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Collaborating with Youths as Co-Teachers in Literacy Learning

Katherine K. Frankel
Boston University

Caitlin R. Murphy
The English High School

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Abstract

The authors featured in this department column share instructional practices that support transformative literacy teaching and disrupt “struggling reader” and “struggling writer” labels.

Collaborating with Youths as Co-Teachers in Literacy Learning

Eleventh- and twelfth-grade “literacy mentors” and ninth-grade mentees arrive to class and sit together in groups of four. In their notebooks, they write in response to today’s opening question: *What is one thing you noticed about how your book started?* Mentors lead small-group discussions about what students noticed about their books so far. Then, everyone in the classroom reads independently. Once or twice during reading, the teacher encourages students to reflect on *how* they are reading by writing their thoughts on post-it notes. With a few minutes left in class, mentors and mentees again write in their notebooks, responding to the questions: *How did reading time go today? What is one thing that surprised you or interested you about what you read today?* Students discuss their responses in their groups.

In this department’s inaugural column, co-editors Frankel and Brooks (2018) urged educators to take a critical stance toward the labels that so commonly define adolescent and adult readers. A recommendation for how to do this was to engage in practices that represent a developmental understanding of reading as situated practice, one that is fostered through the co-construction of collaborative learning environments and that disrupts the traditional teacher-student relationship.

Here, a university researcher (Kate) and a secondary teacher (Caitlin), together with our youth partners, offer one example of an ongoing student-teacher-researcher collaboration to create a classroom literacy community centered on these goals. We discuss both the promise of such partnerships as well as some of their complexities.

In the first section, we describe the class that is at the core of this partnership and highlight four characteristics that have remained relatively constant over two years. Next, we

discuss three principles of collaboration that emerged through this work. We conclude with implications for educators interested in engaging in similar partnerships in other contexts.

Enduring Characteristics of Caitlin's Classroom

Caitlin's literacy class is located in a public high school that serves over 500 students. According to school demographic information, approximately 54% of the student body is Hispanic, 42% is Black, 2% is White, and 2% is Asian. This year, the class includes the teacher (Caitlin), a White woman; nine junior and senior mentors; and cohorts of approximately twenty ninth graders who join the class for four weeks as one of the eight exploratory pathways offered to first-year students. A university researcher (Kate), also a White woman, visits the class approximately once a week, sometimes accompanied by one or two graduate students.

Although the structure of the class has changed over the two years of the project and continues to evolve through feedback from mentees and ongoing monthly meetings with mentors, here we highlight four characteristics of the class that have remained relatively constant over time.

Independent Reading of Self-Selected Books

The first characteristic of the class is that all members of the classroom community spend the majority of class time reading books that they have chosen. The always-expanding classroom library is populated with books and other texts that have been recommended by mentors, mentees, and colleagues (see Figures 1 and 2).

The commitment to independent reading is grounded in the mentors' early and ongoing insistence that students must have complete autonomy in selecting the books they read for the class. This commitment is supported by research that has documented the positive impact of

extensive and self-directed reading on adolescents' reading development (e.g., Francois, 2013; Ivey & Johnston, 2013).

Small Group Discussions About Books

A second characteristic of the class is that students have daily opportunities to talk with their peers about what they are reading. These discussions are initiated through questions such as: What do you like about this book so far? What is something you like or admire (or find frustrating) about a character or the story in your book? Is your book turning out the way you thought it would?

The commitment to small group book discussions stems from the mentors' desire for the class to be about creating opportunities for students to grow personal relationships with books and with each other. This commitment is supported by research that has demonstrated the inherently social nature of adolescents' motivated literacy practices (e.g., Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008) and the importance of peer collaboration and social interaction to literacy learning (e.g., Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003).

Attention to Comprehension Processes While Reading

A third characteristic of the class is that students have regular opportunities to think and talk about how they are reading. These comprehension-focused activities are framed before reading by mini-lessons led by the teacher or mentors (e.g., characterization, metacognition) and supported during reading through metacognitive sentence stems (see Figure 3).

The commitment to making comprehension processes visible comes from Caitlin's and Kate's shared belief that the class should include some attention to strategic reading processes. This commitment is supported by research that has demonstrated the positive impact of metacognitive conversations on adolescents' literacy learning (e.g., Greenleaf, Schoenbach,

Cziko, & Mueller, 2001). However, as noted below, this commitment is not one that has been consistently shared by all members of the classroom community.

