

Small but Mighty: Using Interdisciplinary Small Groups to Deepen Students' Literacy Skills

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Abstract

This article examines the ways in which interdisciplinary small groups were used in a school setting in order to drive students' *joyful engagement and* literacy instruction. Drawing from the work of Dr. Gholdy Muhammad in *Cultivating Genius* (2020) and *Unearthing Joy* (2023) we designed and implemented a summer program built around bolstering foundational literacy skills, with an intentional focus on helping students experience joy and making each and every child feel special. In keeping true to the work of Dr. Muhammad, we designed learning opportunities to develop students' intellect, skills, and criticality, and grounded those competencies in their identity. The program design--including structured small groups, texts chosen to empower and resonate with our specific population of students, multiple opportunities to connect with the same texts--fostered an experience in which students were immersed in literacy in an authentic and meaningful way. Throughout this article we discuss how we

implemented this work with rising first through third graders in a collaborative effort with the Netter Center and Penn GSE and share teacher feedback as well as student data.

“Schools should be spaces of joyful manifestations, where curriculum, community, and consciousness uncover what makes each student special. For me, joy is also uninhibited, undistracted, euphoric. It means living free to define yourself and realizing your personal and professional dreams. Schools are morally obligated to create conditions for joy and to fertilize and cultivate opportunity” (Williams in Muhammad, G., 2023, 9)

It has been another big year for reading instruction. As the Science of Reading gains a foothold in our classrooms, shifts around reading instruction are beginning to occur. Encouraged through school policy and state mandates, efforts to align classroom practice with highly effective methods are at the forefront of many decisions around the teaching of reading. Fueled by national assessments that confirm that students lost ground during the pandemic, with our most marginalized students bearing the greatest impact, some schools have concentrated their efforts in reading to center on a skills based approach that focuses on decoding competencies that are usually mastered in the early years of learning. While decoding is key to independent reading, reading research has noted that while the Science of Reading points to the importance of decoding as a foundation upon which other reading skills are grounded, there are other skills and competencies that proficient readers draw upon (Duke and Cartwright, 2021). The reader’s knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and syntax, and background knowledge (Alexander, Kulikowich, & Schulze, 1994) all positively impact a reader’s ability to comprehend text. While much attention has been given to the Science of Reading and standardized data, when the conversation turns to what makes readers strong, there is one element that seems to be missing; the joy of reading.

Where is the intersection of joy and learning to read? Reading and its precursor, listening, are receptive skills. In *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, Muhammad (2020, p.8) notes that:

A central objective among Black people was to improve and elevate their lives through literary means. One of the ways in which they set out to counter conditions they endured during a time of racism and oppression was through reading, writing, and engaging with literary texts.

Imagine reading and writing as tools for students to use to define their own lives and to advocate for themselves. Imagine supporting students in cultivating the skills to use reading and writing within collaborative teaching and learning communities while developing an understanding of the world around them. Imagine cultivating a culture where students are central to uplifting the genius and beauty of the world around them through and with reading and writing. Imagine celebrating joy.

The Idea and Planning

Our work in the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) Graduate School of Education (GSE) Summer Program began with applying practices described by Dr. Gholdy Muhammad (2020, 2023). Our hope was to establish a program for rising first through third graders in West Philadelphia that brought the joy back into effective reading and writing instruction and experiences. The goals were to see that students were immersed in a learning environment that prioritized deepening their literacy skills while creating spaces that brought together "curriculum, community and consciousness" to help each student discover their genius (2023, p. 9). We aimed to craft a curriculum that allowed each learner to experience the joy that comes from deep connections with texts, multiple opportunities and pathways to display their genius, and a small group environment that lent itself to individualized instruction. In doing so, we hoped to provide the water and nourishment that students needed to grow.

Although we, as teachers, had a voice in planning, the program was brought about by a collaboration of Penn GSE, the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at Penn and the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP). Initial planning of the summer program was led by the Netter Center and Penn GSE working together to collaborate with schools with existing partnerships in the University City community, gather resources, and hire personnel. To make the small group component a reality, academic partnerships worked to provide five adults in each classroom. The adults ranged from experienced elementary teachers, graduate students, and undergraduate students. The variety of teacher identities, perspectives, and experiences supported students in displaying their genius. Regardless of their strengths and experiences, each educator in this diverse group contributed to the cultivation of a joyful learning environment.

