Reading Through the Pause: How Superintendents Viewed Literacy for Middle Grade Learners During the Pandemic

Dana Evans
Troy University, devans177473@troy.edu

Paige Paquette
Troy University

Dionne Rosser-Mims
Troy University

Terry Oatts
Rockdale County School District

Brenda Coley
Russell County School District

Follow this and additional works at: https://openriver.winona.edu/jaep

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Leadership Commons, Language and Literacy Education Commons, Online and Distance Education Commons, and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons

Reading Through the Pause: How Superintendents Viewed Literacy for Middle Grade Learners During the Pandemic

Reading Through the Pause: How Superintendents Viewed
Literacy for Middle Grade Learners During the Pandemic

Reading Through the Pause: How Superintendents Viewed
Literacy for Middle Grade Learners During the Pandemic

Education in the News

During the pandemic shutdown, education found itself centerstage, as the measurement tool for a return to normalcy (Burbio Inc., 2020). Schools continued to operate through pandemic longevity, or a state of uncertainty, with seemingly no end in sight. What was thought to be a virtual ending to the 2019-2020 school year due to COVID-19 extended into the 2020-2021 academic year. This pause, or state of interrupted education is the focus of the following paper through the viewpoint of two superintendents. In times of crisis, the role of superintendent calls for resiliency, grit, and the ability to foster these same characteristics in the administration and teachers within a school community (Wexler et al., 2019).

According to the Burbio.com Study (2020), published as the school year began in August, a reported 50% of United States public school students in grades K-12 signed up for virtual learning. Three months after the initial study report, Burbio.com reported a 10% increase in students, for a total of 60% of K-12 students engaging in virtual school in the 2020-2021 academic year. This astounding number of students learned from home, in a variety of settings and surroundings.

Despite the various challenges of Internet availability, parental involvement, and new digital platforms, educators rose to the challenge of crafting instruction through virtual interactions. Much is at stake for middle grade learners while engaging in literacy instruction during the pandemic pause. This paper sheds light on pandemic learning leadership, as recounted by two superintendents' reflections of digital learning communities through a lens of literacy instruction. The authors highlighted superintendent voices from the field to

share what literacy practices were used in local school systems, in order to paint a picture of the approach to pandemic literacy instruction through academic leadership.

Literacy Practices Before the Pause

Before the pandemic, traditional classroom literacy interactions included an emphasis on meaning-making with a variety of reading and writing activities. Daily classroom interactions included various digital means through an emphasis on new literacies, such as flexible text formats like blogs and audio texts, (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012) and social opportunities for deriving meaning from varying types of texts (Harste, 2003). Before, during, and after reading, shared student discourse played a large part in the navigation of text comprehension. Classroom social interactions were vital to the construction of meaning through students' collaborative funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Harste, 2003; Wexler et al., 2019).

In traditional classroom settings, peer interactions through classroom discourse gave middle grade learners collaborative projects to communicate their acquired knowledge. Before the pandemic, literacy instruction supported a shared sense of meaning-making through writing and reading interactions. Technology was a tool before the pandemic, useful in sharing constructed meaning (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). For example, students used digital platforms such as Padlet or Google Docs to collaborate in reading responses or writing extension activities. In Google Docs middle school students share an authorship role to compose a writing piece. The physical classroom served as a means for shared learning, where middle grade learners accessed writing tools, texts, and literacy interactions on a daily basis.

Literacy Practices in Virtual Learning

Virtual learning utilizes practices necessary to engage students in synchronous or asynchronous platforms. Literacy instruction includes digitized means for repetition of listening and viewing through prerecorded text interactions captured in a shared format (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). Students review virtual literacy instruction for mastery of a topic or repetition of important information. In a virtual setting, students' interactions with text cannot always take place live alongside the teacher. Interactions with text exist in isolation as students' meaning making represents a singular account of text reading (Ames et al., 2020). This differs from traditional classroom interaction, where students combine funds of knowledge to construct meaning through literacy engagement while present in the same physical place. Replication of live classroom collaboration takes place in break-out rooms for virtual collaboration when technology capabilities allow (Ames et al., 2020).

Student discourse in a virtual classroom exists in a different format compared to in person student engagement (Roff, 2021). Virtually, student discourse follows the rules of turn-taking, with microphones muted and unmuted at designated times (Deming, 2015). The use of break-out rooms as an instructional technique encourages small group discourse yet creates divisions within classroom interaction. In a virtual classroom, sharing texts and tools to make meaning of texts looks and feels differently (Roff, 2021). Middle grade learners and teachers must navigate literacy through screens, mute buttons, background noise, and chat boxes.