Mentorship

A final characteristic of the class is that students who otherwise might not know each other have opportunities to learn from each other within a heterogeneous community of learners. Specifically, the structure of the class facilitates cross-grade literacy learning by pairing eleventh- and twelfth-grade mentors with ninth-grade mentees.

This commitment to mentorship is grounded in a desire to leverage the rich resources of students at the school, and to support the growth of a sustainable literacy community that extends beyond the confines of a single classroom. This commitment is supported by research that has documented the power of cross-age tutoring or mentoring relationships in literacy learning (e.g., Jun, Ramirez, & Cumming, 2010; Rekrut, 1994).

Principles of Collaboration in Ms. Murphy's Classroom

Underlying each of the four characteristics described above is a core commitment to an ongoing partnership with the youth mentors as co-teachers. This commitment requires that all members of the partnership remain vigilant about our own and others' roles and responsibilities (which, drawing from positioning theory, we refer to as "rights" and "duties"), the power relationships that influence how we position ourselves and others, and the importance of iteratively evaluating and (re)negotiating rights and duties over time (McVee, Brock, & Glazier, 2011). Below, we highlight three principles of collaboration that are particularly critical.

Listening and Responding to Students Requires Curricular Flexibility

This collaboration would not have been possible without the ability to make substantive changes to the class over time, particularly in relation to (a) prioritizing choice and (b) expanding opportunities to demonstrate knowledge.

Prioritizing choice. In preliminary course designs, we envisioned a space where small groups of mentors and mentees would choose from predetermined text sets and then collaboratively read and discuss those texts together. However, from our earliest discussions with mentors, they were clear that the class would work in the way they envisioned only if students had the autonomy to choose their own books. Moreover, the mentors called on us to ensure that the classroom library was up to the task of engaging all students in reading. Over time, the library expanded as mentors and mentees made recommendations for new and different kinds of texts that represent a diversity of modes and genres.

To support mentees in finding and choosing books, each iteration of the class begins with book talks by the mentors and a book tasting. In the book tasting, students choose and read the first few pages of a range of books and then assess their relative interest in them. Mentors have consistently emphasized the importance of providing students with opportunities to find the books that are right for them. Poppa P, one of this year's mentors who previously participated in the class as a mentee, explained why this is important: "[In this class] I have the time to read, and once I get into a book I get into it. ...Once you start a book and you like it then you continue." Xyanna's advice to teachers echoed these observations: "Have different varieties of books, and be ready to order some new books too. And don't rush them!"

Expanding opportunities to demonstrate knowledge. In the second year of the course, mentors indicated that neither they nor their mentees were satisfied with the culminating project, which asked students to provide an overview of their books to assist future cohorts of mentees in

choosing books. Mentors advocated for a more creative alternative, ultimately settling on a fan fiction option where students could choose to write alternative endings in lieu of an overview. Myiesha commented on the shift in engagement among both mentors and mentees as a result of this change:

This [fan fiction project] was the most active project I've ever done cause a lot of people my first rotation, they didn't want to do [the book overview], second rotation it was pretty quiet, but the fan fic, my mentee was pretty excited, she wanted to share with me and I loved her fan fic.

Building from Students' Resources and Interests Means Decentering the Teacher

In creating this classroom community, it has been essential to engage in practices that position us as readers and learners alongside students, particularly in relation to (a) building community and (b) emphasizing personal connections and relationships.

Building community. Ongoing conversations with mentors reinforce the need for all members of the classroom community to participate in classroom literacy activities. Despite the multiple positions available to members of the classroom, there is a shared expectation that everyone finds and reads a book. Nyavah discussed the value of this shared commitment to reading, including opportunities to talk about that reading with others: "Having new ideas of everyone's book is good...refreshing your mind on what you've just read, talking to someone else about it, maybe thinking about who you would recommend it to."

Emphasizing personal connections and relationships. Over two years, both cohorts of mentors have pushed us to view the class as about more than reading. For them, the class also is about forging personal connections and relationships. In Elena's words, being a mentor means to "be there for them, be a role model too." To this end, mentors have advocated for more and

better opportunities for members of the classroom community to learn about each other through ice breaker activities such as interest surveys, reading histories, and question/answer games.