Drawing on a long history of supporting writing in the early grades in Philadelphia's public schools, members of the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP) provided guidance around book choices, unit themes and the implementation of the Kid Writing method to craft a summer pilot program. Looking to support students in developing their individual and collective identities in tandem with their intellect, texts were intentionally chosen to reflect, empower, and resonate with our students. Throughout the summer, PhilWP provided additional coaching, which supported the development of teachers' pedagogies and toolbox, especially as it pertained to Kid Writing, a systematic approach to the teaching of phonics, where students reinforce their knowledge of letter-sound relationships as they leveraged writing to process new content.

The Implementation

Modeled after the early Black Literary Societies described by Muhammad (2020), the summer program aimed to guide students in developing their identity, skills, intellect, and criticality through culturally relevant means. Challenging the traditional notion of literacy,

Muhammad's (2020) work pushes us to reframe the definition of literacy to include the understanding that literacy skills include reading, writing, teaching and communicating with others to build capacity in ways that parallel early Black readers. With this in mind, opportunities for students to engage in thinking about themselves through writing and creative and artistic expression were intentionally planned and connected to culturally relevant literature explored during each week's theme.

To provide opportunities for students to engage their genius and promote joy, and also to utilize the expertise and pedagogies of the range of adults, a small-group model was used. Each classroom had four stations: Literacy 1, Literacy 2, Math, and Art. Each station provided group activities for the students to interact with curated texts, and each successive interaction in our summer program was designed to deepen students' connection to Muhammad's (2020) model.

Students began each day with a morning meeting facilitated by one of the classroom leaders, and then moved into the read-aloud for the day. These morning lessons were grounded in weekly themes and books provided by the Philadelphia Writing Project and were the cornerstone for the day. They introduced a theme and were tied deeply to identity, skills and intellect. Using texts such as Oge Mora's *Thank You Omu*, Mechel Renee Roe's *I Love Being Me*, and Andrea Beaty's *Aaron Slater, Illustrator*, we began with students' own unique identity and capitalized on their differences as assets, as we supported students in exploring the world around them through reading. As we read, we took an inquiry stance and considered the questions: How are we unique? How are we different? How do we work together? How do we read our world? How do we use our voices? How do we continue to grow and learn? These themes were built out in different ways as students moved into each of their following small groups.

Transitioning to their small groups, students were then given the chance to practice math,

reading, writing and art skills at their level! Each group consisted of 2-5 students and an adult prepared to meet them where they were in their skills, and encourage them on their journey to prepare themselves not only for the next grade, but also to share their genius with the world. Students were initially grouped homogeneously based on their STAR benchmark assessment data, to provide teachers with specific skills and concepts to address in the lessons. However, the groups maintained flexibility as students grew and learning targets changed. This flexibility encouraged students to see the genius in themselves or through others by working alongside, and supporting each other.

. The literacy lead teacher planned lessons and activities for both literacy stations to encourage students to use their reading and writing skills in tandem with one another. While the entirety of the program was not geared towards decoding and foundational skills, these are aspects that are crucial towards developing students as readers. During the reading block students were explicitly taught and given opportunities to practice foundational skills through intentionally planned phonics lessons. Relying heavily on the small group model enabled teachers to tailor their instruction specifically to the skills that students needed. While some students practiced identifying letters and letter sounds, others worked on reading (and writing) words with digraphs and glued sounds. They were lessons designed around the needs of students in order to help them grow and shine!

These foundational skills were continuously exercised as students began their work at the writing center. Here, using the process of Kid Writing, students reflected on the read-aloud from the day, and were encouraged to make meaningful connections with the text as they put pencil to paper. They watched the teacher model the writing process by drawing a picture before moving into the teaching point, and writing out the words. Students wrote about everything from what

they were good at, their favorite people and places in their community, what they wanted to be when they grew up and other creative writing. As they wrote about these topics, they also practiced using capital letters at appropriate times, keeping writing on the lines, using spaces between words, continuing to write past one sentence, and adding adjectives to improve writing.



