

# South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal

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Volume 3

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## SCAMLE Journal 2024

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## South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal

March 2024

[www.scamle.org](http://www.scamle.org)

An affiliate of the [Association for Middle Level Education](http://www.scamle.org)

The South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal is an open-access, peer-reviewed publication that highlights research-based best practices that improve middle schools and the learning that occurs within and outside of the classroom. Readers of this journal are generally teachers, administrators, and other educators who are interested in the issues that young adolescents ages 10-15 and educators of those individuals face. The South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal is published once a year in an online format. Archived volumes can be viewed here: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/scamle/>

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## CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

### Manuscript Deadline: November 30

Classroom teachers, administrators, teacher educators, pre-service teachers, graduate students, and researchers are invited to submit manuscripts to the South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education (SCAMLE) professional journal. The SCAMLE Journal welcomes high-quality manuscripts of varying lengths that address the issues and needs of young adolescents. We accept practical, theoretical, and empirical papers, literature reviews, and book reviews specific to middle level education. We also accept creative writing and original artwork from middle level students and educators. Your manuscript must be original and must not be currently submitted for publication anywhere else.

### SCAMLE Journal

The South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education (SCAMLE) Journal is an open-access, peer-reviewed publication that highlights research-based practices that improve middle schools and the learning that occurs within and outside of the classroom. Readers of this journal are generally teachers, administrators, and other educators who are interested in the issues that young adolescents ages 10-15 and educators of those individuals face. The South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal is published once a year in an online format. Archived volumes can be viewed here: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/scamle/>

### Preparing Your Manuscript

Use the following guidelines to prepare your manuscript:

1. Include a separate cover letter:
  - a. List your name and school name, mailing address, and email address
  - b. List any co-authors in preferred order with the above information for each
  - c. Include a title, abstract (no more than 100 words), and key words
  - d. Confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere
2. The body of the manuscript should not exceed 15 pages. Text should be double-spaced in 12-point font, preferably in Microsoft Word.
3. No identifying characteristics may appear in the body of the manuscript (i.e., names of participants, authors, or schools must not appear in your manuscript).
4. All submissions must conform to the style found in the 7th edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA).
5. Full references for all citations should be included, following APA guidelines.
6. If student artifacts are included (i.e., artwork, photos, writing, etc.), authors must provide written permission releases for the use of the artifacts.
7. Images should be in .jpg format.

### Submitting your Manuscript

Manuscripts should be typed in Microsoft Word and sent as an email attachment to [SCAMLEJournal@usca.edu](mailto:SCAMLEJournal@usca.edu) or [deborahmc@usca.edu](mailto:deborahmc@usca.edu) before the deadline.

### Review of your Manuscript

The review process includes a preliminary evaluation by the journal editor for appropriateness, followed by a double-blind peer-review process with at least two reviewers from the SCAMLE Journal Editorial Review Board. Acceptance is determined by the reviewers' recommendations and balance of topics in the annual issue. Your manuscript will be evaluated using the following criteria: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1hoKGvEoC-dEEicZxIsZpGWItUZFW8Af2sHIXIikzg7o/edit>

A decision is typically rendered within 8-10 weeks from the call deadline. Please send questions about manuscript submission to the Editor, Deborah McMurtrie, at [SCAMLEJournal@usca.edu](mailto:SCAMLEJournal@usca.edu) or [DeborahMc@usca.edu](mailto:DeborahMc@usca.edu)

Please contact [DeborahMc@usca.edu](mailto:DeborahMc@usca.edu) if you are interested in reviewing manuscripts for the SCAMLE Journal.

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## Avoiding Burnout: Resources to Help the Overworked Teacher

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### Introduction

Everyone knows that teaching has always been a demanding job; however, in the last decade the demands on teachers have increased. Today, teachers have to answer to parents, administrators, legislators, and the general public when it comes to their classroom practice and educational beliefs. In addition, long hours, classroom management issues, lack of support, low pay, poor working conditions, and the demands of high-stakes testing have all contributed to widespread teacher stress. As an English teacher, I remember the stress level and how I was always looking for ideas and practical strategies that would help me deliver a rich and rewarding curriculum for my students. I made every effort to stay current in the field, by reading professional material, attending conferences, and sharing ideas with my colleagues. To combat the demands of stress on the job, teachers need support in a variety of ways. Having professional resources that offer easy and practical strategies that help with planning and delivering lessons that are both interesting and engaging to students can be an asset to alleviating some of the stress teachers are experiencing.

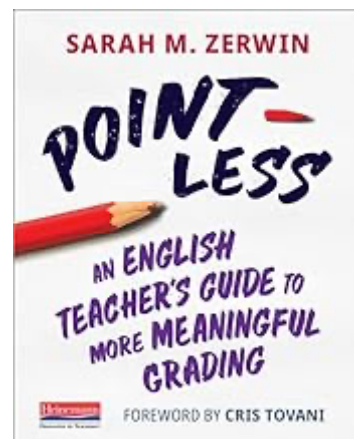
This collection of resources will make your teaching life so much easier. Bringing these authors into your classroom to help you teach will be a good way to alleviate some of the stress you may be feeling. These resources can give teachers a broader understanding of how to configure a classroom that is inclusive and welcoming and focuses on learning and growing students as readers, writers, and thinkers. Sarah Zerwin's book *Pointless: An English Teacher's Guide to More Meaningful Grading* offers teachers a new way to think about how to assess and evaluate students in a way that places the emphasis on learning not on accumulating points. Creating a classroom where teachers combine the reading/writing workshop model into one literacy model is the premise of Walther & Biggs-Tucker's book *The Literacy Workshop: Where Reading and Writing Converge*. It offers teachers a way to save time and energy. Having an American author and classroom teacher co-author a book on nonfiction revision is a gift to teachers. Collard & Spandel's book *Teaching Nonfiction Revision: A Professional Writer Shares Strategies, Tips, and Lessons* belongs on the shelf of every English teacher who feels the

stress of teaching writing. Once again, Kylene Beers offers teachers some new thinking in her second edition of *When Kids Can't Read What Teachers Can do, Second Edition: A Guide for Teachers Grades 4-12*. All teachers have students who struggle as readers and this book offers valuable insight into ways teachers can help these students make steady progress and feel confident as readers. No matter where you are in your current understanding of the reading and writing workshop models, Ellin Keene's book *The Literacy Studio: Redesigning the Workshop for Readers and Writers* will give you an opportunity to rethink the way you plan instruction for your students. Readers of Linda Rief's book *Whispering in the Wind: A Guide to Deeper Reading and Writing Through Poetry* are bound to come away with a fresh perspective on the role of poetry in the middle school English/Language Arts classroom. This is a how-to book for teachers to encourage students to see that poetry exist everywhere in the world. Rief is convinced that teachers will see the poet in every one of their middle school students. (VAO)

**Pointless: An English Teacher's Guide to More Meaningful Grading** by , Sarah M. Zerwin, 2020, 192 pp., Heinemann. ISBN 032-510-951-6

"Teachers will find ways to navigate grading obstacles and learn how to repurpose the grade book into a living warehouse of descriptive data that informs feedback and reflection" (p. viii).

All teachers have many demands on their time both inside and outside the classroom, but English teachers are particularly susceptible to these demands since, very often, they walk out of school most days with a briefcase filled with assignments to grade. Unfortunately, too many English teachers still believe they should collect and evaluate everything students write. In part, this assessment practice occurs because teachers believe the grades in their grade book are one way for them to keep track of students' effort and work. Teachers may also believe that the grades reflect student learning. As well, teachers are aware that the grade book may be considered the measure of their teaching and student learning. Sarah Zerwin calls the accumulation of grades in schools as "academic wealth" (p.4) and she emphasizes that students, parents, teachers, and administrators see this as the focus of education. The truth is, grades do not reflect student learning but rather reflect student compliance in the race to accumulate points. I remember how I felt the



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grade book was a trap both for me and for my students. Like many English teachers, I was open to any suggestions that would lighten my grading load. I also wanted to explore ways to include student voices in the assessment and evaluation process. Zerwin believes it's time English teachers rethink their grading practice and move away from assigning points for student work to a system where the focus is on providing "concise, descriptive data that serves as meaningful and specific feedback" (p. ix) to students during the learning process that will move them forward as learners. Zerwin proposes that teachers shift their grading practice from points for a product to "learning that lives in the process" (p.ix). She offers some solid ideas about ways for teachers to accomplish this.

The book is easy to navigate. It is organized in seven chapters and readers can choose which chapter best suits their needs. At the end of each chapter are examples of student grade letters where students reflect on their learning over the course of a semester and determine what their grade should be. As well, Zerwin has offered "Navigating Obstacles" where she addresses problems that may occur as teachers think about trying this new method of assessment. Zerwin addresses the following ideas: the problems with the point system; how to establish learning goals for students; how to focus students' attention on learning rather than being compliant and completing reading and writing tasks; the importance of feedback on students' work to move them forward as reading and writers; how to use the grade book as a source for students to evaluate their own work; how to make decisions about final grades through conversations with students.

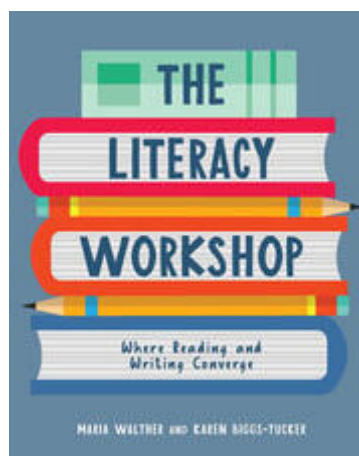
Teachers will benefit from the ideas presented in "Chapter 1: Acknowledge the Problems with Points". Zerwin shares how grades do not reflect student learning, in fact, they get in the way of student learning. Teachers say that growing as readers and writers is most important but the truth is what is most important to students and parents is the grade. Zerwin comments on how her students learned ways to manipulate points on assignments and especially how those students who were concerned with getting a high grade, developed ways to get the grade without working terribly hard. These students learned how to play the game of school and grades. For those students who did not want to play the game, the points/grade system hurt them in many ways. As Zerwin points out "The grading system rewards compliance over learning" (p.5). As a result, Zerwin was convinced she needed to develop a system that did not focus on grades.

"Chapter II: Establish Clear and Meaningful Learning Goals" will help teachers establish a foundation for this new method of assessment. Because both the ELA standards and the curriculum learning objectives are broad, it is impossible for teachers to address everything in those documents with their students in any depth. Zerwin states that teachers then need to decide what they value the most for students to learn. This decision is a significant one since it shifts the focus from points to learning. Zerwin writes, "...learning becomes the foundation of our teaching and it gives students a different and compelling purpose for their work once the need to collect

points is gone" (p.20). By adopting the less is more philosophy, teachers can then address the celebrations and challenges students face as readers and writers. Zerwin wants her students to read because in that reading, students learn about the complexity of the world and of the human experience. She also wants her students to write for a variety of purposes and audiences because in that writing, students craft their voice and articulate their ideas that can contribute to the greater social discourse. For teachers, setting authentic reading and writing learning goals for students sets them up for reading and writing in their lives both in the classroom and beyond; this sets students up to successfully address the many literacy demands of an ever-changing world.

In addition to the collection of ideas shared in each chapter, there are many samples of charts, final grade guidelines, data tracking conference tables, grade book data charts, online resources, and examples of ways to manage feedback and student reflections. Zerwin's book charges teachers to reflect on their beliefs about process, product and the point system. She encourages teachers to make a paradigm shift at the same time acknowledging that this is not an easy task but one that will place students as learners at the forefront of grading. (VAO)

**The Literacy Workshop: Where Reading and Writing Converge** by Maria Walther & Karen Biggs-Tucker, 2020, 285 pp., Stenhouse. ISBN 162-531-196-6



If there is one topic my colleagues have often been interested in, it would be ways to develop a workshop model. My journey to a workshop model took time, effort, reading, and attending conferences. I started out as a traditional teacher with kids in rows, assignments with due dates and points, a focus on product with limited attention to process, and the ever present teacher's

red pen. It was clear to me that students weren't always interested or engaged in the classroom. Through my own learning, I came to understand the workshop model and slowly implemented the instructional strategies, structures, and routines one-by-one. For example, I would conduct an interactive read-aloud to see how my students responded to this instructional strategy. At another time, I would conduct a mini-lesson followed by supported independent reading or writing. My goal was two-fold. First, I wanted to be sure I planned and implemented the instructional strategy with fidelity. Second, I wanted to observe students' interest and engagement with the strategy. Over time, as I became comfortable with each of the workshop elements, I was able to develop a full reading/ writing workshop model. In the model I learned, reading and writing workshop were kept separate.

Teachers might focus learners on reading and reading strategies one day, then turn to a focus on writing and writing strategies another day. This is how I conducted my workshop. What Walther and Biggs-Tucker share in their book is for both primary and intermediate teachers to think about the similarities between the reading and writing workshops and merge these common threads into a literacy workshop where students lead the way and make decisions about whether to focus their efforts on reading or writing. By doing this, teachers have more time to plan, teach, observe students' learning, conference, and offer feedback to both individuals or to a group; students have more time to authentically engage and have choices in their reading, writing, and learning. Teachers will find this resource informative and easy to navigate. For teachers both novice and veteran to the workshop model, this book provides new insights into how to develop a literacy model that merges reading and writing seamlessly.

The book is divided into two parts. "Part I: Exploring the Landscape of Literacy Workshop" has four chapters that focus on planning and launching the workshop. "Part II: Zooming In – Literacy Workshop Demonstration Lessons" has five chapters which focus on ideas for developing lessons that include instructional strategies for teaching the elements of fiction and nonfiction. In this section, many of the lessons traverse all content areas.

"Chapter 2: Planning for Literacy Workshop – Behind the Scenes" offers teachers the basic structures, and elements of the workshop model. Many of these will be familiar to those teachers who have read about or tried to develop a workshop model. Of course, the idea of predictable structures and routines is at the heart of good teaching but is especially important for the workshop model since it provides both teachers and learners with a sort of teaching and learning map. As well, the gradual release of responsibility is also fundamental to the workshop model where the teacher leads the learning and gradually turns over the choices and responsibility for learning to the students. One of the goals of the workshop model is to develop the skills and strategies in students so they can emerge as independent readers and writers. Another important goal is to develop a classroom environment that is collaborative, where students support each other in the service of growth as learners. Of particular interest to teachers in this chapter is the "Literacy Workshop Planning Template" which provides guidance on the framework for planning. The authors also provide a reproducible template in the appendices. The authors make the point that the design of the literacy workshop is not a one size fits all but depending on the teacher and the needs of the students can take many paths. As well, teachers are reminded that students will need time and practice to understand the workshop model, their role as readers and writers, and the control they have over their own learning.

"Chapter 3: Launching the Literacy Workshop – Developing a Purposeful and Joyful Learning Community" and "Chapter 4: Fostering Independence and Engagement During Literacy Workshop" offer valuable insights into the how and why of

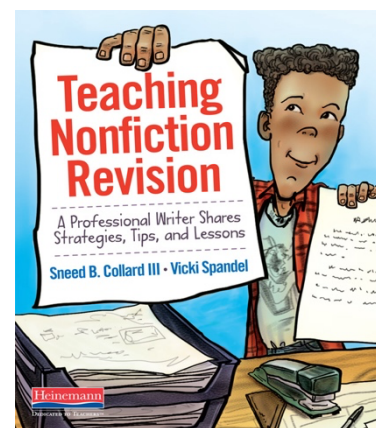
literacy workshop. Included in these chapters is a collection of charts, examples of student writing, teacher and student questions to explore, guides for monitoring student progress, ideas for conferencing with students, ways to encourage student reflection on their efforts, and lists of books for teachers to further their learning about the literacy workshop. Part II offers a collection of demonstration lessons that every teacher will find valuable. Teachers can pick and choose from the comprehensive list of well over 20 lessons in this part of the book based on their needs and the needs of their students. The lessons are detailed in a way that makes them easily understood and implemented. The topics for these many lessons vary and include ideas for: interest, self-awareness, collaboration, types of questions, ways to research, visualization, themes, writing style, making connections, an author's purpose just to name a few. There is also a section for online reproducible resources where teachers can download and print demonstration lessons and appendices. At the back of the book, there is a comprehensive list of both professional books for teachers and children's literature. This book is a gift to teachers who want to create a workshop model that offers them ways to: plan effectively, maximize time for teaching and learning, and create a welcoming and nurturing classroom environment that values students' potential to be proficient learners. (VAO)

**Teaching Nonfiction Revision: A Professional Writer Shares Strategies, Tips, and Lessons** by Sneed Collard III & Vicki Spandel, 2017, 240 pp., Heinemann. ISBN 032-508-777-6

"...revision involves taking rough text and transforming into something clear, fluent, informative—and yes, engaging" (p. xiv).

English teachers spend countless hours marking student work and offering comments to help student writers grow. The goal of teachers' commentary is to help students see areas to work on in their writing. Teachers assume students will take their suggestions to heart and make revisions to their work in an effort to improve

their writing skills. Very often, when students get their writing back, they only look at the grade, paying little attention to the teacher comments. As a student, I remember getting back English assignments that were covered with red pen markings. Most of the markings were errors in spelling and grammar with almost no comments on what I did well. I learned to not pay attention to the markings because they usually focused on my mistakes and offered almost no comments on what I did well or how I could improve my writing. The result of the



teacher commentary was that I developed the belief that I was not a good writer.

