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**Reinforcing Literacy Skills through Interdisciplinary Instructional Planning and  
Multimodal Teaching and Learning**

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**Abstract**

According to Carolan and Guinn (2007), teachers must find multiple paths for children to develop proficiencies in their pursuit of success in the classroom. In order for children to achieve success, we must find ways to engage, motivate, and make learning relevant to the unique and varied backgrounds of children in contemporary classrooms (Nieto & Bode, 2008). We believe that teachers should collaborate to plan for interdisciplinary connections so that all students, including kinesthetic learners will have a better chance to learn. Within this article, we specifically focus on planning for an integration of literacy instruction with physical activities including dance and visual arts tasks as starting points.

*Keywords:* Interdisciplinary planning, literacy, physical education, and art education

## **Reinforcing Literacy Skills through Interdisciplinary Instructional Planning and Multimodal Teaching and Learning**

### Vignette

*With increasing intensity as the lesson progressed, the teacher asked students to look at a list of words to note similarities between them. The students, located on the carpet for whole group instructional time, were muttering under their breath, swaying back and forth, and playing with their fingers in their “cross-legged laps.” In particular, one student, Nakia (pseudonym), had been isolated from the group for evidencing overly active behavior that indicated to the teacher that he was off task during instruction. The teacher waited, with arms crossed, for any response from students to her question related to word patterns. During this instructional pause, I noticed Nakia out of the corner of my eye from his spot in the back of the classroom. He slowly rose from his chair and began bouncing back and forth from one foot to the other. What really grabbed my attention was that, ever so quietly, Nakia was chanting, “-ed, -ed” as he jumped from foot to foot. Not only did Nakia recognize the ending pattern of -ed in the words, he also incorporated dance and movement in offering his response. The teacher, also noticing the movement, whipped her head in the direction of Nakia. Immediately, she ordered him to leave the classroom, with the support of a staff member, because he continued to display off task behavior during instruction. Wait, what? In a flash, I watched in horror as first-grader Nakia was escorted from the classroom, crying and screaming as he went. What message was just sent to this student? Why didn’t the classroom teacher see the knowledge that Nakia brought to this learning activity? She missed it. Nakia not only had the correct answer, but he also offered a cross-curricular connection through movement. Rather than diminish Nakia and the learning modalities that he brought to the table, I began to wonder how we could help classroom teachers to empower our*

*kinesthetic learners in the classroom by recognizing strengths that contribute to the learning process.*

### **Theoretical Approaches that Inform Our Collaborative Interdisciplinary Instructional Planning**

Our collaborative interdisciplinary instructional planning is informed by frameworks of social justice, multimodal approaches to teaching and learning, and multiliteracies (Siegel, 2006). More specifically, literacy research suggests that teachers should engage in a multimodal and multiliteracies approaches to literacy and literacy skill development. These multimodal and multiliteracies approaches promote multiple modes of meaning-making, including meaning-making through pictures, music, gestures, or movement (Siegel, 2006, p. 65). Furthermore, multimodal and multiliteracies approaches to literacy view students as informants (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984) who are at the core of the literacy “curriculum and pedagogy” (Souto-Manning & James, 2008, p. 86). What was not happening for Nakia in the introductory vignette is that he was not at the center of the literacy instruction and the instructional planning was not informed by his preferred modes of learning literacy. That is, his demonstration of learning and knowing through bodily-kinesthetic modalities such as dance and movement was not valued by the teacher. On the contrary, he was perceived as being disengaged and off task and as a result of these negative behaviors he was removed from the learning environment altogether. The act of full participation in multimodal teaching and learning is critical because it is socially situated and mediated (Souto-Manning & James, 2008; Siegel, 2006). As students produce and share knowledge and learning through multimodal forms of expressions, they “position themselves in their multiple social worlds” and “engage in the social work of childhood” (Siegel, 2006, p. 67). Removing Nakia from the classroom deprived from him the

opportunities to participate in such social interactions and thus eliminated his chances to “negotiate a space for his own literacies” (Siegel, 2006, p. 75). Multimodal and multiliteracies approaches to literacy are a matter of equality and social justice since they put “images, gestures, music, movement, animation, and other representational modes on equal footing with language” (Siegel, 2006, p. 65), thus promoting inclusion of all modes of teaching and learning and welcoming all learners in the process of socially negotiated (Souto-Manning & James, 2008). From the social justice perspective (Ladda, 2014), Nakia had every right to participate in this process. Moreover, the focus on social justice and literacy emphasizes school reform where school leadership and teachers alter mainstream curriculum knowledge to broaden perceptions of what is “...made to count in the school as valued cultural knowledge and practice”; these efforts can improve students’ literacy achievement and build partnerships in the community (Woods, Dooley, Luke, & Exley, 2014, p. 509). Within this article, we specifically focus on planning for an integration of literacy instruction with physical activities, including dance and visual arts tasks, as starting points for embracing multimodal and multiliteracies theoretical approaches to literacy.

