Literacy Leaders

West Roxbury High School
West Roxbury, Massachusetts

Subject Area
Language Arts, Technology, School-to-Career

Area of Service
Educational

Grade Level
K-12

Project Designer
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In Brief

When reading becomes too much work, students (bilingual, regular and special needs) develop low self-esteem as well as inadequate written and verbal communication skills. To address this problem, West Roxbury High School designed a series of community service learning activities that emphasize reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. The resulting program, "Reaching Raiders," motivates students through the real-world application of basic skills. The high school students "reach out" by reading, writing, and teaching new skills to elementary school children.

Learner Outcomes

Students learn to:

Value reading, speaking and writing skills;

Appreciate literature;

Examine how children learn (and apply these insights to their own learning); and

Explore teaching as a possible career path.

MASSACHUSETTS CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK CONNECTIONS

This unit is aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Listed are the subject areas and the learning strands addressed:

English/Language Arts
Language strand: 3
Composition strand: 19, 20, 21
Social Studies
Geography strand: 9
Civics and Government strand: 19

OVERVIEW

The Need

At West Roxbury High School, reading and writing continue to be a chore for many regular, bilingual and special education students. Their struggle to comprehend the printed word makes reading both frustrating and boring. This academic deficit spills over to all content areas and contributes to low self-esteem, failure in the classroom and social problems.

I participated because, since I came from Haiti, I know reading is important for my school work and it's so nice to read to children.

Louise Jean-Louis,
Ninth Grade Student

A CSL Response

To address this need, West Roxbury High School has designed a multi-faceted, "learn-by-teaching" CSL program that underscores the life-long importance of literacy skills. The program, "Reaching Raiders," utilizes real-world activities and cross-age partnerships to demonstrate the connection between increased literacy skills and educational success. When this link is made, student motivation and interest in school increases and academic performance improves. In addition, students acquire important parenting skills as they model appropriate behavior and explore strategies for relating to young children.

Students can participate in four different community service-learning initiatives, both within the classroom and after school:

1. Each year, approximately 50 students become "Reading Raiders" by reading to young children after school once a week for eight weeks. In preparation, teachers introduce the older students to children's literature, coach them in "Read Aloud" techniques, and offer strategies on working with young children. Students who complete the eight-week internship are formally recognized with a certificate of participation by the headmaster. For many students, the internship sparks an interest in a teaching career.

2. A team of 18 teachers and their students—spanning all content areas—conduct four to five cross-age learning festivals each year. Teachers use the "learn-by-teaching" strategy to promote mastery of concepts and literacy skills. During the festival, high school students present lessons they have prepared in their content areas to young children. The students divide the school's media center into learning centers where, for example, biology students can teach a lesson on water quality while world language students combine a craft with a vocabulary lesson. The "student-teachers" must know their content material well in order to teach the younger children. In presenting the material, they also develop strong communication skills. The younger children see the older students as role models, which sends a strong message about the importance of reading and education.

3. The "Book Buddies" program, offered in special education, bilingual and regular education English classes, emphasizes communication skills that enhance literacy. Students pair with younger "buddies" to whom they read for a minimum of five times. After each session, the high school students describe their interaction with their "buddies" in journals. These entries are graded by the teacher and shared with classmates. Upon completing the journals, each student draws material from the entries to create a children's book featuring his or her buddy as the main character. The "book buddy" receives a copy of the book as a present; the English teacher receives the book as a polished product to be graded. As a result of this program, high school students master elements of the short story, and both age groups improve their reading skills.

OVERVIEW continued

Students at the elementary level are often the brothers, sisters, cousins, neighbors of the high schoolers and immediately see value in reading if the older students do.

Donald Pellegrini,
West Roxbury
High School Headmaster

4. A "TeachBoston" career pathway course provides high school students with the opportunity to use technology to enhance their literacy skills. These high school students, genuinely interested in becoming teachers, serve as e-mail buddies to students at an elementary school in the Boston school district. In this program, writing and computer skills are taught, practiced, and reinforced.

The above Reaching Raider activities increase student skills and motivation in a non-threatening atmosphere while self-esteem flourishes. Best of all, success spreads to all content areas.

Service Component

In reading, writing and teaching new skills to younger students, the high school students provide a service that is mutually beneficial. Both age groups gain academically and socially. By teaching others, the older students discover how they themselves learn. In addition to honing their literacy skills, they develop leadership and cooperative learning skills and enjoy an increased sense of self-worth. Accompanying this is the realization that community service is not only helpful, but satisfying-an insight that bodes well for the future of the larger community.