More teachers are now embracing the process writing format where students write regularly, conference, make revisions, and publish their work in class. In order for students to grow as writers it's important they understand the significance of the revision process. Teachers need to explicitly teach revision strategies to help students accomplish this skill. Collard & Spandel's book is a must-have in the ELA classroom. Sneed Collard III is a celebrated American author who has written a collection of more than 80 books for young people, an adult memoir, and now has co-authored this professional development book for classroom teachers. He brings a wealth of knowledge to share with teachers on how to demystify the revision process and he offers simple strategies to effectively teach revision. In the introduction to the book, he writes "Professional writers consistently apply proven strategies to hammer and reshape nonfiction until it becomes something that educates and excites readers" (p. xv). Having a professional writer's perspective throughout this book is more than valuable.

Teachers will find this book easy to navigate. It is divided into seven parts and each part has very short sections that teachers can choose to suit their immediate needs. "Part I: Setting the Stage" will be of particular importance for teachers since it focuses on the beliefs about teaching revision, helpful steps for students to engage in effective revision, creating an environment that supports revision, and balancing expectations. The section on creating an environment that supports revision is an essential read. It outlines students' negative beliefs that revision is tedious, time-consuming, and not worth the time. Helping students understand that professional writers view revision as a commitment to both their message and to their audience. Revision is the means to revisit, refine, and rework their writing in order to create something people want to read. This section addresses some of the following ideas as well that teachers will find useful: creating a workshop atmosphere, student choice about what to write, ways to collaborate about their writing, taking risk with new ways to write, student ownership of their writing, and teacher modeling.

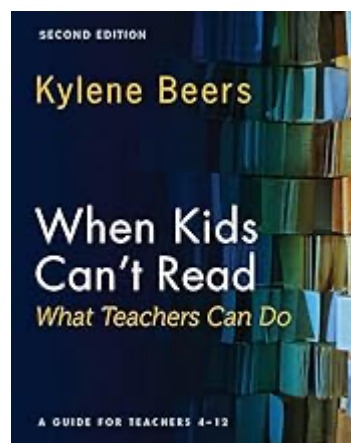
Parts II-VI offer a comprehensive collection of teaching strategies for teaching nonfiction revision that "follow specific approaches many professional writers use to revise their work" (p. xv). The authors make it clear that although their book primarily targets grades 4-8, teachers at all grade K-12 levels can adapt lessons to fit their needs.

In Part II-VI, the collection includes such strategies as: choosing main ideas, researching an idea, addressing transitions, sentence order and length, eliminating unnecessary words, show don't tell, emotional impact of writing, using strong verbs, cohesion, organization, and voice. After each strategy is explained, there is a section that offers tips to help teach the strategy. The authors have kept the strategies as short as possible and easy to read to accommodate the life of the busy teacher.

Part VII offers some suggestions to share with students to help them finalize their revision process. It encourages students to take time away from their work so they return to their writing with fresh eyes. Very often, students will see things they did not see before the break. Giving writing a title begins with the writer offering a working title to begin with and then once the writing is finished, the student will revisit the title to revise it. Some good advice to students is that often when published writers revisit their work they wished they had said something differently. This is a good thing because it means the writing process is ongoing and that there is always something new to use for the next writing.

There are also three appendices that will be helpful to the busy teacher. They offer the following: a checklist of revision possibilities, recommended nonfiction books for students, recommended nonfiction books for adults. As a former classroom teacher, I encourage teachers to take a close look at the offerings of this book. Teaching revision is hard work and having a resource like this that offers detailed instructional strategies will make a difference in classroom practice. It will also make a difference in the writing growth of your students. It's a must-have in your professional library. (VAO)

**When Kids Can't Read What Teachers Can Do, Second Edition: A Guide for Teachers Grades 4-12** by Kyleene Beers, 2023, 418 pages, Heinemann. ISBN 978-325-14459-7



The "Prologue" of this new/old book will make readers stop and think. Do you remember where you were and what was going on in the world in 2002 when you may have read the first edition of this book? As the author so aptly asks readers, how have the past 20 years vanished so quickly? She continues to explain in the first few pages of the book how she quickly realized

that creating a second edition of her first book by simply making changes and additions was not going to be adequate to do justice to a book that would go into teachers' hands a second time. Believe me when I say that we, her readers, are beneficiaries of her decision to rewrite the entire book. However, do not worry. Kyleene continued to address her elusive student, George, who has haunted her throughout her career. Each chapter of this second edition is bookended with letters to him. She has written each chapter with her readers in mind, keeping chapters concise and focused while illustrating her points with vignettes and anecdotes. Indeed, reading this book is like sitting alongside Kyleene and enjoying a deep, thought-provoking conversation about students and their literacy learning.



Readers should not be intimidated by the length of this book. Once you begin reading, if you are like me, you will not be able to put it down. You may even be surprised that a book with 418 pages is divided into only four sections: “Reading Matters,” “Comprehension,” “Word Work,” and “Making Reading Matter.” To better understand the foundational belief behind this book, consider Kyleene’s first sentence in “Chapter 1:” “This new edition, like the original edition, is based on my bedrock belief that reading, though not an innate ability for anyone, is a critical skill for all” (p.3). As you continue to read to the book’s final page, you will come to realize how critical it is for every teacher in every school in every classroom to stop and think about her statement. Why should any children in our country, regardless of their ages or their zip codes, not have access to adequate and effective reading instruction? Are many adolescents simply destined to spend their school years struggling to read the texts put in front of them?

If you decide to read Kyleene’s book, you are a teacher who has recognized the problems adolescents are having with reading and are searching for ways to help students. The good news is that you have found the resource you need. “Chapter 1” gives you the foundation you need to understand the process of reading. When you look at the figure on pages 24-27 of the reading behaviors of skilled and less skilled readers, your students will immediately pop into your mind. You may be surprised at how many of those students display the behaviors of the less skilled readers. The question you must ask yourself is what have you provided for remediation to help them? If the answer makes you uncomfortable, you will find help as you continue to read.

In “Part 2,” Kyleene addresses comprehension by giving her readers the tools to help students grow into their own self-efficacy and agency. She writes, “Helping kids become skilled readers requires teaching kids how to struggle successfully through a text” (p. 49). After all, struggle does not automatically end with failure. Four reading strategies that Kyleene shares in this part of the book for deepening comprehension include: making an inference (chapter 6), accessing prior knowledge (chapter 7), clarifying meaning (chapter 8), and extending understanding (chapter 9). These chapters are filled with examples and ideas for instructional plans and learning scaffolds that will empower students to struggle successfully with challenging texts. Plus, templates for the learning scaffolds are included in the appendices.

If someone were to say to you “Tell me about the types of word work you do with your students,” what would you say? How do you *know* what your *students know* about words? In “Part 3,” you will take a deep dive into Tiers 1, 2, and 3 words and find an easy-to-read figure, correlating specific vocabulary scaffolds with questions to ask so you can determine what your students know about words. Kyleene even includes the page numbers with the scaffolds, making it that much easier for you to navigate the book quickly. Additionally, “Part 3” includes chapters on preteaching vocabulary, context clues and word parts, fluency and automaticity, spelling, and phonics. Yes, there is a chapter on phonics for secondary students.

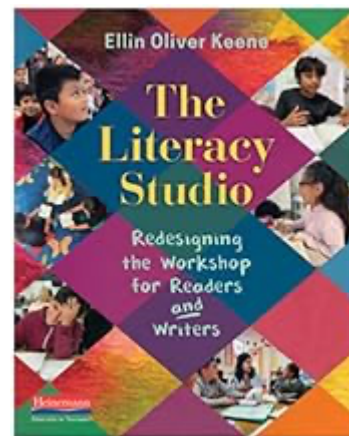
Lastly, Kyleene leaves readers with a mission in “Part 4: Making Reading Matter” to do exactly what she sees as the most important part of helping older students develop as readers—setting up supports and classroom conditions across all content areas and disciplines in grades 4 – 12 to help students understand that yes, reading and struggling successfully matters. For students to grow as readers, Kyleene writes, “We motivate kids to read by surrounding them with books that reflect who they are and what their interests are, by giving them time to read, and by making sure that time encourages them to think about themselves as readers” (p. 284).

Kyleene has completed this new edition of her old book by including thirty templates and lists to support your teaching of reading skills and strategies. The extensive bibliography provides readers with a plethora of future reading resources. Using every inch of space between the covers, Kyleene even included charts inside the front and the back. Readers will certainly get their money’s worth with this book.

As a fan of Kyleene Beers and someone who faithfully relied on her original version of this book with my own middle school students, I am so happy I read this second edition. Kyleene made me think about reading instruction, but, more importantly, she made me think about all the Georges who sit in classrooms every day, just waiting for knowledgeable teachers to show them the way to becoming successful readers. (JRG)

**The Literacy Studio: Redesigning the Workshop for Readers and Writers** by Ellin Oliver Keene, 2022, 214 pages, Heinemann. ISBN 978-0-325-12005-8

Even teachers who willingly and enthusiastically support the workshop model for instruction have one nagging nemesis—time. In her latest book, Ellin Oliver Keene confronts this issue of time by redesigning the familiar workshop model into what she has named a “literacy studio.” As she worked alongside teachers and students inside classrooms, Ellin became acutely aware of the amount of time being spent in transitions between reading and writing workshops. She noticed that students did not have enough time to immerse themselves in independent reading and writing opportunities. She wondered if they saw themselves as agents for their own growth as readers and writers.



No matter where you are in your current understanding of the reading workshop and writing workshop models, this book will give you an opportunity to rethink the way you plan instruction for your students. After reading this book, I found

myself thinking about how much sense Ellin makes when she suggests combining the two workshops into one as a better way to integrate reading and writing. Plus, having one integrated literacy studio in lieu of two separate workshops could mitigate the never-ending issue of time.

In the “Prelude” Ellin writes: “This book is about authenticity. It is about how we can transform students’ literacy learning into a process that aligns more closely with what readers and writers do outside an academic setting” (p. xiv). If you are intrigued by this concept, you will find a roadmap in this book for redesigning the instructional model you use with readers and writers in your classroom.

Ellin takes us through her thought process in “Chapter 1 Why Literacy Studio?” to explain why she believes that current practices in reader’s and writer’s workshops should be changed. She cites numerous researchers and their studies that support the idea of teachers capitalizing on “the symbiotic relationship between reading and writing” (p. 7). Additionally, she lists three goals of this book: 1.) helping students see the connections between the books they read and their work as writers, 2.) providing students with more choice in the texts they read and the topics about which they write, and 3.) giving students more time to read and write each day (p.8).

Ellin begins “Chapter 2 Time for a Reboot” with a review of Donald Graves’s seminal 1983 work and provides readers with a brief history of reader’s and writer’s workshop. She explains how the four foundational components of time, choice or ownership, response, and community have always been essential in a workshop and continue to be essential in the Literacy Studio (p. 17). She asks teachers who teach in a reader’s and writer’s workshop model to think deeply about whether they authentically have the important classroom conditions in place to support the optimal language learning of readers and writers (p. 29). She goes on to offer the Literacy Studio as an alternative instructional model for workshop teachers facing constraining demands such as lack of time and too much content to teach.

The most important chapter in this book may be “Chapter 3 It’s All About the Planning!” Ellin credits Debbie Miller and Samantha Bennett (2007) with introducing her to the planning wheel which she then revised to better fit her ideas for the Literacy Studio. Readers will find the template for this tool, along with record-keeping forms, in the appendices. Also included in this chapter is a transcript of a model lesson plan that includes the lesson (which she calls the crafting session), the independent work time (which she calls the composing time), and the sharing time (which she calls reflection). Additionally, scattered throughout the book are QR codes that lead readers to abundant online resources and adaptations for students with learning differences, English learners, and very young children. Readers will also appreciate the intermediate and primary grades Literacy Studio yearly timelines that are at the end of the chapter.

The remaining chapters are dedicated to each of the Literacy Studio components. In “Chapter 4 All Together Now:

Exploring the Craft of the Reader and Writer in Crafting Sessions,” Ellin once again considers time management and presents an in-depth look at a Crafting Session. “Chapter 5 From Crafting to Composing: How It All Comes Together” is quite an enjoyable read as Ellin uses the metaphor of the Literacy Studio as an artist’s studio filled “with canvases and brushes and paint of every color” (p. 86). Extending this metaphor to the Literacy Studio, the brushes are the instructional moves teachers make—think-alouds, modeling, and demonstrations. The paint colors are “the learning targets in literacy: concepts, tools, strategies, standards, processes, craft moves, curriculum, and areas of focus that will never find their way into a standards document—think developing characters or manipulating white space in poetry” (p. 87). The canvases are the materials, including a wide range of text complexity and diversity. The chapter ends with sample lesson outlines that incorporate reading and writing strategies, tools, and standards.

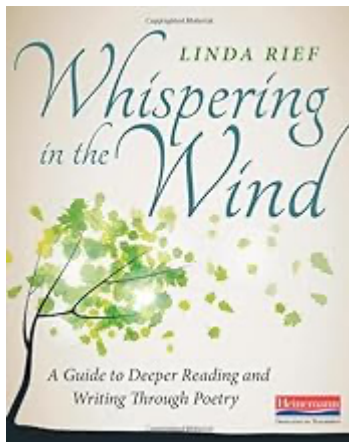
Likewise, “Chapter 6 The Heart of Literacy Studio: Independent Composing” includes both a primary and intermediate Composing Session. Transcripts of the interactions between Ellin and students make these sessions come alive for readers. “Chapter 7 Composing: How It All Comes Together” provides readers with step-by-step suggestions for launching Literacy Studio for the first time, how to confer with readers and writers, and how to establish invitational groups. If sharing sessions in your workshops have become rote, boring, and dull, you will thank Ellin for turning this time on its head as you read the final “Chapter 8 Reflection: The Home for Important Questions and Life Lessons.” Ellin believes in the innate capacity of children as brilliant thinkers and creative language users. As such, she believes reflection is more than simply sharing. She writes: “Reflection is a time for the class to think together about teacher- or student-generated global questions and to share progress as readers and writers. Reflection is student centered, student led whenever possible” (p. 176). In Figure 8.1 (p. 183), she includes a sampling of global questions that were created by teachers as an example for readers to create their own questions.

Ellin closes her book with a “Postlude.” She writes: “Though this book is ultimately about what makes sense to young readers and writers, it is also about what is more efficient, effective, and expedient to us as teachers” (p. 198). We all know the familiar adage about not reinventing the wheel, but after reading this book, you just might find yourself reinventing your reading and writing workshops into a Literacy Studio. (JRG)

**Whispering in the Wind: A Guide to Deeper Reading and Writing Through Poetry** by Linda Rief, 2022, 200 pgs., Heinemann. ISBN 978-0-325-13417-8

Just like Linda Rief, I, too, was an English Language Arts teacher of middle schoolers. Just like Linda Rief, I, too, found my students less than enthusiastic when it came to the dreaded poetry unit in April. Just like Linda Rief, I, too, came under the influence of Georgia Heard (1999, 2016) and her Heart

Maps. Unlike Linda Rief, I did not provide my middle schoolers with the deep literacy experiences around Heart Maps that Linda shares with us, her readers, in this book. Reading this book has made me want to get busy and create my own Heart Book of poems and poets that I love. Believe me when I say that you will find yourself googling the poems and poets Linda and her former students share in this book.



At first, I did not know what to make of this book. After all, there are more pages devoted to student work than actual text by the author. What I came to discover as I read is that Linda intended for this book to show exactly what she included in the book's subtitle: the deeper reading and deeper writing that her students experienced as they diligently explored poets and poetry. Linda's

goal was for her middle schoolers to look to poetry as inspiration for themselves as readers and writers. Instead of cringing when they heard the word *poetry*, she wanted them to luxuriate in a poet's words and seek them out. If what Mark Doty (2010) says is true, "Poetry is the human voice," Linda takes his words one step further by saying, "I wanted my kids to hear those voices and know each other" (p. 4). Readers of this book will find students' voices at the heart of this book, just as they are in their Heart Maps and Heart Books that Linda shares.

This is a how-to book for teachers to incorporate Heart Maps and Heart Books into their own work alongside students. Those of us who live our teaching lives in the company of middle schoolers know what unpredictable worlds theirs can be. We also know there is brilliance just waiting to be expressed inside those young adolescent minds. Linda shows what can and will happen when middle schoolers are given the guidance, freedom, choice, opportunities, and tools to access their innermost thoughts. In Linda's own words:

Ultimately, I want the students to notice the poetry in anything they read—novels, editorials, informational pieces, articles—anything. I want the students to realize that sitting beside clear, beautiful language, steeped in strong feelings, could enrich and elevate their own writing in any genre. (p. 9)

In addition to providing readers with abundant examples of her students' work, she includes instructions for creating the Heart Books and an evaluation rubric in the Appendix. She also includes extensive research supporting the connection between art and the English/Language Arts classroom. There are examples and instructions for the various art techniques she shares with students: contour drawing and watercolor, torn or cut paper, collage, Zentangles, and photography (p. 37). If you are someone who does not consider yourself to be much

of an artist, a quick tutorial by your school's art teacher could come in handy. Then again, you may have aspiring artists in your middle school classroom who could teach their classmates the techniques.