Superintendents' Role in Times of Crisis

Virtual learning contains technical aspects, such as access to laptops or computers, and difficulty navigating platforms such as Google classroom, which need swift resolution to meet the needs of learners (Ames, et al., 2020). In addition to finding the means to meet needs of a

school community, superintendents must also show resourcefulness in locating materials and trainings necessary to sustain learning during times of crisis (Klocko, Justis, & Kirby, 2019).

Conflict and challenges provide a chance to develop resiliency in superintendents' leadership role (Dweck, 2012). In a study of New York city's superintendents, Roff (2021) uncovered challenges in distance learning, such as Internet connectivity and a lack of equipment and teacher inability to navigate new digital platforms during the pandemic shutdown. Superintendents must work to promote and encourage a positive mindset when providing resolutions to the challenges faced in virtual learning (Roff, 2021). Through this role, they must also keep a pulse on the needs of faculty and staff to support the ongoing efforts towards literacy instruction (Ames et al, 2020). The following voices from the field provide a window into pandemic literacy as it exists in virtual middle grade classrooms through the lens superintendents.

Voices from the Field: Interviews with Two Superintendents

Superintendent Dr. Brenda Coley, Russell County, AL

Demographics

Russell County is located in east Alabama on the Alabama/Georgia border. This progressive growing county affords the serene atmosphere and friendly environment of a rural area but also includes the services of Phenix City, AL. It is directly across the Chattahoochee River in Columbus, Georgia, which offers the amenities of a larger city. Fort Benning, Georgia is also in close proximity, and many military-connected students attend a Russell County School. The population of Russell County is approximately 57,961 residents, with an estimated 21,474 living within the Russell County School District community. According to the most recent

census information, the demographics of Russell County is 49.9% Caucasian and 45.5% African American (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

There are five elementary schools (PreK-5) throughout the massive, rural school district. There is one middle school (grades 6-8) and one high school (grades 9-12) located in the center of the county. Currently, there are approximately 454 employees employed by the Russell County Board of Education to include certified and classified personnel. The total student enrollment is 3,450 to include approximately 817 middle school students.

I: What methods of literacy instruction were present in your county during virtual learning?

Dr. Coley: Due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and state-mandated school closures in March 2020, students in the Russell County School District were afforded the opportunity to engage in learning opportunities remotely (with a device) or through printed packets of work depending on each student's access to broadband. During the summer, our leadership team convened to develop a School Reopening Plan. For the safety of students and team members, it was decided that all students would be remote learners from the start of the 2020-21 school year until September 9, 2020. Prior to September 9, 2020, surveys were disseminated to parents for review so the parent choice for the first nine weeks of instruction could be honored. The two options for learning included face-to-face or remote instruction. Remote learners joined in every day for 30-minute live support sessions, but assignments were accessible at the parent and student's convenience through Google Classroom.

Each nine-week grading period, district leaders met to revise the plan and provide families with updated options for student learning. The options (face-to-face or remote) remained

the same during the first, second, and third quarters. Our School Reopening Plan outlines specifics related to curriculum and instruction for all learners to include expectations, schedules, platforms for instruction, grading of instruction, college and career readiness, and special education and English Language services.

I: Can you discuss positive impacts on literacy during pandemic learning?

Dr. Coley: The pandemic caused teachers and parents to have a heightened awareness of student literacy skills, as digital classrooms gave access to daily classroom content. Greater collaboration among grade level team members began to better support students' literacy needs. At the middle school level, we have seen success related to student discourse and voice. Because remote instruction calls for more project-based instruction, students excelled in the areas of speaking, presenting, collaboration, and writing. Where some students showed reluctance to participate out loud in a face-to-face class, remote instruction gave an avenue for those students' voices to be heard while expressing creativity through various tech tools.

We use the Classworks online learning support and assessment platform to allow students access to interactive tools to share reflections and ideas. Classworks allows students practice in small groups or individually as students engage in a close read. Students' text interactions are digitally recorded as they annotate a passage with digital sticky notes and highlights. Students note questions they have while reading and communicate their text responses through open-ended questioning. The paired reading passages and scaffolded instruction in literacy makes us hopeful the continued use of this resource will enhance literacy in our schools.

I: Discuss areas of concern during pandemic learning.

At the onset of the pandemic, access to technology devices and internet connectivity was a concern for some of our students. Additionally, there was concern about the middle grade students who were home with technology devices but not consistently logging in for instruction due to parents returning to work or for other reasons. Learning loss has caused some concern, especially since the summer learning loss gap was widened due to COVID-19. Russell County quickly responded to the potential learning loss by developing a plan to assess and remediate when students returned in August.

I: Describe professional development opportunities provided by your district.

