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## A Whole-School "Read" Creates a Reading Community

### \* *This We Believe* Characteristics

- A shared vision that guides decisions
- Students and teachers engaged in active learning
- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory

\*Denotes the corresponding characteristics from NMSA's position paper, *This We Believe*, for this article.

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Students and teachers at Hand Middle School in Columbia, South Carolina, were in the midst of a two-year, comprehensive renovation and construction project in which some sections of their 75-year-old, historic building were being renovated and new sections added. When parts of the school were boarded up and oversized machinery first moved onto campus, approximately half of the students moved into portables. Classrooms and other academic areas were closed, including the school's media center, which would be unavailable to students while the space for a new, larger media center was being prepared. Amidst the clang of machinery, the buzz of saws, the shouts of workmen, and the high whine of drills, the media specialist, the literacy coach, and a seventh grade English/language arts teacher collaborated to develop a plan that would offset the closing of the media center for a year and would keep books in the hands of students. In this unlikely setting, they created a kind of literary ecosystem in which equilibrium between the community of construction and the community of learning was maintained, creating a balance between bedlam and books, between renovations and reading. Together, these three teachers framed a rich environment where students could talk about books, create art work, craft dramatic productions, write reflections about their experiences, and grow deep community roots. This article recounts the innovative way the school community chose to face potential challenges to their physical environment and to their academic lives and, through a whole-school "read," influence teachers' practices, students' learning, and the involvement of the larger school community.

### A common ground

Recently, cities around the country have conducted "city read" programs in which one text was chosen for a whole city to read, and community members were invited to join city-wide conversations to discuss issues brought up by these texts. For example, readers in Chicago read *In the Time of the Butterflies* (Alvarez, 1995), and the citizens of Columbia, Missouri, engaged in reading *Enders Game* (Card, 1985). People in Seattle read *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (Satrapi, 2004) and the entire state of Vermont read *Seedfolks* (Fleischman, 1999) in their "One State, One Book" gardening project. Universities around the country have also initiated programs for students, along with faculty, to share a reading experience. For example, Syracuse University students and faculty recently read *The Kite Runner* (Hosseini, 2004), and to provide a common academic experience for students, the University of South Carolina's freshmen read *When the Emperor Was Divine* (Otsuka, 2004). All of the texts explored social issues relevant to the cities' and universities' populations, with the idea that readers would share a common experience that

would not only promote literacy but build a sense of community as well. Perfect strangers on the streets of a city or campuses of universities could find common talking points.

However, there are fewer reports of high schools and middle schools that built upon this idea of sharing a common text across grade levels. In 2003, students at Stephenson High School in Stone Mountain, Georgia, read *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), and in 2005, students at Waterloo Middle School in Waterloo, Wisconsin, read *Hidden Talents* (Lubar, 2003). In the same year, Summerland Middle School in British Columbia chose to read *Run* (Walters, 2005). Having read about these programs (Van Dyke, 2005), the media specialist at Hand Middle School, Maura Wilson, wondered if she could bring this idea to life at her school—an idea especially pertinent with the looming specter of the extensive school construction project ahead. She realized that a whole-school read had the potential for all students, teachers of all disciplines, administrators, staff, and parents to read the same book and share in a common reading event; the entire school community would have a common literary experience. Knowing that during the 2006–2007 school year their library would be reduced to a small room with only the bare necessities available to support teachers' and students' curricular requirements, she proposed the idea to Dywanna Smith, a seventh grade language arts teacher, and Tori Thomas, the literacy coach.

Their collaboration began during spring 2005. They coined the phrase, "A Community of Readers" to describe their project and decided that a school-wide read was not only possible but supported their views about literacy and learning (i.e., dialogue among readers would be a way for adolescents to express their responses to literature). Through this process, they could "amplify, clarify, and extend those responses while at the same time working their way into a deeper understanding" of a text (Sloan, 2003, p. 150). When their administrators, as well as the rest of the faculty, were invited into the conversation, they found overwhelming consensus for the idea of a whole-school read. Faculty and staff understood that this would not only be a way to keep books in the hands of students through the year but to support the entire school community as the new year began amidst the disruption of construction, because as Maura said, "It would be nice to have something to pull us together at the beginning of the year. Something that would be common ground."