Victoria discussed the importance of the relationship component as something that extends beyond the class itself:

It's bigger than just being there and telling them what to do, it's actually being a person that they can rely on, that you can understand and get to know the person, actually have a bond or relationship outside of school and in school. Like, they're in the cafeteria, they don't have nobody to sit with, they could just sit with you and be like, "Hey, I remember you when, you know, during that reading group." Or you could actually be like an inspiration or if you understand that person like, if something happened to them and it happened to you, you can have a conversation about that.

Adapting Instruction Requires Space to Consult with Students Over Time

Throughout this collaboration, it has been essential to have consistent opportunities to consult with youth mentors about areas of strength and needed change. At times, opinions about the class have differed across partners. In these cases, we have benefited from the time and space to discuss and negotiate these tensions, and to engage with them as opportunities rather than limitations. A recent conversation between Kate and Tish illuminates one of the ongoing tensions in the partnership around balancing discussions about the content (what) of reading with the processes (how) of reading:

Tish: The questions really help them think, like questions related to the book but related also with what we're living with society right now. So that also can help engage the student with the book.

Kate: One of the things that we talked with mentors last year about was...also talking to the mentees about how they're reading, like, "Oh I got stuck here." Just like we were talking about earlier, when you were like, "Oh I was reading *Little Fires Everywhere* but then I was confused about this part." Right? Those kinds of conversations. What do you think about those? Do those happen? Are they useful?

Tish: A lot? It doesn't happen a lot because these books are very straightforward with the language and everything, but it depends. ...But, yeah, those conversations help. Because I was so disappointed about that book but when I talked to you, when I finally found a person who was reading it, I was like, "I need to go back and read it."

Implications for Future Partnerships

The collaboration described here is one example of how students, teachers, and researchers worked together to co-create a class that represents a developmental understanding of reading as situated practice. While this particular class is located in a public secondary school and, therefore, is concerned primarily with adolescents, we believe both the class and the principles of collaboration discussed above have implications for educators interested in fostering literacy communities in any context.

We conclude by re-emphasizing the collaborative and fluid nature of this joint effort. This class would not exist without the early and ongoing feedback and critique from our youth partners. We hope that educators who consider adapting this approach for their own contexts will take seriously the commitment to establishing a strong and ongoing partnership with students, and to maintaining that commitment even—and especially—in the face of challenges.

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Figure 1. A Selection of Mentor- and Mentee-Recommended Books

The Crossover by Kwame Alexander
Tyrell and Bronxwood (sequel) by Coe Booth
Mexican Whiteboy by Matt de la Peña
Gym Candy by Carl Deuker
Money Hungry by Sharon Flake
If I Ever Get Out of Here by Eric Gansworth
The Fault in Our Stars by John Green
Felton Reinstein Trilogy (*Stupid Fast, Nothing Special, I'm with Stupid*) by Geoff Herbach
The Crank Trilogy (*Crank, Glass, Fallout*) by Ellen Hopkins
Milk & Honey by Rupi Kaur
I See Reality: Twelve Short Stories About Real Life edited by Grace Kendall
Girl in Translation by Jean Kwok
The Boyfriend List by E. Lockhart
We Were Liars by E. Lockhart
How It Went Down by Kekla Magoon
The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates by Wes Moore
Why I Fight by J. Adams Oaks
Wonder by R. J. Palacio
The Cellar by Natasha Preston
Seven Ways We Lie by Riley Redgate
All-American Boys by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely
Burning by Danielle Rollins
Living Dead Girl by Elizabeth Scott
Between Shades of Gray and *Salt to the Sea* (sequel) by Ruta Sepetys
The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas
Snitch by Allison van Diepen
Comic Books (e.g., *Avengers, Black Panther, Justice League*) by various authors and artists
Jumped by Rita Williams-Garcia
Everything, Everything by Nicola Yoon
I am Malala by Malala Yousafzai with Christina Lamb

Figure 2. A Portion of the Classroom Library



Figure 3. Metacognitive Sentence Stems

While I was reading....

I felt confused when and so I
I was distracted by but then I
I started to think about and so I
I got stuck when What I did was
The time went quickly because
I remembered that earlier in the text
A word/some words I didn't know
I stopped because What I did next was
I lost track of everything except
I figured out that
I first thought but then realized
I finally understood because
An image I had in my head
A connection I made
A prediction I made was because

Note. These sentence stems are from Schoenbach, Greenleaf, and Murphy (2012, p. 178).