### **Integration of Literacy with Movement, Vocabulary Instruction, and Choreographed Performance**

Research that integrates literacy instruction with opportunities for physical movement can maximize student growth and learning. Block (2001) argued, “Deeper levels of understanding are achieved when literacy concepts are presented through physical activity because using psychomotor applications to integrate the cognitive and affective domains involves the whole child in the educative process” (pp. 40-41). To illustrate, students like Nakia can be involved in reading and analyzing literary works, including poems, through the integration of movement,

vocabulary instruction, and choreographed performance (Block, 2001). Within this context, Block (2001) suggests that after listening to a poem, and then when the poem is being read again, teachers can encourage students to tap along with the beat or recite the rhythm in order to cognitively participate and rhythmically comprehend “the meaning and ordering of the words and the story they tell” (Block, 2001, p. 41). As pointed out by Block (2001), since typically poems and stories at the early stages of literacy skill development include many action verbs involving movements made by people, animals, or inanimate objects, students can be asked to express their meaning-making of the poem through the choreographed movement. To start, literacy teachers and physical educators can introduce students to the movement vocabulary through a sight reading approach, in which the movement vocabulary is presented in a form of index cards with pictures that illustrate the movement vocabulary to support visual learners. Next, students can be asked to translate words from the index cards into the movement. Once students demonstrate the correct understanding of the movement vocabulary from the poem, they can be invited to actively participate in the choreographed poem reading performance. That is, when being presented with an index card with a movement word from the poem when the poem is being read by the teacher, students can perform the movement vocabulary (Block, 2001), and thus demonstrate active meaning-making of the poem. “Understanding words and meaning through bodily action embodies them in a way that reading from a page alone cannot. Both motor and reading schema are reinforced by this integration, and reading itself becomes more meaningful” (Block, 2001, p. 42).

### **Integration of Literacy Instruction with Movement and Student Sport Interests**

Alternatively, drawing upon Bull and Whittaker’s (2001) suggestions, if students like Nakia are older and are interested in sports, they can be asked to design, as a team, a playbook

providing descriptions and graphical illustrations of practice drills and game strategies that will be used during pre-game warm-ups and tournament play. The physical educators can then work together with art teachers to help students develop skills using simple graphical and symbolic notations for representing the desired game movements and strategies. Adapting Motif Writing symbols as movement notations, as in a dance choreography (Bucek, 1998), physical educators and art teachers can help students express graphically and through movement their game-making thinking because “Motif Writing, used as a tool in learning, breaks down literacy boundaries and enables children to represent their physical intellect in written form” (Bucek, 1998, p. 29). Motif Writing symbols such as “straight, diagonal, curvy, scalloped, squiggly, solid, striped, and dotted lines, V-shapes and rectangular shapes, and open and closed circles” (Bucek, 1998, p. 29) can be introduced to students to guide them on how to represent their movements and game strategies. Once students have completed their team designed game playbooks they should have many opportunities to demonstrate their “ways of knowing” (Bucek, 1998, p. 29). To facilitate this process, physical educators and art teachers can have students videotape themselves explaining through think alouds the game strategies they developed and performing their game strategies while playing a game (Bull & Whittaker, 2001). This should be followed by engaging students in analysis of videos of their play to identify their areas of strength and in need of improvement, especially that “This process of monitoring one’s performance can build ‘metacognitive awareness’ or self-regulation that can be used in learning situations outside of sport and physical activity” (Bull & Whittaker, 2001, p. 35).

### **Interpreting Literary Text through Dance**

Interpreting a literary text through a dance is another creative approach to teach literacy to students like Nakia in spaces other than the regular classroom. Dance allows students to

interpret and/or tell the story in psychomotor, cognitive, and artistic ways (Bucek, 1998). After students have read and discussed the story, including its plot, characters, and setting with the literacy teacher, physical educators and art teachers can invite students to retell the story in a sequence through their individually choreographed and performed dance productions. Students should be encouraged to use Motif Writing symbols, previously discussed in this article, to scaffold a retelling of a story through a dance-making process and to document their individual choreographic designs (Bucek, 1998). The dance-making should be a highly individualized process, thus making it a relevant learning experience for each student. In Bucek's (1998) words, "Dance making and motif writing help children to find their own voice by discovering personal meaning as it is embodied in their own movement" (p. 30-31).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, students like Nakia should not be excluded from academic activities due to perceived off-task behaviors. Instead, literacy teachers, physical educators and art teachers should work together to plan for cross-curricular content connections such as those presented in this article to maximize learning for kinesthetic learners like Nakia. After all, as Ladda (2014) wrote, "physical literacy is a social justice issue!" That is, "for our profession to be socially just, we must not only offer opportunity in theory but also ensure a commitment to diversity and inclusion in practice" (p. 3). Upon reflection, educators must take the lead to point out, from a philosophical and political commitment, ways to meet the needs of those who have not been as academically successful as we intended using mainstream curricula in our schools. This commitment to physical literacy as a social justice issue is shared by the authors of this article and should be a lasting legacy of all teachers, regardless of their discipline. Students, like Nakia, are depending on it.

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