FEATURED ARTICLES

SEL Essentials for Beginning the 2021–22 School Year—and Beyond

Data-informed Practices for Foundational Skills Instruction: Our Top Five Practices

Author’s Chair: An Interview with Juana Martinez-Neal

Facing the Shadows, Moving Toward Grace: Best Practices for Equity in Writing Instruction

Introducing Being a Reader, Second Edition
START THE SCHOOL YEAR WITH COLLABORATIVE CIRCLE

Welcome to the fourth issue of Collaborative Circle. As the 2021–22 school year begins, our Circle is here to provide inspiration, connection, and support for your teaching and learning.

This issue is brimming with wonderful content, but first I’d like to share an article that we published elsewhere—in the August 2021 issue of The Learning Professional, the journal of Learning Forward.

The article, “Coaching—anytime, from anywhere—empowers teachers,” puts forth our thinking about how asynchronous online coaching can provide unique benefits for educators, allowing them to take greater ownership of their own learning, while simultaneously helping districts effectively scale their efforts to provide high-quality professional learning.

The end result of this thinking is Collaborative Coach, our new asynchronous online coaching platform, created in partnership with Javelin Learning. Collaborative Coach embodies our commitment to empowering individual teachers to develop their capacity, growing in both their understanding of literacy instruction and their skill as facilitators of student learning.

This fourth issue of Collaborative Circle embodies this same commitment, with articles including "Data-informed Practices for Foundational Skills Instruction" by Tamara Williams and Lenora Forsythe, who bring a collective 30+ years of experience teaching and coaching reading, and "SEL Essentials for Beginning the School Year—and Beyond" by Kristy Rauch and Peter Brunn, who remind us that attending to social-emotional learning (SEL) is key to achieving everything we hope for our students this year. The issue also features an in-depth conversation with Valerie Fraser about the development and features of the new second edition of our Being a Reader program, now a comprehensive K–2 reading curriculum.

Other highlights include a joyful interview with award-winning author and illustrator Juana Martinez-Neal (whose book Alma and How She Got Her Name we are delighted to use in our curricula) and last but not least, a powerful essay by Sarah Rosenthal, "Facing the Shadows, Moving Toward Grace: Best Practices for Equity in Writing Instruction," which you’ll want to ponder and share with colleagues.

Please enjoy this issue. I hope you’ll find it a source of insight and inspiration for the year ahead. As always, thank you for being part of our Circle.

Kelly Stuart, EdD
President and Chief Operating Officer
Center for the Collaborative Classroom
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Hi!
SEL Essentials for Beginning the School Year—and Beyond

By Peter Brunn and Kristy Rauch

Expectations are high for the 2021–22 school year. As students return to in-person instruction, many educators are feeling the pressure—in particular, the pressure to swiftly accelerate learning that was disrupted or fragmented during the previous year.

So how do we plan intentionally and decide what to prioritize?

While it is tempting to focus solely on acceleration, we must also prioritize attending to our students’ social and emotional needs. In fact, neglecting them will undermine everything that we hope to achieve with our students this year.

Child development research tells us that children learn and grow best in environments where their basic psychological needs are met. Children need to feel physically and emotionally safe. They need to feel that they belong. They need to believe in their autonomy and capabilities.

Studies indicate that when these basic needs are met by providing students with a sense of community at school, the students do better academically (as measured over time by grades and test scores), exhibit more prosocial tendencies, and show greater resistance to problem behaviors, such as drug use and violence (Durlak et al. 2011).

For us, there are three SEL essentials that guide our thinking about best practices for starting the school year (and beyond). Your own list of essentials may be different from ours, based on the needs of your community. Nonetheless we hope that by sharing our thinking, we will help you zero in on your own short list of what is most important for your students.

**Essential #1 – Build Relationships**

“Building relationships” appears at the top of most people’s lists. However, saying that relationships are important is very different from actually doing the constant, ongoing work of building relationships. (And let’s be clear: doing a tidy set of team builder activities during the opening weeks of the school year only scratches the surface of this work.) Authentic relationships are complicated and often messy. They require true listening, openness, and vulnerability. Robust connections are only forged when we acknowledge the hopes, dreams, fears, and weaknesses in one another.

**WHY ARE RELATIONSHIPS SO IMPORTANT?**

Relationships are foundational for learning. If “going virtual” during the pandemic taught educators anything, it was this: when kids do not feel safe, connected, and intrinsically motivated,
doing the hard work of learning is almost impossible. Relationships are crucial for creating the conditions in which students can fully engage and in which learning occurs.

We know from the groundbreaking work of researchers Edward Deci and Richard Ryan that for students to be intrinsically motivated, it’s imperative that three fundamental human needs are first met: the need for autonomy, the need for belonging or “relatedness,” and the need for competence (the ABCs).

We also know from our own organization’s research that a strong sense of belonging and connectedness is positively correlated to a whole host of positive outcomes for students. Here are a few other points to consider about the importance of relationships:

• **Relationships embolden students to take the intellectual risks that are necessary for growth.** Learning involves taking risks. Taking risks means that we are making ourselves vulnerable, opening ourselves up to the possibility of failing, sometimes publicly. In order to take these intellectual risks, students need to feel safe and connected.

• **When we’re trying to accelerate learning, there are twin temptations: first, to rush and cover a great deal of content, and second, to skimp on relationship building.** Although covering content is obviously important, the content won’t be learned if we do it at the expense of making sure students feel safe, cared for, and connected. Just because we cover the content does not mean students learn it; only the learner controls what gets learned.

• **Meaningful relationships between the teacher and each student help us transcend our biases and be responsive to our students.** We all come with unconscious biases about race, ethnicity, gender, and class. When we only have surface level relationships with students, we have a tendency to use these biases to make judgments about them. Those biases shape how we see them and impact what we expect of them. But when we form authentic relationships with our students and take the time to learn about the families and communities they come from, we start to see them as individual people with their own hopes, dreams, and fears. The relationship provides a potential pathway around our biases, into a new space where students can thrive.
• Positive, healthy relationships play a central role in supporting students who have experienced trauma, according to the research. According to a 2017 report by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, “[s]upportive relationships and teaching resilience skills can mitigate the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE),” such as the death or incarceration of a parent or witnessing or being a victim of violence.

How do I build and maintain relationships?

When you consider the most meaningful relationships in your own life, it’s likely they are the ones you actively nurture and maintain. Relationships with students are no different; a healthy classroom community also needs to be carefully tended and cultivated. Whether it’s your relationship with families and students, or the relationships your students have with each other, relationship building must be intentional: it can’t be left to chance.

Here are a few key research-supported structures that we have developed to help students develop and maintain healthy relationships in the classroom:

• Class meetings – Class meetings are conducted with students gathered in a circle. Specific ground rules govern the discussion (e.g., talk one at a time, listen to one another, allow differences of opinion).
  - The teacher’s role in these meetings is to create an environment that intentionally fosters the ABCs of autonomy, belonging, and competence and that takes students’ learning, experiences, opinions, and concerns seriously.
  - The students’ role is to participate as valued and influential contributors to the classroom community. Class meetings might be used to solve whole class (not individual student) problems, plan events, or make decisions.

- To see examples of class meetings and get support for starting your school year, download our free Reconnecting and Rebuilding Toolkit. The Class Meetings in this Toolkit can be used to build relationships and provide a forum for students to come together and talk about some of the important feelings and issues they may be carrying with them.

• “Morning Circle” – This activity forms the centerpiece of our CASEL SEllect Caring School Community program. The Morning Circle is a daily gathering that provides a predictable, caring space for kids to connect with each other, refine social and emotional skills, and transition into the school day.

• Cross-age buddies – One of the key ways in which schools help students feel connected to the school community – not just the classroom – is through the intentional partnering of students with “buddies” from other classrooms.
  - Typically classrooms separated by at least two grade levels are paired together which allows students to form a special relationship as an older or younger buddy with a student outside their classroom.
  - Buddies activities can be simple partner interviews, or more elaborate activities connected to content areas.
Essential #2 – Ensure that Instruction Authentically Integrates Academic and Social Development

Often when working with teachers, we hear a common refrain. Teachers will articulate their support for building relationships, but say, “I do team builders for the first few weeks of school; then I get to the important stuff.”

The “important stuff” usually means moving on to the academic content areas. But as we know, SEL and relationship building are just as important. In fact, relationships are the building block of academic development. In the absence of strong relationships, students will not be motivated to do the work or take the intellectual risks they need in order to succeed.