The teachers wanted a story rich in plot and character that had the potential to influence the character of school-wide dialogue and addressed issues of diversity and difference such as race, ethnicity, and class—issues with which the middle school students were familiar. One challenge they faced, though, was to find a title appropriate for grades six through eight that included a wide spectrum of maturity (Wood & Mraz, 2005), sophistication of topics (McEwin & Thomason, 1989; Hillman, 1991), interests (Wilson, 1992), reading ability, and cultural backgrounds (Santa, 2006; Moje & Hinchman, 2004). To that end, like the "One State, One Book" planners in Vermont, the faculty decided on *Seedfolks*, a novel that brings together a group of disparate inner-city characters, suspicious of each other's motives, who reluctantly begin to work together to reclaim a vacant lot. Hoping to strengthen community ties among students, teachers, administrators, and parents through the common thread of a shared reading experience, the media center staff made more than 600 copies of *Seedfolks* available to the school community. The staff purchased the books with both the media center's budget and supplemental district funding.

While the core group of teachers wanted to ensure that students would have access to books, they also wanted to support the teachers in this project. Understanding well the demands of beginning a new school year, they recognized the need to support teachers with resources as they read the book at the beginning of the school year. They created a guide for teachers entitled "A Community of Readers: Planting Seeds of Change," explaining the purposes, rationale, process, benefits, and the year-long events they had planned surrounding the reading of *Seedfolks*. It included ideas for extensive readings (Peterson & Eeds, 1990), for example picture books for read-alouds that explore similar themes of diversity and difference, prejudice, and racism, such as *The Dot* (Reynolds, 2004), *Wings* (Meyers, 2000), and *Learning to Fly* (Meschenmoser, 2006). In addition, they suggested books for intensive readings that would

deepen students' experiences with these topics. Suggested titles included *The Misfits* (Howe, 2003), *American Dragons*, (Yep, 1995), and *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993). Other sections of the booklet provided potential reading strategies that could be incorporated while reading *Seedfolks*, such as anticipatory questions, inquiry/reflection questions, information about the author, and interdisciplinary lesson plans. The core committee ordered the books at the end of the year, and the books and planning guides were available to the teachers when they returned to school in August.

### **"We're like the gardeners in the book"**

We, three university researchers who have a strong belief that literature allows us to read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1988), observed Hand Middle School's faculty and students participating in the whole-school read throughout one academic year. As we documented what occurred, we found ourselves continually impressed with the creative ways the teachers used *Seedfolks* (Fleischman, 2004). The following narrative weaves in data from the interviews, field notes, and surveys we collected during the school year of 2006–2007 to highlight the impact of the whole-school read on the teachers' practices, the students' learning, and the involvement of the school community.

### **Teachers' practices: Critical literacy, strategic reading instruction, and content area literacy**

With a focus on school-wide dialogue that would include issues of diversity and difference such as race, ethnicity, and class, it seemed natural that the teachers used a critical literacy approach (Bomer & Bomer, 2001; Comber & Simpson, 2001; Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997; Morgan, 1997; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). Several teachers at Hand examined the notion of a diverse community by using the text as a springboard for the school to explore issues of prejudice, stereotypes, and misconceptions regarding different communities and cultures. For example, Paul Fram, an eighth grade language arts teacher, used the text to highlight how people from different backgrounds can work together to accomplish a goal. He highlighted how different cultures can get along with each other.

A seventh grade language arts teacher, Terry Wilson, also wanted to help students become more aware of different cultures. She used the text to deconstruct commonly held stereotypes by having students create individual monologues describing the stereotypes found in the text and then explained the effects that stereotype had on the community. By using a critical approach to reading, the text was not exclusive to the language arts faculty.

