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Creating and Maintaining a Community Literacy Project in Northwest Arkansas

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CREATING AND MAINTAINING A COMMUNITY LITERACY PROJECT IN NORTHWEST ARKANSAS

CREATING AND MAINTAINING A COMMUNITY LITERACY PROJECT IN NORTHWEST
ARKANSAS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English

By

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Middlebury College
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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine both logistical and curricular strategies employed by students and staff working with the “Razorback Writers” project as well as student productions in order to determine which of these strategies lead to the highest level of student participation in literacy-based activities, improvement in reading comprehension and writing abilities, and enjoyment of diverse texts.

This thesis is approved for recommendation
To the Graduate Council.

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Introduction

Walk into any of our after-school sites, and these are some of the images you can expect to see: a pre-service teacher standing in front of students, leading an activity; groups of middle-school students working on projects at tables or on the floor, teachers and students indistinguishable from one another; pre-service teachers on their haunches, sitting on the floor, rolling around in office chairs – assisting students with art and writing; pens, pencils and paper; feathers, sequins and paint; cameras and computers. Welcome to Razorback Writers.

An after-school literacy enrichment program that pairs pre-service teachers with under-served middle school students in Northwest Arkansas, Razorback Writers was created in the summer of 2010 in response to the shifting demographics of our area and the resulting drop in student performance on assessments, including the Arkansas Benchmark Exams. In the past ten years, the population of Washington County has grown by almost 30 percent (“Washington County, Arkansas”), and the population of Benton County swelled from 153,000 in 2000 to 226,000 in 2009 – a 47 percent increase (“Benton County, Arkansas”). Equally remarkable has been the growth of the minority community (comprising Hispanic and Marshallese immigrants), which has grown to 33 percent in the Benton County school district and 39 percent in Washington County schools (“Student Enrollment by County”). As our population has grown and changed, student performance on assessments such as the Arkansas Benchmark Literacy Examinations and the Arkansas Grade 11 Literacy Examination has dropped significantly. In the Springdale school district, for example, 42 percent of the combined population of 11th graders scored basic or below basic on the 2009 Grade 11 Literacy Exam; that number rose to 65 percent at basic or below for the Hispanic population (“Literacy Performance Classes”). School districts across Northwest Arkansas are facing the same question: how can we help this diverse community to gain the literacy skills they will need in order to graduate from high school ready to succeed in whatever step they choose to take next.

As a partnership between middle school students and pre-service teaching professionals, our project also addresses a need in teacher preparation. First, though the number of minority students and English Language Learners in Northwest Arkansas has grown dramatically, the number of minority teachers has remained stagnant at about 96 percent of Anglo origin (Bennett and Fort). For pre-service teachers interested in remaining in Northwest Arkansas, exposure to minority populations and English Language Learners has become an important part of teacher preparation. Second, though the Masters of Arts in Teaching program at the University is experiencing growth in terms of applicants to the program, it still struggles to find students who are interested in working at the middle and junior high school level. By exposing pre-service teachers to this population, we have the opportunity to recruit more students to work with this age level. Finally, education faculty members had expressed concerns about the practicum course that students needed to complete in order to apply for the MAT program. Christian Goering, Assistant Professor in Secondary English Education explains: “the existing [practicum] course left candidates with very little structure in their early observation experiences and [...] pre-service teachers, as they reported, generally needed more experience with literacy strategies and literacy across the curriculum prior to receiving that late in the sequence of courses” (Holland et al. 2-3). Professor Goering goes on to point out that even though students in the University of Arkansas’ MAT program complete more contact hours with students than are required by most comparable programs, that students still enter the profession as “neophytes” (3). By requiring pre-MAT students to complete at least half of their required hours through the Razorback Writers project, we are able to create a more structured experience for students that will also give them hands-on experience with literacy strategies and techniques.

Essentially, my goal for this project is to take a look at how our project developed, what we have done in our first year of operation, and where we can go from here. My research questions are divided into two categories: logistical and curricular. In the first chapter, I focus on the logistics of the project,

beginning with an explanation of the need for this study and the “Razorback Writers” project. I go on to write about the surge of after-school programs and the unique opportunity that these programs provide. I also detail the characteristics of the sites we have and make a judgment of what kinds of sites are the most beneficial. Finally, I consider the relationship between after-school programs and target schools.

In the second chapter, I focus on the curricular underpinnings of Razorback Writers in order to determine what teaching practices work best in the after-school setting. Drawing on case studies of three project sites, I discuss the benefits and challenges of using arts-integration and project-based learning as our guiding approaches for the creation of curriculum. I also consider whether or not arts integration and project-based learning help us to differentiate instruction in order to accommodate our English Language Learners and special education students while also maintaining high expectations for all students. Essentially, I ask how this project can add to what students are learning in school and help students to become more proficient in reading and writing without becoming an extension of the school day. Finally, I reflect on the role that arts integration and project-based learning can play in the training of our pre-service teachers.

In the third chapter, I explore ways that we can strengthen the organization of the project, become more deliberate in our curriculum design, follow through with potential partnerships that will widen the project’s scope and influence, and strengthen the practicum course for our pre-service teachers. Ultimately, I offer ideas for ways that the project can expand and improve in a number of areas: parental involvement, assessment, teacher training, curriculum design, and partnerships. To conclude, I entertain the big picture questions: What is the goal of the project? Why do we need it? Are we doing what we set out to do? My overarching goal is to create a document that will be helpful to others interested in developing similar projects and that can be disseminated to our project and school-based staff as an early assessment of the project in reflection on our first year of service.

Chapter One

As a culture, education reform is one of the major hot-button issues of our time. That the public education system in the United States is in critical condition is both well-known and well-documented. Since the 1983 publication of the report “A Nation at Risk,” waves of school reform have passed through this country. In the 1980’s, it was standardized testing, tougher graduation requirements, and merit pay for teachers. In the 90’s, most states and districts worked to adopt standards and assessment tools; the outgrowth of this movement was Goals 2000, which was set by Congress and based on the principles of outcomes-based education. Most recently, the standards-based reform movement created the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which is still the most influential reform affecting our contemporary public school classrooms. As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, there are salient debates over education reform involving everything from charter schools and vouchers to teacher quality, class size, school funding, and curriculum standards. And Americans are following these trends. In the past 30 years we’ve seen hundreds of cultural productions addressing the failures of the public schools. In the 80’s, Allan Bloom and E.D. Hirsch warned us that American students were not being taught the content that would allow them to become independent thinkers. In the 90’s, Mike Rose and Jonathan Kozol shamed us by writing about the failure of schools to educate our poor and minority students. In the 2000’s, we’re reading books about the public school system with titles like *The Shame of the Nation*, *Dumbing Down Our Kids*, *The Conspiracy of Ignorance: The Failure of American Schools*, and *The Global Achievement Gap*. Our films tell the same story. We’ve watched *Stand and Deliver* and *Dangerous Minds*, *Lean on Me*, and *Dead Poet’s Society*, *Freedom Writers* and *Waiting for Superman*; culturally, we crowd around stories about failing schools and excellent teachers, both fictional and real. We’re dismayed and disapproving of the state of most of our public schools, and those of us who can choose to do so often walk away towards homeschooling, private schools, and charters. Politicians, educators, parents, and students are all talking about education reform, but the only major and widespread

changes we've seen in the past few years have been in the form of additional testing and standardization.

Interestingly, as educators we seem to know a lot about what works in the classroom, about what motivates students and helps them to learn, yet we don't see much of this put into action on the ground. Case in point: Even though I divide my time equally between my position as project director of a writing program based on arts-integration and my status as a graduate student working on a thesis dealing with creative teaching methods, it still took my encountering an article about integrating arts into courses taught to pre-service teachers (Donahue and Stuart) for me to consider asking our pre-service teachers to reflect on their practice in a medium other than text. How can that be? In her article about using theater to help students in a third-grade classroom to digest their reading assignments, Shelby Wolf wonders how it is that the teacher she is working with could be so creative and open to new ideas, yet still reverting to round robin reading (calling on students to read one after the other) as her primary instructional technique (387). Is it that teachers are reliant on outdated materials and texts? Sure. Is it that our teachers are so overworked that they don't have time to read about new strategies, more less implement them? Probably. Is it that teachers don't feel like they have the time to bring in anything outside of what will be on "the test?" In many cases, yes. So, what are we to do? As for during the school day, that's a project for another researcher, another day. In my project I focus on the virtually blank slate of the after-school sector.

As Schwarz and Stolorow write in their article, "Twenty-First Century Learning in Afterschool," the after-school setting has tremendous potential but is often lacking in structure, organization, and pedagogy. In many ways, after-school time shares many of the characteristics of successful small learning communities and offers us much of what would be ideal for during-school hours – small student to teacher ratios; opportunities for long-term projects, real-world learning, and service learning; and space for the arts – yet these projects are often the under-funded and poorly managed step-sisters to

their host institutions. Rife with doubt about its purpose, the after-school sector is slowly working to define its mission(s), and in doing so is gaining more legitimacy as a way to supplement and enrich what students are learning in the classroom.

A quick Google search for professional development opportunities for after-school project staff yields a large number of results: 826 National 101; Expanding Foundations for Learning Beyond School Hours Conference; Reaching At-Promise Students National Conference; Best of Out-of-School Time Conference, to name a few. As after-school programs become more popular, the movement to create a more structured professional organization of programs grows. One way that we can see this happening is through projects such as the Federal Government's 21st Century Community Learning Center program, which supports the creation of after-school programs for children, particularly those who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. The mission of the program is to help students meet national testing standards in core subjects, to expose students to enrichment activities, and to provide literacy services for families ("21st Century Community Learning Centers"). By creating funding opportunities for after-school work, the Federal Government is helping to legitimize the after-school sector as a valuable place to help students by offering supplemental and enriching instruction outside of the regular school day.

Razorback Writers

When the "Razorback Writers" project began, it was designed to take place after school but was not originally conceived of as a project that would work in the physical school building. The original idea, inspired by Dave Eggers' 826 National and Temple University's Tree House Books, was to create a community space for children to come after school for homework help, creative writing instruction, and other literacy activities. Though the project found support from the University of Arkansas and available community space, Northwest Arkansas proved to be a difficult place for a community literacy center because students live far from one another. At one of our sites, students are bused 85 square miles to

get home after school. Also, our area lacks a public transportation system, which means that most students would be unable to make it to a project site after school. In the summer of 2010, a solution was found through partnerships with two schools that had been selected as recipients of the Federal Government's 21st Century Community Center grants. The Brown Chair in English Literacy at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, in collaboration with the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, took on the project with the goal of developing an after-school literacy enrichment program for middle-school English Language Learners (ELL) in Springdale and Rogers, AR at these two middle schools. Because these projects had already received funding for transporting students home after school, providing snacks to participants, and compensating school-based staff for after-school hours, our project had the opportunity to come in to provide a structured curriculum as well as the instructors. The resulting program, Razorback Writers, has been funded by the Walton Family Foundation and holds as its mission both to deliver a program to local middle and junior high students that will help them to improve their literacy skills and grow a love of reading and writing while also providing meaningful, genuine teaching opportunities for pre-service teachers at the University of Arkansas.