Readers of this book are bound to come away with a fresh perspective on the role of poetry in the middle school English/Language Arts classroom. While creating and implementing the Heart Books with students may seem intimidating, proving young adolescents with the singular experience of connecting with poems that help them "gain insight into all that's important in their lives" (p. 159) is invaluable. (JRG)

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# Uniting Students with Literacy Connections in Mathematics

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**Abstract:** Literature provides opportunities for students to connect to mathematics, as well as each other. Reflecting on personal identities, storytelling, and place-based connections are avenues to enhancing the relevancy of content across the curriculum. Literature can bridge the divide for students reluctant to see the beauty in mathematics. It can also be the impetus in helping unite students as they gain a better understanding of cultures and places beyond their own. Stories, along with interactive tasks, give context for collaborative experiences. This article shares resources and strategies for building understanding and collaboration among students using cross-curricular connections between mathematics and literacy.

*Keywords:* Mathematics, literature, interdisciplinary, literacy, storytelling

## Introduction

The 2020's are challenging unity among young adolescents in American society. Troubling issues include social justice concerns, a mental health crisis, wars and rumors of war. Young adolescents are often caught "in the middle" of the larger societal and personal challenges, and often mathematics is taught using little cultural connections (Sagun, 2010). Our young adolescents are beginning to show their resilience from the global pandemic that cut many people off from social engagement but are needing more opportunities to develop their ability to communicate socially and academically. So, how can educators help unite students in classrooms that engage them in creative, integrative ways that also enhance academic skills in a social context? Particularly in mathematics classrooms where algorithms and procedures usually take the forefront, we believe educators who promote unity and listening to one another while also providing

rigorous content help young adolescents connect their lives to mathematics. We suggest teachers can be intentional about better understanding students by uniting them using literacy as a conduit for problem solving. What can we do to help students consider their relationships with each other and stories they read? In this article, we share resources and strategies for building understanding and collaboration among students using cross-curricular connections in mathematics to literacy. We believe four elements provide deep connections between mathematics and literature: storytelling, journaling, hearing all voices, and focusing on place-based learning. For each of these elements we provide a discussion and how to integrate a literacy connection.

SCAMLE

South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education

## Our Identity Stories: Storytelling as a Tool

First, building a classroom environment where everyone has value and collaboration is key. A place where it is expected that we make mistakes and learn from them begins with trust. We must teach our students to trust the process, trust one another, trust that eventually each of us will know more. We believe two things must accompany trust: A growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) and productive struggle (Hiebert & Grouws, 2007). These two elements are conduits to helping students find solutions to problems (Toney, 2019). Toney (2019) examined the impact of three different mindset strategies on middle school math students' attitudes toward math: "yet", "process praise", and "celebrating success". He found that sixth graders show the greatest impact using the celebration of successes where they had struggled!

In order to create a culture that challenges and embraces struggle, we believe we start by building a community of learners who trust and accept unknowns. Helping students build relationships takes effort and the teacher sets the tone. A tool for engaging students, building community, and exploring challenges can happen with literacy skills (Sircey, 2017) and more specifically, story-telling (Landrum, Brakke, & McCarthy, 2019). Sircey (2017) examined middle school math students' who were given specific literacy tools such as storytelling as a strategy to help build a classroom environment conducive to learning math and providing experiences to learn about each other. Reading allows students to learn through others' stories. In our writing, we each can learn through personal stories.

Let's begin with asking our students to share their own stories as opportunities for young adolescents to get to know one another, connect to literacy, and discuss unknowns. Two experiences students can engage in are timelines and text lineages. Bishop, Downes, and Farbe (2021), wrote *Personalized Learning in the Middle Grades*. They share how asking students to explore and examine their own lives and goals allows them to grow and monitor their own challenges and successes. We suggest two books to use in helping

students think about their own lives: *The Dot and the Line* and *The Day You Begin*.

### ***The Dot and the Line: A Romance in Lower Mathematics (1963)* by Norton Juster**

What better than a light-hearted mathematical romance to fire up a classroom of young adolescents? In *The Dot and the Line* (Juster, 1963), a relationship grows when the dot wants to impress the line. The story depicts love across boundaries. After reading the book, there are two areas to explore – 1) geometry concepts and 2) questions relating the story to young adolescent identities, relationships, and self-concepts.

#### Related Math Activities:

- Analysis of introductory geometry vocabulary
- Student drawings of introductory geometry vocabulary - hand-drawn and utilizing interactive software such as the DESMOS Geometry tool. <https://www.desmos.com/geometry>
- Comparison of mathematical relationships
- Exploration of architecture

### ***The Day You Begin (2018)* by Jacqueline Woodson**

Jacqueline Woodson (2018) wrote, *The Day You Begin*. This picture book allows students to relate challenges in their lives to mathematical struggles. A growth mindset is illustrated by the main character. Using this book to talk about how we overcome challenges is a great segue to connecting perseverance in the math classroom and can open up discussion in a variety of ways. Woodson's YouTube version (2021) features the author introducing the book. It is a nice book to introduce preservice teachers how to integrate math into an ELA class. After reading the book, the following questions are used for reflection and discussion:

- What are your cultural connections? What stands out?
- What feelings/memories come forth for you?
- In what ways can you connect some part of this book to one content area? How would the standards fit?
- How might you extend the content connection to another content?
- Why does this book matter for students? For identity? For class community building? For fostering a love of literacy?
- What do you notice about the pictures in the book?

## **Journaling**

We often associate journaling with language arts, but the mathematics classroom is another appropriate place for student expression. Journaling is a great way for students to share their ideas, their concerns, and a way to monitor their growth as budding mathematicians. We can begin the year or the semester asking students to reflect on their own mathematical journey, their past, and their hopes for the future. One way to do this is by sharing *The Girl with a Mind for Math: The Story of Raye Montague* (Mosca, 2018). This is a story of dreams and prejudices and ultimately success. After reading the story, students can write their own math

autobiography. Students can describe their math journey in written narratives, verbal stories, by drawing pictures, and/or by creating a timeline of milestones. After reading, the following questions can stimulate students' sharing their own journeys:

- What did you find particularly insightful in the book?
- What were the pivotal moments in your own math journey?
- What experiences impacted you as a mathematician?

Text lineage is also a form of journaling. Goldie Muhammad (2018) uses text as a way for students to share their own journeys. A text lineage is an illustration, usually written in words, but could use images, and books that influence our own ideas related to perseverance and dreams.

In the math classroom we can ask students to design and display their own experiences that impacted their journeys. *The Housekeeper and the Professor* (Ogawa, 2003) is the story of a mathematician who experienced a traumatic head injury and can only remember things for 80 minutes at a time. The characters are the housekeeper and her son who learn to grow and trust, and, in turn solve problems together. Together a class could create a text lineage to describe the professors, the housekeeper, or her sons' lives. Teachers can use the literature to help students get to know one another and examine mathematical literacy. Japan is the setting of this story. Consider the equation the professor loved. There is a consistent theme of productive struggle and perseverance. For example, the professor had a "a special feeling for what he called the 'correct miscalculation,' for he believed that mistakes were often as revealing as the right answers. After reading, students can then create their own text lineages to talk about how they attempt or are challenged by problems and how they persevere. Allowing students to explain their world in numbers can give them the opportunity to explore their worlds mathematically.

#### Related Math Activities:

- Lineage - personal, story characters, and/or historical figures
- Examination of 'amicable numbers' as noted in the story (Ogawa, p. 18-22)
- Analysis of student collected data of heights and birthdays
- Place-based data analysis - population through historical periods, median income, demographics, climate, ecosystems
- Measurements with scaled maps (geography of Japan's islands), cartography, explorations of landforms

## **Hearing All Voices: Listening and Learning**

Whose stories do we hear? As teacher educators, we want to bring various perspectives to our students as well as stories that can bring multiple meanings to our future teachers. We ensure that instruction fosters learning that is active, purposeful and democratic (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

Diverse learning opportunities expose students to “multiple, diverse perspectives and viewpoints” (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 27). We invited our colleagues to talk about their own experiences:

“I never considered myself a mathematician, always a reader and a writer. Math has always been a daunting subject for me. My math teachers always explained concepts too fast for me and I was always afraid to ask questions for fear of being embarrassed or feeling “dumb”. I wanted to learn the concepts and understand how they all build on one another, but I let my fear control my ability to ask questions before, during or after math class. When I felt brave and confident enough to ask questions, I was left feeling humiliated and I let myself be ok with “getting by” in math.

It was late in life that I encountered an individual who not only had a love for math, but a passion for teaching it and then I was able to build my confidence in the content. However, my love for reading and writing was unhinged. I began as a timid reader and writer, and was sent to “reading lab” for a short while, so my mother and father would read to me and take me to the library and bookstores to expose me to the kinds of books that I enjoyed reading. After some time, I turned my book collection into a library, and I would rent out books to friends. I developed a community of readers among my friends and soon after my best friend and I started writing plays and acting them out. This was how my love of reading and writing started.

I always ask students if they are readers or writers and then ask them to explain why. We begin class with a read aloud, journal writing or a brief discussion on the journal topic.” - (Literacy Professor)

Giving voice to students requires a variety of avenues for participation including written, verbal, and signal responses. Classroom questioning techniques include volunteer and non-volunteers. Tools such as equity sticks or random name generators like WheelofNames.com help ensure diversity in how teachers select participants. Technology tools such as Menti and Flip where students provide responses give voice to more students, encourage participation by all, and offer opportunities for collaboration. Integrating the technology can help make all students feel seen and heard and help the class make democratic decisions.

Sharing *The Girl with a Mind for Math: The Raye Montague Story* (2018) by Julia Mosca can inspire students to overcome adversity to solve problems and attain their goals. Raye Montague is an empowering example of how a young person was able to share her voice. Personal stories allow our students to identify with and learn about the uniqueness of individuals. This book includes a timeline of milestones in Ms.

Montague’s life. Additionally, *The Girl with a Mind for Math* can be a springboard for STEAM activities.

Related Math Activities:

- Creation of timelines - personal or of historical figures and/or events
- Analysis of measurements of naval ships and submarines
- STEAM Activity: Peer collaboration in simulated ship building. Teams build a ship utilizing a limited number of various materials provided - paper, paper clips, wood sticks, straws, aluminum foil sheet
- Comparison of mathematical identities: Raye Montague’s story of mathematics and engineering
- Sharing heritage: Place-based connections using literature

### Place-Based Connections

A third experience young adolescents can learn from is using place-based connections. Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author” (Bishop, 1990, p. ix). When we provide our students with opportunities for exploration of new places, concepts, histories, and people, they gain understandings about places near and far. At a time in their lives when so much is unknown, middle school students deserve opportunities for engaging, enriching lessons that introduce concepts, places, and people who can inspire them to think deeply about their place in the world. These windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors await and entice our students to go beyond what and where they know to learn more about the world in which they live. For example, we can virtually visit Peru while reading *Patterns in Peru* (2007) by Cindy Neuschwander. In this story, Bibi and Matt Zill must use their algebraic knowledge of patterns along their adventure to navigate their way. The patterns in the story include repeating, positional, and growing patterns. There is even a T-chart in the book! The main characters must think critically to extend patterns to guide their way to the Lost City when they are suddenly separated from their parents.

Related Math Activities:

- Construct algebraic patterns with color tiles (or other manipulative) and discover linear functions
- Place-based data analysis - population through historical periods (South America, The Inca Civilization, Machu Picchu), median income, demographics, climate, ecosystems
- Measurements with scaled maps (geography of South America, Peru, Machu Picchu), cartography, explorations of landforms
- Mathematical analysis of cultural designs in art and clothing

Where stories take place and/or using stories that relate to students locally can inspire students to problem solve and work strategically to understand how people live in

community. Incorporating literature into math lessons allows students opportunities to get to know one another, learn about careers which prioritize math, examine mathematical applications through authentic situations, and gain insights about historical figures who made contributions in STEM fields. While connecting students to their own communities is critical, books can allow students to take adventures into other cultures. Since the books are being used as entry points to connect with students, it is not necessary for the books to align with the reading level of the students. Relevancy can be established in adolescent literature, children's books, and picture books.

Examples highlighted in this article include: *The Dot and the Line: A Romance in Lower Mathematics* (1963) by Norton Juster; *The Day You Begin* (2018) by Jacqueline Woodson; *The Housekeeper and the Professor* (2003) by Yoko Ogawa, set in Japan; *The Girl with a Mind for Math: The Raye Montague Story* (2018) by Julia Mosca; and *Patterns in Peru* (2007) by Cindy Neuschwander. Each of these narratives weaves mathematical concepts with elements of history and allows students to develop their geographical knowledge. The stories offer glimpses into the lives of mathematicians, engineers, researchers, and writers. Through these stories students are able to see, hear, and discuss how math concepts are applied to real life situations in different places. Lessons can be extended for students to create their own math stories and through this, they can see themselves as mathematicians, engineers, architects, researchers, and/or writers. Elements of adventure, art, suspense, and rich characterizations provide high interest and engagement for concepts that might otherwise be difficult to garner students' attention. Each story immerses students into a particular place – the faraway lands of Peru and Japan, for example.

Exploration of the settings of the stories can serve as connections to our students' lives and provide opportunities for place-based lessons which add authenticity to our lessons. The interdisciplinary possibilities with math and literature are numerous. According to the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), curriculum should be relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory. AMLE promotes education that is responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging (2024). *The Successful Middle School* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) explains integrative curriculum as including inquiry of significant problems and societal issues. Communication and collaboration are essential in the process. Finally, three of NCTM's (2014) seven Effective Mathematics Teaching Practices include: facilitating meaningful mathematical discourse, supporting productive struggle in learning mathematics, and posing purposeful questions.

## Conclusion

While we work to unify our students, we should keep in mind that collaborating with our colleagues sets a powerful example. Reaching across the hallway to share ideas can provide the benefit of a cross-curricular approach. While teachers explore the mathematics of the literature in one class, colleagues can spotlight and expand upon additional discipline-specific content. Intentionality is key. What do

middle schoolers spend their time thinking about and doing? In a path forward for one's own ideas, consider books and media, and community-based connections, along with questions and interests from students. The intent is to make learning student-centered and student-focused, helping students see the relevancy of content and collaboration. As we work through authentic tasks, we develop as citizens collaborating with each other at increased levels of engagement. We create a culture of engagement, curiosity, and collaboration when we give our students opportunities to make connections and explore their wonderings.

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## The “System” Was Never for Us: Redefining Middle School Discipline to Empower Black Girls

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**Abstract:** This manuscript addresses the need for a transformative redefinition of school discipline, focused on empowering Black girls. It highlights the heightened likelihood of suspension and expulsion faced by Black girls, exposing flaws in traditional practices. Advocating for a paradigm shift, the manuscript emphasizes adopting restorative practices, centered on healing and collaboration to address behavioral issues at their core. It explores the impact of implicit biases and systemic racism on Black girls' experiences, proposing a comprehensive, inclusive approach. Through transformative measures, schools create environments that actively empowers and supports the academic journey of Black girls, fostering a more equitable educational experience.

**Keywords:** school discipline, restorative justice, racial disparities, implicit bias, empowerment of Black girls

### Introduction

In the realm of education, where fairness should reign, a glaring truth surfaces: the system meant for all students doesn't quite fit the unique challenges faced by Black girls. Historically, Black students, particularly Black girls, face disproportionate discipline and punishment in school settings; they are often labeled as disobedient or defiant by school personnel with a limited understanding of how race and racism impact their lives (Annamma, Anyon, Joseph, Farrar, Greer, Downing, & Simmons, 2019; Blad & Harwin, 2017; Cherng, 2017; Morris, 2019). This often leads to negative consequences for their academic and socio-emotional development, making Black girls vulnerable to the life-long

consequences of dropping out of school (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015; Esposito & Edwards, 2018; Morris, 2016).

Black girls encounter a disproportionately higher likelihood of facing suspension and expulsion when compared to their peers of the same gender (Annamma et al., 2019).

While existing research acknowledges the shared racialized risk of punitive measures for both Black boys and girls in educational settings, the distinctive challenges faced by Black female students remain notably absent from advocacy efforts concerning school achievement (Crenshaw et al., 2015).

The well-documented prevalence of racial disparities in school discipline often fails to spotlight the pronounced inequity experienced by Black girls; this silence is supported by data collection and reporting methods that commonly overlook the crucial intersection of race and gender (Blad & Harwin, 2017; Carter Andrews, Brown, Castro, & Id-Deen, 2019; Morris, 2019). Reports that scrutinize data to unveil the status of boys frequently neglect to present parallel information for girls, inadvertently fostering the misconception among key stakeholders that Black girls encounter fewer race-related obstacles within the educational system (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2019). It is essential to address the unique struggles faced by Black girls and advocate for tailored interventions to redefine middle school discipline in a manner that empowers and supports their academic journey (AMLE, 2021; Cherng, 2017).