A social studies teacher, Lee McDonald, tied *Seedfolks* to a unit on Native Americans and the hegemonic policies that occurred during Western Expansion. These critical approaches to reading *Seedfolks* provided the teachers and students opportunities to explore deeper issues involved in creating a community.

Helen Schell, a sixth grade language arts teacher, explained it best when she told us about speaking with her colleague, Paul Fram, and how she used his line of inquiry with her own students:

Mostly we would take a question that was sparked by the story. For instance, Leona is a character who brings her garbage into the municipal hall to say, "This is what I'm living with. Please, fix the problem." And that was civil disobedience. And so, we would take an opportunity to say, "When do you think civil disobedience is right and when do you think it's wrong? And have you ever done something, or your parents ever done something where you have civilly disobeyed the law?" And some kids have been in marches in Washington. It was really neat. Just as students were learning about cultural diversity and acceptance, the teachers, too, were learning about the rich experiences and lives of their

students.

As incorporated into the design of the whole-school read, many classrooms around Hand interacted with the text based on the needs of the students and the personalities of the individual teachers. Not all the teachers used *Seedfolks* as a way to critically examine their world. Others used it as way to teach strategic reading and build community within their classroom. For example, Caren Hazelwood, a sixth grade language arts and social studies teacher, started her school year using the textual structure of *Seedfolks*. In the text, each chapter is written by a different member of the community, which allows the reader to view the storyline from multiple perspectives while, at the same time, becoming acquainted with the community members individually. The reader sees the community as a whole through the individual chapters. In Caren's classroom, the students created a quilt where each block was a different student in the classroom (see Figure 1). Using *Seedfolks* as the example, each block of the quilt allows the viewer to learn about the individuals in Caren's classroom while learning about the class as a whole. Caren's use of *Seedfolks* helped extend her sixth grade students' understanding of a more sophisticated text structure while concurrently engaging them in a community- building activity that would enable students to respond more deeply to text discussions later in the year.

#### Figure 1

Inspired by the novel *Seedfolks*, sixth graders created a quilt to present themselves individually while revealing the classroom community as a whole.



Helen Schell, a sixth grade language arts teacher, used the notion of a mandala to help students dig more deeply into the characterization in *Seedfolks* (Flesichman, 2004) (see Figure 2). Helen described a mandala as "a circular form of art that Native Americans use and Tibetans use. It's usually used for spiritual purposes and has symbols that represent portions of your life. It's like you're creating a prayer. It's very beautiful and you have repetition of symbols." In her class, small groups of students created a portion of the mandala highlighting a specific character in the text. After the mandala was completed, the students sat back and reflected on the similarities and differences between the characters as represented on the mandala, deepening the students' understanding of characterization. This activity also prompted the students to begin exploring similarities and differences with the characters and each other. Helen stated later, "I was surprised by what I learned about them [the students]. ... I got a lot of information in terms of getting to know my students as thinkers and just learned more about their history, which is something so critical."

#### Figure 2

Characters in the novel *Seedfolks* are represented on this student-created mandala allowing the students to reflect differences and similarities among the characters and themselves.



The excitement and enthusiasm of the committee, language arts teachers, and students encouraged many classrooms from various disciplines to participate. For example, in the multiaged drama class, Jennifer Bjorn taught the students about shadow puppets, multi-jointed figures that date to ancient Indonesian culture. In small groups, the students wrote their own scripts based on an event in *Seedfolks*, created shadow puppets, constructed a stage, and performed their plays for other classes (see Figure 3). Students repeatedly commented that the dramatic interpretation was one of the most memorable experiences of the whole-school read.

### Figure 3

In drama class, students wrote scripts based on an event in *Seedfolks* and performed them using the shadow puppets they made.