Celebration

"Celebration" is an important part of the Reaching Raiders program and ranges in form from a certificate of completion to a culminating event, such as the learning festival or the presentation of student-authored books to elementary school buddies.

OUTCOMES

Academic Gains

Reaching Raider activities are aligned to the new Boston Citywide Learning Standards. As participants in this program, students learn to:

- Connect what students read with their experiences and the experiences of others;
- Analyze, interpret and evaluate literature;
- Understand and express different points of view;
- Conduct effective discussions;
- Contribute to the graduation portfolio through a collaborative project that applies learning to educate others;
- Employ various formats and use technology to complete and enhance work; and
- Respect and value diverse cultures and recognize the rich diversity of human experience.

Societal Gains

The older students demonstrate not only teaching skills but parenting skills as well. Some students-already parents-are learning what they need to do for their own children. They learn that one must be patient, solve problems, explain concepts clearly, use language that can be understood, teach appropriate behavior through role modeling, and make education a priority. CSL students also explore through field experience different careers that have a human service component.

Community Partners

The following educational sites open their doors to provide high school students with the opportunity to work with younger children:

- Boston Public elementary schools;
- Community-based organizations (e.g., the YMCA); and
- Day care centers.

TIES TO THE MASSACHUSETTS CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS

LEARNING STANDARDS/ OUTCOMES	ACTIVITY	ASSESSMENT
BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS LEARNING STANDARDS		
English/Language Arts **Strands 1, 2 4, 5**		
Standard 1: Connect what students read with their experiences and the experience of others.	"Read Aloud" books are selected and read in class. Students working in small groups share the memories sparked by the readings and reflect upon them in their journals.	Student journal.
Standard 2: Analyze, interpret, and evaluate literature.	Students review potential "Read Aloud" books.	Self-assessment and peer evaluation using "Did I" assessment sheet (see Addendum).
Standard 3: Use the writing process effectively.	Students explore various styles of writing, examine the elements of the short story, and write (with peer editing) a children's book.	Children's book and oral presentation is graded by teacher.
Science and Technology INQUIRY **Strand 1**		
Employ various formats and use technology to complete and enhance work.	For learning festival, science students prepare a lesson for elementary students that features a science experiment in the physics lab, age-appropriate worksheets, and a review of safety measures.	Reflection essays. Learning festival "Did I" assessment sheet. Worksheets developed by high school students for the younger children. Pictures with reflections for student portfolios.
History and Social Science GEOGRAPHY **Strand 9**		
Students understand how geography and climate affect the development of social, economic and political patterns of human life. **Boston Public Schools Learning Standard:** Learn to respect and value diverse cultures and recognize the rich diversity of human experience.	In selecting relevant materials for the "Read Aloud" Program, students review books focusing on many different cultures and backgrounds.	Student journal. Self-assessment and peer evaluation using "Did I" assessment sheet and rubric.

LESSON PLAN Writing a Children's Book

Objective

Students will write a well-constructed short story in the form of a children's book.

This book will be read aloud to a small child and an elementary class. The final product will be of publishable quality. It will have correct grammar and punctuation, be typed written, and contain illustrations.

Learning Standards

English Language Arts

Strand #1 Reading and Comprehension Strategies - Standards 2, 3, 4

Strand #2 Writing - Standard 4

Strand #4 Oral Language - Standard 2

Materials

Children's books, high school students' journals, Read Aloud Handbook, folders, plastic binders, magic markers, disposable cameras, colored paper.

Procedure

Students are introduced to the project and given a task description sheet for the project.

Students bring in children's books from home or the library.

Class reviews "Read Aloud" techniques and how to keep an audience's attention.

"Read Aloud" books are selected and presented. A discussion follows about what memories have been triggered by this process.

Students share their memories in small groups.

Students reflect upon their memories in a journal.

Students find a "Book Buddy." This buddy can be a relative, sibling, or friend. They will read to their "Buddy" five times.

Students are given a five-page "Book Buddy" journal (see Addendum) that must be completed after each reading. A timeline of when these entries are due is also distributed to the class.

Periodically during class, students discuss the "Book Buddy" initiative, voicing their problems and concerns and evaluating their learning experiences.

LESSON PLAN continued

The journal is completed and brought into class. Students are given a "Did I" sheet and a rubric to score their own journal.

The journal is graded and returned to the student.

Students now transpose their journal into a children's book using their "Book Buddy" as the main character. Models of books are displayed for the students to examine.

The elements of a short story are reviewed.

Writing and editing begin. Students pair with a classmate for feedback.

Different ways of inserting illustrations are introduced. (Pictures from magazines, photographs taken during reading sessions, pictures the child or the high school student have drawn, computer generated pictures).