We began planning for our two original sites in the summer of 2010 before the first of the programs. In both instances, the level of support from school-based staff was strong. At Oakdale Middle School, Dr. David Jolliffe, the Brown Chair in English Literacy at the University of Arkansas; I, project director, and Iris Shepard, coordinator for the Oakdale project, met with the principal and directors of the after-school project on more than one occasion to discuss our curriculum as well as the logistics of the project and demographics of the student body. In 2010, Oakdale Middle School received a T1 (targeted improvement, year one) rating for students with disabilities, and though Oakdale's English Language Learners had met benchmarks, they had only done so barely. These two groups of students were the focus for Oakdale's after-school program. Luckily for us, though Oakdale's concern about

competencies in these two groups of students, the staff was still very supportive of providing a curriculum based in the arts. Thus, though they want (and need) to see their students' test scores improve, the staff was totally open to any curriculum that we suggested.

At our other 21st Century grant site, J.O. Kelly Middle School, preliminary planning was similar. We met with the Principal, Sara Ford, and members of her staff over the summer. Though J.O. Kelly was in Targeted Improvement year four for its population of students with disabilities ("School Summary"), our planning did not focus on creating services to target this population. Interestingly, though our original intention at this school was to provide curriculum and instructors for the after-school program only, teachers and staff members who sat in on our first meetings asked if there were additional ways that our project could get involved, outside of the after-school program. In the end, during the fall semester of our first year, our program provided the curriculum and staff for the main literacy project, but we also staffed two additional projects. First, the school's library media specialist approached our group about working with her students to prepare for a regional film festival. We were able to provide two tech-savvy undergraduates to help with this project, whose mission was to infuse as much reading and writing into the project as possible. So, for example, our pre-service teachers hoped to work with students to create story boards, write out scripts, create dialogue, and write instructions for complex editing software. In our second project, we worked with the school's gifted and talented teacher to prepare a small group of students for a regional Shakespeare festival. This teacher and her students chose a scene from Macbeth, and three of our pre-service teachers preparing for positions teaching secondary English helped to get these students ready for a fall performance at a local arts center.

Overall, we enjoyed working with these two additional projects, though we would probably choose not to be involved in the same way in future semesters. In this kind of setup, where the lead teacher is creating a project without input from the Razorback Writers staff, projects may be lacking in some of the central tenets of the program. For example, in the film project, the lead teacher was not as

interested in having students write and read, and thus the project did not fit within our mission.

Similarly, though we enjoyed the Shakespeare project and thought that the students put on a solid performance, had it been up to us, we would have added much more reading and writing rather than focusing singularly on drama. In the future, we hope to work with teachers to team teach some of these projects. Most importantly, we need to make sure that our pre-service teachers are participating in projects that support our mission of engaging students in reading and writing.

Outside of our two original sites, we also picked up three additional sites through a partnership with the Fayetteville Boys and Girls Club's School Kids' Connection (SKC) program. Initially, the partnership seemed ideal. The Boys and Girls Club was already staffing SKC programs at two middle schools and also at the local Club. Our idea was that Razorback Writers could come in to these sites to provide instructors and curriculum, as students who were currently participating were not involved in any structured activities after school. At the Boys and Girls Club itself, the project got off to a rough start when the liaison between Razorback Writers and the Boys and Girls Club went on vacation during the first week of the program, which resulted in a poor recruiting strategy. Though we had spoken about ways to get students interested in participating in the project, the staff member who took over on the first day that the project was to run went into a room of students playing basketball and asked who wanted to be involved. Of course, the students were reticent to leave their games, so the only students who were recruited were a few third graders. Because our pre-service teachers are preparing for teaching at the secondary level, working with this age group did not give them the experience they needed, and they had to be reassigned to other projects. In the end, a small group of volunteers did decide to stay on with the project until the end of the semester. Even with a number of other logistical challenges, the group managed to produce two newsletters full of student writing and art that were displayed in the Boys and Girls Club.

Beyond the logistical issues that prevented us from recruiting the correct age group of students, there were a few other problems that kept this site from functioning efficiently. First, students who participated in SKC at the Club were allowed to move freely between sites, which made it difficult for us to keep kids engaged with a constant sense of movement. Though we like to think of our projects as compelling and engaging, we had trouble competing with other activities like rock climbing and swimming. Finally, the biggest issue for us was that there just were not enough middle school students participating at SKC at this site, which was a problem that the Boys and Girls Club staff had noted to us early in the fall.

Our two other sites hosted by the Boys and Girls Club' SKC program were organized very differently. At each of our two additional sites – McNair Middle School and Holt Middle School – the SKC program had hired two undergraduate students from the University to supervise the 10-15 participants at each school. When we arrived, students were mostly used to doing their homework and chatting with the supervisors. Because of this precedent, it was initially difficult to get students to buy in to the activities, as they were content with having “down-time” after school. Fortunately, though, at both sites, children got to know our project staff and became more willing to work with us on reading, writing, and art projects. At Holt Middle School, for example, students are given opportunities to choose texts, writing and art activities which helps to give the students a sense of autonomy and has been an important component in the success of this project.

At both of these sites, after the initial reticence, students have overall been willing, enthusiastic participants in the projects. Even so, we do not plan to continue our projects at either of these sites next semester. First, the cohort of students participating in the project is not an at-risk population. In fact, most of the students who come to SKC come from families that have memberships to the Boys and Girls Club, an expensive privilege that many families cannot afford. Also, working without a strong partnership with the school comes with its own problems. At Holt Middle School, for example, students

sometime have other activities after school such as intramurals or guitar lessons. Because the school is virtually unaware of our presence on campus, they do not work with us on scheduling. On more than one occasion, we have had to wait for an hour or more for students to arrive or have had a very small group due to scheduling issues that would not occur if our project were included in the formal schedule.

At all of our sites, we have found that the key element in success of the program, beyond the curriculum, comes directly from the level of support we receive from the host school. As Eli Goldblatt writes in his book *Because We Live Here: Sponsoring Literacy Beyond the College Curriculum*, working with the schools is one of the most challenging parts of creating and maintaining partnership programs. Goldblatt writes of his own experience,

What I came to realize is that our model for working together as collaborative partners did not match the model school administrators had for working with outside contractors, particularly around art. We saw ourselves as developing plans together with teachers and principals, learning about institutional imperatives and brainstorming the best projects for everyone involved. But school people don't have time for deliberation and experiment (182).

In our experience, planning together with teachers and principals is an imperative part of the process. At our strongest site, we are in constant contact with the principal and after-school project staff about everything from scheduling and funding to research and professional development. Though this school does not offer many directives about the curriculum we teach, the logistics are never problematic, as the school maintains a close relationship with our staff. At our other Learning Center site, though we worked closely during the early planning stages, communication dropped to a lower level as the semesters progressed. At this school, any support we have requested has always been granted, though in the future we feel that we can improve our performance there if we meet with school-based staff more regularly throughout the school year.

In his article, "Learning with excitement: Bridging school and after-school worlds and project-based learning," Gil Noam creates a typology to help after-school programs to identify the level at which they are bridging with schools and how that fits with the program's goals. Essentially, Noam explains

that after-school projects can bridge with schools in three areas: interpersonal, curricular, and systemic (126). Noam goes on to explain that bridging occurs on a spectrum ranging from self-contained, in which programs have little or no collaboration with the school, to unified, which basically extend the school day with little to distinguish the transition. Between these stages are three additional categories: associated, coordinated, and integrated. In the article, Noam does not classify one approach as any stronger as another, remarking only that programs should use the typology to figure out whether or not they are bridging with the schools in a way that is most beneficial to the mission of the project (134).

For Razorback Writers, the level of bridging is different in each of our different sites. At Oakdale Middle School, we are bridging on the interpersonal and systemic levels by corresponding with one another regularly and sharing resources such as transportation, food, and supplies. Oakdale has invited us to participate in their planning meetings, and we have specific information about their grant, resources, and staff. In the fall, our staff conducted a professional development workshop for Oakdale's teachers entitled "After-School Literacy Enrichment: Meeting the Needs of Middle Schoolers and Supporting the On-going Work of the School," which helped to open a dialogue between our staff and the school-based staff. Because of our staff's experience with other similar projects, we were aware of how important it would be for teachers to feel like we were working with them rather than feeling that we were a foreign entity in their school. Though we did not conduct professional development workshops at any of our other sites, we hope to do so in the future.

At J.O. Kelly Middle School, we also bridged on the interpersonal and systemic level, sharing transportation, food, and supply costs and staying in contact. Unlike Oakdale, however, our formal meetings with staff did not continue past the original planning stages in the summer. In the future, because we don't typically have the chance to interact with the principal or staff at J.O. Kelly after school like we do at Oakdale, it may make sense for us to schedule a more formal meeting at least once per semester to discuss the calendar, attendance, and other logistical aspects of the program.

At our three Boys and Girls Club sites, very little interpersonal bridging took place. Though we met with central staff members at the beginning of the fall semester, once we had set up the logistics of the project, we did not meet again. At the two middle schools hosting the School Kids' Connection after-school programs, we have no relationship with the school-based staff (outside of one teacher at one school), and, in fact, we couldn't be sure that the schools even know that the project is taking place. In terms of systemic bridging, the Boys and Girls Club SKC program and Razorback Writers did share the system of the after-school program, if only in that the Boys and Girls Club set up the after-school project and paid two undergraduate staff members to monitor the students while our project came in to deliver the content.

As far as curricular bridging is concerned, neither our 21st Century grant locations nor our Boys and Girls Club school sites are regularly bridging with schools. The exception to this is for two projects that were conducted in the fall of 2010 at J.O. Kelly Middle School. At that time, our project partnered with two groups – one producing a film for a regional festival and one preparing for a Shakespeare festival – both of which were direct extensions of projects that were taking place during the school day but that teachers felt they needed more time to work with. Though these projects were not without flaws (such as the program's lack of control over the project structure), the format worked well and provided an excellent opportunities for students to explore an area that they were covering in school in more depth during the after-school program. If this type of project were to be successful for Razorback Writers, our staff would need to be involved in the development process to assure that the tenets of the project were consonant with the mission of our program.