In the ongoing discourse surrounding educational equity, it becomes increasingly evident that the prevailing disciplinary systems within middle schools often fail to address the challenges faced by Black girls (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Smith, 2022). This manuscript delves into the intersection of race and gender, shedding light on the disparities and inadequacies present in traditional disciplinary approaches and aims to challenge the status quo, by advocating for a transformative shift that recognizes and supports the diverse experiences of Black girls in middle schools. Such a shift requires redefining discipline through a lens of empowerment; seeking to cultivate a more inclusive and just educational environment for all students, thereby acknowledging and affirming their racial and gender identities.

### Unique Challenges Faced by Black Girls

Navigating adolescence as a Black girl within a societal framework dominated by Eurocentric standards, presents distinctive challenges, creating a dynamic that is often difficult for others to comprehend (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). The middle school phase, acknowledged as a demanding period for all students (AMLE, 2021), further complicates the experience as minds and bodies undergo simultaneous and multifaceted changes that middle school students find difficult to comprehend (AMLE, 2021). This places individuals in the

paradox of being perceived as mature in certain aspects while still deemed too young in others. Black girls, in particular, contend with adultification or the pervasive assumptions that they are attempting to appear older or more mature than their age suggests (African American Policy Forum, 2015; Annamma et al., 2019; French, 2012). This perception, particularly concerning their sexuality, reinforces stigmatizing notions, implying a sense of shame associated with their perceived sexualization (Esposito & Edwards, 2018; French, 2012)). External perspectives frequently cast Black girls as hypersexualized figures, reinforcing harmful stereotypes such as oversexed vixens, teenage mothers, and carriers of sexually transmitted infections (French, 2012). The rapid shift from childhood to being perceived as a sexual being is a challenging experience commonly faced by Black girls. From contending with pervasive stereotypes and biases to facing disciplinary disparities, the journey for Black girls is challenged with obstacles that demand attention and intervention. Cultural expectations and the pressure to reconcile societal norms with personal identity further intensify their experiences (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2009). The development of a positive self-image becomes a delicate task amid societal pressures and identity exploration (French, 2012). Microaggressions, subtle yet impactful expressions of bias, add an additional layer of complexity to Black girls' middle school experiences (Cherng, 2017). Recognizing and addressing these challenges is imperative for fostering an educational environment that not only acknowledges the unique struggles of Black girls but actively supports their holistic development and academic success.

### **Disparities in Disciplinary Practices**

Black girls, in the United States, often fall victim to disciplinary disparities compared to their white counterparts; in too many situations, Black girls receive a consequence that is often disproportionate to the behavior (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2011). Black students are disproportionately represented in schools with police presence, both at the middle school and high school levels; Black students are nearly 10 times more likely to attend a school with a law enforcement officer compared to their white counterparts (Bled & Harwin, 2017). The disproportionate representation of Black students in school arrests is likely due to their typically being in the minority among school populations (Bled & Harwin, 2017). Even increasingly harmful, these students are disciplined at disproportionate levels (Blake et al., 2011). On average, Black girls faced significantly higher rates of discipline, being disciplined ten times more, expelled 53 times more, and suspended ten times more than their white counterparts (African American Policy Forum, 2015; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2016). Black girls bear the brunt of under-resourced school districts in their disciplinary practices, particularly affecting all young Black students, and more specifically Black girls who often grapple with the intersection of racial and gender biases within a societal context that perceives them as a marginalized gender minority (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Esposito & Edwards, 2018; Morris, 2016).

Although research on the causes of these disparities is still in the early stages, implicit biases and results of stereotyping are two very likely reasons (Alinia, 2015; Esposito & Edwards, 2018). Teachers might be unaware of the mainstream Western cultural implications that they inflict upon Black students (Esposito & Edwards, 2018; Leafgren, 2012; Morris, 2019). For example, encouraging Black girls to “adopt more ‘acceptable’ qualities of feminists such as being...more passive” (Crenshaw et al., 2015). Likely because Black girls are more likely to be seen as excessively loud, they might fall victim to stereotypes and face discipline for not following behaviors traditionally outlined by Eurocentric standards (Esposito & Edwards, 2018). Irrespective of the reasons, stakeholders working in a school setting should be mindful of the disparities in disciplinary practices, recognizing and addressing their own personal biases to ensure the equity of their disciplinary approaches.

### **Redefinition of Discipline**

In the evolving landscape of education, the conventional paradigms governing school discipline are under scrutiny as we confront the need for a transformative redefinition (Leafgren, 2012). The traditional punitive measures, rooted in exclusionary practices, have proven not only inequitable but detrimental to the overall educational experience of Black girls (Blake et al., 2011; Leafgren, 2012)). Discipline should be viewed as a means to teach and guide students rather than merely as a system for punishment (AMLE, 2021). It is within this context that the call for a redefined approach gains resonance, urging educators and policymakers to reconsider disciplinary frameworks. The essence of this paradigm shift lies in embracing safe spaces, and restorative justice practices that prioritize healing, understanding, and collaboration over punitive measures (Smith, 2022). The journey toward redefinition encompasses a holistic examination of the root causes of behavioral issues, coupled with an acknowledgment of the pervasive influence of implicit biases and systemic racism (Alinia, 2015; Blake et al., 2011). As schools embark on this transformative endeavor, the goal is clear: to foster an inclusive, empowering, and supportive environment within our schools, ensuring that every student, irrespective of their background, can thrive and succeed (AMLE, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Schools' discipline must undergo a reformed approach to student behavior and discipline tactics, moving beyond traditional exclusionary practices (Blad & Harwin, 2017; Leafgren, 2012; Esposito & Edwards, 2018). The adoption of restorative justice practices emphasizes the importance of repairing harm and cultivating positive relationships between students and school staff (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Homrich-Knieling, 2022; Klevan, 2021). In this perspective, discipline becomes a joint effort, focusing on understanding and tackling the root causes of behavioral issues (Annamma et al., 2016; Klevan, 2021). Educators are provided with the necessary training and resources that not only covers the practical aspects of implementing restorative justice, but also addresses implicit biases (Homrich-Knieling, 2022). Crucially, restorative justice practices seek to deepen educators' understanding of how race and racism significantly influence

the experiences of Black girls in the school environment (Annamma et al., 2016; Klevan, 2021). Discipline practices such as these provide a comprehensive and inclusive approach to redefine middle school discipline, aiming to create an environment that empowers and supports Black girls throughout their educational journey.

Redefining discipline for Black girls within the framework of *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* necessitates a comprehensive and tailored approach that acknowledges the unique intersectionality of their experiences (AMLE, 2021). Guided by the principles of *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe*, discipline should transcend punitive measures, shifting toward restorative justice practices that prioritize empathy, understanding, and collaboration (AMLE, 2021; Klevan, 2021). The commitment to fostering a positive and inclusive school culture requires educators to actively address implicit biases, dismantling stereotypes that disproportionately affect Black girls (Smith, 2022). This approach is executed by prioritizing relationships and acknowledging the impact of systemic racism on their educational journey (Esposito & Edwards, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995), the redefined discipline approach aligns with AMLE's emphasis on promoting equity, social justice, and the holistic development of every student (AMLE, 2021). This transformative approach seeks to empower Black girls by creating an educational environment that embraces diversity, celebrates individual strengths, and provides the necessary support for their academic and personal growth.

### Empowerment Strategies

Middle school is a period marked by transitions, both physical and emotional, as young individuals strive to find their place in the world (AMLE, 2021). For Black girls, these transitions can be compounded by factors such as racial identity development, cultural nuances, and societal expectations (Blake et al., 2011; Carter Andrews et al., 2019). To address these challenges and unlock their full potential, it is crucial for educators to implement strategies that not only acknowledge the specific experiences of Black girls but also provide them with the tools to navigate and overcome obstacles. From fostering a positive self-image and promoting cultural pride, to building resilience in the face of adversity (Ladson-Billings, 1995), the goal is to equip young Black girls with the skills and mindset needed to navigate the complexities of adolescence with grace, strength, and resilience.

There is a pressing need to expand existing opportunities for the inclusion of Black girls and other girls of color in policy research, advocacy, and programmatic interventions (Annamma et al., 2016; Esposito & Edwards, 2018). Emphasizing the importance of equitable funding, it is crucial to ensure support for the specific needs of women and girls alongside those of men and boys. Simultaneously, there is a growing demand for the development of strategies that prioritize the safety of Black girls without an overreliance on punitive interventions (Crenshaw et al., 2015). Achieving this requires comprehensive teacher and staff training in schools, encompassing historical and contemporary dimensions of racism, equity, oppression, and power dynamics (Alinia, 2015);

Annamma et al., 2016). Training should prioritize addressing educators' personal biases and dismantling stereotypes about Black girls (Homrich-Knieling, 2022). Instead of relying on disciplinary exclusion rooted in Eurocentric standards, educators are encouraged to adopt alternative perspectives; viewing Black girls as powerful and assertive individuals, capable of problem-solving with savvy and ingenuity, to foster a more inclusive and empowering educational environment (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Additionally, educators must actively listen to the narratives of Black girls and place their experiences at the forefront of policy discussions (Annamma et al., 2016; Esposito & Edwards, 2018). Educators must acknowledge the crisis faced by youth of color and advocate for a commitment to expanding both conversations and resources essential for addressing these critical concerns (Crenshaw et al., 2015). In essence, a holistic and inclusive approach, recognizes and rectifies systemic disparities to create a more safe, just, and supportive environment for Black girls (Smith, 2022).

*This redefined discipline approach aligns with AMLE's emphasis on promoting equity, social justice, and the holistic development of every student (AMLE, 2021)*

### Conclusion

The exploration of empowerment strategies for middle school Black girls reveals not only the resilience and strength these students embody but also the need for systemic change in discipline practices. By recognizing and addressing the intersectional challenges of race and gender, the emphasis here is on the importance of tailored strategies that go beyond conventional approaches (Blake et al., 2011; Crenshaw et al., 2015). The empowerment of Black girls in middle school is not solely an academic pursuit; it is a call to dismantle historical disparities and create a transformative educational experience. It is evident that true empowerment requires ongoing commitment and collaboration (Klevan, 2021). Schools, educators, policymakers, and communities must work in unison to implement and sustain these strategies, fostering an environment where the potential of every middle school Black girl is not only acknowledged but actively cultivated.

In moving forward, this manuscript serves as a foundation for broader conversations and actions aimed at redefining the middle school experience for Black girls. By prioritizing empowerment, we sow the seeds for a future where every Black girl can navigate the challenges of adolescence with resilience and self-assurance. The journey toward equity and inclusivity demands continued advocacy, policy reform, and cultural shifts. These results stand as a testament to the potential for positive change, urging stakeholders at every level to embrace empowerment strategies that uplift and support the unique aspirations of middle school Black girls. Only through sustained commitment can we collectively pave

the way for an educational landscape that not only recognizes the inherent worth of Black girls but actively propels them toward a future of limitless possibilities.

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## And Then the Black Birthed Me: Celebrating Black Girlhood in Middle Level ELA Classrooms Through Afrofuturism

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**Abstract:** The manuscript delves into the dynamic interplay between Afrofuturism and young adult literature and Middle Level English pedagogical inspiration to offer fresh perspectives on intersectionality, agency, and empowerment among marginalized youth. The authors explore how Afrofuturistic young adult literature authors are employing characters who navigate a multitude of identities, challenging traditional power dynamics, and dismantling oppressive structures. Through its incorporation of technological innovation, speculative visions, and the reclaiming of historical narratives, Afrofuturistic young adult literature creates new paradigms of empowerment and self-realization for all students, but especially Black girls. Works such as Kalynn Bayron's *The Poison Heart* (2021), Namina Fornas' *The Gilded Ones* (2020), and Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Warrior* (2017) exemplify the intricate Afrofuturist aesthetics, thereby providing middle level readers with both mirrors to their own experiences and windows into transformative possibilities.

**Keywords:** Afrofuturism, Black girlhood, middle level ELA, young adult literature, representation, empowerment

### Introduction

The emergence of Afrofuturism in young adult literature has transformed the literary landscape, creating a new age of storylines which resist traditional archetypes and boundaries, providing sanctuary spaces (Smith, 2022) amplifying the voices of marginalized individuals, such as middle level Black girls. Afrofuturism is a movement that emerged from a deep commitment to justice, equality, and liberation (Tarran & Benedito, 2022). It provides a critical lens through which to examine and challenge the multifaceted oppressions faced by Black girls (Thomas, 2019a). By emphasizing intersectionality, agency, and empowerment, Afrofuturism has laid the foundation for narratives that not only confront the realities of discrimination and inequality but also celebrate the resilience and strength of Black girlhood at the middle level. Afrofuturism has been instrumental in creating a space for

Black girls' voices in middle school to be heard and their experiences to be validated (Abril-Gonzalez, Aguilera, Linares, Nightengale-Lee, Nuñez, Nyachae, Rusoja, & Templeton, 2021). Through Afrofuturism, Black girls have been able to explore their identities and experiences in ways that were previously impossible. The impact of Afrofuturism on young adult literature and culture has been profound (Holbert et al., 2020; Moudileno, 2020; Thomas, 2019a). It has inspired a new generation of writers and artists to create counternarratives that challenge dominant ideologies and celebrate the diversity and complexity of Black experiences. Afrofuturism has also helped to create a sense of community and solidarity among Black girls, providing a space for them to connect and share their stories (Sunday & Akung, 2022).

Afrofuturistic young adult literature is a powerful tool for middle level educators to foster critical reading and writing skills in their students. By immersing middle school students in Afrofuturistic narratives, educators can expose them to a wealth of speculative ideas, diverse perspectives, and alternative futures that challenge conventional norms. Students can analyze and evaluate these narratives, exploring complex themes of identity, social justice, and the impact of technology on society (Thomas, 2018b; Thomas, 2019b). Engaging with Afrofuturistic literature encourages students to question existing power structures, envision transformative possibilities, and articulate their thoughts in a persuasive and coherent manner (Tolliver, 2019).

This manuscript showcases how analyzing the principles of Black girlhood and Afrofuturism through a critical study of three Afrofuturistic young adult novels can inspire middle level educators in developing transformative and healing lesson plans that cater to the diverse experiences, broadens what counts as canonized literature and provides a healing literary space by offering a glimpse of a future rooted in African diasporic communities' experiences and perspectives. This manuscript is guided by the following inquiries: (1) How can an understanding of intersectionality deepen our comprehension of the unique challenges and strengths experienced by Black girls in middle school as they navigate adolescence and young adulthood; (2) How can Afrofuturism serve as a platform for promoting diversity, dismantling stereotypes, and empowering marginalized voices, particularly within the context of young adult literature; and (3) In what ways does Afrofuturism young adult literature inspire creative middle level lesson plans encouraging individuals to envision a more inclusive and equitable future?

### Awakening Spirits: Black Girlhood in Middle School and the Art of Soul Sustenance

Black girlhood embodies a journey rooted in liberation and empowerment, centered on a radical embrace of Black love and identity. However, the conventional educational system often overlooks and fails to nurture this pivotal journey (Tolliver, 2019). Truly honoring and nourishing the

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experiences of Black girls necessitates a radical overhaul of the educational system. This transformation demands a complete reimagination and reconstruction of our educational institutions, encompassing a curriculum that resonates with the lived experiences of Black girls and a pedagogy that authentically speaks to their souls and identities (Smith, 2022).

Awashed in memories  
of futures yet imagined,  
I was first an amalgamation  
of gas and dust;  
a divine collision  
caused a shockwave  
to propel into  
this present;  
And then  
the Black  
birthed me;  
All at once,  
I came undone  
and was reformed  
by stitching together  
starlight  
and moonbeams forming  
a melanated masterpiece  
luminescent from the  
inside from out.  
(Smith, 2023)

Within the context of the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)'s *This We Believe* (2021), a guiding principle for middle-level education emphasizing effective practices during this crucial phase of learning, the focus remains on acknowledging and embracing the unique experiences of Black girls within our schools. It urges the creation of inclusive and empowering spaces for these young individuals, recognizing the challenges they may face and celebrating the diverse identities they bring. The ultimate goal is to ensure that Black girls feel not just seen but deeply valued, heard, and supported throughout their educational journey. AMLE's framework provides a foundation for promoting equity and establishing an environment that genuinely honors and celebrates the varied experiences and perspectives of Black girls in middle-level education.

At its heart, Black girlhood is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the unique experiences, identities, challenges, and triumphs of young Black girls as they navigate the intersectionality of race, gender, and age. It involves understanding their history, heritage, and the diverse narratives within the Black community, acknowledging the diverse ways in which Black girls experience their girlhood, and appreciating the cultural richness that shapes their identities. Black girls' journey of resilience, strength, and empowerment is a testament to their ability to define themselves within a society that often imposes limiting stereotypes and expectations (Jacobs, 2017; Abril-Gonzalez, et al., 2021).

Black girls in middle school often face a unique set of experiences that are both racialized and gendered. These experiences can vary depending on the context, such as whether the school is predominantly white or racially diverse (Smith, 2022). One common experience is the phenomenon of racialized tracking, where Black girls are often placed in segregated classes within racially diverse schools. This can limit their exposure to diverse, inclusive, and comprehensive instruction, particularly in areas like Black history and culture (Katz & Acquah, 2022).