Dr. Coley: Russell County Middle School teachers have participated in numerous sessions that provided opportunities for growth. At the beginning of the year, all secondary teachers participated in a professional learning session centered on the key aspects of effective curriculum, instruction, assessment, and improvement. This training focused on instructional strategies to keep all aspects of Talking, Writing, Investigating, Reading, and Listening (TWIRL) evident in face-to-face and remote classrooms. In August and October, middle grade reading teachers participated in a training session from the Classworks company. Classworks is a program we are using in Russell County to provide students with instruction and assessment on each individual student's learning level. Also, in October, all secondary teachers in Russell County participated in a detailed session related to meeting the literacy and numeracy skills of all students. In this session, we discussed content-specific strategies to use remotely and in-person to provide students with the skills they need to be successful in transitioning from middle to high school and beyond. Teachers have also been given numerous opportunities throughout

the year to participate in technology training related to learning tools and resources for remote, face-to-face, and blended instruction.

Continued professional development entitled "Powerful Literacy Practices," centered on practices developed by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE). With a focus on formative assessment, literacy-based assignments, scaffolding, and discourse, students and teachers will continue to grow in literacy teaching and learning.

Superintendent Dr. Terry Oats, Rockdale County, GA

Demographics

Rockdale County Public Schools is one of thirteen school districts comprising the Metro Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) district, and it is located in Rockdale County. The county seat of which is Conyers, Georgia. Rockdale County is the second smallest county in the state of Georgia from a real estate perspective, but it is a growing county with more than 90,000 residents located roughly 24 miles east of Atlanta. The community is a primarily minority county with the largest minority being the African American population. Rockdale County is a close-knit community with a rich history and heritage, and the county is celebrating its sesquicentennial this year.

Rockdale County has a total of 23 schools (22 facilities as one of the schools is the Rockdale Virtual Campus, established more than a decade ago and physically facilitated within our Career Academy but is a strictly virtual school) with approximately 16,500 students and just under 3000 staff.

I: What methods of literacy instruction were present in your county during virtual learning?

Dr. Oats: Rockdale County students received instruction 100% virtually beginning in March 2020 to finish the academic school year. At the middle grade level, students engaged in primarily synchronous instruction, with asynchronous instructional opportunities Monday-Friday. (Students have had a 9:15-4:15 schedule.) All middle grade schools included academic intervention at the end of each day. Students received direct academic support from their instructors during this time. Fridays were primarily utilized for social emotional learning support, small group academic enrichment and tutoring, and district-led professional learning communities (PLCs).

I: Can you discuss positive impacts on literacy during pandemic learning?

Dr. Oats: Since the pandemic started, a greater alignment appeared between the work addressing the appropriate level of rigor for our reading/writing standards. The school district has seen an increase in professional learning communities using backwards design to identify appropriate resources for daily lessons. PLC work has been much more focused with the increased opportunities to focus on instruction and less on operational interruptions. A noticeable increase in collaboration appeared among all four middle schools to employ best practices in literacy instruction.

The district focuses on low stakes writing in all disciplines (writing across the curriculum), thus providing students more opportunities to practice writing strategies. District pulse checks are conducted weekly. This includes professional learning time to share research-based practices, pacing, and utilization of resources. Students had access to check books out of the school library in order to engage readers who enjoy interacting with a physical book. A few

other positive impacts on literacy include the use of myON reading program to align novels to a student's interest and Lexile level (greater digital book access). We have been able to increase engagement in student reading goal setting and next steps. There has also been an increase in digital literacy for students and teachers. For example, our RCPS Professional Learning Department in collaboration with our Technology Department facilitated professional development (PD) for teachers and administrators on how to successfully navigate a blended learning environment. This professional development guided teachers through the responsibility of simultaneously teaching both hybrid in-person students and remote/virtual students. The PD included familiarization with the blended learning environment with an emphasis on instructional strategies. Also, our students became more knowledgeable of our videoconferencing tool of record – Microsoft Teams. Anecdotally, elementary, middle, and high school students in my Superintendent's Advisory Council this year have affirmed that a benefit of the protracted remote/virtual learning has been greater familiarization with digital tools and resources available in the district.

I: Discuss areas of concern during pandemic learning.**

Dr. Oats: Virtual learning environments result in challenges with identifying what content students are struggling with in each class. For example, questions are posed in a physical science course, but teachers have difficulty assessing if the student is challenged by the content or the complexity of the text that accompanies such challenging content. The dependency on screens through the pandemic shutdown sometimes prevented the amount of direct instruction needed for creating more opportunities for students to write, respond to their peers' writing or perhaps respond to text (e.g., read, annotate, and GIST reading). All of these opportunities naturally

occur in the physical learning context; however, training continues to bring all teachers to the same level of comfort in the virtual context.

Teachers expressed concerns regarding the students' ability to verbally communicate their level of text understanding.