Overall, the levels of bridging in our sites vary from school to school. Both of our SKC after-school sites are self-contained projects, as we have no direct relationship with the schools. The Boys and Girls Club itself interacts with the project minimally, only asking that the pre-service teachers register at the Club as volunteers before they go out to a site. At the two schools where we work, the school-based

staff are most likely unaware that the Razorback Writers project is present on campus. Our only contact with school staff at either of these sites is with a sixth-grade teacher at Holt Middle School who is also the sponsor for the school's garden club. Though our project has reached out to this teacher, our partnership has proven to be fairly surface level. Since we do not plan to continue these SKC projects in the fall, our staff is not reaching out to work with the school-based staff. As we can see though through some of the logistical challenges of these two sites, it will be important for our project to have direct support from the principals and key educators at our schools in order for sites to be successful.

At Oakdale Middle School and J.O. Kelly Middle School our projects could be classified as associated. Noam describes associated programs as those in which "there is some recognition of the academic experiences of children in schools but insufficient knowledge of school content to link after-school programs to academic pursuits" (130). So, while our programs are connected in the interpersonal and systemic domains, we are not so connected in terms of curriculum. So far, during our first year of operation, we have focused mostly on making sure that we are not working with the same texts that teachers have chosen for their classrooms; because we are not working directly with teachers, we wanted to make sure that we were not covering the same material. However, as the project matures and learns more about each school, it should be a goal of ours to work more closely with our schools. Even if we are not teaching unified lessons that stretch from during-school to after-school hours, information from the school about our students and how they are learning during the day is helpful to us.

At the end of the spring semester, I spoke with the literacy coordinator at Oakdale Middle School, Ms. Arnold, who explained how students work with technology such as Readers' Theater and Successmaker. We talked about how English Language Learners and students with disabilities are taught, which students are receiving supplemental instruction, and which grade levels receive instruction in reading as well as language arts. This kind of information is very helpful to our project, as

the more we understand about where kids are coming from, the better-equipped we are to tailor our program in a way that works best for these students. Noam writes, “After-school programs, because of their informality, allow for in-depth and flexible adult-child relationships, can invite families and community to participate in programming, and have the ability to connect with schools. Thus, they have the potential to function as an essential environment, connecting the multiple worlds of children” (126). Essentially, as an after-school program, our project creates a link between the learning that students do during their school day and how they will continue to learn and process this knowledge when they leave the building. By drawing from instruction that they receive during school, we can ease students through this transition without either replicating the school day or rejecting it.

Chapter Two

When we approached the staff at our chosen sites, we came in with a few basic ideas. First, though we were certain that our project would help students to improve their performance on standardized tests, we were clear with our schools that our focus would not be on traditional test preparation, and they were also clear with us that this was not what they wanted either. Next, we knew that we wanted to get the students reading and writing, but we wanted to integrate our curriculum with arts. Our third caveat was that all of our projects would culminate in some kind of final project to be presented to members of the community beyond our classrooms. Overall, our goal would be to get students excited about reading and writing and to make sure that they were doing a lot of both, but we also knew that we needed to be mindful of students’ needs after school. As Noam writes in “Learning with Excitement,” “After-school time should not be just more school; it should provide children and youth with a different space and experience” (135). Eli Goldblatt explains the difficulty of this task in his writing about one of his own sites: “Curriculum is caught between the needs to produce higher state test results but also foster independent thought” (53). How can we create a space that is different from school where kids can learn skills that will help them to become better test takers but also more

independent thinkers? In the following sections, I will look more closely into our two driving approaches – arts integration and project-based learning – to understand both how our project uses these approaches to accomplish our goals as well as how our expanded understanding of these methods will help us to deepen our relationship with both.

As graduate students with diverse teaching histories, the project was first shaped by the professional experience and graduate work of our staff. After spending five years as an academic counselor for a federally-funded, college-preparatory program for low-income and minority high school students, I came to the project with an awareness of the importance of creating an exciting curriculum that would engage students in the after-school setting. As a result of this as well as my other teaching experience, I was committed to a curriculum that would use the arts as a way to hook students. Also because of my experience with the college-prep program, I understood that one of the components of a successful extra-curricular program would be a final project that would give students a clear sense of where they were going throughout the process and would provide all of us with a concrete record of what we had created. Michelle Bond, site coordinator at J.O. Kelly Middle in the fall and McNair Middle in the spring, was similarly impacted by her experience working with low-income students during the summers. Though Michelle has spent most of her professional life in the classroom as a licensed secondary science teacher, Michelle explained that she felt that she was drawing mostly from her experience with teaching outside of the classroom for her work with Razorback Writers (Bond). Oakdale Middle's coordinator, Iris Shepard, explained that she has been most affected by her dissertation work, which focuses on children's literature and film (Shepard). Iris' work has provided us with the awareness of the "marginalization of children, both in the images of children in texts and in the imagined child who texts are geared towards" (Shepard). Because of this work, we knew that it would be important for us to provide our students with access to texts written, illustrated, and produced by their peers. What we hoped to do was to create a supportive space for children to write, revise, publish, and distribute their

own stories and poems, which was a goal that fit well with both our commitment to arts integration as well as our commitment to the production of a culminating project.

Arts-Integration

We officially began the “Razorback Writers” project in the fall of 2010, though one of the most formative experiences for our program happened before we got started with a workshop that our two site coordinators attended entitled, “Arts with Education.” During this workshop, our staff learned about arts integration, which we understood as an approach to teaching that would allow students to understand and demonstrate their understanding of material through art (“Laying a Foundation”). For Razorback Writers, the arts-integrated curriculum was a natural choice. Arts-integration was appealing to us because it naturally draws on multiple modalities, allowing children to learn visually, aurally, and kinesthetically. Relying on a constructivist approach to teaching, we saw arts integration as a way to create a structure that would allow students to participate actively in the learning process rather than to passively receive information. As an after-school program, we knew that we had little chance of creating a fertile atmosphere for reading and writing if we expected our students to remain in their seats at the end of a long school day. We also knew, though, that as an after-school program, we had the freedom to bring arts into our curriculum in a way that many of the teachers felt that they could not. In “The Case for 21st Century Learning,” Schwarz and Stolow that “in most schools that serve low-income students, hands-on projects are the rare exception and far outside the core strategy for teaching and learning” (89). This is absolutely the case for Razorback Writer’s target populations.

We also learned from classroom teachers in our area that most of them felt they did not have the time to integrate art into their curriculum, and consequently, students were not being exposed to much art during their school day; this was especially the cases for our low-level readers who were failing to meet proficiency on state and national exams and were already being pulled from extra-curricular courses for additional test prep. Wolf explains, “[...] although there is a strong match between current

reading theorists and experts in drama, children who are labeled at risk are often limited to traditional reading instruction with an emphasis on skill and drill. Drama is a frill, an extracurricular activity to be explored only after the basics are mastered” (386). This is a particularly distressing cut for students who struggle with reading and writing, as drama is one of the most fruitful ways for students to explore literacy in an unthreatening environment. Lloyd-Rozansky explains, “Dramatic participation gives students a mechanism to explore different perspectives on an issue” (460). She goes on to point out that “[...] the arts can provide students who have been unsuccessful in traditional educational practices with opportunities to show that they in fact do understand the texts they have read” (460).

Considering that we were aware that our students would be those who were seen as the schools’ lowest level readers, arts integration seemed to be a way that we could engage students who did not think of themselves as readers and writers and whose experiences with literacy may have been overwhelmingly negative. As Casey cautions in “Engaging the Disengaged,” struggling students who don’t perceive themselves as readers and writers “resist structures where reading and writing are necessary” (289). Thus, by providing students with a safe space for engaging with a text beyond the traditional verbal mode, arts-integration reaches out to these students. In their article “Students Create Art,” Schwartz and Pace cite a Minneapolis-based after-school project in which an arts-integration program allowed under-performing students to exceed teacher expectations and find “pathways to success that eluded them in the conventional classroom” (Ingram and Seashore qtd in Schwartz and Pace 52). Essentially, the reason that these arts programs can have these successes is because arts such as drama encourage students to use cooperative learning strategies. Students are given the opportunity to “know, accept, and like each other, feel a sense of belonging and inclusion and get up from their seats and interact with others [...]” (Misiewicz 3); the arts are a major component in the creation of the warm atmosphere that we want for our projects. Overall, this is what we hope our projects will do as well: help students to find success and confidence in their writing and reading.

While my in-depth analysis of three of our projects will detail the specific ways that we were able to integrate arts into our curriculum, there are a few guiding concepts that can be seen in all. First, in all of our projects, we used art to grab students' interests in hopes of getting them excited about the texts. Second, we relied on art as a way to help students understand and digest written texts. Finally, we used visual art in combination with verbal art in order to expand how students could respond to and reflect on what they had read.

As we continue to develop our project and look towards our second year of programming, we hope to engage more deeply in the arts-integrated curriculum by asking coordinators and pre-service teachers to create the kind of balanced lessons as described by Donahue and Stuart in their article for the journal *Teaching and Teacher Education* entitled, "Working towards Balance: Arts Integration in Pre-Service Teacher Education in an Era of Standardization." They write, "Lessons attempting to balance making and analyzing art [...] give equal priority to both goals within the same lesson." They continue, explaining that "[...] balanced lessons ask students to learn how to make art, develop habits of mind, and apply them across more than one discipline" (351). The major pitfall of this approach, they explain, is that balanced curriculum takes longer than standard curriculum. Fortunately, since the after-school arena is less affected by the race to prepare for standardized tests, this is less of an issue for projects like ours.

In addition to adding depth to our curricular approach, we also hope to add other forms of arts integration to the curriculum by taking student to arts performances and bringing artists to the classroom. Though we have begun to do this in one project by inviting local musicians to perform for students, we would like to integrate these additional opportunities into all of our projects. Because of our status as a grant-funded, after-school project, we want to make sure that we are using our additional funds and instructional flexibility in a way that adds to and deepens what students are learning during their school day.

Project-Based Learning

Though we initially referred to this approach as “project-based learning,” we appreciate now that project-based learning (PBL) is actually much more dynamic and multi-faceted than we had originally understood. When we first began Razorback Writers, we knew that it was important to us that all of our work culminate in a final project. We knew from our own teaching and learning experiences that students would be more motivated to read and produce work if they knew that this would culminate in something finite and would have an audience outside of our classroom. We also knew that assessment for these types of projects would be challenging, and thus we wanted to make sure that we would have something physical to show for our efforts at each project.