WHY MUST ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT BE INTEGRATED?

If we are to create and sustain authentic relationships with and among students, we can’t relegate the work of building meaningful relationships or practicing social and emotional skills to the beginning of the year or to a special SEL-themed block of time during the day.

Since our founding in 1980, Collaborative Classroom’s mission has been to equip teachers with effective practices that fully integrate social and academic instruction. Below are several structures that help students learn more about each other, explore their own identities, build meaningful relationships, and find real-life contexts for refining and growing their social skills, all while engaging in rigorous academic work:

• Relevant and meaningful content – This is often overlooked, especially in the younger grades. If we are to build deep relationships in school and help students do high-level work, the content we cover and the topics we discuss must be relevant and meaningful. None of our other strategies or structures will work if there is no meaning to the work that students are doing. By honoring and including topics that kids care about, we ensure that the collaboration built into our lessons has purpose and meaning.

• Random partner work – At the beginning of the year, we create norms that make it safe and expected for students to work with everyone in the classroom during instruction. Students might not be (and certainly don’t have to be) close friends, but they will need to develop strategies for collaborating with each other. This means working through sticky situations, solving problems, and advocating for yourself and others when necessary.

• Reflecting on partner work – A key act of learning and community building that is often overlooked in the classroom is providing students time to reflect together on their partner work during instruction. After students have talked with a partner about a book, solved a problem together, brainstormed a list, given feedback on writing, or conducted an experiment, it is essential that we provide time for them to reflect on their behavior. We might ask them:

  - How did it go working with your partner?
    What went well? What did not go well?
  - What strategies did you use to work through that together?
  - How did it feel when you did not get a turn?
  - Where did you get stuck?
These questions provide teachers with opportunities to hear what skills kids already have and what skills they might need. It sends the message to kids that we value this learning, that it is essential to our academic development, and that we can work through problems together. In fact, it is often the act of overcoming a challenge that brings us closer together.

- **Reading aloud and discussing the big ideas in books** – There might be no better way to help students feel connected than to read a great book together. Books can make us laugh, make us cry, make us wonder, and fill us with joy. Rigorous book discussions open windows for students to look through and show them mirrors to see themselves.

- **Choice and independence** – Students thrive when they are given choice in their learning and are encouraged to be independent. Choice fosters autonomy, which, as mentioned earlier, is foundational for intrinsic motivation.
Essential #3 – Take Care of Yourself and Stay Connected to Others

“Put on your own oxygen mask before assisting other passengers.” As flight attendants always say when explaining what to do in case of a drop in cabin pressure, it’s imperative that we each take care of ourselves before we try to help the people around us.

This might be a good way to think about our task during the year ahead. We all need time to take care of ourselves, to make sure that we are doing OK mentally and emotionally. Self care will mean something different to each of us. It might take the form of exercising, meditating, praying, journaling, making art, gardening, connecting with friends and family, or all of the above. If you’re feeling burnt out or unsure of how to begin making time for self-care, we invite you to explore our Teacher Wellness series on our blog.

Even if you are already well-versed in self care, the truth is that none of us can do this alone. We will need advice and a sympathetic listening ear. We will require hard feedback, and we may need shoulders to cry on. For all these reasons, it’s vital that we stay connected with our colleagues and keep those relationships strong.

REFLECT: WHAT ARE YOUR SEL ESSENTIALS?

These are our SEL essentials as we embark upon the school year: building relationships, integrating academic and social development, and taking care of ourselves and staying connected to others. What will you prioritize? What will guide you? We hope that, through reflecting on our essentials, you have solidified your own.

Reference:
The *Caring School Community* curriculum has been evaluated by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and has received SESelect status, CASEL's highest designation for quality social and emotional learning (SEL) programming.

As a recommended curriculum, *Caring School Community* is included in the 2021 edition of the *CASEL Guide to Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs*.

The SESelect designation “indicates that a program is evidence-based, well-designed, and classroom-based, and that it systematically promotes students’ social and emotional competence, provides opportunities for practice, offers multiyear programming, and delivers high-quality training and other implementation supports.”

Learn more at [collaborativeclassroom.org/programs/caring-school-community](http://collaborativeclassroom.org/programs/caring-school-community)
Our intent as teachers is to ensure mastery of skills—especially when it comes to foundational skills—using data-informed instruction. The challenges of the pandemic have underscored the need for data-informed instruction to accelerate student learning, as we think about not only intervening, but literally making up for lost instructional time. As the 2021–22 school year unfolds and we prepare to approach the midyear mark, it’s important to pause and consider what data we have now and how we’re using that data to adjust instruction to meet our students’ needs.

Our collective 30 years of experience includes teaching and coaching reading with a variety of student and adult learners, so when asked to write about our “go-to” moves for data-informed practices, we were excited to collaborate on the data we consider and how we use it to make instructional decisions.
Practice #1: First, Look Within

When we think about foundational skills instruction, there are many known best practices based in the science of reading. We know students need to be highly engaged in systematic, explicit instruction. We know students need ample practice. We also know that early intervention matched to each individual’s point of need is essential. Finally, we know that students benefit from consistent, clear instruction.

Considering these "knowns," our first recommendation is to ensure that what is happening during instruction does in fact align with these best practices. Before digging through student data and assuming instruction is not working or suspecting a learning disability, we suggest that you ask yourself the following questions:

• Am I following a systematic progression of instruction?
• Is my instruction targeted to meet a known gap/deficit?
• Has my instruction been explicit? Consistent? How do I know?
• As an interventionist, what do I know about core instruction? Is my instruction aligned to core? Is the core instruction effective?
• Have students had ample time to practice recently taught skills?

If the answer to any of these questions is "No" or "I'm not sure," this is the perfect opportunity to delve deeper into current instruction by engaging in self-reflection to ensure you are teaching in alignment with best practices.

Practice #2: The Power of Observation

Observing. Kid-watching. Anecdotes. No matter how formal or informal, having a keen eye on what students are doing (or not doing) is an essential part of data collection.

Between ourselves, we’ve joked that this is sort of a mini self-challenge—we want our observations to provide a solid prediction for upcoming progress-monitoring data. By using our observations, we can proactively add in additional practice of the skills we see lacking before a formal data collection opportunity. Here are some things to look for during the literacy block:

• Reading tasks: Is the child able to decode patterns and read sight words that were previously taught? Are they able to do this in isolation and in connected text? Is the child able to read at the expected rate with high accuracy?
• Writing tasks: Is the child able to spell previously taught sight words and spelling patterns?

Practice #3: Observing During Instruction Itself

The kid-watching continues—in all honesty, it never stops!—but with a new layer. During actual instruction, our observation skills intentionally shift and expand to encompass what’s happening within the lesson. As described in Practice #2, we continue to note how students are doing as they practice recently introduced reading and spelling skills. Now, during direct instruction, an additional layer of observation comes in. Here are some of the things we look for:

• We watch for mouth movements and eye contact that signal that our students are in the moment with us.
• We use proximity to support attention as needed. For example, during choral responses, we still attempt to lean in to each student individually so we can listen carefully as they respond.

• During virtual instruction, we ask students to sit on the edge of their seats, with their bodies and cameras poised for optimal viewing of mouth movements and/or writing observations.

• We also lean in to listen and watch as students apply what they have learned to reading decodable text and spelling during dictation tasks.

Our observations during direct instruction allow us to be more responsive, supplementing with additional practice when any observational data indicates the need for it. Then, when the time comes, we collect individual student progress monitoring data that brings us back to our original goal: mastery of foundational skills.

This data will inform our decision-making—it helps us decide if we keep moving along with the systematic progression of instruction at the same pace, continue instruction at a slower pace, or return to reteach previously taught skills. It will tell us if the whole group should move on, or if only some students are ready to do so.

Practice #4: Observing Across the School Day

Our next tip? That’s right! Kid-watching. But this time, we suggest you look beyond the isolated instructional time that’s devoted to foundational skills and really consider what you see students doing across the entire school day. (If you are in an interventionist role and only work with students for a short part of the day, this may mean asking the child’s homeroom teacher to provide artifacts or to share observations with you.)

While it’s essential that our students master foundational skills, that mastery is always in service of a bigger, overarching goal: developing our students as well-rounded readers.

While it’s essential that our students master foundational skills, that mastery is always in service of a bigger, overarching goal: developing our students as well-rounded readers. To that end, we encourage you to lean in and listen as students engage in independent reading. Are they applying what they know to be true in lessons to their leisure reading? Are they accurate? Fluent? Take a close look as they write. Are they applying what they have learned about words to their drafts?