Another student favorite was planting their own gardens. One special needs teacher, Patricia Pantsari, had her class build a vegetable garden (see Figure 4). The students plotted the land, decided on the type of vegetables to plant, actively plowed the soil, planted their seeds, and clearly marked their garden to protect their growing plants from student traffic. This work enabled Patricia to make the text come alive for her struggling readers, integrate a variety of content knowledge (math, science, and literacy), and provide hands-on learning experiences that promoted student success (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Another teacher, Chris Bailey, used *Seedfolks* to deepen his unit on plants during his seventh grade science class. He was able to incorporate information about photosynthesis as well as help students learn where vegetables originate. They planted seeds and used observational journals to track the progress of their "experiment."

### Figure 4

The special needs teacher helped connect her students to *Seedfolks* by having them plant a vegetable garden, thereby integrating math, science, and literacy.



Using the text in a different way, Canisha Fletcher, an eighth grade science teacher, used *Seedfolks* to help establish ground rules for group work. She explained to us that she normally created the rules for the whole class, but that this year she tried "to involve the students a little bit more in the decision making process" by tying the process to the text:

I pulled from *Seedfolks* the section when they were talking about having to put in the first barbed wire fence or the first "do not enter" sign. Even though they had this community, they still had to establish some rules, and they were basically community rules. So I read a section from *Seedfolks* as my introduction. ... And, luckily, the language arts teachers [on my team] were actually teaching the whole novel, so I was able to piggyback off of some of the discussions they'd already had. It wasn't the first time the students were exposed to it. And a lot of them said, "Oh, I remember that section!"

Canisha went on to help the class develop a list of rules they felt were necessary to ensure collaborative, respectful, and effective group work. Canisha's use of *Seedfolks* allowed her students to revisit the text from a different perspective and with a different purpose.

### **Student learning: A sense of community and valuing multiple perspectives**

Though student learning was measured in a variety of ways throughout the year by the teachers, we chose to focus our attention on the students' perceptions of their learning as reported in focus group sessions and end-of-the-year surveys. As the students explored community, both as readers and as participants in their school, they gained new insight into what it means to be a member of a dynamic and diverse community. One eighth grader told us, "A community is not just, like, one race of people. Like, there's a lot of different people." Through the whole-school read, this middle school was able to experience a transformative process to grow into a community of learners. This was especially true for the sixth grade students involved in the project. As these students transitioned from a comfortable, familiar elementary community, the whole-school read facilitated their feeling of acceptance in the new, larger middle school community. One sixth grade student said, "I think it teaches us that maybe some kids don't even know other kids in their school. And maybe it brought each and every person closer together just by reading this one book."

Many students reported they felt that Hand Middle School was socially segregated. Some felt that division was by cliques, while others felt it was along racial lines. This social segregation was exactly what the teachers at Hand wanted to address through the reading of *Seedfolks*. Yet, as Hand students and faculty explored these differences, they began to gain a stronger understanding of each other. Students mentioned over and over that learning to value multiple perspectives was one of their biggest areas of growth from the whole-school read. One student mentioned that she learned about "other people's experience when they come to a new country," while another explained how he learned that "a lot of good people have bad things happen to them." The students shared with us how they began to recognize that everyone is different and that learning about each other's backgrounds helps prevent racism and cliques from forming in their schools. One student explained it best, "You should get to know somebody before you judge them. And you shouldn't, like, assume what people are doing or how they are, because everybody has different backgrounds."

### **School community: Growing in our understanding and disrupting isolation**

Documenting the changes in the school community was difficult, as Hand Middle School had a strong sense of community prior to the whole-school read. Yet members of the Hand community continually grew in their understanding of what it means to be a community. As previously stated, the students spoke about what they learned about community, yet the teachers also talked about the impact the whole-school read had on the larger school community. One teacher mentioned how nice it was to have a touchstone text that everyone could relate to when she was supervising

the lunchroom or participating in bus duty. She felt that when students were making bad decisions she could say, "Hey, remember in *Seedfolks* when ... " and it was a way for teachers and students to have a similar set of stories to refer to regardless of grade level or content.