Overall, we found that leading our students to the creation of a final product was a natural part of the progression of our projects. Be they films, newsletters, literary journals, or dramatic performances, these projects motivate most students to produce their best work, and, in the end, students have been proud to show their projects to their peers, teachers, and families.

Though we have been successful in creating projects that allow students to engage with texts and show their understanding of texts, many of the guiding principles of PBL have been unaddressed. In “Project-Based Learning for the 21st Century: Skills for the Future,” Stephanie Bell describes project-based learning as “a student-driven, teacher-facilitated approach to learning” that asks students to “pursue knowledge by asking questions that have piqued their natural curiosity” (39). Similarly, the Buck Institute for Education explains that PBL asks students to “go through an extended process of inquiry in response to a complex question, problem, or challenge. While allowing for some degree of student ‘voice and choice,’ rigorous projects are carefully planned, managed, and assessed to help students learn key academic content, practice 21st Century Skills (such as collaboration, communication & critical thinking), and create high-quality, authentic products & presentations” (“What is PBL?”). For example, Nichols writes that teams have “replaced the individual as the foundation of effective organizations and

the work is no longer simple, isolated tasks (3). Because PBL emphasizes collaboration, through which knowledge is socially constructed, it is well-suited to prepare students for the challenge of working in teams (Cook 95).

Though we feel that our projects do ask students to make use of 21st Century Skills such as collaboration, communication, and critical thinking, we have yet to delve into asking students to devise their own inquiry questions and take on separate research projects. Logistically, this would be a challenge to some of our sites where students and staff do not have access to technology. In addition, this type of design might be difficult for low-level readers to pursue, considering that the independent reading required could prove to be insurmountable for some. On the other hand, we could consider breaking students into small groups led by our pre-service teachers. One option would be to allow pre-service teachers to come up with a question; students could then decide on a group based on their interests. Alternatively, small groups of pre-service teachers and students could work together to come up with a question. In either case, project-based education and its focus on designing projects around inquiry questions will provide a foundation for our programs as we look to expand beyond the literature and creative writing focus into other disciplines.

Case Studies

I have chosen to highlight three of our projects to illustrate how our goals of arts integration and project-based learning are interpreted and applied at different sites. Each of our five sites has a graduate student site coordinator who develops the curriculum and then guides and supports the volunteers and pre-service teachers who work at each of the various sites. By looking closely at three different curriculum designs, I hope to illustrate the flexibility and adaptability unique to arts integration and project-based learning. I also hope to show how these projects attempt to address the problem of lack of comprehension instruction. McCormick et. al write that their students told them that they “just read and answered questions in their language arts classes” (643). The following projects should serve

as examples of how we can move beyond this kind of didactic structure to get students excited about reading, writing, and thinking.

Site One: Holt Middle School

Our project at Holt Middle School takes place from 3:00-5:00 on Mondays and Wednesdays every week. The students who participate in this project are participants in an after-school program run by a local Boys and Girls Club. Unlike our other projects, these students have not been selected for the project because of need. Rather, these students are a mix of 5th, 6th, and 7th graders whose families are members of the Club and need care for their children after school. Before our project came into the school, students were loosely supervised by two undergraduate employees of the club and were not engaged in any organized activities.

Because our projects are all staffed primarily by university students who are completing a practicum requirement as a pre-requisite to the Masters of Art in Teaching program, it is important that the "Razorback Writers" projects provide all of our pre-service teachers with the 60 service hours that they will need to complete their practicum. Because our site was only able to run for two days per week this semester, we added a weekly planning meeting to the schedule to help students earn their required hours. Interestingly, this weekly meeting has become one of the major strengths of this particular site. Because we meet together every week, I am able to give the pre-service teachers more support outside of project time, which means that they can take a larger leadership role on-site. My role in designing the curriculum this spring was to provide pre-service teachers with a text and some guiding concepts, based mostly on arts-integration and project-based learning, and then to sit in on planning meetings, not as a supervisor, but as a participant. The pre-service teachers then lead the lessons on-site, and I move back into the role of participant-observer. The curriculum that I detail here is a result of our collaborative effort.

In January of 2011, before the start of the spring semester, Razorback Writers hosted two visitors from an after-school literacy project in Philadelphia: Michael Reid and Darcy Luetzow, the Program Director and Executive Director of Tree House Books. Mike and Darcy mentioned the success that they had had during their summer program with the novel *Seedfolks*, which inspired us to take up this novel as the foundational element for our spring project. When I met for the first time with our staff of pre-service teachers, I gave them some ideas for creative projects and ways to get the students reading and writing, but the structure I provided was very loose. The pre-service teachers, over the course of the next few weekly meetings, came up with a final project and the reading, writing, and art that would flesh out the project.

Every day that the project meets, participants begin by completing homework with the help of our staff. This helps the middle-school students with school work, and is supported by parents who want their kids to have completed their assignments before they get home. As students are finishing homework, the group transitions into our project with an activity we refer to as the “fishbowl.” During our meetings, our staff has come up with a number of writing prompts related to *Seedfolks*. I have included a selection of these questions in the following chart:

Fishbowl Questions Related to <i>Seedfolks</i>
What is your favorite kind of weather? Make a list of five characters and relate them to different types of weather. (Ex. icy wind = what kind of person?)
Like Ana, you spend a lot of time looking out of windows. What do you see? (This can be real or made up or both!)
Think about when Ana dug up Kim’s beans and how she felt. Do you have a moment in your life where you felt like that, or can you write a scene where a character feels similarly?
Pick a few songs that relate to important moments in your life, such as when you were born, and explain why each of your choices illustrates that particular moment.
Have you ever thought you understood a situation but later found out it wasn’t what you originally thought? Tell us a real story or make one up.

These prompts are meant to get kids transitioning into thinking about the novel. Logistically, this is a good way to deal with students finishing homework at different times. Also, we make the activity a little

more fun by putting our prompts on paper fish and allowing the students to use a fishing game to “fish” for their prompt. Especially for the middle-school crowd, this kind of activity seems to work well.

After all students have completed their homework and everyone has had a chance to work with a writing activity, we transition the students into reading. Every day we read one short chapter with the group, and our reading strategies vary. Sometimes we have our staff read to model dramatic reading. Sometimes the students want to read round-robin style; if they make the request, we allow them to do so. Overall, the most successful strategy for this group seems to be to break the students into small groups or, if possible, pair them one-to-one with a pre-service teacher to read in pairs. The small groups work well, as students seem the most engaged in this setting and are most willing to admit when they are having difficulties. Because we have the staff to work in small groups, we try to do so frequently.

In the novel, *Seedfolks*, each chapter is written as a portrait of one character. There is a picture of each character on the first page of the chapter, and the chapter develops these different characters’ relationships with a community garden in the neighborhood where they all live. Each of these characters comes from somewhere outside of Cleveland, and many are immigrants. To help students to learn about these characters, we have asked our pre-service teachers to prepare mini-lessons to teach the students about the countries that characters come from. We are also working with the International Culture Team at our University to get international students from these countries to come in and talk to the middle-school students about where they come from. This is particularly exciting for us, as most students in our project have little, if any, exposure to international students.

The art projects that we have developed to accompany our work with *Seedfolks* have been based on our gardening theme. Students sprouted their own lima beans, just like the character “Kim” and researched the conditions needed for beans to grow. They have painted clay pots for narcissus cuttings that they received from one of the pre-service teachers. They are making mosaics, creating self-portraits for the front page of their chapters, and are in charge of taking pictures and documenting all of

their own work. In addition to the hands-on art projects, we also have the benefit of being in a school with a community garden. Because of this, we have also been able to get students out in the garden planting their own flowers and vegetables.

As our final project with this group, we are asking our students to make their own chapters. Each student has four pages to work with, and they may include any variety of writing and art that they have completed over the semester. Razorback Writers will publish these chapters into a book similar to *Seedfolks* that will be distributed to students, their families, and selected sites around the community.

The strengths of this project are numerous. First, the novel that we have chosen is appealing in subject matter to the students, and the short chapters make it easy to read and easy to pick back up, even when students haven't met with us in a few days. In addition, the book has lent itself easily to artistic projects, and the students have enjoyed themselves while creating art and reflecting on reading. Another strength of this project is the way that the semester has been connected thematically with a project at the end without making students and staff feel like they are doing the same thing every day. Again, the structure of the book makes it easy for us to drop in and out of the text. For example, the chapter "Sae Young" is written about a young girl from South Korea. Our students were interested to learn that there were two Koreas, and they had a number of questions about these two countries. Because of their interest, we were able to make a space in our curriculum for a mini-research project about North and South Korea. We introduced this mini-project by putting a satellite picture of the Korea peninsula in front of the kids and asking them to think and write about the image. This activity touched off a fascinating discussion about why South Korea would appear to have so many more lights than North Korea. This is one of the many examples of the way that project-based, student-driven learning fits more easily into the after-school curriculum; when students encounter an idea that is interesting to them, we want to allow them to pursue that idea as independent readers and thinkers. By asking them

to come up with questions that they would like to answer about a particular subject, we also model to students how to find information on their own.

Though we have yet to complete this project with the students, there are already ways we can see that we could improve this kind of project. First, we would like to try giving more responsibility of the project to the middle-schoolers themselves. For example, instead of having our pre-service teachers research the countries for each chapter, giving this task to the students would likely make them more active learners and listeners. Also, in order to achieve genuine integration of arts into our curriculum, we need to design projects with art in the center. Because most of our pre-service teachers at this site came in from the humanities, our activities were designed with verbal arts at the center and visual arts on the periphery. In future projects, we may try flipping this relationship by developing our arts projects first. Finally, if we were to adhere to project-based learning, we would need to give more autonomy to the students to choose their own topics. Though I would hesitate to allow students to each pick a separate topic, one way to compromise might be to present more than one option to students and allow them, as a group, to choose the project that most interests them. In addition, designing the project around a question might help students to keep track of the purpose of their project, though I would argue that the final production of the book did provide that structure successfully for this group of students. Finally, though this project was well-received by our students, we would like to move beyond literature and creative writing based units to help students to see that literacy skills are important for all disciplines.