Pay attention to other content areas, as well. Do you notice application of these reading and writing skills during math? Science? Social studies? In addition to observational data, consider student performance on additional outcome measures that help you look at each child as a whole reader. What is the big picture telling you?
Practice #5: Invite a Thought Partner

When in doubt, phone a friend. Whether you’ve been teaching for one year or for decades, the value of a thought partner cannot be overstated. Sometimes student data is perplexing, and the fresh perspective of a colleague can help draw attention to certain areas, or help prioritize instruction.

In our experience, thought partnerships have proven especially helpful in situations where the data doesn’t point to a specific skill (e.g., the child is having difficulty with the short “e” sound), but instead points to a few weaknesses. It helps to think through the instructional approach with a colleague: Would inserting extra practice be enough? Is reteaching warranted? After I insert extra practice or reteach, should I adjust the pacing on upcoming lessons? When should I remove the scaffold(s)?

In addition to having a colleague with whom to collaborate, a research-based intervention curriculum can serve as a partner and support for your data-informed instructional decision-making. For example, in the SIPPS (Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words) program that we use, teacher supports such as Instructional Self-Checks and Mastery Test Interpretation guidance are embedded within the program materials. These supports have helped us individually and in collaboration with others to analyze student data and ensure we are well-informed for determining instructional next steps.

IN CONCLUSION: WORKING EFFICIENTLY TOWARD MASTERY

So there you have them: our top five practices for data-informed foundational skills instruction. Before we conclude, here are a few final words of encouragement as you embark on this work:

• Embrace the individuality of each student.
• Appreciate the wealth of information that is available to triangulate—within lessons and beyond—to paint a clear data story for each child.
• Take time to hone your kid-watching skills.
• Give yourself grace, always, as you continue to learn and grow!

In navigating the challenges of this school year, we believe that a focus on data-informed instruction will help you and your students work more efficiently toward mastery of foundational skills. By relying on comprehensive data collection, we ensure that our time teaching is spent on exactly what students need most. While it feels overwhelming, keep in mind that growth can happen quickly, especially when instruction is tailored, and there is nothing more rewarding than seeing all the pieces come together for your readers!
An Interview with Juana Martinez-Neal

By Jennie McDonald

Juana Martinez-Neal’s first picture book as both author and illustrator—*Alma and How She Got Her Name*—was awarded a 2019 Caldecott Honor and Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Honor, was chosen as a 2019 NCTE Charlotte Huck Award Recommended Title, and was named a Best Book of 2018 by *School Library Journal*, *ALA Booklist*, and the *New York Public Library*. Collaborative Classroom is proud to feature *Alma and How She Got Her Name* in our *Being a Reader* program.

No stranger to accolades, Martinez-Neal has also won the Pura Belpre Award for illustration, the Robert F. Sibert Medal Award, and the American Indian Youth Literature Award. Her books include *Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story*, *La Princesa and the Pea, La Madre Goose: Nursery Rhymes for los Niños*, and *Zonia’s Rain Forest*, among others.

Exuberantly embraced by the children’s literary world, readers everywhere love her beautiful and signature artistic style as well as her natural storytelling ability. She generously agreed to share her thoughts about her creative work and life, including the path she took from Peru to the United States, and in some ways, back again. We hope you enjoy the conversation.

**Collaborative Classroom:** This is an exciting time in your career: you’ve illustrated five beautiful books, received many awards—from the Pura Belpré and the Robert F. Sibert Medals to the Caldecott Honor, to name just a few—and now, you’ve published the second book you both wrote and illustrated, *Zonia’s Rain Forest*, a stunning achievement. What’s this moment like for you? How does it feel to be doing the work that you do?

**JMN:** I feel satisfied more than anything. It is exciting to see when and where I started and what I have done so far. Yet I do not like to sit and think about this much. There is always a new idea to chase, a new book to figure out, and more importantly, finding new ways to share what I want to express through my art.

**Collaborative Classroom:** Let’s go back to the beginning for a moment: can you tell us the story...
of your journey here—from Peru and art school, to the United States and the illustration of children's books? Along the way, who helped you? What were your challenges? What did you learn about yourself?

**JMN:** I went to art school because I thought I wanted to be a designer. I wanted to help make the world prettier. While I was there, I realized I wanted to be a painter; like my dad, like my grandfather. But the professors at the school didn’t think that my calling was painting. One of them told me that I was an illustrator. He was right, but I felt lost at that moment because I didn’t know I could make a living as such. I thought that my best option was to take a year off from college to decide what I was going to do with my life. My dad suggested I move to Los Angeles to spend a year figuring out my next steps. I left Peru in March of 1995 and never moved back. The first years in the United States were not easy. I had never had a full time job or lived on my own before. I was forced to learn fast to become an independent adult.

On my way to becoming “American,” I stopped painting and writing poetry, and lost who I was. This was a period of about ten years while I was trying to learn English, understand this new culture, and find my place in my new country. More often than I wanted, I felt out of place and very lonely. Luckily, I met Chris Neal, who would later become my husband. He went to art school for illustration, and brought happiness, security, and art back into my life. I started a small design studio and was doing well but by the time our second child was born, I was tired and running on empty. I had lost my connection to Peru, my culture, and who I was before I moved. This was the lowest emotional point in my life.

Thanks to Chris, I found children’s illustration. He had told me (repeatedly, because I kept ignoring him) that I could make a living illustrating children’s books. I started to pursue a career as a children’s illustrator in October of 2005. Then in 2009, I took a trip to Peru that helped me reconnect with my old self. I traveled alone and stayed with my college and childhood friends. I realized then everything that I had lost and forgotten about my country. After the trip, my work changed. I started focusing on painting the people I knew and the life I had left behind. As I found my way back, my work improved. The rest of the story you know.

There were so many people who helped me to find my way. First there was my dad, who knew I was an illustrator decades before I had the words to call myself that. My husband, who pointed me towards picture books. My bestie, Molly Idle, who is a constant support and believed that I could be a picture book illustrator AND author. And there is my agent, Stefanie Sanchez Von Borstel, who always believes in my vision and ideas; and my editor, Mary Lee Donovan, who helped me turn ideas into something tangible. And so many more people.

**Collaborative Classroom:** I’m curious about how you collaborate with the authors of the books you illustrate, like on *Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story*, winner of the 2020 Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal and a 2020 American Indian Youth Literature Picture Book Honor.
JMN: The collaboration I had with Kevin Noble Maillard was very involved. I had questions for him and needed his help to be able to make a book that could accurately represent the Seminole, his Nation, and the Native people in this country. He suggested designs for clothing and specific pieces of art that made it in the book. He helped me find the designs of tattoos that carried cultural significance and also helped research the names of all the Nations and Tribes that I had handwritten for the endpapers. This book was a true collaboration.

Collaborative Classroom: Zonia’s Rain Forest brings to life the Amazon Rainforest and the many creatures that live within it (e.g. Blue morpho butterfly, Arrau turtle, Amazon river dolphin, South American coati). It tells the story of Zonia, who is a member of the largest Indigenous nation: the Asháninka. The text and the art offer an immersive experience; Zonia is so intimately part of the world around her, and beautiful textures abound—in the hair, the trees, the roofs, the fabric, fur, and feathers. Even the paper itself seems woven into the whole. Everything on the page is literally connected in some way. In your Candlewick Press interview about the book, you brought your own visit to the forest to life. It sounds as if you felt you were inside and part of an organism; hurting the forest would be like hurting yourself.

Collaborative Classroom: Zonia was not an easy book to make because of the message at the end. At times, it felt like the heaviness took over me, and I had to take breaks. However, it was an important message to share with young readers.

JMN: I am honored that you feel this way. I truly try to immerse myself in each book I create, even more so if the book I’m working on is one that I am writing and illustrating. For this reason, I can only work on one book at a time.

I believe that each book should make the reader feel a certain way. Each piece should communicate a deep emotion. This emotion is born when I am working on the sketches and later painting the illustrations. If I did my job well, the reader will feel that same profound joy, worry, excitement or sadness I felt as I was working on the art. The art manifests through media, textures, palettes and surfaces, every element compounds and works together to share these emotions with the reader. The same happens when I add the words to the book.

We gain nothing by shielding children from the truth.