Student communication skills are being impeded in the virtual environment, as teachers adjust to managing students in this setting – preventing the one-on-one setting that is needed during conferencing in both reading and writing. We are also working to provide more opportunities for student discourse. Virtual instruction does not allow for all students to verbally defend their frame of thoughts, ideas, points of view or even counter arguments. More of our teachers are using tech-based formative assessment measures, but there is a learning curve with this challenge in digitized assessment and student feedback. When students complete reading and class assessments there are numerous outside factors that impact the reliability/validity of the data; therefore, creating a response to student data becomes a little more difficult.

I: Describe professional development opportunities provided by your district.

Dr. Oats: Our teachers received several professional learning opportunities. We hosted a district-wide PL on low-stakes writing in the four core content areas. School-based professional learning opportunities have included RACE and CER writing strategies, and summarization strategies for teaching writing. We have provided professional learning for using digital resources that support reading and writing in our school district. We often use ThinkCerca and SAVVAS Learning Company, formerly known as Pearson K12 Learning, to support our classroom instruction, and guidance is provided on how to use the data from these resources to support classroom instruction.

Implications for Future Literacy Instruction

Despite numerous challenges faced by educators to support and advance literacy instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, they have remained vigilant and found areas of success as noted in the snapshot of pandemic instruction as presented in the voices from the field. There are resounding themes that emerge from reflections. First, leadership, vision, and flexibility are required of superintendents as they navigate an unprecedented pandemic schooling environment. Secondly, there is indeed a way to virtually engage middle grade learners in literacy. Lastly, limitations and boundaries of the current longevity of the COVID-19 pandemic have not deterred teachers, students, and parents from finding ways to construct literacy interactions.

Harste (2003, p. 11) asks, "What kind of literate being should inhabit the 21st century?" We ask, what kind of literate being will emerge from virtual classrooms of the pandemic? Literacy instruction, which includes student discourse and interactions surrounding texts, exists in virtual classrooms. Teachers must acknowledge and confront limitations in order to assess their literacy instructional practices. Superintendents play a role in the orchestration of materials, access for learners and teachers, and guided connections through professional development to offer solutions when challenges arise in times of crisis. The pandemic shutdown presented school superintendents, faculty, and staff with numerous concerns and challenges in literacy instruction. Through these challenges, emerge new plans of action for future crisis situations in the traditional route to literacy instruction.

About the Authors

Dr. Dana Evans is an assistant professor of elementary education. Her research interests focus on literacy pedagogy, teacher education, and literacy education. She earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree in curriculum and instruction at the University of Alabama.

Dr. Paige Paquette is an associate professor of secondary English language arts. Her research interests focus on literature in the community, retention, and higher education. She earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree in English language arts from Auburn University.

Dr. Dionne Rosser-Mims is a Professor and Vice Chancellor of the Troy University Phenix City campus. Her research interests focus on adult education and women and leadership from a global perspective. She earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree in adult education from the University of Georgia.

Dr. Terry Oatts is Superintendent of Rockdale County School District. His research interests focus on community engagement and leadership development. He earned a Doctor of Education degree in curriculum studies, with an emphasis in educational leadership from Georgia Southern University.

Dr. Brenda Coley is Superintendent of Russell County School District. Her research interests focus on leadership and community engagement. She earned a Doctor of Education degree in administrative leadership from Walden University.

References

Ames, K., Harris, L., Dargush, J. & Bloomfield, C. (2020). 'So you can make it fast or make it up': K-12 teachers' perspectives on technology's affordances and constraints when supporting distance education learning. *Australian Education Research*, 48, 359-376. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00395-8

Burbio (2020). In reversal, more than 60% of U.S. K-12 public school students will be attending schools with in-person options by election day. https://info.burbio.com/press/

Deming, D. (2015). The growing importance of social skills in the labor market. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 132(4). 1593-1640.

National Bureau of Economic Research. https://doi.org/10.3386/w21473

Dweck, C. (2012). Principal connection/Got grit?. *Educational leadership*, 69(6), 84-89.

González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms.* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Harste, J. (2003). What do we mean by literacy now? *Voices from the middle*, *10*(3). 8-11.

Kalantzis, M.& Cope, B. (2012). *New Learning: Elements of a Science of Education (*2nd ed.). University Press.

Klocko, B., Justis, R., & Kirby, E. (2019). Leadership tenacity and public-school superintendents.

Journal of Leadership Education, 18(1). Retrieved from:

https://doi.10.12806/V18/I1/R1

Roff, K. (2021). Superintendents' experiences with distance learning practices in K-12 public-school districts in new york during the COVID-pandemic. *International journal of e-learning & distance education*. 36(1). Retrieved from https://www.ijeda.ca/index.php/jde/article/view/1175

U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). Quick facts Russell County, Alabama.

https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/russellcountyalabama

Wexler, J., Swanson, E., Kurz, L. A., Shelton, A., & Vaughn, S. (2019). Enhancing reading

comprehension in middle schools classrooms using a critical reading routine. *Intervention*

in school and clinic. https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451219855738/