Site Two: Oakdale Middle School

The “Razorback Writers” project at Oakdale Middle School meets from 4:00-5:10 for three days a week, Tuesday through Thursday. We work with four sections of ten to fifteen students each, with two of our groups comprised of sixth graders, one of seventh graders, and one of eighth graders. We alternate weeks with these groups, meeting with the sixth grade groups one week and the seventh and

eighth grade groups the next week. Unlike the project at Holt Middle School, Oakdale's after-school program works in close communication with school-based staff and targets specific students in need of literacy enrichment. More than 50 percent of the students who participate in our program are English Language Learners, and several other students have special needs ranging from physical disabilities to ADD, ADHD, and other behavioral issues. Similarly to the program at Holt, some of the children who participate in Oakdale's after-school project are from households where parents are working late and have requested after-school services for their students. One of the original schools targeted by our grant, Oakdale was the recipient of a 21st Century Community Learning Center grant from the Federal Government, which provides snacks and transportation for participants as well as staff to coordinate the program and teach other classes.

Oakdale's activities director, Iris Shepard, is a PhD candidate in English working on a dissertation that focuses on children's literature and film. Specifically, she is interested in the marginalization of children when it comes to the production of texts. Because of her work, Iris has been particularly interested in creating a space for children to produce and distribute their own texts. Iris also draws on her experience as an instructor, and most recently as an instructor of international students. Also, as an artist and musician herself, Iris is naturally drawn to a curriculum steeped in the arts. At Oakdale, Iris has created a scaffolding for each week that first asks students to participate in some type of physical activity. She then moves her group on to the reading, which they typically do aloud in a large group. Iris tries to end each week with a creative project and writing activity. For the first term, Iris divided her project into three units. The first unit focused on identity, which she chose because it helped for staff and students to get to learn about one another. For this unit, the students read selections from Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Students created masks and collages and wrote short autobiographical pieces.

An activity that Iris introduced the first week and continued to use throughout the first semester was the creative dramatic technique called “tableau,” which asks students to use their bodies to express still, silent pictures. When making a tableau, the students need to ask one another three important questions: “What will we make?” “What parts do we need?” and “What part will you play?” Of tableaux, Iris explained,

Initially, we asked the students show simple concepts like a bowl of spaghetti and a family pet, but once they grasped the concept of tableau we moved to representations of more abstract ideas such as love, hate, and other emotions. As we moved on to other units, we use tableaux mainly when we are reading. When beginning a book, we ask the students to make predictions about the book using tableau. At several points in the story, we stop reading and use tableaux to make more predictions, to show what’s happening in a scene, or to explore characters and plot in more depth. Tableau helps the students become more engaged in the story instead of simply listening passively. Additionally, tableau speaks to kinesthetic learners and allows low-achieving readers to demonstrate their understanding of a text (Holland, Shepard, and Thomas 13).

After the first unit, Iris continued to approach projects in a way that would allow the group to use art to deepen their understanding of the texts. In October, students read selections from Neil Gaiman’s *The Graveyard Book* and Lois Metzger’s short story collection, *Bites*. The pre-service teachers and volunteers worked with students to write their own scary stories, which they turned into a competition and plan to publish as a collection at the end of the semester. Also on the holiday theme, in the final weeks before the winter break, Iris and her staff worked with students on projects ranging from writing about their favorite holiday memories to using Microsoft Publisher to make Christmas cards for their friends and family.

In the spring, Iris moved on to another project that would take her from January through May. Essentially, her plan is to have students work towards publishing a magazine at the end of the semester to be titled “You, Me, and the World.” As an instructor for the Spring International Language program, Iris has connections with the international community at our University that allow her to invite these students out to her project site. In an interview about her project, Iris explained that her main goal for the spring semester was to “help [students] cultivate a sense of a global community and a sense of self-

worth as well as an “understanding of place,” whether that be Rogers, Arkansas, Mexico, or Kuwait (Shepard). In a paper that she and I presented at the Conference on Applied Learning in Higher Education, Iris wrote:

Many of the students involved in this program are socially isolated; they don't have a lot of opportunities to cultivate a global perspective. On the other hand, several of the participating students are recent immigrants to the United States. In an attempt to both bridge the gap between the students in the program and help all the students develop a deeper sense of their community and the broader global community, we are focusing this term on exploring the history of Northwest Arkansas and developing a broader global perspective (Holland, Shepard, and Thomas 13).

Iris chose to focus specifically on the culture of the surrounding Ozark Mountains, a culture that most of the students didn't even recognize as “culture.” To introduce Ozark culture, Iris invited a local, nationally-acclaimed folk duo called “Still on the Hill” to come to the project and share some of their music with the students. After the performance, which also included some storytelling about characters that these musicians had met in the Ozarks, we asked students to compose their own songs about their local culture and people that they know.

After we led the students through some exploration close to home, we invited other speakers, musicians, and international students to come and talk with our students about their experiences outside of the United States. In February and March, the middle school students at Oakdale met international students from Bolivia, Japan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, and Turkey. In fact, even the principal at Oakdale enjoyed meeting these students and made sure to drop by to visit with the group when the international students were present. During these two months, Iris and the pre-service teachers and volunteers led students in an interview activity. Though we asked students to interview family or neighbors while they were home, we knew that many of the students would not have done this, so we made sure that all students had an opportunity to interview each other, the pre-service teachers, school staff, or the international students. After interviews were completed, students went to the computer lab to type up their work, which could be included in the final magazine.

Reflecting on her work for the spring semester, Iris explained that, even beyond exposing children to different cultures, she hoped to help them understand “that everyone has an interesting story to tell [and] that our job as writers is to find those stories and write them down” (Holland, Shepard, and Thomas 14). For Iris and the Oakdale group, the magazine that they are creating, “You, Me, and the World,” serves as a way to keep students motivated and engaged. Also, this work compliments Iris’ dissertation work and personal interest in giving children the opportunity to create and publish their own texts.

Site Three: J.O. Kelly Middle School

The “Razorback Writers” project at J.O. Kelly takes place three days per week from 3:30 to 5:15. During this time, we work with two rotations of students for about 50 minutes each. The students in this project are [add demographics]. Our site coordinator for this project, Michelle Bond, came to the project with a goal of completing a novel with the students. She learned of the novel, *Taking Sides*, from a friend who was teaching middle school at a local school. Because it is about a young Latino basketball player, Michelle felt that the students would connect with the topic. Also, the book seemed to be an appropriate level for our struggling 6th and 7th grade students. Michelle decided to use the technique of tableau to help students to reflect on their reading in a way that would get them moving. Two of the three days that the project met per week, Michelle worked with students on reading and tableau. For one day per week, I came in and focused on writing with the students, trying to connect thematically to the book, but not writing directly about what the students were reading. For example, when Lincoln, the main character in *Taking Sides* was struggling with some issues of identity, I led students in the writing of “Where I’m From” poems, which asked students to read George Ella Lyon’s poem “Where I’m From” and then use that as a model to write their own poems. I’ve included an example here of a poem written by one of the students:

I’m from Hawaiian music that I hum to.
I’m from the family of eight, three sisters, four brothers, and my mom and dad.

I'm from the cool breeze, which makes the flowers dance.
I'm from the lavender soap that I've used to clean.
I'm from hot sun, beaming on my back.
I'm from cookies and cream, sweet and icy cold.
I'm from salt water, the water I swim in.
I'm from coconut trees, they sway back and forth in the wind.
I'm from sand, the way it comes between my toes soothes me.
I'm from paradise.

At the end of the semester, Michelle and I prepared a video to demonstrate the student tableaux and published a book of student poetry. We had the opportunity to present both of these final projects at J.O. Kelly's literacy night, which was very well attended. Reflecting on the fall semester, both Michelle and I felt proud of the final projects. Even so, we also felt that the project began to lose momentum at the end of the semester. Because student attendance was sporadic, we ended up having to backtrack with the book to catch students up. Also, we were only able to complete a few writing projects, which mean that those who did attend every day began to lose interest. Though Michelle noted that she enjoys projects and is more comfortable organizing her semester around a specific theme, she was hesitant to read a novel again in this kind of situation because she felt that lessons needed to be able to stand on their own (Bond). I felt the same way. In order to keep the students' interest, we need to be able to keep the project moving, even when students are not present every day.

In the spring, because of some issues with scheduling, Michelle moved to another site, and J.O. Kelly was turned over to one of the volunteers from the fall who was interested in continuing his work with the school in the spring. This student, Corey Thomas, came in with an interesting perspective, as he had had a chance to see the project from the perspective of a pre-service teacher and thus was highly aware of what needed to be done to draw these pre-service teachers and volunteers in. During the first semester of the program, Michelle focused mainly on reading from one book and working with the dramatic technique of tableau. Even though the tableau did get students to reflect on their reading while also having the opportunity to get moving, Corey explained that the students quickly became bored with doing this activity every day (Thomas). Michelle and I agreed. For the new term, Corey had

two main goals: to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to be more involved with the planning and instruction of curriculum and to keep students interested while still getting them to think critically about the reading. To address the latter point, Corey began by asking students what they wanted to read. He received a clear response: scary stories. Rather than choosing to tackle an entire book, Corey chose to focus on shorter texts because he wanted to make sure that students were able to read an entire work, he was concerned about the weather's having shortened the schedule and amount of time that the project would be spending with students, and he hoped that reading shorter works would allow the group more time for reflection, discussion, and related activities (Holland, Shepard, and Thomas 10).

Though J.O. Kelly is in year four of targeted improvement for their students with disabilities ("School Summary"), the number of English Language Learners in the after-school program far surpasses the number of students with disabilities who are participating after school. More than 75 percent of the students in J.O. Kelly's Knight Time project are ELL while only 14 percent are students with disabilities; both of these percentages are representative of the demographics of the school as a whole (Courtney). With such a high population of English Language Learners, the briefer readings in small groups help to keep students from feeling overwhelmed or uncomfortable. For this particular group of students, we've found it important that every student be given the opportunity to read aloud. This helps us to build trust among the students and leads to more interesting discussion and reflection. Instead of reading round-robin in a large group, we break students into smaller groups that are led by volunteers, which helps to make students feel more comfortable and keeps them focused.

So far this spring students have read poetry, including "Masque of the Red Death" by Edgar Allan Poe and short stories such as "The Most Dangerous Game." Corey is also working to bring in art whenever possible, as it provides a way for students who are struggling to learn English to express themselves. After reading "Masque of the Red Death," Corey asked each student designed and created a mask. While reading "The Most Dangerous Game," the group had an island-drawing competition, the

idea of which was to get students to visualize the setting and details of the story. One of the most interesting projects that has resulted from Corey's project this spring has been his idea to partner with an archery instructor who was already on-site working with another group of students in the after-school program. During one afternoon session, Corey brought his group into the cafeteria and divided them in half, with one half on stage learning about archery and the other half in the audience watching those students and reading selections from the story. The groups then switched places to allow both to participate in each activity. Corey's idea was to allow students to simulate the "hunt," which is central to the story, in a safe and controlled environment. With half of the group learning archery while the other half read, an excellent backdrop was also set for the group working with the readings in the audience.