Zonia was not an easy book to make because of the message at the end. At times, it felt like the heaviness took over me, and I had to take breaks. However, it was an important message to share with young readers.

Collaborative Classroom: How did this story come to be? Could you tell us about your experience researching and creating it, and what you hope readers will take from the book?

JMN: I found myself drawing the Amazon and its people. I was exploring the idea of “home” and how this changes depending on who you are and where you live. I wanted to touch on the rights of the Indigenous people over their lands. I also wanted to make a book about the Amazon from the perspective of the people who call it home. As I was reading more about the Asháninka people and their life, I started learning about their efforts to protect their lands led by Ruth Buendia. At this point, Zonia started to have a direction and purpose.
It is my hope that with *Zonia*, young readers can see and understand that we are all interconnected. Even more so, I would love to know that the character helped them become involved in the environment so they could help educate others about respecting every way of life.

**Collaborative Classroom:** I was struck by Zonia’s joyful, meditative presence, and the sudden shock of the empty, broken forest page. You’ve mentioned you struggled with deciding how much is too much when sharing something that will make people sad. This reminded me of questions we ask ourselves at Collaborative Classroom: how should we handle painful subjects in the classroom—topics brought up through books teachers read aloud or student experiences in the world? What is the right balance?

**JMN:** I struggled knowing how much was right to share. At the same time, I thought that we gain nothing by shielding children from the truth. Let’s just look at what we are living through in this country right now. We have to consider that some children have difficult lives. Being young does not allow them to escape hardship and pain. Yet we prepare and equip young readers for life when we openly discuss difficult subjects and possible solutions. In the case of *Zonia*, we had fires in the Amazon, and in Oregon, California, and Washington before the book was released. The children were and are watching the news. They know what is happening. I believe that these younger generations will grow to be better adults than we are because of that.

**Collaborative Classroom:** *Alma and How She Got Her Name* was your first book as both writer and illustrator. In it, you explore Alma’s “too long” name that “never fits” and you lightly, beautifully weave in important themes of identity, family, and self worth. How did this book come to be, and what was it like to make the shift from illustrating others’ stories to writing and illustrating your own?

**JMN:** I knew that having a book as an author and illustrator would allow me to get published sooner. Yet being ready takes time and work. I had heard “write what you know” many times, so I started there. If there was a story I knew well, it was the
story of my name. My name was changed at the very last minute, and growing up my name felt too formal and uncomfortable for most people to say without endearments. My personal experience with my name was the seed that started *Alma*.

**Collaborative Classroom:** In the book, you say that you once thought your own name was “way-too-Spanish”—why is that?

**JMN:** Peruvians are greatly influenced by foreign countries. It is common to think that something from another country is better than something Peruvian. This includes names. With that in mind, many people give their children names in other languages like Erika, Giselle, Anushka, and Cynthia.

My dad believed the exact opposite! He believed that if our language in Peru was Spanish, his children would have Spanish names, very Spanish names. So I was named Juana Carlota, which was difficult for people to shorten. Now after writing *Alma*, I have to confess that I would have loved it now if he had given me a name in Quechua or Aymara.

**Collaborative Classroom:** At the end of the book, you invite readers to find out about their own name and think about what story they would like to tell. In your interactions with children (in classrooms, perhaps over Zoom, or in correspondence), what have they shared with you? How have they responded to *Alma*?

**JMN:** Who doesn’t like a chance to share their own story? *Alma* gives the readers that chance. It was a thoughtful and purposeful choice, which is the reason I close the book with those questions. I see *Alma* as a conversation starter, as a suggestion to share personal stories. I love hearing how it is used in elementary schools, yet also in middle school, high school and for adult learners. And in both English and Spanish! English learners can practice names of family members and descriptive writing. Spanish language learners can read or be read the book in Spanish and students can learn how to write their own introductions of themselves in Spanish using past tense.

One thing that is common among *Alma*’s young (and not as young) readers is their huge sense of pride in their names, their heritage, their families, and their personal stories. I never thought the book would do that and I love it.

**Collaborative Classroom:** Writing and drawing require a certain amount of courage and a willingness to be vulnerable. In our *Being a Writer* program, children do a lot of writing and sometimes experience both the excitement of sharing who they are and the fear of doing so. What advice do you have for teachers and students about how to find their own voice and share it with others?

**JMN:** We are all so unique. I would encourage everyone to embrace our peculiarities and fears. This is what makes us interesting and beautiful. When we open our hearts and become vulnerable, we share who we really are. Other people can then recognize our emotions and find them in themselves. At that moment, we are connecting at a deeper, personal level. I would invite teachers to visit my website. I have many resources, along with *Teacher’s Guides* based on *Alma* and *Zonia*.

**Collaborative Classroom:** Shifting gears just a little bit: about 10% of students in US public schools are English Language Learners (~ 5 million young people). I wonder, how many feel their names, their languages, and perhaps their life experiences, don’t “fit in” at school? In our literacy work, we strive to expand ways we support all students, respect first
languages, and embrace the background knowledge everyone brings into the classroom. There’s always more for us to learn, and more we can do.

I realize you grew up in Lima, but if you have ideas about ways you think we could support young English Language Learners in US schools, we’d love to hear them.

_In the US, bilingualism needs to be seen as the advantage that it is._

**JMN:** First, I think it is important for young readers in the US to have books available in both English and Spanish. This is why I wrote the original Spanish myself for _Alma y cómo obtuvo su nombre_ and _La selva de Zonia_. My native language is Spanish and I learned English mostly as an adult. In the US, bilingualism needs to be seen as the advantage that it is. We need to praise children for learning new languages and celebrate their culture and heritage as valuable and beautiful.

I love when teachers tag me to share how they use my books in their classrooms. Please take advantage of the wonderful Teacher’s Guides that Candlewick has created for both books. They are available in both English and Spanish.

**Collaborative Classroom:** The rich variation in your character illustrations is a visual reminder of the diversity within communities—such as Latinx, or Asian and African American—that are often defined narrowly. Sometimes in children’s literature, the pictures of BIPOC characters are so flattened and ambiguous all you can tell is that the character is not white. Could you speak to the important role of visual representation when we talk about inclusive literature for children?

**JMN:** I believe illustration is an extension of an illustrator’s life. We paint what we know. If we have friends of different sizes, genders, beliefs, and abilities, it’s very easy to include them in our books. Every character in my books is someone I know and love. I find it very problematic to just draw a character and paint the skin a certain color. If this happens, we are just filling in color but we are losing the layers that make us unique and interesting.

**Collaborative Classroom:** What about early influences in your life—could you tell us about a favorite childhood book and/or a favorite teacher or mentor?

**JMN:** _El Principito_. The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry was the first book I saw that mixed images and words. The images told you part of the story, picking up where the words left off. Not only that, but I connected to the tenderness of the message, how it was written for a young reader, how it protected a young heart.

**Collaborative Classroom:** What’s something we’d be surprised to know about you?

**JMN:** I love country music. I love the stories that are told in the songs. I love how they talk about deep emotions and how life is portrayed in a much simpler but beautiful way.

**Collaborative Classroom:** Do you have a favorite musician or song or two?
**JMN:** Oh, boy! I have a super long list but the first couple that come to mind are “The House that Built Me” and “Airstream Song” by Miranda Lambert.

**Collaborative Classroom:** What are you working on now?

**JMN:** *Tomatoes for Neela* is available now from Viking Children’s Books. The book was written by host of Bravo’s *Top Chef* and Hulu’s *Taste the Nation* Padma Lakshmi and illustrated by me. It is a celebration of how food connects us to our family and our culture. I am also working on illustrations for a new upcoming picture book, and starting sketches for *Alma and How She Got Her Name* board books!

*I would encourage everyone to embrace our particularities and fears. This is what makes us interesting and beautiful.*

**Collaborative Classroom:** Is there anything else you’d like to share?

**JMN:** I want to thank all the teachers and librarians who have embraced my books. Seeing them loved and used in such brilliant ways is the best gift a bookmaker can get. Thank you for the time and the opportunity to chat!

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**ABOUT JUANA MARTINEZ-NEAL**

Juana Martinez-Neal is the recipient of the 2019 Caldecott Honor for *Alma and How She Got Her Name* (Candlewick Press), her debut picture book as author-illustrator. She is also the recipient of the 2020 Robert F. Sibert Medal for *Fry Bread: A Native American Story* (Roaring Brook) and the 2018 Pura Belpre Medal for Illustration for *La Princesa and the Pea* (Putnam). Juana was named to the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) Honor list in 2014, and was awarded the SCBWI Portfolio Showcase Grand Prize in 2012. She was born in the busy city of Lima, Peru and now lives in the woods of Eastern Connecticut, sharing a home with her husband, two sons, daughter, two dogs, and the souls of their late cat, Kitty, and ginormous dog, Puppy.