Black girls often face both racial and gender bias in school settings. They are more likely to be suspended or arrested at school compared to their white counterparts (Jacobs, 2017). This disciplinary disparity can have significant consequences, including lower academic scores and decreased likelihood of attending a four-year college. The concept of "adultification bias" is another common experience, where Black girls are perceived as more mature and are held to higher standards, leading to more frequent and harsher discipline. This bias can result in Black girls being disproportionately pulled out of class for being perceived as too loud, too assertive, too sexually provocative, too defiant, and too adult-like. Despite these challenges, Black girls also demonstrate resilience and awareness of their identities (Epstein et al., 2017). They are aware of the difficulties in navigating educational settings, but this awareness is often coupled with parental support that promotes positive gendered racial identities. Afrofuturistic young adult literature plays a protective role in their identity development and helps them navigate the challenges they face in school (Holbert et al., 2020).

Incorporating the exploration of Black girlhood in public education English classes is essential for fostering inclusivity, empathy, and a comprehensive understanding of the human experience (AMLE, 2021). By delving into the stories, voices, and struggles of Black girls, students can gain a broader perspective on social justice, equity, and the importance of representation in literature and society (Smith, 2022; Tolliver, 2019). It allows students, regardless of their own backgrounds, to engage with diverse narratives, challenge biases, and appreciate the unique strength and resilience that Black girls embody (Edwards et al., 2016). Furthermore, incorporating Black girlhood into the curriculum promotes critical thinking, cultural competence, and a more holistic and accurate depiction of history and contemporary society, contributing to a more inclusive and empowering educational experience for all students (AMLE, 2021).

### **Beyond Boundaries: Afrofuturism and the Liberation of Black Girlhood**

Young adult Afrofuturism represents a cultural blend of African diaspora traditions with technological innovation. This philosophy combines elements from science fiction, historical narratives, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism, forming a vibrant cultural expression found in music, art, fashion, and technology. Beyond merely featuring Black characters in futuristic settings, Afrofuturism deeply roots itself in celebrating the ingenuity and distinctiveness of Black culture. In this genre, Black girls find a canvas to envision futures that



embrace Black and African perspectives on technology, mythology, and worldviews. It's a platform that rejects conventional beauty and femininity standards, encouraging them to embrace their own definitions of glamor. Thomas (2019a) boldly asserts:

The traditional purpose of darkness in the fantastic is to disturb, to unsettle, to cause unrest. This primal fear of darkness and Dark Others is so deeply rooted in Western myth that it is nearly impossible to find its origin... No matter what the reasons were for the way our culture came to view all things dark in the past, the consequences have been a nameless and lingering fear of dark people in the present (p. 13).

It is crucial to challenge these stereotypical perceptions to ensure Black girls aren't misrepresented, misunderstood, or denied their individual identities. Giving voice to their experiences, vulnerabilities, dreams, and challenges is essential (Jacobs, 2017; Smith, 2022; Tolliver, 2019). This approach offers vital insights into the realities of Black girls' lives and helps combat the damaging impact of adultification bias and stereotypical portrayals. Ultimately, challenging these misconceptions plays a pivotal role in fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for Black girls. It's about providing them with the same level of care, protection, and nurturing as their peers, creating a space where their voices are heard, and their experiences respected (AMLE, 2021). There is a dark and troubling danger when we do not teach our students to critically analyze colorblind and racist portrayals.

By not noticing race, writers and other creatives do the work of encoding it as taboo. While silence and evasion around race in dystopian science fiction is 'understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture', implying the inevitability of a post-racial future, this silence also has the effect of confusing readers (Thomas, 2019a, p. 53).

The significance of young adult Afrofuturism for Black girls lies in its ability to liberate their imaginations from conventional narratives. It provides them with representations in futuristic realms, enabling exploration of themes like identity, empowerment, and resilience within speculative contexts (Thomas, 2018a, 2019b). Through engagement with Afrofuturist literature, Black girls discover inspiration, empowerment, and a profound connection to their cultural heritage (Holbert et al., 2020; Tarran & Benedito, 2022). Across literature, visual arts, music, and other expressive forms, Afrofuturistic young adult novels such as Kalynn Bayron's *The Poison Heart* (2021), Namina Fornas's *The Gilded Ones* (2020), and Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Warrior* (2017) offer Black girls a space to explore themes of identity, empowerment, and resilience, contributing significantly to a more diverse and inclusive representation of Black culture in speculative genres. The lesson ideas presented in the next section can be utilized to jumpstart lesson planning for Middle Level English/language arts classes.

## **Building Bridges to Tomorrow: Afrofuturism Lesson Ideas in ELA Classes**

Afrofuturism, which includes science fiction, fantasy, and dystopian literature, offers a rich landscape for educators to integrate into their lesson plans. Teachers can use speculative fiction to prompt discussions about the impact of new technologies on society, ethical dilemmas, and the consequences of present actions on future generations. Middle level educators can incorporate activities such as writing assignments, creative projects, and critical analysis of speculative fiction works to enhance students' analytical and imaginative skills. By utilizing Afrofuturism in lesson planning, educators can create an engaging and thought-provoking learning environment that encourages students to explore complex themes and develop a deeper understanding of the world around them. Try delving into these young adult novels to take you into brave new worlds.

### **This Poison Heart (2021)**

*This Poison Heart* by Kalynn Bayron is a captivating young adult novel that follows the story of Briseis, a teenage girl with a natural affinity for plants. As an adoptee, she discovers that her birth mother has left her a house with an apothecary and a garden full of poisonous plants that only she can handle. The novel weaves together elements of Greek mythology, mystery, and family, offering a modern take on classic stories. With its engaging narrative, diverse characters, and themes of self-discovery, *This Poison Heart* provides a refreshing and enchanting reading experience that brings much-needed inclusivity and contemporary flavor to the teen fantasy genre (see Appendix A).

### **The Gilded Ones (2020)**

*The Gilded Ones* by Namina Forma is about a sixteen-year-old teenager, Deka, who has a guiding gift of intuition. Her village has a blood ceremony for girls that determines if they belong in the village; red blood signifies that someone is a member while gold blood represents impurity and unimaginable consequences. When Deka and the village make the discovery of her gold blood, making her an alaki, a woman proposes for her to join an army of girls who share the same unique trait to assist the emperor in saving their empire. Deka makes the decision to leave home, although yearning to be accepted by her home village, and commence training for the emperor's army to defeat other monsters. As the book explores feminism and a sense of belonging, Deka's experiences highlight the importance of not basing one's self-worth on traditional, patriarchal beliefs and how the power of sisterhood provides the internal strength necessary to build self-love (see Appendix B).

### **Akata Warrior (2017)**

The fantasy novel, *Akata Warrior*, by Nnedi Okorafor, follows Sunny Nwazue, a young girl of Nigerian descent with magical abilities, as she navigates the complexities of a hidden world of magic. In this sequel to *Akata Witch*, Sunny, along with her friends, enters the magical realm of Leopard Knocks to undergo training and discovers her role in a secret society known as the Leopard People. As they face various challenges

and adversaries, including a malevolent force threatening both magical and non-magical worlds, the novel explores themes of identity, friendship, and the responsibilities that come with extraordinary powers. *Akata Warrior* is rich in its incorporation of Nigerian mythology, cultural richness, and diverse characters, making it a noteworthy contribution to the Afrofuturism genre (see Appendix C).

## Conclusion

Through powerful storytelling and insightful plots, Afrofuturism becomes a tool for middle school Black girls to challenge and redefine societal norms, nurturing a sense of agency and self-expression. In essence, young adult Afrofuturism stands as a creative and empowering platform for middle school Black girls, fostering the envisioning and shaping of their own futures (Moudileno, 2020). It becomes a celebration of cultural heritage while serving as a vehicle to challenge societal norms (Sunday & Akung, 2022).

Transforming the educational system goes beyond textbooks; it encompasses altering environments, fostering inclusivity, and instilling a continuous, holistic nourishment that transcends the limitations of traditional academic calendars (Edwards et al., 2016). In a world where Black girls are under siege every day, providing a sustenance of the soul that is constant and unwavering becomes an imperative, ensuring they are perpetually fed, nurtured, and fortified to face the challenges and celebrate the triumphs of their unique journeys (Smith, 2022).

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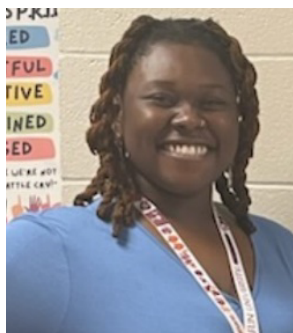
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### About the Authors



Dywanna Smith is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Claflin University. As a scholar-educator, Dywana’s research examines the intersections of race, literacies, and education and equipping teachers with equity pedagogies to successfully teach linguistically and culturally diverse students. She has presented nationally and internationally on these subjects. Her book, *Transformational Sanctuaries in the Middle Level ELA Classroom: Creating Truth Spaces for Black Girls*, is available on Amazon.

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Kiana Eddy is a dedicated middle level educator who seamlessly integrates literacy strategies into her classroom. Kiana’s dynamic teaching style emphasizes critical thinking and active participation, instilling in her students the skills they need to succeed academically and beyond. Her commitment to cultivating a supportive learning environment ensures that every student feels valued.

**Appendix A: *This Poison Heart* (2021)**

<p><b>Author</b></p>	<p>Kalynn Bayron</p>
<p><b>Magical Quotes</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Imagine plants are kind of like people. Tell a person they’re worthless, hurt their feelings everyday—they’d wither, too.” She let her delicate fingers dance over the surface of the counter, then up to her lips. Her eyes were like the centers of Velvet Queen sunflowers, brown and blazing. She held my gaze. “But imagine telling someone they’re beautiful, magnetic, stunning. Every single day. Imagine how they’d flourish” (Bayron, 2020, p. 160).</li> <li>● “Whenever you hear a story about villainous women, you should ask who’s telling the story. Medea’s tale has been told and retold a dozen times, but always by men who seem to revel in her heinous actions without addressing what caused it” (Bayron, 2020, p. 190).</li> <li>● The people we love are never really gone from us,” Mom said. “Try to remember that. I know it’s hard. It feels like the whole world should just stop spinnin’, but it doesn’t. And we’ve gotta find a way to pick up the pieces (Bayron, 2020, p. 2).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Content Lesson</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Types of Conflict (Internal vs. External)</li> <li>● Character Analysis</li> <li>● Genre Study: Folklore; Mythology; Science Fiction</li> <li>● Theme</li> <li>● Motif</li> <li>● Figurative Language</li> <li>● Author’s Perspective</li> <li>● Allusions</li> <li>● Imagery</li> <li>● Tone</li> <li>● Word Choice</li> <li>● Style</li> <li>● Contextual Influences</li> <li>● Citing Textual Evidence</li> <li>● Analyzing theme development</li> <li>● Analyzing how setting and plot impact character development</li> </ul>
<p><b>S.C. 2023 EA Standards</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● ELA.6.OE.1 Read and write for a variety of purposes, including academic and personal, for extended periods of time.</li> <li>● ELA.OE.3 Make inferences to support comprehension.</li> <li>● ELA.6.OE.5 Cite evidence to explain and justify reasoning.</li> <li>● ELA.6.OR.6 Create quality work by adhering to an accepted format.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.1: Evaluate and critique key literary elements that enhance and deepen meaning within and across texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.2: Evaluate and critique the development of themes and central ideas within and across texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.3: Evaluate how an author’s choice of point of view or perspective shapes style and meaning within and across literary texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.4: Evaluate and critique how an author’s perspective and purpose shape style and meaning within and across informational texts.</li> <li>● ELA.R.1: Use critical thinking skills to investigate, evaluate, and synthesize a variety of sources to obtain and refine knowledge.</li> <li>● ELA.C.2: Write informative/expository texts to analyze and explain complex ideas and information</li> </ul>

**Appendix B: *The Gilded Ones* (2020)**

<b>Author</b>	Namina Forna
<b>Magical Quotes</b>	<p>“I will not die in this horrible place. I will not die before I discover the truth about myself. I’ll survive, and I’ll do so long enough to leave this place, long enough to find someone who cherishes me the way Katya’s betrothed does her. All I have to do is be brave for once” (Forna, 2020, p. 150).</p> <p>“Even then, I know it’s real, know that it’s the truth. White Hands told me to trust this voice, trust the power hidden inside of me, and I do [...]” (Forna, 2020, p. 242).</p> <p>“Besides, I’ll always have Britta. The feelings I have for Keita always makes me warm, but Britta’s the one who’s forever there by my side, ready to support me, to push me when I’m being silly, to laugh with me when I need cheer. I’ve learned many things these past few months, and if there’s one thing I know, it’s this: Britta is my dearest friend, and my kinship with her is the foundation I stand on” (Forna, 2020, p. 306).</p>
<b>Content Lesson</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Types of Conflict (Internal vs. External)</li> <li>● Character Analysis</li> <li>● Genre Study: Folklore; Mythology; Science Fiction</li> <li>● Theme</li> <li>● Motif</li> <li>● Figurative Language</li> <li>● Author’s Perspective</li> <li>● Allusions</li> <li>● Imagery</li> <li>● Tone</li> <li>● Word Choice</li> <li>● Style</li> <li>● Contextual Influences</li> <li>● Citing Textual Evidence</li> <li>● Analyzing theme development</li> <li>● Analyzing how setting and plot impact character development</li> </ul>
<b>S.C. 2023 EA Standards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● ELA.OE.3 Make inferences to support comprehension.</li> <li>● ELA.OE.5 Cite evidence to explain and justify reasoning.</li> <li>● ELA.OE.6 Create quality work by adhering to an accepted format.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.1 Evaluate and critique key literary elements that enhance and deepen meaning within and across texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.2 Evaluate and critique the development of themes and central ideas within and across texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.3: Evaluate how an author’s choice of point of view or perspective shapes style and meaning within and across literary texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.4: Evaluate and critique how an author’s perspective and purpose shape style and meaning within and across informational texts.</li> <li>● ELA.R.1: Use critical thinking skills to investigate, evaluate, and synthesize a variety of sources to obtain and refine knowledge.</li> <li>● ELA.C.2: Write informative/expository texts to analyze and explain complex ideas and information.</li> </ul>

**Appendix C: Akata Warrior (2017)**

<p><b>Author</b></p>	<p>Nnedi Okorafor</p>
<p><b>Magical Quotes</b></p>	<p>“A core characteristic of being a Leopard Person is that one of your greater natural ‘flaws’ or your uniqueness is the key to your power” (Okorafor, 2017, p. 3).</p> <p>“Superstitions are like stereotypes in a lot of ways. Not only are they based on fear and ignorance, they are also blended with fact” (Okorafor, 2017, p. 63).</p> <p>“Fear of failure leads to more failure! And you won’t fail this time! You will be able to leave this place, trust me” (Okorafor, 2017, p. 170).</p> <p>“Leopard People read books by everybody and everything. We look outside <i>and</i> inside. But you have to be secure with yourself to do either...” (Okorafor, 2017, p. 313).</p>
<p><b>Content Lesson</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Types of Conflict (Internal vs. External)</li> <li>● Character Analysis</li> <li>● Genre Study: Folklore; African Mythology; Science Fiction</li> <li>● Theme</li> <li>● Motif</li> <li>● Figurative Language</li> <li>● Author’s Perspective</li> <li>● Allusions</li> <li>● Imagery</li> <li>● Tone</li> <li>● Word Choice</li> <li>● Style</li> <li>● Contextual Influences</li> <li>● Citing Textual Evidence</li> <li>● Analyzing theme development</li> <li>● Analyzing how setting and plot impact character development</li> </ul>
<p><b>S.C. 2023 EA Standards</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● ELA.OE.3 Make inferences to support comprehension.</li> <li>● ELA.OE.5 Cite evidence to explain and justify reasoning.</li> <li>● ELA.OE.6 Create quality work by adhering to an accepted format.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.1 Evaluate and critique key literary elements that enhance and deepen meaning within and across texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.2 Evaluate and critique the development of themes and central ideas within and across texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.3: Evaluate how an author’s choice of point of view or perspective shapes style and meaning within and across literary texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.4: Evaluate and critique how an author’s perspective and purpose shape style and meaning within and across informational texts.</li> <li>● ELA.R.1: Use critical thinking skills to investigate, evaluate, and synthesize a variety of sources to obtain and refine knowledge.</li> <li>● ELA.C.2: Write informative/expository texts to analyze and explain complex ideas and information.</li> </ul>

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# Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Adolescents: How To Support Them in Life and Education

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**Abstract:** Research has shown that a socioeconomic divide is occurring and only getting larger in classrooms, and it is especially affecting the young adolescent age group. While there are many different problems that these students must face in their personal and public lives, the education system should be doing all it can to prevent this divide from growing larger with different strategies and prevention tools. This article will promote the use of several classroom management strategies, suggestions, and private organizations that offer help to make classrooms a more welcome place for all students no matter their home life.