Grade level and content area structures have the potential to create a sense of isolation, and teachers rarely find opportunities to discuss a common text or plan together. In fact, isolation among teachers is more often the mode for public school teachers than is collaboration (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). However, the "Community of Readers" project gave teachers from different disciplines a chance to come together and forge cross-disciplinary connections and learning based on a common literacy experience. As one teacher said:

We're kind of separated when it comes to grade levels and schedules, and teachers don't get to meet. And it's just kind of nice that we started the year [this way]. And I didn't get to talk to a whole lot of people unless I saw them in the hallway. But, at least, when I did, we had something that we could commonly talk about.

We saw the whole-school read promote a hands-on approach to learning, encourage authentic use of content area literacy, move teachers to think differently about their curriculum, and support the growth of a community at Hand Middle School. One eighth grade teacher, Heather Eldridge, explained:

I think there's a lesson in it for all of us. If you think about our community at Hand, we come from different backgrounds as well, and together we're like the gardeners in the book. To try to produce something beautiful or worthwhile, we all have to work together. People who we might not have known at the beginning of the year, we befriended during the school year. We become more and more like a team.

### **Producing something beautiful or worthwhile**

The project, "A Community of Readers," succeeded in its initial goal of keeping books in the hands of the students, and paralleling the book, disparate groups of students and teachers came together to experience a young adult novel in a collaborative environment. However, the project went beyond its initial goals; it opened spaces for dialogue that created bridges between what students were reading and their own lives. Their reading and Fleischman's book created a forum for students and teachers to discuss issues of prejudice, stereotyping, poverty, immigration, and racism. Beyond that, the school-wide read brought students and teachers together in dialogue. Peterson and Eeds (1990) wrote that "if we trust that making sense of the world is inherent in being human; and if we walk alongside our students in the collaboration of true dialogue, then we can expect that remarkable insights about literature will occur" (p. 74), and these concepts were honored at Hand Middle School. A space for dialogue between students, teachers, and administrators had been nurtured and tended, much like the gardens in *Seedfolks*.

In addition, the dialogue at Hand Middle School broke through the inter-grade, inter-disciplinary divide that too often marks our schools (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Students from one grade do not often have the chance to interact with students from another. However, through this project, students in different grade levels shared in the same reading experience. As fellow readers, they came together to discuss a story, and these conversations took place within and beyond classroom walls. In addition, literacy was honored not just in language arts classes, its usual and expected home, but also in art, drama, science, and mathematics classrooms.

The teachers created authentic opportunities to bring literacy into the content areas and facilitated interdisciplinary connections (Jackson & Davis, 2000). The middle school faculty and students engaged in multiple learning experiences from oral storytelling, dance, poetry, art, and video imaging to express their new understandings about their school, their community, and themselves. This immersed the students in the ideas of community, extended their own

understandings of diverse cultures, and allowed them to use multiple literacies to communicate their budding understandings (Siegel, 2006).

Through the students' responses and the teachers' practices with *Seedfolks*, we found multiple perspectives about the impact of the whole-school read, too. Several eighth grade girls shared their view that nothing really changed at Hand from the whole-school read. Yet they believed that if the faculty continued with a whole-school read, and students participated in one during each of the three years they were at the middle school, it would change the dynamics drastically. With that in mind, plans for next year have already begun. The group that planned this year's whole-school read, along with the faculty and administration, want to continue this project. They have already selected the next book, *The Golden Rule* (Cooper, 2007), a picture book that examines messages of tolerance and acceptance found across multiple global cultures and texts. They have begun compiling the new supplemental reading list for teachers who want to delve more deeply into the issues the picture book explores, issues such as diversity and difference. Plans are also under way to invite parents into the process with parent/student literature study groups, extending the reading beyond the walls of the school and inviting parents to become a part of their students' literary lives.

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