Learn more at juanamartinezneal.com.

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**REFERENCE**

A PLACE AT THE TABLE

I had a dream recently in which I was editing a paragraph. I wanted to trim every extra word—but made sure to preserve the phrase shadow and grace.

I’ll skip an exploration of all that the phrase holds at this particular juncture in human history, and simply ask: Who wrote it? In the dream, it was by an unknown author. On waking, I realized it recalled similar phrases I’ve heard and read. So was the phrase mine? Yes ... and no.

Words belong to everyone and no one. When we write, we’re taking a seat at the communal table—sharing a poem, arguing a point, telling a story, laughing and weeping, responding vociferously or reflecting on others’ contributions.

Everyone deserves a place at the table. And as writers, we practice showing up in a way that commands attention. We apprentice ourselves, hone our craft. Gradually we develop the patience and the determination to wrangle sentences to say something new, true, and important. We come to love the process itself. This love, and the belief that we can make a contribution to the larger discourse, are necessary to sustain us through the hard parts.

SHADOW AND GRACE

Shadow: When students receive poor writing instruction, they learn to hate writing. They produce weak work that neither reflects nor advances their thinking.

Shadow: Many students inhabit identities that society has relegated to the margins. Told they have nothing to say, they get the message and act accordingly, making paper airplanes out of those journal pages before snoozing or secretly checking their phones.

Grace: Students who have been marginalized have within them untold stories, memoirs, poems, essays, pieces of opinion and documentation and advocacy that society needs if we hope to gain a truer understanding of the world and work toward social justice.
Grace: Writing can be taught well.
Grace: We writing teachers can learn and employ equitable practices that help all our students write pieces that Wow us.
I’m counting more grace than shadows. The odds are working in our favor, so let’s dive in and discuss practical ways to improve equity in writing instruction.

**1 USE FACILITATION TECHNIQUES AND COOPERATIVE STRUCTURES**

If we all have stories to tell, then we must also stop and listen to the stories others have to share with us. It has to be a two-way communication, which means really listening to the other person too.

— Saadia Faruqi, Author, A Thousand Questions

If we want all of our students to put themselves on the line, literally and figuratively, we need to create an atmosphere of trust and mutual support. Zaretta Hammond writes, “Relationships are the cornerstone of culturally responsive teaching.” Facilitative techniques such as asking open-ended questions and using wait-time, coupled with cooperative structures, help build a true writing community in which all students know that they and their ideas matter. This is a necessary precondition for students to take risks with their writing and produce original work.

During whole-class discussions, open-ended questions help ensure that students dig deeper with their thinking, while wait-time encourages more than a handful of students to enter the discussion. To use the cooperative structure “Turn to Your Partner,” the teacher asks a question; then students turn to face a partner and take turns sharing their ideas. Now everyone is getting a chance to express themselves verbally—a highly effective way to prime the writing pump. With “Think, Pair, Share,” students have a few moments to reflect before turning and talking. And with “Think, Pair, Write,” students funnel the ideas, language, and energy they’ve just generated through partner conversations directly onto the page.

Facilitation techniques and cooperative structures are invaluable during writing lessons. Better yet, using these approaches throughout the school day helps all students develop as confident speakers and thoughtful listeners who are more likely to approach writing time as a welcome opportunity to connect with themselves and others.

**2 ESTABLISH A PREDICTABLE LESSON STRUCTURE**

I’m often writing something almost every day. I keep journals: one on the computer, one for dreams, one for general observations and overheard things, and one for learning jazz standards...[I write best] when the airwaves are clear, either really early—like 6 a.m., 7 a.m., before anything is said—or really late.

— Joy Harjo, US Poet Laureate

Humans have always known that rituals help generate invention and vision—and at the most basic level simply help us get stuff done. When we know how things happen, we feel less jangled and better able to connect with the task at hand.

Harjo has created a daily practice crucial for continuing to accrue and weave together the multiple strands of her creative work in the midst of a busy life. Similarly, when designing writing instruction it’s important to establish a reliable container where students feel safe taking creative and intellectual risks. In “Principles and Practices for Integrating...
Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning into Daily Instruction,” Peter Brunn recommends a simple, four-part process: preparation for the work; whole-class instruction; individual and small-group work; and lesson reflection. Implementing a durable framework like this can help students settle into their writing and ultimately gain independence and confidence. And the more they can do that, the more the writing process itself will engage them. It’s a positive spiral.

3 FOREGROUND VOICE AND CHOICE

I regret being scared. I regret wasting time thinking I wasn’t good enough, that I didn’t deserve a seat at the table. You do belong and your voice is worthy. Say it to yourself in the mirror every morning if you have to, but don’t ever forget it.

– Jenna Wortham, Staff Editor, The New York Times Magazine

I don’t know whether Wortham’s words are more heartbreaking or inspiring. I do know we writing teachers have the means to help ensure that more young people don’t waste time doubting the worthiness of their voices.

We can make sure our writing curriculum gives all students equal opportunities to exercise their imaginations, express themselves, and explore their identities. (Their plural identities. We all have several, and many students face inequality based on more than one of their identities—for example, racial and class and gender identities.) Let’s not treat these opportunities as rewards to be deferred until our writers master the technical aspects of craft. As Dr. Marisa Ramirez Stukey and National Writing Project Executive Director Elyse Eidman-Aadahl point out in “Writing for Life: The Evidence Base for Powerful Writing Instruction,” “Celebrating and amplifying student voice in writing is an essential aspect of quality writing instruction and is a way to cultivate the unique gifts and talents of each student.”

One way we can foreground voice and choice is by encouraging students to select their own topics and develop their own characters. Another is to provide opportunities to write in a variety of genres. Each genre stretches budding writers in a different way. Through persuasive writing, they learn to present cogent arguments for their points of view. Through nonfiction they learn the importance and practice of backing up ideas with facts. Personal narrative invites them to share their unique experiences. Fiction opens doors to imaginary worlds while also at times providing a scrim behind which hard truths can be shared safely. Poetry operates as a permissive zone where rules can be freely broken and words become raw material for creative expression, much like paint or modeling clay. Down the road, having a panoply of genres at their disposal will allow our students to gravitate toward the ones that match their purposes and preferences while also enabling them to approach each piece with more versatility and skill.

4 TEACH THE WRITING PROCESS

I never have a problem finding enough words; I have to cut pieces down. That is usually the hard part. What goes? What stays?

– Ken Mochizuki, Author, Baseball Saved Us

Mochizuki grapples with trimming his drafts; other authors struggle to generate enough language. Each of us brings to the page our own assortment of strengths and weaknesses. But in the writing process we find a structure that helps us work through our individual quirks to produce a piece of solid work.
The writing process is an indispensable tool in our equity toolkit. As Hammond makes clear, we must disrupt the historical tendency to underestimate what our disadvantaged students are capable of intellectually. Culturally responsive teaching includes helping every student move toward independence. Teaching our students a tried-and-true series of steps that can be internalized over time does just that. I’ve written about Collaborative Classroom’s use of the writing process elsewhere, but here I’ll just note that it includes generating ideas and inspiration through mentor texts, discussion, and quick-writes; writing first drafts; revising; proofreading; and sharing with an audience—with plenty of teacher support and peer input along the way.

Besides the Author’s Chair, other purposes can be established for different types of writing. Students might share persuasive pieces on a classroom or school blog, inviting responses by others in the community, or send them to elected officials. Fiction pieces or personal narratives might be bound together in a book to be featured in the classroom or school library. Expository nonfiction writing might be done in the form of exhibit materials for a student-created "museum" addressing a particular topic or theme, replete with artifacts created or collected. Poems might be incorporated into a school mural. The sky (a.k.a. your imagination) is the limit.

**CREATE AUTHENTIC PURPOSES**

Stories can save lives and it’s never been truer than in my case, where I am determined to stay alive by pushing back at everything that says people like me are expendable and not worth saving.

– Alice Wong, Author, *Year of the Tiger* (forthcoming 2022)

Disability rights advocate Alice Wong writes with a burning purpose. Not every piece of writing needs to have this level of urgency, but like any of us, students write better and more eagerly when they know their work will have an impact—one more meaningful than demonstrating compliance by turning in assigned work.