**Keywords:** socioeconomic disadvantage, equity, self-esteem, classroom management, relationships

## Introduction

If someone were to grow up attending school anywhere in the United States, they probably would have seen students with a variety of different resources and support from home. The research, however, that is coming out day by day is showing a growing trend in children having less opportunities and resources in the United States. When a child has fewer opportunities compared to others in society, both economically and socially, then we classify that child as being socioeconomically disadvantaged. If someone were to define a socioeconomically disadvantaged or low-income child with economics then their family typically is under the poverty line, which is 19,720 dollars for a single-parent household, or the child may qualify for free lunch because they fall anywhere from 130 to 185 percent below the poverty line (ASPE, 2020, n.p.). Even though this can be a somewhat broad definition for this group of students, they may be left behind in terms of academic achievement and their own personal emotional development. This is particularly concerning for students in middle school, who are experiencing dramatic changes in all areas of development. With that in mind, there is some hope for these adolescents as there is new research and strategies coming out every day that improve their odds of closing the gap with their fellow schoolmates. Despite studies that showcase that socioeconomically disadvantaged children suffer from educational inequality, a lack of self-esteem, and poor outcomes in life, new studies suggest that with proper mentors, encouraging teachers, and parental involvement, these students are more likely to succeed.

## Why is Socioeconomic Disadvantage Important?

I personally chose to research this topic because of three different reasons. One of the major reasons was that I grew up in a low-income school system where, every day, we felt disadvantaged compared to other schools because we didn't have as many opportunities and that took a toll on us. This included fewer AP Classes, less funding for our clubs, and even less opportunities to do sports and participate in band. Another reason that is similar to my first is that because of my time in that same community, I was able to meet friends who were classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged, and I personally saw the impact it had on their school career and the expectations they had for their life. The third reason that I had is that judging from what I have seen my entire life, I know that economic and social inequality is a huge problem within South Carolina, and yet it is a problem that we rarely, if ever, see addressed despite the situation leading to an educational gap between students. So, between the reasons that came from my personal experience and the reason that came from my personal knowledge, I decided to do this topic because it is very important to me personally and will be something that many teachers will come across in the classroom that they need to be informed about.

## Connection to AMLE Position Statement

Ultimately, socioeconomically disadvantaged children are often thrown aside for other issues, but this issue is only growing by the day, and we see it starting to have a large effect as we see the gap growing. So, many say that this issue isn't as important as others, but the truth is that this issue is especially important when we talk about the connection to the AMLE's position statements. In fact, this issue connects to two different aspects of the AMLE's mission, such as the idea that "Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about young adolescents, equitable practices, and educational research" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p.9). Essentially, this issue is important because leaders at middle schools should be practicing everything equitably to make sure everything is being done efficiently without monetary goods being a factor, so the issue of economic and social disadvantage should be important to leaders at middle schools. On the other hand, this issue is also important because the statement also says that every student "must have access to the very best programs and practices a school can offer" (AMLE, 2010, p.1). So, throughout this paper, and as seen in the AMLE's own mission statements, the goal should be for every young adolescent to have access to the same programs and practices to make sure they all have an equal chance of success, and the problem is that we don't see that in modern-day schools.

## The Current Research is Grim

Even though the issue of socioeconomic disadvantage is not covered as well as other topics within the educational field, there is plenty of research that showcases just how important it is and how prevalent the issue is in current society. In fact, it

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was found in a research project by Kids Count, a research organization based in South Carolina, that “for the middle and high school level, over 18% of kids in this state live either at or below the poverty level” (2023, n.p.). So even though the topic may not be as prevalent in the news and the media, the truth is that over 18% of students in the upper levels of school are at any time below or at the poverty level, and this is a significant number of students who may be falling behind in life and in school. To make matters worse, in an additional study done by NCES, it was found that “nationally, 50% of students are at a middle-level or high-level poverty school” (NCES, 2019, p. 110). That means that over 50% of students in the United States are currently getting their education from a school where at least 50% of the students are at or below the poverty line, and that is a huge amount. Despite this topic not being seen as important, most of these students nationally and locally qualify as being socioeconomically disadvantaged, which means it is a much bigger deal and incredibly prevalent in society.

In addition to research that has been done on the prevalence of socioeconomic disadvantage among students, there have been other research projects that show the detrimental effect that this disadvantage has on students. In a research study done by a group of scientists, it was found that “for two students with the same teacher but different economic status that the kid with a low socioeconomic status would have lower confidence” (Foster, Woodhead, Barton, and Clark-Wilson, 2021, p. 515). Essentially, when you put two different students in the classroom who are the same in everything except for socioeconomic status, the child who is socioeconomically disadvantaged would automatically have lower confidence in their schoolwork. This lack of confidence also leads to feelings of deprecation, which was also proven in a study done by the government of Turkey, which concluded that students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged “...frequently identify themselves as inadequate” (Özden and Atasoy, 2020, p. 80). Both feelings combine to create a perfect storm, which makes these students feel like they must work harder and faster to keep up with everyone else in their classes. That is also why, in the same study done by the Turkish government, they found that these same students “tend to take school much more seriously and get upset with disruption” (Atasoy et al, 2020, p. 78). These students are much more dedicated to their schoolwork because they feel like they are automatically not on the same level as their classmates and feel like school is their only way to succeed. With all this research in mind, it is easy to get a clear view of the mental and emotional state of socioeconomically disadvantaged children and why this is an important issue that has to be addressed.

## Demographics

When it comes to describing this group of students, there are a few things that can be said. If you were to look at this from a demographic standpoint, it was found in a study that “boys of color tend to make up a significant portion of this category and tend to suffer the most in comparison to other groups” (Pittman, 2017, p. 1172). Essentially, if we were to break the demographics down of this particular group of students, boys of color not only tend to be a significant portion of

socioeconomically disadvantaged children, but they also tend to suffer from more effects compared to the other members of this subgroup due to the double-edged sword of being both a person of color and also socioeconomically disadvantaged, which tends to lead to inequality within the school system. In fact, in recent years, many programs across the United States have even had to change their systems because “this focus on equity, and in particular on boys and men of color, has significantly increased the demand for guidance on how to help local systems and organizations already serving low-income youth and youth of color sharpen the program components and improve the program practices” (Pittman, 2017, p. 1173). Another thing to acknowledge about this subgroup is that often, these students are socioeconomically disadvantaged because they come from families that were already disadvantaged before they were born, so these students frequently come from families in poverty or from welfare centers like adoption centers or foster homes. With a basis of both what this group comprises of and the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage on these students, it can give you an idea of how it can influence these students’ education.

## The Challenges are Immense

Despite the current research addressing the needs of socioeconomically disadvantaged children, the truth is that this subgroup goes through many unique challenges that other adolescents don’t. For example, children who are disadvantaged tend to struggle with self-confidence, and this ends up affecting the work they put out into the classroom. In a study done in Turkey, it was found that “most of the participants’ self-perception of success is not high. The vast majority of students believe that they could achieve a higher level of success by studying harder” (Atasoy et al, 2020, p.77).

If these students don’t feel like they can succeed and their self-esteem is low enough, then they won’t put their full force into their schoolwork because they already feel like they are set up to fail. Another challenge that many of these adolescents face is a lack of parental involvement compared to other children in their classes. Multiple studies have been done on the level of involvement of parents in their children’s education, and in a study, it was found that “with regard to the effect of SES on parent involvement... We found that, overall, parents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be involved than parents of lower SES at school and in educational expectations” (Park and Holloway, 2013, p. 116).

Due to the financial situation and educational level of these households, many of these students don’t have access to the resources and help they need to get ahead and meet the level they need at school. It isn’t because their parents don’t want to be involved, but they either can’t afford or find the time to be able to. It also hurts because many of these students can’t afford after-school programs that give them extra help. Statistically, this is horrifying when the research showcases that “caregiving quality in ECE was associated with reduced disparities between low- and higher-income disparities in STEM school performance...and STEM achievement...[was] reduced when children from lower-income families experienced more exposure to higher caregiving quality in



ECE” (Bustamante, Bermudez, Ochoa, Belgrave, and Vandell, 2023, p.1440). So, these kids aren’t just falling behind at school, but also after school because of this socioeconomic boundary. All of these issues are challenges that they face without even acknowledging the economic issue, which makes supplies and extra help impossible to afford for those who are low-income. With all of this in mind, it isn’t a shock that it is having a negative effect on their education.

Consequently, many of these challenges have a negative effect on low SES students when it comes to getting an education and learning new material. When it comes to their confidence, if a student doesn’t feel like they can succeed from the very beginning, then they are already setting up a blockade for themselves that they can’t break. So, even though there is no systematic cause in this instance to keep a student from succeeding, they socially and culturally don’t feel adept, and it is damaging their ability to succeed in school. On the other hand, parental involvement is a significant part of a child’s success in school, and if a student is already struggling at school because they aren’t adequately prepared and they come home to an environment where their family also can’t give them a boost, then these disadvantaged children don’t have a chance at closing the gap with the other children. So, these children are facing societal, systematic, and cultural challenges that are putting them at risk when it comes to their education, which can only be fixed by implementing changes that make education more equitable.

### Strategies to Help These Students Succeed

Even though many teachers do implement strategies to try to help their underserved students, the truth is that socioeconomically disadvantaged students need multiple forms of challenge and support to get the help they need. One strategy that teachers need to follow is making sure every single student in their classroom feels supported. Some teachers don’t follow this strategy and instead have focused on specific students, and this needs to stop because whether the child is underserved or not, all students in a classroom should be getting the support they need. So, whether this is making sure to give your students compliments anytime they complete something or building a positive environment where your students know they can trust you. It needs to occur to make sure all your students feel like they can succeed. In terms of financial support, teachers can provide things like pencils, paper, and other school supplies to help bridge that gap because those who are disadvantaged probably don’t have the money for school supplies or can’t afford to replace them.

When it comes to challenges, there is one strategy that every teacher needs to follow, and that is never to expect less from a student just because they struggle with life. So many kids who are socioeconomically disadvantaged get left behind because their teacher or administrator doesn’t believe they need to be pushed because they just need to pass, and that is belittling them. Have high expectations for all students, and if one who is low SES seems smart and like they know the material, see if you can push that student to do harder work so you are giving them the challenges they need to succeed in class and in life.

### Advocates for These Students Can Help

Equally important is the role of the adult advocate because they play a big part in helping these students succeed in life. In this situation, the role of an adult advocate is to not only encourage these students to bridge that gap but also to be there as a representative whenever these students need that extra encouragement. One of the biggest challenges that disadvantaged kids go through is not wanting to acknowledge that they need help when they need it, so an adult advocate could notice when the student is having problems and develop a strategy to either intervene or find a way for the student to overcome it for themselves. The other role of an adult advocate is to be a listening ear when these students are struggling and just want to talk. Often, it is talked about by outside sources how much these students are going through, but rarely do we let the adolescents speak for themselves, so the adult advocate can be that listener for them. It also is a good idea for counselors to be adult advocates in students’ lives because they can put them on the right track or find resources for them to succeed in life. An article was even written which showed that “school counselors can take the lead in preparing students to be college and career ready by implementing interventions that are systematic and address...career exploration, and college planning” (Péruce, DeRonck, and Parzych, 2017, p.1226). This could really help disadvantaged students who don’t get these resources from their parents and families and need that extra push to get on the right path for life. The most important role, however, of an advocate is to make safe zones and safe classrooms where students don’t have to be worried about being picked on because of their economic and social status. When students don’t feel pressure or stress from other students picking on them or attacking them because of a life they didn’t choose, then they are more likely to pay attention and succeed. That is why the role of an adult advocate in this situation is so important: if students feel less stressed and more supported, then they are more likely to succeed when it comes to their academics as well as in life, because they have the support they need to try new things and pursue interests.

### Organizational Resources

Throughout this article, there has been a constant effort to showcase how serious this issue is and how it needs as much help as possible, but there are already some organizations who are doing what they can to help the issue as it stands right now. One of those organizations is Children International, which is an international organization that provides medical, educational, and housing services to children and their families wherever they have a team on the ground. Here in the United States, they provide afterschool programs, scholarships, and monetary donations to help bridge the gap between those with advantages and those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. The only way to reach them is by going to their website, which can be found by searching their name. Another organization that is more known for its resources is Save the Children, which is an international organization that provides aid to children around the world in multiple areas. In terms of the United States, they oversee Head Start and multiple other educational programs to give students from disadvantaged backgrounds a head start in life

before the gap even begins in terms of education. You can contact them on their website or at 1.800.728.3843, where you can talk to a person about donations or receiving help. One more organization I would like to acknowledge is the Children's Defense Fund, which is a United States charitable organization that provides monetary assistance in multiple areas on behalf of children. They help provide scholarships to make schools more equitable and to make sure that students of color and those who are economically disadvantaged get the same opportunities as other students. Just like the other charities, you can find them on their website, or you can contact them at their southern office, where the phone number is 601.321.1966.

## Conclusion

Socioeconomic disadvantage is a large problem in society, but just because it has a large effect on our students' living situations doesn't mean we should allow it to affect their education and their future in life. It may be hard to identify the main problem causing the socioeconomic disadvantage in school because it is very systemic, but at the end of the day, administrators, teachers, advocates, and community members must work together to make sure all kids, no matter their status, are getting the best education they can to succeed in life, no matter what the social and economic cost is. So, at the end of the day, we are making sure that all our students are succeeding not just with their education but with their mental and emotional health to set them on a greater pathway in life.

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## Advocating for Teens in Single-Parent Households

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**Abstract:** This article examines the issue of young adolescents living in a single-parent household. Challenges include reduced income, limited resources, family stress, and less parental involvement. Academic achievement and social-emotional development may be adversely affected. Teachers can help by becoming advocates for these students.

**Keywords:** single parent household, divorce, social-emotional development

### Introduction

It is no secret that adolescents are faced with many challenges every day. One of these challenges may be living in a single-parent household. Single parent households are families that consist of one parent and one or more children. This family structure can be a result of numerous circumstances such as divorce, a parent's death, or a parent leaving. Advocating for adolescents in single-parent households is important to me because it is more common than people think, I had my own experience living in one, and I faced many challenges in and outside of school because of it.

When many people hear that a child's parents are divorcing, they immediately feel bad and assume the child is heartbroken. For seven-year-old me, this was not the case. Hearing my parents were getting a divorce was the best news in the world to me. I know this is shocking to many people, but I was living in a situation that no child should have to. I remember while my mom and biological dad were having awful fights, having to distract or comfort my little sister. My biological dad was very abusive towards me and would take his anger out on me when my mom was not home. I also remember my mom sending me and my sister to go stay with my aunt for a summer while she was in nursing school, because she did not think my biological dad would take care of us. These were all events that happened before their divorce, so finding out the news gave seven-year-old me hope. During and after the divorce, my biological dad blamed me for it, continued to abuse me, often tried bashing my mom to me, and told me to go to court when I was fourteen and tell them I wanted to live with him. When I was at school, these things constantly played through my mind causing me to zone out a lot in class, turn in work late, and overall have poorer grades. This is just my story, but there are millions of other children across the country who are faced with similar circumstances. Each of their situations are unique and they all have their own story they could tell.

### How Prevalent Is This Issue?

When most people think of a family, they typically envision a mom, dad, and a few children. However, this is not what most families look like in the United States today. According to an article from the Boys and Girls Clubs of Mississippi, "the United States leads the world with nearly 10 million single parent households, and 23% of children under the age of 18 living with a single parent" (Dallas, 2021, n.p.). These statistics prove single parent households are very common in the United States and how many children are living in this demographic. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, "In the United States today, nearly 24 million children live in a single-parent family. This total, which has been rising for half a century, covers about one in every three kids across America" (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022, n.p.). This information proves single parent families are increasing in the United States. Therefore, it is important to explore what challenges these families face and how the children are affected.

### How Might This Affect Young Adolescents?

Lots of research has been conducted over the years to investigate how adolescents are affected by living in single parent homes. According to the Journal of Indian Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health, "Children in single-parent families usually don't have the same resources as regular families. Loss of net income, as obtained when married, may lead to increased work time for parent and repeated change in residence" (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023, p.15). Many single parent families must survive on one income from the single parent. It can be expensive to support an adult and one or more children. This results in the parent having to work longer hours or multiple jobs just to survive and provide for their family. Further research states, "Various studies have found reduction in academic performance, motivation, and creativity among those group in single parent households. Children were likelier to dropout, have poorer grades, and get jobs outside of school" (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023, p.15). In many single parent households, the child will get a job or try to provide some type of income to lessen the burden on the parent. Sometimes these children must work long hours or have work schedules that conflict with school. This is likely to result in a child having poor attendance, being tired or falling asleep in class, turning in work late, or seeming distracted in class. It is also likely that these children have low creativity because they do not have the time or money to spend on art supplies, instruments, sports, and other creative outlets.

### What Unique Challenges Do These Young Adolescents Face?

Most single parent families are low-income households because they are only supported by one parent's income. According to social work research, "Compared with two parent households, single mothers with little to no perceived social support from family experienced a 33% increase in the relative risk of a late rent payment" (Martin-West, 2019, p.31).

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This study showed that families of single mothers are much likelier to pay their rent late. Whenever rent is paid late, it allows the owner of the property to make a lawsuit against the tenant or file an eviction notice. That means that the mother and their children constantly fear getting kicked out of their homes or brought to court because they are unable to make rent on time. Teachers cannot expect these students to come to school and be the perfect student. These children are constantly worried about keeping their home and it will likely be present in their minds during class. The student may seem distracted or uninterested in the lesson, but it does not make them a bad student; it is the result of them fighting the obstacles of their personal lives.