In the fall, logistics led us to separate the project in a way that had the group reading two days a week and writing one day a week. Because we had two different coordinators on-site, we tried to split the project in a way that would make the reading and writing independent of one another.

Unfortunately, not only did this keep us from being able to produce a cohesive final product for the fall, but it was also confusing for the students and kept us from using the writing to complement the reading and vice versa. Corey picked up on this problem right away and focused on integrating the two components in a way that allowed students to respond to what they were reading. Corey explained that he felt this was good preparation for exams that test the students' reading comprehension (Thomas), and I concur.

The other major change that Corey implemented in the spring was to bring the pre-service teachers in to the creation and implementation of the project. In the fall, Michelle and I chose our own texts and writing assignments and led the group. For both of us, the only expectation that we had for the pre-service teachers was that they help with small group work and classroom management. Corey, on the other hand, has asked each of his pre-service teachers first to develop an activity and, later, to develop a short unit. By involving them more directly in the planning, Corey is able to provide a model of

arts-integration that the pre-service teachers can begin implementing right away, which we hope will encourage them to bring this technique into their own future classrooms.

Pre-service Teachers

Razorback Writers is a program steeped in the arts and driven by a constructivist paradigm that champions project-based, collaborative learning. As such, our project provides opportunities for both our middle school students and our pre-service teachers that the traditional classroom and classroom observation experiences do not. First, by providing an arts-integrated approach to literacy instruction, we not only help our middle-schoolers to become better readers and writers but also help them to come to love reading and writing by showing them the powerful relevance of literacy to their lives. In addition, by setting goals beyond proficiency and being creative in our design, we model a teaching approach to which most of our pre-service teachers would not typically be exposed.

For Razorback Writers, the arts-integrated, project-based curriculum creates opportunities for pre-service teachers to observe and practice creative methods of instruction that they may not have the opportunity to experience or practice during their observations. For example, as we began our projects in September, both of our site coordinators decided to use tableau as a central piece of the curriculum, though the two projects used the technique in different ways. At J.O. Kelly Middle School, our coordinator, Michelle Bond, chose to give her students the opportunity to read one book, Gary Soto's *Taking Sides*. As the group read, Michelle and the pre-service teachers first used tableau to check for comprehension. For example, when they began the book, students were asked to use their bodies to depict one aspect of the main character's personality. At the end of the first chapter, students were divided into groups and given one sentence from the text, which they were to use their bodies to illustrate. At the end of the semester, Michelle worked with the pre-service teachers as well as the middle school students to create a video of tableaux that the group was able to present to parents at a literacy night sponsored by the school.

In our other site at Oakdale Middle School, our activities director, Iris Shepard, integrated tableaux into her instruction throughout the semester. Initially, students practiced solo tableaux. Moving around the room in a large, slow circle, the students would freeze when Iris called out a certain word or phrase and then use their bodies to express the emotion they felt. For example, when Iris said, “On the count of three I want you to show me how you’d feel if you woke up one morning and heard that school was canceled!” all the students threw their hands up in the air, smiling. Students in Iris’ group also used tableau to show their predictions about selections from books like Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and Neil Gaiman’s *The Graveyard Book* when they’d only seen the covers. In anticipation of a unit on scary stories, Iris asked students to use tableau to illustrate qualities that make stories scary. Nearing the holidays, students used tableau as a pre-writing exercise by using their bodies to illustrate a specific holiday memory and then writing about that memory. In addition, the students used tableaux to explore charged topics such as being popular or unpopular at school and being rich or poor.

In both situations, the work with tableau provided a number of opportunities for students and pre-service teachers. Students were able to construct and demonstrate their understanding of text through creative movement that allowed them to work with their peers and move their bodies. For English Language Learners, which make up a large percentage of the participants at all of our sites, the opportunity to create knowledge through a kinesthetic experience allowed them to come to a deeper understanding of the text. In addition, all of the students tended to feel more confident about written work that followed these activities. The pre-service teachers, on the other hand, were able to interact with students by joining their groups and creating their own tableaux. Most importantly, pre-service teachers were able to see one specific technique of the arts-integration approach in action. Considering the stress that most classroom teachers feel in the face of high-stakes testing, we find it particularly

important that our pre-service teachers see the arts being used to facilitate student learning and the demonstration of that learning without the typical reliance on standard methods of assessment.

One of the greatest benefits of the Razorback Writers program for our pre-service teachers is that those in our project come away with a more realistic understanding of themselves as teachers. In order to even be eligible to apply to the Master of Arts in Teaching program at our institution, students must complete the practicum in secondary education, which was designed to provide field experiences for applicants. Since its inception, this course has held as its only requirement the completion of 60 hours of “experience” with children and a brief reflective essay on this experience. In the past, students have been able to count everything from substitute teaching and observation to babysitting and camp counseling. The problem with this was that many students were still coming into the MAT program without any genuine teaching experience in which they were in charge of teaching a group of students. The Razorback Writers project meets the need of this practicum in a number of ways. First, the project has been designed and staff have been trained to create meaningful, genuine teaching opportunities for pre-service teachers. They are asked to play a role in designing curriculum, and each pre-service teacher is called on to deliver content to participants at various times during the semester. This structure is particularly accommodating, as it provides a low-stress atmosphere for trying out new teaching skills and strategies. Rather than go into the MAT application process with only passive experiences, students who participate in Razorback Writers have active, first-hand experience with teaching and managing students in a classroom setting.

In addition to offering meaningful opportunities to teach and get to know students, the Razorback Writers project also hopes to give pre-service teachers the opportunity to think more deeply about their experiences in the classroom. In the fall, every pre-service teacher who participated in the project was asked to complete one short reading assignment and then participate in an online discussion about the topic. For this purpose I created a blog: <http://writersinthemiddle.wordpress.com/>.

For example, in November, my post read,

For next week, 11/8-11/12, please take a look at “Low-Achieving Readers, High Expectations: Image Theatre Encourages Critical Literacy.” You can find this article on our Blackboard account; it’s also accessible via EBSCO. Interestingly, nearly all of our projects have evolved to include some kind of dramatic, theatre-related element. After reading the article, please comment on how your project is currently working to encourage critical literacy and what new ideas you may have for incorporating some of the techniques detailed in the article into your own projects (Holland).

And this response, written by Lisa Stewart on November 8, 2010, illustrates the kind of response that I had hoped to receive –

We are trying to get our kids to look at characters in their play and get them to see how each character might react differently to the same situation. In developing characters we tried to get them to write a back story of the character and to use that to determine what behavior the character might exhibit when put into a situation. This article gave me some ideas on how to get the kids that are still reluctant to participate involved. For example I think I might find an article about video games and censorship to get these kids involved since they are very interested in video gaming. Maybe I can include some questions to get them focused on looking at things in an unbiased way (Stewart).

Unfortunately, because the reading and writing were not required, most students did not complete the reading or participate in the discussions. To this particular post, only four students, of the 30 participants, responded.

In the future, I would hope that students would be required to complete the readings and participate in the discussions, as this is a great way to show students that these conversations are happening in the educational community at large. For example, some of the other readings that I chose for the semester addressed topics such as teaching English Language Learners; working with students with disabilities; delivering content in the after-school setting; understanding adolescent development; etc. In addition to completing these readings, students are also asked to participate in an electronic discussion that integrates both what they have read and what they have experienced in their projects. My intent in creating these opportunities for reading and discussion was not only to help students to write more reflective “reflective papers” at the end of the semester but also to prepare them for their interviews for the MAT program, which require them to explain their teaching philosophies and place

themselves within the academic discussions happening in their field. By exposing our pre-service teachers to books, journals, and topics that they may not have been familiar with, we give them a better chance to understand their developing pedagogies; if fewer teachers felt like they were fighting a battle alone in their classrooms and instead were connected to the national discussions on issues, maybe our teacher attrition rates would not be so high. In sum, if we allow pre-service teachers to enter teacher preparatory programs and the teaching profession without giving them experiences to help to prevent passive teaching methods and narrow views on what constitutes education, we would be replicating the very situation we all know needs to be repaired.

Chapter Three

As we near the end of our first year, we are beginning to understand the breadth and depth of our project's potential impact, particularly for our middle school students, pre-service teachers, and even our target schools. Nearly all of the school students who are working with our project have been targeted because they are failing to demonstrate proficiency on standardized tests. Most of these students have Academic Improvement Plans. More than half are special education students. A large number are English Language Learners. Essentially, the students who participate in our project are their schools' non-readers. When asked, most will tell you that they don't like to read or write. However, students at this age, as we know, are extremely impressionable. They thrive on the attention that our low student to teacher ratio can offer them, and because they pine for connections with our staff, they are sometimes more willing to reach beyond their comfort zones and participate in ways that they might not during the school day. We see them do it with great frequency. Destiny, a seventh grader who missed a lot of school, was reticent to write a poem until one of our pre-MAT students came over to her computer to help her compose (and, inevitably, chat about their mutual admiration for Taylor Lautner). The two worked together for a number of sessions until Destiny was finished with her poem. A sixth grader named Allen sat on the floor with one of our teachers, learning phonetics so that he could write

out the first line for his short story. When Larry, a physically-handicapped eighth grader, was unable to position himself for a tableau, one of his classmates, Shane, stepped up and put his right arm where Larry had wanted to put his own. For all of these students, regardless of where their apprehension about English originated, the freedom to use art to learn how to read and respond to a text allows them to approach literacy-based activities with a level of confidence that struggling readers typically do not bring to text-based work. Several of the participating students have mentioned how different and exciting our after-school project is compared to their normal school day. One student remarked, "I hate school, but I really like this after-school program."

One of the unexpected outcomes of housing our projects in the schools, rather than working from one central location, is that the school community can see what we're doing. During the first week of our program at one site, three teachers unaffiliated with our project approached us to inquire about ways that their students could work with Razorback Writers. At another, a gifted and talented teacher, whose classroom was near where we were working, heard us reading aloud with our students and liked the book we were reading so much that she decided to teach it herself. In yet another instance, a school librarian and literacy coach requested a list of the books we were reading. She said that her students were so interested in reading them that she wanted to order more copies for the school library. At another site the teacher whose classroom we were working in asked for copies of some of the activities so that she could try them with her students. In a way, this benefit is extremely exciting for us because it illustrates what we already know about most teachers – that we want our students to be excited about learning and that we are open to trying new methods; we just need the exposure.