Students can present finished pieces to their peers from the Author’s Chair, a powerful demonstration that every voice in the class matters. This celebrates the students’ hard work throughout the writing process, while providing practice in skills such as oral presentation, listening, and responding in thoughtful, kind ways.

Besides the Author’s Chair, other purposes can be established for different types of writing. Students might share persuasive pieces on a classroom or school blog, inviting responses by others in the community, or send them to elected officials. Fiction pieces or personal narratives might be bound together in a book to be featured in the classroom or school library. Expository nonfiction writing might be done in the form of exhibit materials for a student-created "museum" addressing a particular topic or theme, replete with artifacts created or collected. Poems might be incorporated into a school mural. The sky (a.k.a. your imagination) is the limit.

**PROVIDE DIVERSE MENTOR TEXTS**

Chicana Falsa: And Other Stories of Death, Identity, and Oxnard [by Michele Serros] marks the moment on my timeline when I discovered that I had a voice, and that that voice was bilingual and it was just as valid as any other voice. It was truly an awakening. Bilingual people wrote stories, poems, and books that were taught in colleges? And even used SPANGLISH?!

– Isabel Quintero, Author, *My Papi Has a Motorcycle*

Carefully chosen mentor texts do heavy lifting when it comes to both inspiring young writers and teaching them craft. And students need mentor texts that reflect their own identities as well as give them access to others’ identities and experiences. I’m guessing you’re familiar with Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop’s oft-quoted language about the importance of providing our students with windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors via multicultural literature. There’s a reason we’ve heard this metaphor a lot—it’s profoundly true, and nowhere more so than in the context of writing lessons.
Quintero’s quote speaks to the earth-shattering impact that multicultural, #OwnVoices texts (texts by diverse individuals based on their own experiences) can have on students. Thanks to the impetus provided by movements such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #WeNeedMoreDiverseBooks, more and more Own Voices texts are being published. If we want all of our students to light up and lean forward into read-alouds and writing prompts, getting these texts into our classrooms and libraries is a necessary step.

WRITE

...for the first 8 years of my teaching career I never once completed a writing task that I assigned my students. It wasn’t until Holden in my 1st period 5 years ago, asked, “So, what is your poem going to be about, Mr. Briseño?”... Entirely unaware, Holden was inviting me into 1st period’s community of practice. I was on the outside, or more accurately, I was at the top of the pyramid and community was scarce.

– Stephen Briseño, Educator

Writing alongside our students is a profoundly supportive act. We don’t need to be accomplished authors by any means. But we can demonstrate that we view writing as truly important, and gain a profound understanding of our students’ writing challenges and breakthroughs, by putting pencil to paper alongside them. As Dr. Ibram X. Kendi has said, part of the teacher’s role is to serve as a “model of vulnerability, of self-criticism.” When students see us check a fact or wrestle with the cadence of a sentence, they gain motivation for chipping away at the craft of writing. When we draft our own stories about the birth of a sibling or the loss of a treasured friend, we build an atmosphere of vulnerability that elicits writing with much more at stake than a grade.

ASSESS FOR INDIVIDUAL GROWTH

...a real writer is always shifting and changing and searching. The world has many labels for him, of which the most treacherous is the label of Success.

– James Baldwin, Author, Nobody Knows My Name

As teachers it is so difficult to maintain an SEL-healthy approach to students’ academic development. We join the larger culture in pushing students toward standardized measures of achievement. Isn’t a higher score better? Doesn’t “best” mean something?

These measures are what we have, and it is our job to use them. But it’s worth stepping off the wheel entirely for a moment and listening to one of our greatest writers.

Baldwin resisted the treachery of labels on every front—even the label of success. As a great writer he knew that every time you pick up your pen you must be ready to write the truth as it comes to you now, here, in this form. And that being told what you are—even being told that you are a success—dampens this readiness to discover and learn.

It’s as American as apple pie to strive for success. But an even yummier and more nutritious version of the pie is this: each of our voices is unique and important and constantly evolving. If we believe in serving nourishing pastry for all at the communal table, we need to help our students fall in love with bringing their best, not being the best. That translates into lots of supportive formative assessment during the writing process and across writing projects, avoiding student-to-student comparisons, and holding standardized testing lightly.
SHADOW AND GRACE, REDUX

Shadow: Our society’s severe inequities won’t evaporate by tomorrow.

Shadow: We long to do every single thing possible for our students, pronto, to provide ideal and equitable learning conditions for them. We can feel too small for the job.

Grace: If you’re reading this, I’m guessing you’ve already committed to providing equitable writing instruction, and are doing lots well. Bravo! As a next step, you might pick one item from the list above to implement or improve next, and make a plan for addressing the rest.

Grace: As we continue to work toward making space for all at the communal table, we will see results. Our students will generate powerful, authentic writing that feeds us and our world.

Grace: We can give it to our young writers... and we can give it to ourselves.

These are a few of the ways I understand the phrase shadow and grace in the context of equitable writing instruction. How about you?

REFERENCES
Collaborative Coach: Asynchronous, Personalized Coaching Support for Teachers

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Collaborative Coach is an interactive, video-based asynchronous coaching experience that provides one-on-one coaching for individual teachers in a safe and supportive environment.

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“
This is the most powerful professional learning I have participated in throughout my career. This process allowed me to reflect on my own practice and have individual coaching feedback.”

—Kelly S., Interventionist/Title 1, Bethalto School District #8, IL

To watch a video about Collaborative Coach, scan the QR code.

collaborativeclassroom.org/professional-learning/collaborative-coach
Interview with Valerie Fraser:  
Introducing  
Being a Reader, Second Edition  

By Kelly Stuart  

Collaborative Classroom is excited to announce the publication of Being a Reader, Second Edition, which is available now for the 2021–22 school year. With the launch of the second edition, Being a Reader is now a comprehensive reading program for grades K–2, adding rigorous comprehension work to the program’s systematic, explicit, and sequential foundational skills instruction and integrated social skills development.

In this interview, President and Chief Operating Officer Kelly Stuart, EdD, spoke with Valerie Fraser, Vice President of Program Development and Publishing, about the development and features of the new second edition of Being a Reader, focusing on how the program is intentionally designed to support instructional equity and support all students in becoming confident, fluent readers, independent learners, and caring, fully engaged members of their school community.
Kelly Stuart: Before we talk about Being a Reader, I think it’s important to acknowledge how the national conversation about the science of reading has evolved during recent years. When you consider this evolution, what in particular stands out for you?

Valerie Fraser: There are many committed researchers and advocates for the science of reading who have been doing this work for decades. It’s encouraging to see how recent reporting by journalists such as Emily Hanford is now bringing these important ideas to a wider audience.

In the research community, I think of Dr. Louisa Moats, who is a nationally recognized authority on literacy education, as well as Professor Nell Duke, an eloquent advocate for well-rounded literacy instruction built on a solid foundation of decoding, world knowledge, and intrinsic motivation to read. We’re also grateful to our partners at the Consortium on Reaching Excellence in Education (CORE), who do superb work with foundational skills instruction.

Finally, I always think of Professor John Shefelbine, who developed the SIPPS (Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words) curriculum and who spent his long career working to ensure that all students become successful, fluent readers.

Here at Collaborative Classroom, we embraced the science of reading early on, during the time when the organization (then named Developmental Studies Center) transitioned from a focus on research and began to develop curriculum.

Our founding pedagogy is based in seminal research into intrinsic motivation and social and emotional learning, but as you know, all the motivation in the world is not going to help a student who cannot decode; systematic, explicit foundational skills instruction is crucial. That’s why it was an incredibly important moment in the organization’s development when we began our relationship with Dr. Shefelbine and the SIPPS program in the 1990s.

On a personal note, I had the great privilege of working with Dr. Shefelbine to develop SIPPS into the curriculum that it is today. In fact, that was the first project I worked on when I came to Collaborative Classroom, and it’s still one of the highlights of my career. His research and instructional practices are part of my DNA, and so today it is heartening to see so many educators embracing the research and science of reading.

Kelly Stuart: So how does Being a Reader, as a K–2 program, fit into what the science of reading tells us about how young children learn to read during those crucial early elementary grades?