### **How Might This Affect Their Academic Achievement?**

Single parents' inability to spend a lot of time with their children can cause them to miss developmental milestones. According to the Journal of Indian Association of Child and Adolescent Mental Health, "Children from divorced homes have less language stimulation, are more likely to have lower grades, are made to repeat a year of school, have lower math and science scores, and more likely to be diagnosed with learning disabilities" (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023, p.15). This information shows how a child's development can be negatively affected by living in a single parent household. Adolescents miss out on having a parent around to help them develop and exercise skills such as reading, writing, socializing, critical thinking, problem solving, or handling emotions. These are all skills that are crucial to a child's development and build on top of each other to help a child succeed. It is even more difficult if the child has an undiagnosed/unnoticed learning disability, because the child is unlikely to receive the proper help they need. These children get left behind and miss out on opportunities because they are unable to get the support they need. Teachers should be on the lookout for students like this, so they can make recommendations and get students help.

### **How Might This Affect Their Social-Emotional Development?**

Experts have also studied how an adolescent's mental health can be affected by living in a single parent household. According to the Journal of Education and Learning, "single-parent adolescents become more visible to them, and the coincidence of these stressed with the problems caused by single-parent status led to more behavior problems in single-parent adolescents" (Zoleykha, Mirmahmoud, & Eskander, 2017, p.242). This research shows that children of single parent households are likelier to experience anxiety, depression, and behavior problems. When a parent is constantly working, it decreases the amount of time they can spend with their children. It is easy for a child to become anxious or depressed from not seeing their parent. Anxiety and depression could also be a result of the student not being able to complete or turn in assignment because their parent was not able to be there to provide materials or support. It could also be caused by the stress that comes with having to work to help provide for the family. Behavioral problems are also common

for these adolescents because they often crave attention, are stressed from their circumstances, or lack repercussions for their actions from a parent. Living in a single parent household can put a lot of stress on the child and cause some mental health problems. It is likely that teachers spend more time with students than their parent can. It would greatly benefit the student if the teacher were to communicate with that student and come up with ways for them to cope with their anxiety or depression. Communicating with the student could also decrease the behavioral problems if the student has someone to talk to, work with, and point them in the right direction.

### **How Can Teachers Challenge and Support These Students?**

Living in a single parent household presents many challenges to parents and children it can be difficult to know exactly what is going on in their lives and what battles they are fighting. However, there are some things someone can do as an advocate for these children and as a teacher. One of the most important things for helping people in this situation is communication. There will be many times when a parent is unable to meet with the teacher or the child is struggling with something. It is important to communicate with parents and students to keep them informed, to have an idea of their situation, and to be able to work together and come up with ways to help. Some helpful ways of doing this would be setting up a remind message system, email, or sending out a newsletter that reminds students and parents of assignments, what they are doing in class, or what is coming up. Another way to support these children is by adjusting lesson and assignments. Students with learning disabilities might need a different approach or strategy to be flexible with assignment due dates because of their work schedules or events of their home life. Teachers could also offer extra credit whether it be an assignment or bringing in classroom materials such as tissues or paper. It would also greatly benefit these students to offer tutoring. The teacher could offer tutoring before or after school or recommend someone that could tutor them. Another major way to advocate for these students is to create an environment where they feel welcome and safe to express themselves. A lot of these students are facing major challenges, and they will likely want to talk with a trusted adult about it. Be there for them and listen, be respectful, be slow to judge, offer some advice, maybe recommend resources such as the guidance counselor, and praise them for their strength and courage. These students do not have it easy, but it does not mean that they are not capable of doing great things.

### **Connections to AMLE's This We Believe**

I believe this topic aligns with two of the successful middle school statements from the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE). First, "the school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p.9) statement aligns with the topic very well because it demonstrates that all students are welcome despite their family background. It is also inclusive which suggests that no student will be left behind no matter what obstacles

they face in and outside of school. This statement suggests being mindful and respectful of all students and creating an

environment they can feel safe in. The second AMLE statement is, "Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p.9). I believe this statement demonstrates how teachers do not only value a student's academics, but who they are as a person. It shows that they want to help and guide students through all their obstacles to create the version a student can be.

## Conclusion

Although single parent households are a result of various circumstances, the most common reason is divorce. Like all divorces, there were likely substantial problems that lead to it. Divorces can get nasty as parents argue about who gets what and who gets custody of the child. It is an ugly process that changes the lives of the entire family forever. Eventually, everything is finalized on paper, but everything else is brand new as everyone tries to find a new balance in their daily lives. According to an article from *Family Relations*, "For new single parents, their appears to be an unstructured period that many interviewees identified; we have labeled it the hazy period. Single parents are short on resources, and maintaining daily routines becomes difficult. At this time, people live in a haze, liberated from old routines but also short on money and time and uncertain of how they will survive as single parents" (Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020, p.1110). These newly restructured families are trying to find a new normal and trying to heal which a very stressful and emotion process. It takes time, healing, communication, and love to stabilize these families after this process, but the progress is not always linear. It is a unique process for parents and children to navigate. A child going through any stage of the divorce process is going to struggle in some way. In school they are likely to have angry or crying outbursts, zone out, not complete work, or not turn in assignments. On the outside, this may give someone the impression the child is a bad students and does not care about school. However, it requires communicating with the student or their parent to find out the reasoning behind their unusual behavior. Teachers must be patient with these students because they are very vulnerable and trying to find solid ground.

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# An Argument for Interdisciplinary Learning in Middle School

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**Abstract:** Interdisciplinary education is a pedagogical approach that is beneficial for adolescent learners. Using this approach, students can integrate knowledge from one subject into another and form a holistic understanding of the real world we live in.

*Keywords:* adolescent brain, interdisciplinary, interlocking learning, humanities, liberal arts

## Introduction

The idea of interdisciplinary education is not a new concept, but it has become increasingly clear that this approach best meets the needs of young adolescents who are experiencing rapid growth and change in their cognitive abilities. They are ready to wrestle with abstract concepts and make connections across content areas. These “adolescents are diverse in many ways” and this pedagogy is one way to help meet their individual needs and to assist their learning (Dore & McMurtrie, 2020, p. 1).

## What is Interdisciplinary Education?

The world is more than just one discipline. Ideas are connected and integrated into one another in the real world, inspiring some teachers to use interdisciplinary pedagogy. Even and Race (2021) describe how they decided to try out an interdisciplinary unit to combine science and history. They provide the student perspective too, saying how many students said that it “made it clearer how their classes connected and made it easier to see how subjects in school relate to the real world” (Even & Race, 2021). Three different tips are provided: 1) Look for moments of curricular overlap, 2) Choose a theme and a shared summative assessment, and 3) Build knowledge and inquiry for each discipline (Even & Race, 2021). The tips provided by Even and Race are useful to understand what interdisciplinary education is and help educators facilitate the process in innovative ways.

## Interlocking Learning

Interdisciplinary learning functions much the same as interlinking learning in education, just under a different name. Interlinking learning focuses on “connectivity, context, and applicability,” which is how interdisciplinary education functions as well (Hendricks, 2023). Those three focuses are helpful in breaking down information. Adolescents are always asking when they may use information in the real world. It is

important to provide the context for the adolescents as they can build connections to their anticipated path in life. Connections to the world will help create adolescents who dive further into learning and assist them in becoming knowledgeable adults. Hendricks also notes that the learning style can be traced to the philosophy of John Dewey as he encouraged more connected learning to build a whole adolescent. This connected learning helps students of all kinds to build on a subject they may be more comfortable in. Creating a classroom focused on interdisciplinary learning “fosters vibrant classroom environments where students can make connections between different subjects” (Hendricks, 2023). Interdisciplinary education is there to build a better student, one with knowledge in multiple areas to boost their skill set.

Assisting them in creating connections with their learning will allow them to retain their information past a test as they will use their information in other subjects. Beane (1995) notes that integrating the curriculum in an interdisciplinary way does not cause shifting lesson plans across the subjects but helps students access the information in innovative ways (p. 616). The pedagogy is not difficult to implement for adolescents and integration can help them, too. Adolescents build their own learning experiences and focus on creating a connection to their current knowledge.

## The Adolescent Brain

Interdisciplinary education is especially important at the middle level. During the initial period of adolescence, the brain grows to 90-95% of the maximum size it will reach, during which unused connections transform into grey matter (“Brain development in pre-teens and teenagers,” 2021). When the brain forms a variety of connections that are used there becomes a myelination of the neural links, strengthening them and allowing an easier recall of those connections. Another key tie-in with adolescence is that it is the period when adolescents are finding themselves, challenging previous ideas, and experiencing a shift in executive function (Robinson, 2017, p. 30). Adolescents are at an age where there is going to be a shift in identity, and they will have challenges associated with their development. This shift is about the idea of mental elasticity for adolescents as they stretch their current knowledge and build more of their identity. Providing information through multiple contexts that the adolescent can access within their mind builds the adolescent to bring their individual experiences to the table throughout their future.

## Humanities

What does interdisciplinary learning look like in the classroom? One key representation in the modern classroom is a stronger push for including humanities for students as it allows them to explore new ideas in innovative ways. Literature courses can provide ways for adolescents to do some deeper thinking when analyzing a text, while something

like a history course can help provide context for someone to understand how society has gotten to where we are today. It is also found to help adolescents get out of their comfort zone and experience a new state of being in areas such as music, art, or theatre. Humanities allow adolescents of diverse backgrounds to come together and build their identity in a more holistic sense. Adolescents can blend the lines of disciplines within humanities to find their connections to life to help their development mentally. Often, humanities work to show adolescents the real world in a new way, but not everyone is in support of humanities.

One argument against focusing on the humanities is that adolescents will spend less time on their topic of interest and are forced to dive into other areas. Adolescents may lose interest due to not finding a passion in a humanity or feel that it is a waste of money depending on the age of the adolescent. There are valid reasons to be against a broader span of learning but there are ways to fix that process to create more of an access for that information that can be reinforced in different areas. Skeptics of interdisciplinary education vie for the topic to be seen as negative due to the lack of concentration one may have on a specific subject due to learning about general education courses on top of their core classes. There is a push for this compartmentalization to help adolescents specialize in an area in which they excel and push down the number of courses for students, so they are not pushed into classes they have no interest in. This idea of compartmentalization can result in an adolescent who is knowledgeable in one area but lacking in many. However, compartmentalization is not a concept beneficial for adolescents. The concept acts against the adolescent mind and how they process their information as they are learning to 'connect the dots' within education regarding how subjects interact.

### **Finding Common Ground**

Szostak (2017) brings to light that there is a widespread misunderstanding of what the nature of interdisciplinary education is. Some identify the pedagogy as being hostile towards the disciplines in that it will create a lack of focus on any singular discipline, or that interdisciplinary scholars view themselves as superior, which is a minority of those invested in the subject (Szostak, 2017). There is also the fact that some adolescents may learn better through a disciplinary focus because it may fit their learning style in a better way. The reason to go against that disciplinary focus is that learning needs to be challenging for adolescents as that is what helps make a well-developed adolescent (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 10). The critics of interdisciplinary education offer valid concerns when dealing with the topic and they mention more points to support their claims.

Focusing on one discipline is good as it can help build strength in certain areas. A disciplinary focus is also important because it can help build foundational skills in areas in which one may need improvement. There is also a need for an understanding of the individual disciplines before there is a shift towards an interdisciplinary learning process. Disciplines also do need researchers who form innovative ideas within the field and

make new discoveries, however, it is not an end-all-be-all. There is importance in listening to the concerns brought by the critics to work in improving interdisciplinary pedagogy because doing so will help in producing a common ground. The ideas proposed by the critics should not be dismissed. Education does need some clear separation of disciplines and not every content will be usable in interdisciplinary teaching, creating a need at times to separate the content. The opposite is also true, there will be ideas that have value in being taught in an interdisciplinary way because the topic can cover a wider amount of content. The critics bring in a focus on the different disciplines, showing the power that having a clear direction in just one path can create because it builds a more focused individual. There is a need for disciplinary learners, but also a growing need for those pursuing an interdisciplinary understanding. Because of the age of information that we are in now, there is a need to understand a little of everything to see how actions and knowledge can be put into context,

### **Liberal Arts Education**

Despite these arguments, it is important to acknowledge that the world is progressing in ways that require young people to stretch themselves across multiple areas and demonstrate proficiency and adaptability through the skills they acquire. For example, English majors often find their degrees being spread into multiple fields of writing: creative, workplace, technical, and more. Other majors have concentrations within them where they home in further on an idea that first needs a basic understanding that each area can pull from, creating that base as an interdisciplinary start. Having a background in areas such as a humanity can provide some deeper thinking skills necessary for something like a law degree, or for building study methods and foundational skills to transfer to a law degree. This idea has brought about a focus on increasing liberal arts education, a topic related in some ways, because it helps create a more holistic-minded adolescent who brings in knowledge from other areas into their learning. Liberal arts education provides a dip into multiple subjects to test the waters of interest, while interdisciplinary learning is diving into several subjects that an individual finds interest in.

### **Collaborating with Colleagues**

One viable way to meet in the middle is to take the process of integrating interdisciplinary education slowly, not jumping straight into going through an interdisciplinary unit while unprepared. Work together with co-teachers if teaching in the classroom or with fellow researchers to get a wider view of a subject of interest. Compare standards to look for concepts that overlap. For example, Social Studies classes studying the Great Charleston Earthquake of 1886 could investigate the cause of earthquakes in Science class, while reading a novel or diary entries about the experience in English class.

Including information from multiple angles helps adolescents to decompartmentalize that information. That means of learning is beneficial for the adolescent mind as they can reach out to other areas and see the holistic nature of learning. This can be difficult at times in public education, but it is viable to introduce. The idea can be done by talking with other teachers about content and homing in on examples that relate to other

content. Interdisciplinary education benefits from the advancements made within the individual disciplines and that needs to be emphasized to those that critique the topic of interdisciplinary education. The world relies on disciplines and needs their success to bring a focus into the interdisciplinary world. Interdisciplinarity builds the bigger picture for adolescents that they can bring into their learning if they pursue a specific discipline. Education needs both those with a clear aim of pursuing a disciplinary path to focus on an individual goal and those open to expanding the horizons with a broader look at information. Both methods help build a better adolescent in different ways, requiring a need for both in the world.

## Conclusion

Education is a growing field of knowledge, and the way content is taught is constantly changing. Teachers believe in different educational philosophers, different literary arguments, and more. Education is not stable, causing a need for interdisciplinary education to arise to help provide adolescents access to knowledge in multiple formats. This will provide adolescents with an opportunity for them to learn content in ways that suit them, be it through different learning styles, modalities, content preferences, or anything else. Education matters most to the student as it is meant for their benefit. Preparing students with interdisciplinary methods can increase their understanding of foundational knowledge. By using that preparation, students will be able to connect their information holistically throughout the disciplines to tie in their existing throughout the world.

AMLE affirms that education for young adolescents must be:

### Responsive

Using the distinctive nature and identities of young adolescents as the foundation upon which all decisions about school are made.

### Challenging

Cultivating high expectations and advancing learning for every member of the school community.

### Empowering

Facilitating environments in which students take responsibility for their own learning and contribute positively to the world around them.

### Equitable

Providing socially just learning opportunities and environments for every student.

### Engaging

Fostering a learning atmosphere that is relevant, participatory, and motivating for all learners.

(Bishop and Harrison, 2021, p. 10)

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# Advocating for Adolescent Sexual Minorities

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**Abstract:** Sexual minority (gay, lesbian, and bisexual) adolescents experience bullying and mental health issues at higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts. It is important that teachers find ways to protect, support, and advocate for these students to prevent them from struggling academically and socially. Through the use of inclusive curricula, gay-straight alliances, and informal mentoring, educators can foster an environment of inclusion and respect for sexual minority students.

*Keywords:* gay, lesbian, LGBTQ, middle school

## Introduction

Millions of adolescents are victims of homophobic bullying, feelings of alienation, and resulting mental health issues every single year. My own adolescent years were rough because of the bullying and alienation I experienced as a result of my sexuality. The ways in which I related to my female classmates completely changed when they started to be “boy crazy,” so to speak, and I realized that I was different. I felt confused and shameful about my feelings, and I felt very alone. My peers could tell that I was different, and they did not take nicely to me at all. I was called homophobic slurs on multiple occasions, and very few of my teachers were outwardly supportive. It was a super complicated and distressing time for me, and I wish I had been better supported by my school. As I grew older, I realized I was not alone.

Sexual minority students are bullied at much higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts. The Trevor Project’s 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health found that 50% of LGBTQ youth aged 13-17 reported considering suicide within the past year, and 18% attempted suicide. Within the entire 13-24 age range, 35% of gay males, 46% of lesbians, and 43% of bisexual people considered suicide (The Trevor Project, 2022, p. 5-6).

In GLSEN's 2021 survey on school climate for LGBTQ students, 76.1% of students reported being verbally harassed and 31.2% reported being physically harassed by their peers specifically because of their sexual orientation, gender expression, or gender (GLSEN, 2022, p. 16). This type of bullying is more likely to occur in schools where students are not educated about sexual minorities in a positive way. Especially in more conservative states, the only impressions of sexual minorities students have may come from their families or churches, which commonly hold prejudices based on

religion. How a school represents and supports sexual minority students sets a precedent for how students should treat them.