Looking Ahead and Moving Forward

As we move into the second year of the program, I hope to focus on five major goals: (1) to define the mission of the project and expand project services to support this mission; (2) to continue working with our staff to develop and implement research-supported curriculum that works in the after-

school setting; (3) to explore community partnerships and opportunities for collaboration with other institutions and organizations; and (4) to redesign our practicum as a more rigorous, reflective course. Overall, we hope to continue to provide students with enriching, exciting literacy instruction and pre-service teachers with genuine opportunities to observe and practice creative teaching.

One: Define the Mission

First, as more schools and other organizations begin to hear of our program and approach us about partnerships, it has become important for us to define exactly what it is that we do. In the spring, when the principal of a local junior high approached us about leading test prep workshops during his school's sustained reading time, we originally considered the request but ultimately decided that the setup of the project did not allow us to fulfill our mission. By considering how we could meet the needs of the district while also remembering our commitment to arts integration, we were able to redesign the project in a way that would work for both the school and Razorback Writers.

One of the programming goals that we have for next year is to focus more on inviting parents to participate in our projects. J.O. Kelly's 21st Century grant coordinator, Rachel Courtney, expressed interest in inviting parents to school for parents' night and in asking parents to come to the afterschool program to work with students and share their skills. Oakdale Middle School's coordinator suggested having an alumni dinner that parents and students could attend. She also suggested having a kick-off event at the beginning of the school year, inviting parents to open houses once a month, and sending out newsletters to keep parents up-to-date on what was going on during after-school time. In their article, "Community-Building in a Diverse Setting," Rule and Kyle discuss ideas for parent involvement at an urban magnet school. Some of the suggestions that they give that would also work for our project include parents visiting the project to talk about and maybe demonstrate job skills, sending out weekly newsletters with interactive activities, inviting parents and other siblings to participate in cultural

celebrations, and designing activities that students can bring home and work with alongside their parents (Rule and Kyle 291).

Two: Develop Successful Curriculum

Our second main goal for the project is to continue working with our staff to develop and implement research-supported curriculum that can succeed in the after-school setting. In order to do this successfully, we first need to prioritize making time for creating our projects together. Rather than each site coordinator working on his or her own to design projects, we need to make sure that staff are working together and sharing ideas and materials as much as possible. For example, this spring, two sites worked with students on the same novel, yet we did not share materials. Also, over the course of the year, all four of the coordinators realized that creating a weekly structure for the lessons helped students and teachers to know what was coming next, yet we all came to this conclusion on our own, independent from one another. In the future, we hope that we can share our planning and experiences with one another so that we can learn from all of the projects' challenges and successes.

One artifact that our teaching team should create is a template for lesson planning that includes guidelines for how to structure units in a way that fits with our program's mission. In *Reflective Teaching, Reflective Learning*, McCann et. al quote a study by Csikzentmihalyi and Larson who report that "classic academic subjects such as [...] English showed the lowest levels of intrinsic motivation" and that "Classes that provide more concrete goals and require more intellectual skills" are better because they aren't "entirely cognitive" (85). By creating a template for curricular design, we can help to assure that our staff and pre-service teachers are not creating lessons that are entirely reliant on cognitive skills. Using part of a lesson taught by Michelle Bond at McNair Middle School this spring, I have created an example of the kind of template that would be useful to our project:

Lesson Title: *You in the Present*

Goal: *Students will create a piece of art that will also serve as pre-writing for a paragraph about themselves to be included in the publication.*

Time Needed: 30 minutes		
Materials Needed: colored paper, writing utensils		
Step One: Students will create their self-portraits using only colored paper, no words.		
Individual	Small Group	Large Group
Students will begin the activity working alone.		
Auditory	Kinesthetic	Visual
Students will listen to directions.	Students will use their hands to build a visual representation of themselves with colored paper.	Students will create a visual art piece that will help them to begin writing their autobiographical paragraphs.
Reading	Writing	Art
		Students will create a piece of art.

This kind of template would help our staff and the pre-service teachers to develop lessons that draw from multiple intelligences and do not rely solely on verbal skills. Also, by developing templates and using these templates, we make it easier for others to come after us and share lessons rather than constantly needing to start from scratch.

In addition to making sure that we are creating lessons that are drawing on students' multiple intelligences, we also want to make more of an effort to connect with students through content as well. Considering that students do not encounter much autonomy during the school day, we hope to give students in our program more choice. In "Low Achieving Readers, High Expectations," Lloyd-Rozansky writes that, in school, students often encounter "texts and tasks [...] based on a reductionist model of reading, thereby focusing on skills to the exclusion of critical thought or connections to the students' lives" (459). Lloyd-Rozansky goes on to point out that students often feel that they don't have the opportunity to read "real books" and are not very interested in the materials in their textbooks (459). In the future, we hope to do two things in response to these sentiments: first, bring in "real books" for

students to read, and second, make an effort to choose texts that will impact students. In *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth*, Morrell suggests drawing on popular youth culture to bridge in-school academics with out-of-school literacy practices. In his book, Morrell uses case studies of students engaging in projects relevant to their community to show how students respond to material that has some direct impact on their lives. Like Freire, we hope to engage our students in the process of “conscientization,” which is defined as “a process that invites learners to engage the world and others critically” (McLaren qtd in Lason-Billings 162). At Oakdale this spring, Iris did engage her students in a project entitled “You, Me, and the World,” which first asked students to consider their own cultures and the culture of their town and their school before moving outwards to talk about international cultures. By doing this, Iris allowed students to draw on what they knew and to have the opportunity to see the value and relevance of what they were doing. In this way, we also help to challenge the teacher=expert framework that students are accustomed to by creating a space for students to value and make use of their own knowledge. This is something that we hope all of our projects will do.

Tribal peoples and basketball. Rachel Carson and cyber-spiders. Douglas MacArthur, wolves, and *Wuthering Heights*. Glancing into a popular workbook used to prepare our 8th graders for benchmark exams, one can get a good idea of what these tests are asking students to do: read a passage; answer questions; repeat (Jackson). Is it any wonder that these students, especially those who are struggling with reading, would be reticent to complete these exercises? What is the payoff for their reading – another set of questions? The passages are fairly interesting, and the skills that these exams attempt to measure are important; our students must know how to read, to understand what they’ve read, and to respond thoughtfully. However, there must be a better way than asking our energetic middle schoolers to sit down and fill in the blanks. We hope that, in as many ways as possible, the “Razorback Writers” project addresses this dilemma by changing students’ perceptions of themselves and, in turn, helping students become motivated to become better readers, writers, and thinkers.

In order to determine whether or not our project is successful, we know that it will be important for us to develop a system for assessing our students and pre-service teachers. Though we do expect to see a marked improvement in literacy scores for students participating in Razorback Writers, we are most interested in having our students demonstrate their learning through their work. Because our programs culminate in final projects, student growth and improvement can be evaluated on an individual basis. This spring, we have begun to ask students to compile a portfolio of their work which they will present to an audience of their peers, teachers, parents, and members of the community. Some of the projects that students have already completed include the writing and production of a short film, the publication of books of poetry and art, the performance of a scene from “Macbeth” at a regional arts festival, as well as two public presentations of work. It is through these performances, productions, and publications that we hope to monitor student growth.

In addition to these project-based assessments, we also plan to monitor changes in students’ perceptions of themselves as readers and writers by interviewing students when they begin the project and then talking with them again at the end of the year. We anticipate that these interviews will show a positive change in students’ relationships with literacy. In order to make sure that we are seeing causal relationships rather than correlative relationships, we also plan to interview a control group of students at each of our sites who are not participants in our projects. Finally, in the future, we do plan to look at test scores including the Benchmarks. Ms. Courtney, the grant coordinator at J.O. Kelly has also suggested that we consider looking at STAR and MAP tests, which correlate with the Benchmark exams. These tests would give us the opportunity to see student scores over the year, as the tests are typically given three times during the school year, and results are available as soon as a student completes a test (Courtney). Again, though we are not teaching a test-prep curriculum, we do anticipate that we will see growth on these tests as students become more comfortable and confident readers and writers.

Three: Explore Partnerships

Our third goal for the project is to explore community partnerships and opportunities for collaboration with other institutions and organizations. In his book, *Because We Live Here*, about Temple University's writing program, Eli Goldblatt writes, : "[...] a framework for literacy sponsorship that includes multiple partnerships within a region will serve most postsecondary schools better than a traditional view of writing contained by campus boundaries" (194). Goldblatt explains how Universities should develop a "foreign policy [...] that will complement the domestic policy WAC represents" (2). Though Razorback Writers is not directly funded by the University (they do provide some cost-share), the project is housed on the University campus and is often seen as outreach from the English department. As such, the project carries the responsibility of representing the University off-campus.

In addition to our existing partnerships with the English department and Curriculum and Instruction department, we are also interested in other partnerships on campus. From the University's federal TRIO programs, to the Quality Writing Center and the Writers in the Schools project, we have a number of untapped resources that will help to grow our project. Next year, we are also looking forward to working to staff and students involved in the University's Latin American Studies minor, which requires their students to participate in a service learning project, with Razorback Writers as one project option.

Beyond our university, we are excited to be working with two additional entities: a local community college and the retiring superintendent of a local school district. Our partnership with the community college will connect students at the community college who are in courses with service learning requirements to Razorback Writers by placing the community college students in our schools as tutors, just as our universities pre-service teachers are currently positioned. Our partnership with the project being created by the retiring superintendent will also broaden our tutor pool by bringing in minority high school students who are interested in pursuing careers in teaching and giving them the opportunity to work with our schools. Through both of these partnerships, we hope to increase the

number of students and pre-service teachers who are available to work with our projects. Another benefit of this setup is that all of these students would be coming to the project as part of another project, which we hope will mean that they will be committed to participating regularly for at least one semester, if not a full year or more. We also hope that these students will participate in the reading and writing components of the project, which we see as an essential part of the design.