Valerie Fraser: Before I answer, I’m going to lean on a really helpful 2019 article “Implications of the DRIVE Model of Reading: Making the Complexity of Reading Actionable” by Nell Duke and Kelly Cartwright to provide insights about the research itself. This article illuminates the underpinnings of learning to read and the many factors that contribute to successfully orchestrating the reading process. I especially appreciate this article because it moves the discussion around decoding and comprehension in a productive direction—toward the acknowledgement of the “messiness” of teaching reading. Students need both the foundational skills to decode the texts as well as deeper skills to comprehend, analyze, and synthesize the various texts they encounter. It’s not either/or; it’s both/and.

Students need both the foundational skills to decode the texts as well as deeper skills to comprehend, analyze, and synthesize the various texts they encounter. It’s not either/or; it’s both/and.
Being a Reader intentionally takes account of this messiness or, if you prefer, this complexity. We are very aware that the teacher is in the best position to tailor literacy instruction. Being a Reader provides all the elements of a wrap-around literacy environment, and gives the teacher the tools, including formative assessments and "just in time" teaching notes, to adjust instruction and meet the needs of students.

The program is multi-faceted: whole-class experiences; small-group phonics and decoding instruction at students’ point of need; independent reading with conferring. The small-group component of Being a Reader is aligned with the instruction in SIPPS, both in terms of the scope and sequence and the instructional model. This alignment allows us to use SIPPS as an intensive intervention and move students seamlessly between Being a Reader and SIPPS.

In short, with Being a Reader, we are providing the solid foundational-skills instruction in the context of rich reading and instruction around background knowledge, academic language, speaking and listening skills, and critical thinking, as well as integrated social skills development. It’s a complete solution.

Kelly Stuart: How did your team undertake the work of conceptualizing Being a Reader, Second Edition? Tell us about your process and areas of focus. How did you incorporate feedback from district partners, educators, and leaders in the field?

Valerie Fraser: We are a learning organization: we know that there are always improvements that we can make to better support teachers and students. We’ve benefitted from having several years of seeing Being a Reader used in classrooms across the country and working with our district partners to gather input on what works well and where we could make the program even stronger.
That feedback was carefully studied by our core team of experienced program managers and curriculum writers—most of whom are educators themselves, and all of whom are steeped in our pedagogy and in research-based best practices for literacy instruction.

We are a learning organization: we know that there are always improvements that we can make to better support teachers and students.

We approached the revision of Being a Reader well aware of the reinvigorating conversations around education during the past several years. That’s why it was important that our revision process be outward-facing. Our curriculum development process is very connected to our field staff. These folks fall into two groups: field staff who work closely with school- and district-based leaders, and those who facilitate professional learning around our programs. Their insights from their work with district partners are always invaluable.

We also developed a panel of teacher-users across the country, and they graciously worked with us as we conceptualized the revision of Being a Reader. Based on observations and feedback from users and from our field staff, we identified several areas to explore, including digital literacy, support for English Language Learners (ELL), support for teachers’ professional learning around literacy, and instructional equity.

So, we targeted these topics, enlisting the teacher panel again to answer questions about these issues in their own practice. We also searched for recent research and thinking on these specific topics, and we partnered with outside experts who were able to review our previous curriculum and provide concrete recommendations of ways to revise.

In regard to ELL, we worked with researchers at WestEd, including Marianne Justus, and with Dr. Marco Bravo at Santa Clara University. Being a Reader now includes pre-teaching support for each book and lesson. We also categorized the ELL notes that we have always included at point of use so that teachers could immediately see what type of support might work at that point in the lesson. On digital literacy and connecting reading to writing, we worked with Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, executive director of the National Writing Project, and one of her colleagues, Professor Troy Hicks of Central Michigan University.

Everything in our curricula is focused on instructional equity—that’s the work we do. We are privileged to be in contact with Zaretta Hammond, who (as one of our board members) provides constant encouragement to do better. She raised up for us the concept of independent versus dependent learners, which is something that she emphasizes in her own work. Although our pedagogy has always had the goal of creating independent learners and building students’ cognitive skills, we had not framed it so consistently or explicitly in these terms for teachers. So, in this new edition of Being a Reader, we worked hard to bring this guiding concept to the forefront, and I think that the curriculum is more powerful because of it.
Kelly Stuart: I’d like to dig deeper into this idea of independent versus dependent learners, as well as instructional equity. Could you say more about Being a Reader in this context?

Valerie Fraser: Let’s begin with instructional equity as it relates to becoming an independent learner. Being able to read at grade level is the most important thing in elementary school: specifically to be reading at grade level by the end of grade 2. Students can’t become independent learners without concurrently becoming fluent readers; the two are intertwined.

As Zaretta Hammond has stressed—and I don’t think we can say it often enough—this is actually the instructional equity issue right here. Motivation is great, but if students are not receiving effective decoding and foundational skills instruction, we’re not moving the needle on instructional equity in a meaningful, impactful way.

This is at the heart of what we wanted for Being a Reader. The program is laser focused on getting all students reading at grade level by grade 2. And when Being a Reader’s core instruction is paired with SIPPS as the intervention program, everything is instructionally aligned across tiers and becomes even more effective in reaching all of our readers.

Going back to the idea of independent learners, we’ve always believed that instruction should be student-centered. It should be designed in a way that taps into students’ intrinsic motivation, curiosity about the world, and desire to learn. We prioritize student choice of topics, authentic tasks, and discussions in which students take the lead while teachers adopt a facilitator’s stance and take care not to over-scaffold.

We also intentionally expose students to key content areas and funds of knowledge about the world and use them to generate motivation and interest in big, important, multi-faceted topics.

Kelly Stuart: What features of the newly published second edition of Being a Reader are you particularly excited about?

Valerie Fraser: The single biggest difference you’ll see is that the reading comprehension instruction from our companion Making Meaning program is now incorporated into Being a Reader. The two programs were always intended to work together, and in the new second edition of Being a Reader we wanted to make that easier to manage in classrooms. Now that instruction is seamless, it’s fully integrated, and that’s exciting to see.
In addition, there are other features we’ve incorporated into the second edition that will make a huge difference to teachers and students, including reorganized materials; increased ELL support with pre-teaching and educative teacher notes; many more digital texts and explicit teaching around navigating websites in grade 2; and more “about” notes that provide context and background knowledge for teachers.

Kelly Stuart: For educators who are planning to transition from the first edition of *Being a Reader* to the second edition, what changes will they particularly notice?

Valerie Fraser: Besides the fact that *Being a Reader* is now a comprehensive reading program? Teachers who are transitioning from the first edition to the second edition will notice increased support for ELLs, more digital texts, and especially the “educative” parts of the program that we’ve enhanced with even more embedded professional learning.

They’ll also notice specific notes about equity issues appropriate to different aspects of instruction. And they will see the idea of developing independent learners called out repeatedly. We really want to get that to be the focus of instruction.

Kelly Stuart: High-quality children’s literature is an important part of *Being a Reader*. Can you tell us about the process used to select the trade books that appear in the program?

Valerie Fraser: High-quality literature that represents the variety of students in classrooms is of utmost importance. It’s an instructional equity issue. We prepare to select books in several ways. We begin with a checklist of criteria, and in addition, every book is read and reread by our curriculum developers and other stakeholders, discussed in depth, and considered from multiple perspectives.

Of course a primary question is: does this particular book work for the instructional focus of the lesson we envision? It needs to serve the instruction and the learning. We also consider and carefully track diversity of all kinds: socio-economic, gender, ethnicity, and more, for all books that we might decide to use.

We actually have a full-time employee whose job it is to liaise with publishers. She’s always looking for the types of books she knows we use, and that work is constant and crucial to what we do. One important side note about our book selection process is that we work with a relatively restricted number of publisher partners, so sometimes we find a perfect book that we aren’t able to put into the program, which can be wrenching.

Finally, once a book is in our programs, we always appreciate feedback from educators who are using our work and who provide thoughtful responses to the trade books we use; we read and discuss every email, every message that we receive.

Kelly Stuart: How does the new second edition of *Being a Reader* fit into the Collaborative Literacy suite?

Valerie Fraser: Collaborative Literacy is our comprehensive ELA curriculum: it’s complete reading, writing, and intervention instruction for grades K–6. Within that suite, *Being a Reader* is a complete program for K–2 reading instruction, bringing together systematic, explicit foundational skills instruction with comprehension instruction. *Being a Reader* works seamlessly as a module within Collaborative Literacy, but it can also be used as a stand-alone reading curriculum.
Looking specifically at grades K–2 of the Collaborative Literacy suite, *Being a Reader* represents one-third of the suite. It’s meant to be implemented alongside our comprehensive writing program, *Being a Writer*, and our fully aligned reading intervention, SIPPS.

