and the materials needed for each step of a given unit. All teachers actively instructed students, moderated breakout groups, conducted small group read alouds, and conferred individually with students.

Materials were generated, such as rubrics and graphic organizers. The department supervisor purchased new books for the classroom libraries and teacher guides on genres to support student learning. Teachers and administrators worked together on gathering materials to ensure best practices.

Teacher assistants worked with students in small groups and individually. A large, multi-purpose space in the school became the workshop space. A closet was stocked with writing materials and became the writing workshop closet. Academic and behavioral needs were addressed. Tables were set up—as many as were needed and in whatever configuration worked best for the particular day's lesson. Student seating arrangements included:

- Heterogeneous groups so there was peer modeling
- Homogeneous groups so students who needed extra support or additional enrichment received it
- "Free choice" seating (with a limited number of students per table)
- Random seating assignments by grade, ensuring there was a mix of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students at each table

Teachers often conferred with students who were not in their homerooms or in their grade. The team created conference note sheets that the students kept in their workshop folders. When a teacher conferred with a student, the date, topic, and suggested follow-up focus points were noted on the form. This allowed the teacher who conferred with the student to know at a glance what had been covered during previous conferences. Also, by periodically glancing over the conference sheets, the lead teacher or the homeroom teacher could see any student who had not had an individual conference for a few days and set up a "red flag," ensuring no student slipped through the cracks.

The degree of release—and independent work—was determined by students' needs and abilities, not by grade level. This gave teachers the freedom to differentiate levels of instruction for all students. The units were written in a way that they could be taught with more or less depth and complexity. Teachers decided the degree of the unit's complexity based on the abilities of their students; they could provide enrichment for some students and support for others. The amount of release, like the complexity of instruction, depended on the skill of the

individual student. For example, when teachers released their students into independent practice, they would differentiate the product of their teaching by assigning some students to draw a picture, other students to develop labels, still other students to make a poster, and still others to write in paragraph form. To differentiate process, teachers would assign some students to work in larger groups with guided instruction, some students to work in pairs with minimal teacher support, and some students to work individually with teacher conferencing. To differentiate content, teachers looked at and individualized the goals of the unit.

Teaching Today
Heartening Encounters

The students have responded positively to the new curriculum. Not only do they complain less about writing, but they are also eager to go to workshop and express disappointment when it needs to be canceled. We often see students spontaneously apply skills they learned in workshop to other areas of their work, and we enjoy their excitement when they report understanding cultural references they see on television. Further, students have developed confidence in their presentation skills—an unexpected and wonderful outcome. As with every aspect of the curriculum, students "spiral" in their ability to present publicly, beginning in sixth grade by standing with a friend to sign one sentence on stage and by eighth grade volunteering to give solo presentations, act in skits, and perform on videotape. As we respond to our students' response, we realize that the curriculum has raised our expectations as teachers.

The curriculum continues to evolve. When technological advances rendered the blogging unit obsolete, it was replaced with a unit on opinion writing that encompasses a variety of media. Planning sessions have evolved as well. Today our team meets weekly. Each teacher selects and leads one unit. The lead teacher is responsible for collection of materials and preparation necessary for that unit as well as for direct large group instruction. This teacher, as our leader, is also responsible for sending out weekly e-mails as a follow-up to the planning meetings.

In a further evolution, teachers and teacher assistants are present for each large group lesson, providing instructional and technical support and assisting with behavior management. The teachers lead small group sessions and conference individually with students. One teacher may lead a group, another teacher may take a station, and a third teacher may lead a pull-aside activity.

Professional development—that allowed time out of the classroom during which we could work with each other and with other professional educators—and the tenets of community of practice—that encouraged us to speak freely, frankly, and even forcefully with each other—continue to allow us to teach, maintain, and improve the curriculum we have used for 10 years. This collaboration, in which all contribute as equals, has enabled us to maintain the integrity of the instruction. Professionals brainstorm, discuss, and write together. Teachers instruct individually and together in various co-teaching forms. Students learn from direct instruction, collaboration, and each other. Best practices of balanced literacy theory, workshop methodology, and deaf education enable teachers and administrators—and students—to succeed with a spiraling reading and writing workshop English Language Arts curriculum at SJSD.

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