The final draft of the book is then put into a binder and a copy is made.

The teacher receives one copy for a final grade and the "Book Buddy" receives the other for a present.

Assessment

Task Description Sheet

Student journal

Children's Book written by student

Oral presentation of Children's Book

Reflective Essay on project by student

"Did I" assessment

Some of the concepts that they learned had to be broken down and they had to re-learn it themselves to teach younger children.

Mary Ellen Bower (far right)

LESSON PLAN "Peace Chains"

Objective

To introduce Spanish and English vocabulary words around the theme of "Peace" to a small group of bilingual second graders while developing a "peace chain".

Learning Standards

English Language Arts

Strand #3 Vocabulary - Standard 1

Strand #4 Oral Language - Standard 1, 2

Materials

Spanish/English Dictionary, easel, construction paper cut into 2 inch strips, scissors, markers, stapler.

Preparation for Lesson

High School students brainstorm in class to create a vocabulary list around the theme of peace. The list is written in both Spanish and English. Discussions continue on how these words are related to peace. Students are then instructed on how to create a paper chain with a stapler. Students design the lesson and develop a workshop for the younger children.

Procedure

Introduce the word peace and have second graders define it in their own words. Ask them what peace means to them.

Start listing the words on an easel in both Spanish and English.

Review the words with the students.

Give each student a strip of paper to write one word both in English and Spanish.

Students then form a circle with their strip and together they make a chain with the help of the older students.

The chain is then hung on a tree to make a "Peace Tree".

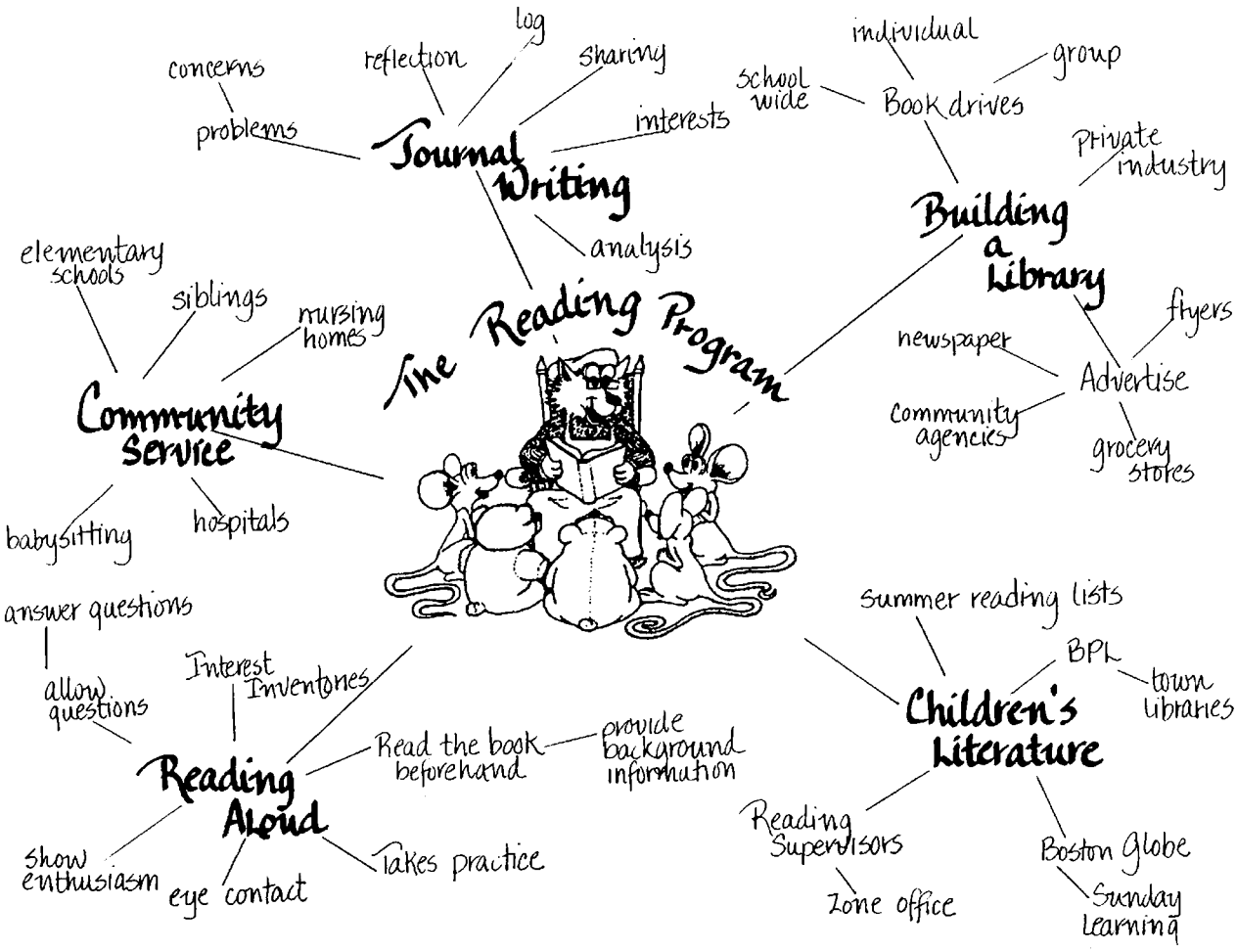
The students then recite the words again in both English and Spanish.