Four: Redesign the Practicum

Our fourth and final goal for the project at this time is to redesign our practicum as a more rigorous, reflective course that will also engage our pre-service teachers in the arts integration approach. In her interview, site coordinator Michelle Bond related a story about one of her pre-service teachers and a lesson gone wrong. In her first solo lesson, one of Michelle's students, Cecily, taught about Arkansas history, but she presented the lesson as a lecture, with the only interactive component being a matching choice quiz. Michelle said that Cecily's handout was "aesthetically uninteresting" and that the lesson covered "too much information." In fact, Michelle said that the quiz Cecily handed out at the end even stumped her (Bond). Our site coordinator at J.O. Kelly quipped that the only directive she gave to her after-school teachers is that they shouldn't expect the kids to do any pencil/paper work. Of course we have our students write, but doing so creatively is key, especially in the after-school setting. When Michelle spoke with Cecily about the kids' negative response to the lesson, Cecily explained that she was not artistic and, as a social studies major, just didn't know how to teach with art. This experience is precisely why we need to model for the pre-service teachers how arts-integration works. When our pre-service teachers fail to teach to their potential because their own negative perceptions about themselves as readers, writers, artists, and thinkers, we can see how important this practicum course can be for modeling creative teaching and giving pre-service teachers the opportunity to try it out for themselves.

For our pre-service teachers, the opportunity to see the arts in tandem with literacy instruction is invaluable. Too often, when new teachers enter the classroom they revert to what they know, which for most of us is some variation on the theme of “drill and kill.” Especially in the traditional observation setting, it would be quite courageous for a pre-service teacher to try an approach that diverged drastically from that which they were observing. In her reflective essay for the practicum, one pre-service teacher who completed 30 of her service hours with us and 30 through observation wrote of her observation, “While observing Mrs. X, I also had the opportunity to see her teaching methods. She designed a similar schedule every week. For example, Mondays are devoted to vocabulary; Tuesdays are devoted to textbook material; Wednesdays are devoted to worksheets; Thursdays are devoted to group activities, and Fridays are test days.” As noted earlier, we worry about students observing limited teaching methods without exposure to other more creative pedagogies. Without a creative model and the autonomy to experiment with teaching methods, pre-service teachers are destined to copy what they have experienced as students or observed through traditional observation.

One of the great benefits of our project is that pre-service teachers not only see creative teaching in action, but they are also given the opportunity to help to design the curriculum and as the semester progresses are expected to take a more and more active role in facilitating. At the end of the fall semester, one of our pre-service teachers wrote, “While I have learned a lot by observing Mrs. X, I feel like I got the most out of being a part of the Razorback Writers project. The project was more hands on than observing. We were the teachers, not observers.”

At one of our sites last fall, our pre-service teachers were struggling with a particular student and eventually found out that this student had Asperger’s Syndrome. On their own, our teachers contacted this student’s aid and did some outside research to get ideas for how to work with him. One of the teachers in this group wrote,

“In terms of planning activities for [the students,] he also proved to be a challenge. We planned one activity in which we read the students a book about the three little pigs but that was told

from the wolf's point of view. The goal of the assignment was to get the students thinking about how one story could be told lots of different ways and relate that back to their movie. However, we did not take into account that it can be almost impossible for students with Asperger's to see things from any perspective other than their own."

In addition, after realizing that much of Aaron's resistance to the project was rooted in his anxiety in social situations and his discomfort with group work, our teachers were able to tailor the project so that Aaron had specific tasks he could work on independently. This challenge of working with a student with special needs was a completely new experience for all of the pre-service teachers on this site and helped to give them some perspective on the varying needs of all of the children in the classroom. Even if they had encountered challenging students like Aaron in an observation setting, it would be unlikely that they would be charged with addressing the issue on their own, which would be a loss both for our teachers and for students like Aaron.

At another site, we asked our pre-service teachers to talk to the students to decide what kind of project they would like to do and then to design a project that would both fit with the students' interests and accomplish the literacy goals of the project. Ultimately, the project that these pre-service teachers and middle school students designed was one of the most exciting projects taking place that semester. At first, our pre-service teachers pitched the idea of students writing a newsletter, and though students were originally on board with the idea, they quickly came to see that writing as merely a continuation of the school day. Our teachers then pitched the idea of an autobiographical portfolio that students would fill with stories, poetry, photography, and art. This spring, the new cohort of pre-service teachers at this site has picked up the project and plans to have students tie this autobiographical material they have already produced in with the art and writing they are doing as they read the book *Seedfolks*. In *Seedfolks*, each chapter is a vignette describing one character in the book. At the end of the semester, students at this site will each compile their visual art, photography, and writing into a chapter of their own, which will then be published in a book to be shared with students, parents, and the school. Though many of the students at this site came into the project with a negative attitude about reading

and writing, they have become enthusiastic about the final product and are working hard on their chapters. It is through successful experiences like this that our pre-service teachers can see how arts integration can provide that essential stepping stone to move students from seeing reading and writing as a task to moving towards an open mind to literacy-based work.

What we hope is that through experiences like the three we just described we can create a space for pre-service teachers to experience the inherently creative and reflective nature of teaching through arts integration. At the end of the fall semester, one of our teachers who spent the most time on-site with students reflected on her experience: "I learned some very important things from this class and the students in the program. [...] If a technique or activity is not working, or not working well, keep looking for new ways to accomplish the task because there are many approaches to teaching and many resources for ideas for the classroom. Connecting with students is required to teach them. It takes time, listening, and being truly interested in what they are interested in. Teachers should read the books they are reading, play the games they are playing [...], listen to the music they listen to, etc." By asking our pre-service teachers to get up from that safe seat in the back of the classroom and move into the middle of a nebulous, active group of young students, we are able to give them a chance to see themselves as teachers and develop a philosophy of their own, a step in the direction of becoming the creative, dynamic, and effective teachers that we need.

Beginning in the fall, we aim to ask pre-service teachers to produce three important items: a literacy artifact – a story, poem, script, web page, etc. – created in collaboration with our students; a set of pedagogical materials and methods that can be used in future teaching situations; and an essay reflecting and relating what they have learned to reading on literacy and service learning that they will have done for the practicum course. We hope that these pre-service teachers would be able to compile these documents for use in their teaching portfolios, and, ultimately, we hope to change this gateway course from its position as a 1 hour course that doesn't meet and requires only a three-page essay at its

end into a dynamic course through which students have the opportunity to observe, practice, and create through genuine teaching and authentic reflection.

On the day after Cecily presented her lesson on Arkansas history, the group scrambled for a way to reconnect with the students. Ditching their original plan for the day, Michelle's group decided to tell the students real, emotional stories about things that have happened to them and then asked the kids to write emotively about an experience of their own. Even though the students had had what Michelle called a "coup" in response to the previous day's lesson, she recounted that this emotional stories day was one of their most successful, as it allowed students and pre-service teachers to connect in a personal way. This personal connection and affirmation that we can offer the students is what makes Razorback Writers a successful program. When we show our students that we are working with them, that we are willing to share something about ourselves, and that we are interested in knowing about them, we can impact students in a way that really begins to make a difference.

We do a disservice to our children and our community as a whole when we allow individuals who are interested in becoming teachers to begin their lives as educators by sitting in the back of the room. By requiring our pre-service teachers to participate in a practicum with our project at the center, we are able to circumnavigate outdated methods and approaches. By taking control over how pre-service teachers complete their "observation" requirements, we can stack the deck with our best, most creative teachers. By exposing pre-service teachers to the literature of their field and asking them to contribute, we enable them to participate in the fundamental discussions happening in education. And by showing them how to use the arts to teach in all disciplines, we prepare our pre-service teachers to cultivate the creative, dynamic energy that we hope they all bring to the classroom. In this age of standardized tests, we must make sure that our new teachers remember that the ultimate goal is not just to prepare students for success on exams but to prepare them to become moral, ethical individuals who can contribute to society.

Conclusion

In her well-known 1947 address to Oxford University, Dorothy Sayers explained, “We have lost the tools of learning--the axe and the wedge, the hammer and the saw, the chisel and the plane-- that were so adaptable to all tasks. Instead of them, we have merely a set of complicated jigs, each of which will do but one task and no more, and in using which eye and hand receive no training, so that no man ever sees the work as a whole or "looks to the end of the work.” Through Razorback Writers, we hope to show both students and pre-service teachers the importance of remembering that those higher goals of education – creating morally and ethically grounded individuals who are posed to contribute to society – will not be achieved through passivity. Rather, by asking our students and pre-service teachers to become involved in education through writing and reading, movement and art, we are modeling the kind of wisdom that we hope these students and teachers will be able to apply both in the classroom and beyond it.

In her study of a classroom of ethnically diverse third- and fourth-grade remedial readers who are moved from traditional round robin reading to a curriculum focused on classroom theater, Shelby Wolf wonders if struggling readers in higher grade levels would be as amenable to trying out an artistic curriculum as her young elementary students were (410). If our experiences with struggling middle-school readers over the past year tell us anything, it is that the answer to this question is a firm “yes.” Whether through creative dramatics, painting, gardening, singing, dancing, drawing, or any other manner of artistic expression, we have found that when we ask our students to get up, move around, play a part, or dig a hole, they want to. And when we succeed in creating a fun, warm atmosphere, students want to be with us. One of the main reasons that critics of charter schools give for their lack of support for these kinds of schools is that they can only succeed because of charismatic leadership. Why is this a criticism? When students like who they’re with, when they’re in a space where they feel enthusiasm and movement and creativity, of course they are going to be more open to participating in

anything we ask them to do. For Razorback Writers, by creating a welcoming space for our students through art, we are able to engage in interactions with verbal arts in a way that is less threatening and more inviting, especially for struggling readers. Wolf also notes that one of the most important components of her study was a consideration of children's attitudes towards reading, which she argues are greatly impacted by teachers' perceptions of students (388). When Darcy Luetzow and Michael Reid from Tree House Books visited our project, one of the main messages that they left us with is that, ultimately, the most important thing that we can do is change the way that we think about students so that they will change the way they think about themselves. When our students walk into our room, they are not English Language Learners and students with Academic Improvement Plans and students with learning disabilities, they are readers and writers and artists and thinkers.

When I interviewed our site coordinators and school-based staff working with the project, I asked each of them what they saw as the goal of the literacy project. What was striking to me was how similar all of their responses were. Iris explained that it has been her goal to "cultivate a sense of global community and a sense of self-worth" among her students (Shepard), while Michelle explained that she wanted students to "achieve the feeling of success" after putting in effort and producing something of which they could be proud (Bond). Ms. Courtney explained that she wanted to "keep kids connected to school" by giving them a place where they could form community, and Ms. Arnold said that she's not as worried about changing test scores as she is about making students feel "a vital part of something [...] where they all belong." Ultimately, we all hope that this project will help students to create a community where reading, writing, and art are supported, and where opportunities to interact with texts and make meaning in the world abound.

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