

Building a Literacy Program at a Local School

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Abstract

Literacy is an essential skill in society today. Literacy involves building critical thinking skills, understanding the evidence in a text, and asking questions. At one St. Louis school, Lafayette Preparatory Academy (LPA), the students have varied literacy abilities. This school needs a more formalized literacy program. This essay focuses on thinking about how to authentically understand the literacy needs of this community and how to build a literacy program at this school.

Keywords: literacy, authenticity, critical thinking

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“Reading is the foundation upon which all other essential skills are built” (TEDx Talks, 2017). John Trischitti, in this TED Talk, discussed how illiteracy affects over a billion people worldwide. Literacy is essential to decreasing poverty and crime rates and can help with building critical thinking skills, strong self-perception and self-confidence, and curiosity and creativity. Teaching literacy is centered on the ability to read and write, but this process should move beyond reading words on a page. Schmoker (2006) made a case for authentic literacy, claiming that students should be taught higher-order literacy skills, or the ability to critically read a text, understand opposing viewpoints, and ask thought-out questions. These skills must be imbued in the curriculum. At one local school in the St. Louis area, Lafayette Preparatory Academy (LPA), building a literacy program of this type is critical. Determining the core literacy issues and building a successful literacy program at LPA involves understanding how to authentically engage the needs of the community and how to build capacity within this literacy program.

Lafayette Square boasts a historic section of St. Louis—a Victorian elegance, an active community, a slew of businesses from Park Avenue coffee to Clementine’s Naughty & Nice Creamery, and Lafayette Square Park. The total population in this area is 19,693, and the median household income in this area is \$47,780 (“Lafayette Square Demographics,” n.d.). About 75% of residents have some college experience or a college degree (“Lafayette SquareDemographics,” n.d.). Surprisingly though, based on the 2017 Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) data, Lafayette Preparatory Academy (LPA), a K-8 public charter school in the area, had only 48.9% of students advanced or proficient in English (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018). These statistics were based on yearly standardized assessments. Merrill Sheils (1975) lamented the struggles of

literacy in her 1975 Newsweek article, “Why Johnny Can’t Write.” She argued: “If [students] are in high school and planning to attend college, the chances are less than ever that they will be able to write English at the minimal college level when they get there” (Sheils, 1975). These complaints of students’ low literacy levels have not changed much since decades ago.

Some might think helping with the literacy issue at LPA starts with understanding the Missouri educational system. Authentic engagement is often defined with the state education board in mind. Ryan Delaney and Marshall Griffin (2017) discussed the reform school bills that did not “get through the 2017 Missouri legislature.” In this article, Brent Ghan, School Boards Association spokesman, mentioned the following: “Our local school boards are in the best positions to understand local circumstances, the local resources that are available, and what their local communities want... Too often we have bills that attempts to develop a one-size-fits-all policy.” The issue then is the absence of local communities in the discussion of the Missouri educational system. Each local community, such as the Lafayette Square area, might have a different view of what education is and subsequently, what literacy is.

Building capacity for a successful literacy program involves determining changes to the current curriculum, thinking about programs that could encourage literacy, and frequently assessing literacy practices. Since LPA is a public charter school, it operates within the sphere of Missouri standards but also has a flexible curriculum. The curriculum should then reflect the needs of this urban community. One current program that has increased the literacy of students at this school is the afterschool program, which tutors students on reading fluency and comprehension. Additionally, skill development seminars could be implemented for parents and others in the community. That way, the skills developed in the classroom can be reinforced in the community.

Often, education and literacy are viewed as fixed constructs. Students need to have specific knowledge and skills, and they need to demonstrate that knowledge on standardized tests. Each community has its own unique literacies though, which are often not validated as literacies. While it may be impossible to fully understand the Lafayette Preparatory Academy community, it is important to reflect on where the students are. Instead of “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” think in terms of “How Johnny Can Write.” What literacies are relevant to this community? What skills do these students already have? What are students interested in writing? It is important when structuring these meetings and determining solutions to have all stakeholders present and to make sure they all have an opportunity to be heard. Bringing aspects of their culture, community, and literacies into the literacy program at LPA shows cultural sensitivity and helps to localize the literacy issue within this urban community. Only then can a successful literacy program be developed.

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