All of these programs are designed to work together: the *Being a Reader* and SIPPS scope and sequences and instruction were intentionally created to be in sync with each other, so that all tiers of instruction are in alignment. Also, if you compare the lesson structures and teaching practices in *Being a Reader* and *Being a Writer*, you’ll see how much the programs are in harmony. If a teacher is already implementing one program, it’s easy and intuitive to use the others.

Finally, it’s important to point out that social skills development and SEL competencies are embedded into every lesson within *Being a Reader*, as they are throughout the entire Collaborative Literacy suite. Students are consistently learning how to work together, how to agree and disagree respectfully, how to articulate their feelings and experiences, and how to be caring, productive members of their classroom learning community.

**Kelly Stuart:** Let’s talk about outcomes. If you envision a student who starts kindergarten with *Being a Reader* and goes through the program all the way to the end of second grade, what would we expect to see? I also wonder about this student’s teacher. If the teacher is implementing *Being a Reader*, what shifts would we expect to see in their teaching practice?

**Valerie Fraser:** Our goal for students who experience *Being a Reader* is for them to emerge as truly independent learners with well-developed cognitive skills. This student will be able to read fluently, decoding text with automaticity, and be able to focus on comprehension and critical thinking.

The social skills development is equally important, as well. The embedded SEL in the program is intended to foster strong prosocial skills and help each student learn how to participate fully and joyfully in the classroom learning community.

For teachers, our hope is that the embedded professional learning in every lesson of *Being a Reader* provides a path toward new levels of awareness, skill, and confidence in their teaching practice. Educators are deepening their practice as they teach the program.

Specifically, teachers who implement *Being a Reader* gain a quiver of facilitation techniques and insight into how best to apply them to encourage
the development of their students as independent learners. They'll have a strong understanding of issues of equity and effective practices for supporting ELL students. Underlying all of this, educators are accumulating solid knowledge about the way in which research-based reading instruction works and how the pieces of the literacy block fit together.

Kelly Stuart: In the wake of the pandemic, how does Being a Reader work when the program is implemented in a blended or remote-learning format? Tell us a bit about the support that is provided. Where will you go from here?

Valerie Fraser: Like everyone in education, we went through a real crucible in spring of 2020, working around the clock to support our partner schools and districts as they scrambled to transition to remote learning. It was an intense and grueling experience with a steep learning curve, but I think that our collaborative, hands-on approach and our commitment to providing robust program support and professional learning support paid off.

Then we spent the summer of 2020 developing even more supports and specific guidance for teaching our programs remotely, all of which are accessible on our Learning Portal. We also created our complimentary Reconnecting and Rebuilding Toolkit, which offers class meetings and community chats to support all K–6 educators.

This work hasn’t stopped. It’s ongoing; we continue to improve and refine our program and professional learning supports. In addition to having a really committed team here in-house, we’re fortunate to have such smart, engaged, creative teachers using our programs—shout-out to the educators in our Collaborative Classroom Facebook community group, who are a great source of insights—and we’re always listening to them as we plan our next steps.
JENNIE MCDONALD
Publisher Relations and Rights Director

Jennie McDonald is the Publisher Relations and Rights Director at Collaborative Classroom. She is responsible for the organization’s evolving trade book strategy and works closely with their trade publishing partners (publishers, authors, and agents) throughout the country to acquire the children’s literature necessary for Collaborative Classroom’s programs. She has developed a series of author interviews to support teachers and students who wish to learn more about writers and writing and spearheaded the diversity review of program literature for the organization.

Jennie began her career in trade publishing at Ecco Press in New York and spent the next two decades working on both coasts as a literary agent, subsidiary rights director, editor, writer, and publishing consultant. She completed the Radcliffe College Publishing Procedures Course at Harvard University, attended the University of London, and graduated from the University of Oregon with Honors in English Literature.

LENORA FORSYTHE
Manager of Educational Proposals and Pursuits

Dr. Lenora Forsythe is Manager of Educational Proposals and Pursuits at Collaborative Classroom. She earned her EdD in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Reading from the University of Central Florida (UCF). Her research emphasized professional learning for elementary school literacy coaches. She earned her Master’s degree in Reading Education from Nova Southeastern University and her Bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Education from UCF. Lenora has ten years of teaching experience at the elementary school level that includes literacy coaching and teaching first and third grades. Additionally, she has spent five years teaching undergraduate elementary education courses that focus on literacy at UCF.

KRISTY RAUCH
Manager of Educational Partnerships

Kristy Rauch is a Manager of Educational Partnerships at Collaborative Classroom. She has worked for twenty years in the field of education, as a high school teacher, curriculum developer, facilitator of professional learning, and Social and Emotional Learning consultant to schools and districts. Kristy received her BA in English from Northwestern, and an MA in Educational Policy and Evaluation from Stanford.

PETER BRUNN
Vice President, Organizational Learning

Peter Brunn is the Vice President for Organizational Learning at Collaborative Classroom. Previously at Collaborative Classroom, he was the director of professional development, director of staff development, the assistant director of the Reading Project, and a staff developer. Before coming to Collaborative Classroom, Peter was a staff developer for the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project and worked in New York City public schools helping teachers implement reading and writing workshops in their classrooms. Peter received his master’s degree in curriculum and teaching from Teachers College, Columbia University, and his undergraduate degree in history from Marquette University. Peter is also the author of *The Lesson Planning Handbook: Essential Strategies That Inspire Student Thinking and Learning*, published by Scholastic. Follow Peter on Twitter at @pdbrunn.
SARAH ROSENTHAL

Program Manager

Sarah Rosenthal is a program manager at Collaborative Classroom. She is currently part of the Program Development and Publishing team revising Collaborative Classroom’s core programs. Sarah also enjoys supporting Collaborative Classroom teachers with attending to their own wellness.

Prior to joining Collaborative Classroom, Sarah taught writing to children and adults. She designed and taught creative writing workshops for more than 3,500 K–12 students in 17 Bay Area schools, and designed and led an inquiry-based nonfiction writing program for grades 3–8 at St. Raymond’s school in Menlo Park, CA. She also taught writing courses at several Bay Area universities, led private writing workshops for adults, and conducted one-on-one manuscript consultations. In addition, Sarah wrote language arts curricula for the Institute of Reading Development based in Berkeley, CA.

Sarah is a poet and writer who has published four books and has seen her work published widely in journals and anthologies. Her short film "We Agree on the Sun" has received numerous film festival awards. Sarah is also a Life & Professional Coach and a California Book Awards juror. She holds a BA Magna Cum Laude in Literature & Society from Brown University, an MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University, and a coaching certification from New Ventures West.

KELLY STUART

President and Chief Operating Officer

Dr. Kelly Stuart serves as President and Chief Operating Officer at Collaborative Classroom. In earlier roles at Collaborative Classroom, Dr. Stuart worked as Vice President of Dissemination and Implementation and as Assistant Director of Dissemination. Previously, she served as the senior research associate at WestEd, where she led dissemination for the Doing What Works (DWW) website, which developed practical tools and videos to support educators in their understanding and use of proven research-based practices. Also while at WestEd, Dr. Stuart launched the US Department of Education’s School Turnaround Learning Community (STLC), an online community for states, districts, and schools involved in turnaround efforts. Prior to WestEd, she was the director of special programs at the Success for All Foundation. Since beginning her career as an elementary school teacher, Dr. Stuart has worked with educators in schools and after-school sites in every state. She has a BS in liberal arts, a teaching credential, an MA in education administration, and an EdD in education leadership.

TAMARA WILLIAMS

Manager of Educational Partnerships

Tamara Williams joined Collaborative Classroom as a Manager of Educational Partnerships in Florida in 2021. She has numerous years of experience as a reading interventionist and classroom teacher. She earned her Bachelors in Elementary Education from Florida A&M University and her Masters in Education from Walden University.

For the past twenty years, Tamara has worked in high-risk elementary schools and, for four of those years, she was able to implement a co-teaching model that blends the best practices in teaching with technology practices. In addition, her work in schools focused on providing high-quality intervention instruction to support students’ acquisition of reading and independence. Tamara’s belief in visible teaching and learning led her to participate as an observation classroom as part of a school-based coaching initiative. She has enjoyed supporting teacher growth by facilitating professional learning at the district, state and national level.
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