Studies on LGBTQ students show that “in-school victimization is both directly and indirectly related to diminished educational outcomes” (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013, p. 54). A hostile learning environment is not just emotionally harmful, but academically harmful as well. Students may feel distracted, unmotivated, or afraid to go to school due to LGBTQ-specific bullying. The GLSEN survey reports that 15.6% of students were “prevented from writing about or doing school projects about LGBTQ+ issues” (GLSEN, 2022, p.18). When students are prevented from sharing their personal experiences and struggles with sexuality and identity, they are left feeling unimportant and excluded. Educational researchers claim “the heteronormativity prevalent in curricula might isolate and further marginalize students” (Batchelor, Ramos, & Neiswander, 2018, p. 32). Addressing heteronormative curricula and expectations is another important aspect of sexual minority advocacy.

Sexual minority adolescents may be ostracized from peer groups and rejected by their loved ones. They are often bullied because they are different and made to feel shameful, perverse or gross. Certain situations students may be put in will be particularly uncomfortable for sexual minorities. GLSEN's 2021 School Climate Survey reports “LGBTQ+ students most commonly avoided school bathrooms, locker rooms, and physical education or gym classes, with approximately 4 in 10 students avoiding each of these spaces because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (45.1%, 42.6%, and 39.4% respectively)” (GLSEN, 2022, p. 15). This demonstrates the importance of creating school environments that are LGBTQ-friendly in design.

## Why Adolescents Need Advocates

Middle school is a critical juncture in the development of sexuality and peer relationships. Amid adolescent development, one develops a sense of sexuality and begins to take interest in romantic relationships for the first time. This is also a period in which peer relationships are extremely important, and students prioritize “fitting in” with their peers and forming identities. This is difficult to navigate for any adolescent, but when an adolescent is a sexual minority, they will encounter an additional set of struggles that are unique to them.

## Inclusivity in Curricula

Teachers can improve school climate through inclusive curricula. Students may never see people like them represented in their day-to-day lives or in their school curriculum. This lack of visibility can make them doubt the validity of their orientations and feel excluded. It also prevents straight students from learning about sexual minorities. Research on the topic stresses the importance of content that feels real and relatable to all students: “when curricular

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content becomes more prescribed, relational and human elements of English teaching can be weakened in favor of assessment and performativity” (Pearce & Cumming-Potvin, 2017, p. 83). Keeping curriculum close to your students in terms of relatability can make a significant difference in their performance, as they will easily engage in something that speaks to them so personally. Because reading and discussing literature often focuses on stories of everyday life, students learn by connecting to these stories personally or empathically.

Teaching with inclusive curricula is an excellent way to foster a culture of empathy and inclusion in the classroom. Doing so helps to engage LGBTQ students and make them feel included in the classroom environment. This may look like teaching LGBTQ liberation movements in history class or teaching with novels with LGBTQ characters in English class. If this is not possible, including novels with LGBTQ characters in a classroom library can be a small but meaningful gesture to show support. Curricula has an immense impact on how students see the world and one another, so it is absolutely vital that this curriculum portrays society’s most vulnerable populations in an accurate, positive way.

### Gay-Straight Alliances

Teachers may have the opportunity to advise a gay-straight alliance (GSA) in their schools. GSAs have been shown to improve school culture surrounding LGBTQ people (GLSEN, 2022, p. 20). Within a GSA, teachers can facilitate discussions, provide students with language to explain their feelings, arrange school pride events, and provide a space for LGBTQ students to make friends and feel a sense of community within their school. The presence of a school GSA makes LGBTQ students feel supported and protected while showing heterosexual students that homophobic bullying will not be tolerated.

### Barriers to Advocacy

Teachers may be afraid to advocate for LGBTQ students for fear of pushback from parents, other teachers, students, or administration. A teacher may be accused of discussing inappropriate topics with students by anyone who does not agree with them. When researchers surveyed GSA advisors among high schools, many expressed a fear of personal and professional consequences for advising the GSA, a lack of LGBTQ education, and a lack of school-based resources (Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, Dever, Greenberg, Roach, & Morillas, 2015, p. 441). Certain states, primarily rural Southern ones, have laws which limit and prohibit the content that teachers can discuss in the classroom. Despite anti-sodomy laws being overturned twenty years ago, laws still exist that force teachers to portray homosexuality as an unacceptable, criminal “lifestyle,” if at all. Laws like Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill and Alabama’s rules on sexual education are passed in the name of ensuring that class content is age appropriate, but they often prevent teachers from discussing LGBTQ topics at all (Rudrick et al., 2018, p. 529).

Protesting these laws and finding ways around them would be a worthwhile endeavor in advocating for LGBT students. The

ability to teach with an LGBT-inclusive curriculum is worth fighting for. Findings from a survey on LGBTQ secondary students report, “youth who had been taught positive representations of LGBT people, history, and events reported less victimization” (Kosciw et al., 2013, p. 47). True activism is never easy, and it can require great feats of courage. This tangible data on the difference LGBTQ advocacy can make on the lives of students may be the motivation that teachers need to exhibit that courage.

### Informal Mentoring Strategies

With their jobs on the line, it only makes sense that some teachers might steer away from inclusive curricula. While it is not always possible to advocate for sexual minority students in a public way, there are smaller ways to support these students. A less formal alternative to advising a GSA is simply acting as a supportive mentor to sexual minority students. Being available and trustworthy to students will draw in those who are in need of support. In pursuing a mentor, students report testing the waters, so-to-speak, with teachers and slowly building trust with continual affirmation of the teacher’s support (Mulcahy, Dalton, Kolbert, & Crothers, 2016, p. 409). Things they often look for are whether a teacher is a part of the LGBTQ community themselves or if they have visual markers in their classroom to signify acceptance, such as “safe zone” stickers (Mulcahy et al., 2016, p. 408). It is so important that teachers mind what they say and do around students, as it sends a message to students about one’s character and whether they are to be trusted. LGBTQ students are already vulnerable, and many have experienced victimization from people in their lives whom they once trusted. Additionally, the sensitivity of the adolescent brain causes adolescents to perceive neutrality as negativity more easily than adults. For these reasons, it is not enough to not be hateful, bigoted, or offensive to students. As a teacher, one must make an active and persistent effort to be supportive, inclusive, and respectful.

### Resources For Sexual Minority Students and Adult Advocates

Countless organizations exist to support and advocate for LGBTQ students. Teachers may be able to help students simply by connecting them to these resources.

- The Trevor Project is an organization with educational information and resources for LGBTQ youth. Visit [thetrevorproject.org](http://thetrevorproject.org).
- GLSEN is a national network of teachers, students, and local chapters working against LGBTQ bullying. It has resources for teachers and students alike. Visit [GLSEN.org](http://GLSEN.org).
- GSA Network provides resources and materials for school GSAs. Visit [gsanetwork.org](http://gsanetwork.org).

### Conclusion

The Association for Middle Level Education’s *This We Believe* states in its characteristics of a successful middle school: “The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all” (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 9). By advocating for sexual minority students, we as educators can help them to feel welcome, affirmed, and included.

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# Adolescents with Eating Disorders Due to Bullying

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**Abstract:** Bullying is a strong predictor of eating disorders. Adolescent girls are more susceptible to developing eating disorders due to social media, developmental changes, and societal pressure for unattainable perfection. Adolescent advocates have an important role in addressing this issue and providing support for students.

*Keywords:* anorexia nervosa, bulimia, binge eating, bullying, social media, anxiety

## Introduction

When adolescents experience bullying in critical personal and mental growth periods, they can tend to develop eating disorders or disordered eating habits. Eating disorders tend to fall under diagnosable categories such as anorexia nervosa, which is the act of restricting ones eating until they do not eat for days at a time resulting in massive weight loss. Binge eating disorder, which is when a person does not eat much at all day, then eats a mass amount of food resulting in becoming sick, or worse. Bulimia nervosa is when a person eats meals regularly but forces themselves to become sick immediately after. Disordered eating tends to not be diagnosable but is teetering on the edge. This is where a person will eat sporadically and not much when they do. Disordered eating is a prevalent issue that is not talked about enough. It can result from bullying and sexual harassment, which has grown significantly due to the rise of social media and streamline texting services. Due to the pervasiveness of social media, middle school aged adolescents are now able to see celebrities and influencers who are the conventional state of pretty and compare themselves to them, resulting in body dysmorphia. Streamline texting services also allows for an easier way for kids to cyberbully their peers. It is important for teachers to notice when students are suffering due to peer-victimization, and best prepare themselves on how to handle these types of situations. Personally, I believe it important because growing up I was a victim of bullying and sexual harassment in middle school developing in an eating disorder. I suffered from binge eating for many years of my life due to this and the rapid rise of social media in my youth. In perfect clarity, I still struggle today to eat correctly, though many of my symptoms of binge eating disorder have passed.

## How Prevalent are Eating Disorders?

Though this topic is important, the rising prevalence of eating disorders has rapidly grown. In one study administered by the National Institute of Mental Health in 2004 showed that

“62.6% of people with binge eating disorder had any impairment and 18.5% of people had severe impairment” (National Institute of Mental Health, 2004, n.p). Binge eating disorders can cause many impairments such as a burned stomach lining, rotted teeth, and a future inability to process food correctly. Furthermore, some eating disorders effect a person much longer than just through adolescence. The same statistic showed that” lifetime prevalence of anorexia nervosa was three times higher among females (0.9%) than males (0.3%). The lifetime prevalence of anorexia nervosa in adults was 0.6% (National Institute of Mental Health, 2004, n.p.). Eating disorders can last long into adulthood, causing severe health issues, and in the worse cases death.

Because of the nature of eating disorders resulting from bullying and sexual harassment, women are more susceptible to develop these habits due to the societal pressure to be ‘perfect’. Women also tend to take these habits from their adolescence into their adulthood because the standard for beauty is everchanging. Men as well have societal pressure to look a certain way as well, this type of standard can also start around middle school because of their changing bodies at a different rate. Men who do not develop as fast as their peers can often be bullied for such, as well as women.

## Predictors of Eating Disorders

Bullying is a strong predictor of eating disorders, but it is not the only predictor. Factors such as parental overprotectiveness, sociocultural pressure, personality, and bodily dissatisfaction can also be predictors (Abebe, Torgensen, Lien, Hafstad, & Von Soest, 2014, p.114). Bullying can cause sociocultural pressure, body dissatisfaction, and personality changes. It is important to understand that because of peer victimization along with parental and self-influences, adolescents are more inclined to try and control some aspect of their life when they do feel so out of control, such as their eating habits.

Anxiety can also play a role in the development of disordered eating. Anxiety tends to be very prevalent within middle school aged adolescents as they think the whole world is watching them, this can also be a justified thought if their body size and personal image is under attack. In one study they found “There is evidence that childhood bullying effectively predicts eating disorder symptoms...This study of middle school students’ peer victimization, anxiety, and eating disorder symptoms found that greater peer victimization was associated with a higher degree of eating disorder symptomatology overall” (Cook-Cottone, Serwack, Guyker, Sodano, Nickerson, Keddie-Olka, & Anderson, 2014, p. 363). Anxiety in an adolescent can heighten their sense of being out of control within themselves, their peer groups, and their lives. Bullying can also elevate their levels of anxiety to an unsafe level. Previously mentioned, girls tend to experience more disordered eating than their male counterparts. Women tend to be bullied more about their bodies and the way they present

themselves. This can also lead to comparison of themselves to others and be detrimental to their mindset. It is common for girls to be emotionally dissatisfied in themselves, leading to bodily dissatisfaction. Verbal bullying can further increase these feelings and the need to carry out disordered eating habits. One study says, “Bullying, emotional symptoms, restrained eating, and body dissatisfaction were all correlated. Emotional symptoms were found to significantly mediate the relationships between verbal bullying with body dissatisfaction in girls but not in boys”(Farrow,& Fox, 2011, p.409).

Furthermore, adolescent girls are more susceptible to the objectification theory which a study states are, “Objectification theory argues that individuals who self-objectify focus their attention on an ideal physical appearance, which they are unable to attain, and which may be linked to negative outcomes such as disordered eating”(Petersen& Hyde, 2013, p.184). Through sexual harassment, objectification theory can come into play. When girls go through the process of being mocked, catcalled, harassed, groped, and more they tend to think of themselves more and more as objects for people to look at. The more this happens, the more they tend to try and achieve society’s ideal body type, which most times is unachievable. This can lead to disordered eating and one or all of the types of eating disorders. Sexual harassment in middle schools is not uncommon, though it may seem that way. Though it progresses through the grade levels, and ages, it still happens quite frequently in schools. This is a time where students are not only becoming aware of their bodies, but also others, opening up the gateway for sexual harassment accompanied by bullying.

### **What Challenges Do These Adolescents Face?**

Though this may already be challenging enough, adolescents who struggle with disordered eating face many more obstacles. They can begin to see themselves as an object and not a person. This can result in them dressing, acting, and looking different to appease others in order to feel worth in themselves. As a way to achieve this, adolescents may restrict their eating, develop disordered eating habits or develop eating disorders in general. These challenges can also lead to adolescents developing low self-esteem, low-body confidence, and struggle with their self-image. These habits are not only personally damaging, but they can be physically damaging in the extreme. Sexual minorities can also face unique challenges as they are under a more specified lens of their peers. Sexual minority students, such as the LGBTQIA+, tend to be scrutinized more heavily because they feel differently than their peers. In these cases, it is important to create safe spaces within the school for not only the, but for everyone feeling this way because of peer victimization. Safe spaces can allow for students to talk to a trusted adult about what they are going through and how they feel about themselves. One study shows, “efforts to support feelings of school safety among SGM students are likely to have positive implications for eating and weight-related behaviors and emphasize the need for interventions to promote climates of safety and inclusion within the school setting”(Lessard, Wang & Watson, 2021,

p.788). These types of disorders can also lead to academic struggles. Having an unbalanced diet or poor nutrition can lead to issues such as dizziness, lightheadedness, trouble focusing, trouble sleeping, drowsiness, nausea, stress, headaches, and fatigue. These symptoms can lead adolescents to not be able to participate or focus on schoolwork as much as they might need to. The lack of participation in academics can also be caused from low self-confidence in themselves.

### **How Can Teachers Help?**

Educators can best equip themselves for these types of situations by educating themselves on the signs of disordered eating or eating disorders. Adolescents tend to exhibit certain behaviors in class due to bullying or eating disorders such as severe low self-confidence, unable to participate or pay attention, a drastic shift in mood or personality, and a drastic change in self-presentation. After noticing these signs teachers are better equipped to become a safe space for these students, by allowing their class to have an open-door policy, not taking a judgmental tone, understanding that adolescents going through this do not need prying eyes, instead accepting ones. It is also important for teachers to talk about correct nutrition, to explain how correct and healthy nutrition fuels the body, further explain how adolescent’s bodies are changing, needing proper nutrition to develop properly. Teachers have also been surveyed about policies being put in place for schools to provide classes on nutrition which include the effects of eating disorders. In this survey they found, “A large majority (75%-94%) supported 8 of the 11 policies, especially actions requiring school-based health curriculum to include content on eating disorder prevention (94%) and addressing weight-bullying through antibullying policies (92%), staff training (89%), and school curriculum (89%)” ( Puhl, Newmark-Sztainer, Bryn Austin, Suh & Wakefield, 2016, p.507).

### **The Role of the Adolescent Advocate**

Adolescent advocates also have an important role as well, in advocating for students with eating disorders and experiencing bullying in school they can push for these policies and classes to be put in place. Advocating can include building trust with students who are suffering and having an open and honest space for them. Through pushing for these policies and safe spaces, students will be able to better express themselves, gain confidence and information necessary for them thrive in their adolescents. This can also lead to more participation in school as they grow more confident and gain better nutrition. Advocating can also look like having resources for students to reach out to if necessary. Some of these resources are the National Eating Disorder helpline, where they can call and speak to someone about their problems, receiving trained and professional help to better navigate their disordered eating. In more extreme cases, the eating recovery center can also be contacted. This organization provides programs and outpatient services to better accommodate and educate adolescents of the effects of disordered eating while giving them the tools to correct their eating habits.

*Every young adolescent “faces significant life choices and needs support in making wise and healthy decisions” (AMLE, 2010).*

## Connections to AMLE’s This We Believe

This topic connects to AMLE’s position statement, *This We Believe*. I agree that every young adolescent “faces significant life choices and needs support in making wise and healthy decisions” (AMLE, 2010). I also agree that the successful middle school is “welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all” and that “every student’s academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate” (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 9). Adolescents at this time are coming into themselves and facing choices they have never had to make before. Adolescents are having to choose who they are, how they dress, who they hang-out with, etc., these choices can be new and intimidation for many students. Once these choices are placed on top of bullying and sexual harassment, many adolescents struggle to make healthy decisions for themselves. This relates to body-image and self-esteem as they may resort to restricted eating habits as a way to cope or control how they look to better fit in. By being able to guide the adolescent to make good and healthy choices for themselves we are able to help steer clear of disordered eating. Informing students of these choices and the influences that cause them will not eradicate bullying and body dysmorphia, however it will aid students to better feel empathy for their peers and equip them with information on how to deal with bullying and unhealthy eating habits.

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