"Did I" sheet and rubric.

Assessment

Teacher assesses students' reflective paragraph.

Teacher assesses students' Spanish lesson design and vocabulary proficiency.



TIMELINE

This project can be found at web site: teachnet.org.

The program can be adapted to a 4-6 week period, a marking term or a semester. The following is a sample semester timeline.

September
Students bring in children's books from home or the library.

Class revisits "Read Aloud" techniques and how to keep an audience's attention.

Students interview parents or relatives about reading aloud activities at home.

October-November
"Read Aloud" books are selected and read. Students share in small groups. Journal entries reflect the memories sparked by this process.

Students pair with a "book buddy". Read to the buddy a minimum of five times.

November-December
Students complete a five-page journal reflecting on their interactions with their buddies. Students assess their journals using "Did I" evaluation sheet.

December-January
Students examine elements of the short story.

Students write a children's book featuring their buddy as the main character. They pair with a classmate for peer editing. Class explores different ways of illustrating the works. Teacher grades final draft; the book is read and presented to the buddy.

February-May
Learning Festivals take place.

Assessment

The following assessment tools are used to evaluate student performance including reading skills; the most significant benefit of this program—increased student self-esteem—is difficult to measure.

- Assessment forms and rubrics designed to measure reading skills improvement
- Reflection essays
- Student journals
- Product assessment (book created for "book buddy" is graded by teacher)
- Learning Festival lessons created by high school students

The lesson I thought went well. I was surprised how some children have an easy time writing and others don't. Their skills are very different and on very different levels. It was really fun to watch the kids smile and have a good time. But some kids didn't smile at all. I wonder if it was my fault. I learned a lot about Spanish pronunciation. The bilingual kids can really speak Spanish well. I enjoyed listening to them speak.

"Peace Chains" lesson
High School Student

CONNECTING TO MCAS: OPEN RESPONSE QUESTION

Compare / Contrast

From a TeachBoston School-to-Career classroom:

The Teacher
Said to the students:
"Come to the edge."
They replied: "We might fall!"

The Teacher again said:
"Come to the edge!"
and they responded:
"It ís too high!"

"Come to the edge!"
the teacher demanded.
And they came
And the teacher pushed them

And they
Flew!

— Source unknown

"Those who trust us educate us."

— George Eliot

Read the above poem and quote. What messages do these writings convey? Compare and contrast the writings and relate them to what you have learned in your Book Buddies project. How do these writings relate to your own education? Respond to these questions in a well-constructed paragraph.

Challenges	Solutions
High school students may initially reject the idea of using children's literature.	Objections fade as students prepare for a live audience, making the jump from classroom learning to real-world application.
Some students need help finding a "book buddy."	Encourage students to seek input from friends, family, and librarians. Telephone calls to neighborhood elementary schools can also initiate pairings and partnerships.
Some students are overwhelmed by the enormity of the task and feel that they will never have time to complete the project.	Emphasize time management skills.

Extending the Vision

The Reaching Raiders program is adaptable for grades 6-12. At West Roxbury High School, the program could be expanded to involve the entire student body. The school would be using (and strengthening) its greatest resource-its students-and at the same time contribute to the community's goal of literacy for all.

The Book Buddies program can be easily integrated into any English Language Arts curriculum. As students begin to write their books, they quickly take ownership of the project. Because they are anxious to create a professional-looking product, they eagerly peer edit and share ideas. This project provides an excellent opportunity to practice cooperative learning.

IN CONCLUSION: School's Role in the Community

The potential rewards of this program are limitless. Every year, student-participants become more involved. When students return to the high school after graduation, they often comment that they will never forget their reading aloud experience because of the difference it made in their lives. They feel empowered by the experience and now recognize the importance of being a community contributor. As a teacher, it is extremely rewarding to watch this outlook grow and spread one student at a time.

High School student teaching Science lesson to elementary class.