Following the teacher model, students began their own work, following the process of beginning with a picture to transfer the ideas from their head to the paper, and then ultimately writing.

Drawing the picture was not only a time for students to transfer ideas from their head, but also a way to verbalize with

themselves, their group mates, and their teacher what their picture was about, and practice sharing stories with vivid details regardless of their writing skill level. Because of this writing model, students' genius was not just limited to the words they were able to put on paper, but was seen and heard as they drew pictures and shared their ideas with the people around them. As students worked they often relied not just on the teacher, but also their peers, sharing ideas with one another and consulting one another to sound out words or identify letters to match sounds. During this time students worked to develop their own genius, while also recognizing the genius in one another. It is here that we see the embodiment of Dr. Muhammad's thinking when she says, "The work we do in education is not just about graduating students or ensuring they pass state assessments; It is about human development and helping children come to self and recognize and celebrate their own genius" (2023, pg. 100).

The work of celebrating genius continued as students moved to the art station.

Throughout both *Unearthing Joy* and *Cultivating Genius*, Dr. Muhammad reminds us of the power of multiple literacies, pinpointing the fact that throughout history, “Genius was extended



through creative, innovative and expressive language practices” (2023, pg. 37). In addition to reading, writing, and math, students were given the opportunity to display their genius through creating art. Whether it was creating self portraits, collaborating to create a mural or making individualized name placards, students once again connected with the text and found new ways to develop identity and share their genius. As students read *Hey Wall* by Susan Verde (2018), a story of art and community, they collaborated on a classroom mural depicting the people and

places in their neighborhood. In reading *Kicks* by Van Garrett (2022), students designed their own pair of sneakers. In this way we were no longer just teaching skills, but rather “teach[ing] students to know, validate and celebrate who they are” (2020, pg. 69).

At the math station students were daily given opportunities to engage in talk centered around a visual image that would lead them into the concept for the day. Students were given the opportunity to practice skills while receiving immediate feedback from the teacher. They also engaged in math games to collaborate with one another and again practice the listening and speaking skills that are essential to developing life and literacy skills.

Followed by a morning of instruction, students broke for lunch and recess, as well as an afternoon of enrichment. Because life is more than reading, writing and math, students spent afternoons pursuing activities such as gardening, science and yoga. Additionally twice a week

students participated in field trips throughout the city.

Conclusion

By following this pathway, we aim to enable students to see purpose in their lives and in the world around them well beyond traditional approaches to teaching and learning. Students' skills and intellect were developed in ways that exposed and celebrated their genius instead of in



traditional and evaluative ways. With guidance and support, students received attention and recognition of their successes. Growth was seen not just in test scores, but in everyday moments in the classroom as students read and wrote together. Teacher anecdotes described the ways in which

students came into the summer not knowing how to put their ideas on paper, but left the summer writing their own stories. Stories were shared of students beginning to use digraphs and glued sounds, orthographic skills which they had not grasped and applied at the start of the summer. One teacher noted that her students never wanted to leave their centers. Through centering learning in genius and joy, students engaged deeply in their learning, and achieved because of it. Looking at students' STAR scores (standardized testing done by the School District of Philadelphia in both math and literacy), there was a higher percentage of students who increased their proficiency level, compared to students who did not attend the summer program (Penn GSE, 2023).

However, it was not just the students who benefited from this program. The teachers who participated in this model all overwhelmingly stated that they hoped to be able to participate

again in the future, and that the texts and strategies that they used in the summer program that they hoped to take back to their classrooms in the fall. The joy they felt from the program was so evident that the moderator of their exit interviews paused between questions, noting how each of the teachers' faces lit up as they talked about the highlights from the program.

While every component of the program may not be practical for teachers to apply on a daily basis, incorporating aspects of genius, joy and identity throughout the week can be a transformative act for increasing student growth and teacher joy.

References

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