

# Cultivating Visual Literacy among Preschool through Middle School Students: Strategies and Applications

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*Abstract.* The chapter shares strategies for cultivating visual literacy in students from pre-Kindergarten to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. These approaches were conducted in the following educational contexts: a) family literacy workshops; b) an elementary literacy-through-art curriculum (collage by Romare Bearden and poetry by Langston Hughes); and c) visualization/technology applications through creative writing and *Audacity* with middle school students in an urban setting.

*Keywords:* visual literacy, family literacy, literacy-through-art, content area literacy, poetry, technology, creative writing

In an increasingly visual world, pedagogical strategies for understanding visuals and images merit consideration. Clearly, there is value in teaching skills to enable students to interpret and analyze images, as “authors and artists use different types of visual representations with text to communicate information about a particular topic” (Coleman, Bradley, & Donovan, 2012, p.32). Educators across grade levels should consider how to embed visual literacy applications throughout their teaching repertoire (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Three case studies that illustrate the implementation of visual literacy strategies will be discussed in this chapter. Visual literacy is a valuable reading comprehension strategy that is needed for students to succeed academically and better understand the meaning of a text (O’Neil, 2011).

The chapter begins by sharing comprehension strategies designed to help fifteen participants in a family literacy workshop (presented at an urban elementary school in the Southeastern United States as a component of a community-based Early Learning College initiative). The workshop design fostered understanding of text with their pre-Kindergarten and early elementary-aged children. Authors and illustrators of books for young children drew upon elements such as shape, size, style, line, and color to facilitate students’ abilities to grasp intricacies of a concept (O’Neil, 2011). The chapter describes the three-part read-aloud strategy that 1) presented children with a range of color swatches, 2) provided opportunities to associate an emotion with a color that children felt accurately represented the feelings in the text as well as 3) share the reasoning evident behind their choices. In addition, visual literacy activities using poetry addressed fundamental concepts such as colors, shapes, and months of the year. The activities established a foundation for basic skills and early learning success. The final element of the family literacy workshop focused on creating the “I am From” poem based on the “Where I’m From” template inspired by George Ella Lyon (1999).

Second, visual literacy and writing activities guided by Romare Bearden’s collage art and Langston Hughes’ poetry around a Harlem city block through the text *The Block* (1995). This project took place in an urban school with third grade students who were studying the construct of cities. An interactive writing activity invited participants to consider the senses (such as sight and sound) after reading the poem. Also, the facilitators brought picture books to help in conveying

meaning through the use of a two-sign system — written language and visual images (Serafini, 2010). The use of picture books focused on cultivating skills and strategies that promote an understanding of the written text. However, expanded pedagogical strategies for unpacking visual images merit reflection as teachers draw upon the overwhelmingly visual nature of contemporary society for learning and teaching (Cappello & Lafferty, 2015).

Third, this chapter described and discussed how readers were invited to consider a multimodal writing workshop. Dr. June Parsons, a local middle grades book author and featured speaker at the annual Savannah Children’s Book Festival, facilitated the workshop. The event combined writing (based on visualization) and audio digital recording (including sound effects) in order to bring the mystery genre to life. The twelve middle school students are members of “Teens for Literacy” from an urban K-8 school. After reading the author’s book, the students had an opportunity to meet the author, posed questions about her writing process, and received feedback on their own creative writing output. Then, students composed using visualizations strategies to extend portions of the text based on the interactive “Reading with Eyes Shut” paradigm. They read and recorded their writing with a sense of fluency and expression using an audio application called *Audacity* to perform and share their own version of a book trailer. This writing initiative helped participating students develop valuable literary skills and hone their creative writing abilities. The middle school students branched out to draft descriptive writing assignments that cultivated advanced comprehension skills, connected them together as a community of readers, and inspired their peers to participate in literacy endeavors.

### Family Literacy Workshop Activities

*Visual literacy activities through read aloud.* When implemented at an early age, visual literacy can plant the seed for properly deciphering in-text imagery rather than strictly pictures alone (O’Neil, 2011). This is a crucial strategy for students to possess throughout life as a reader and learner. Educators should be familiar with different tools to guide students’ understanding towards constructive picture reading.

Ten Bachelors of Science in Education students enrolled in a Language Acquisition course at a mid-sized Southeastern United States educational institution conducted a demonstration of visual literacy strategies with fifteen pre-school children and their families at the Early Childhood Center where they shared and donated their literacy projects (see Figure 1). O’Neil (2011) described how illustrators provide the reader with pictures to guide him or her through the text, showing emotions and actions present through color choice, shape, and artistic style. Pictures enhance the storytelling by making them important elements in supplementing the interpretation of words. Particularly, images help facilitate the understanding of passages that can be difficult for children to understand from reading the text alone.

A language development strategy highlighted in this chapter is the color and culture association approach. A student can learn to explain why those colors were selected by the author/illustrator to represent the character’s feelings and contribute to the tone of the story. The children were provided with a range of color swatches and were asked to choose a color that they



Figure 1. College of Education students display the family literacy projects that they created for Early Childhood Center families.

believed represented the feelings presented in each portion of the text during the read-aloud/explain their rationale (see Figure 2). The activity stresses that pictures and words have a unique relationship (Serafini, 2010). They interact in a way that can be dependent on one another, especially in picture books. The story concept hovers between text and imagery.



Figure 2. Early Childhood Center students participate in the color association language development strategy during a read-aloud.

This university-community center partnership aimed to bridge theory with practice for education students. It simultaneously provided parents with tools that empowered them to create high-quality early learning environments for their children. According to Hart and Risley's (1995) study on language development, children's academic successes at ages nine and ten are attributable to the amount of conversation they hear from birth to age three. Providing parents with strategies and resources to create high-quality early learning experiences at home prepare the children to become active participants in language and literacy learning when they enter formal schooling as well as optimizing their academic and personal success.

The collaboration between the education students and parents empowered the teacher candidates to apply their content knowledge while building valuable connections with community members. Teachers bring who they are to their teaching, using their personal and professional knowledge to shape and guide their teaching decisions (Uzum, 2012). This experience facilitates the development of teacher literacy identities for these education students.

Spitler (2009) defines teacher literacy identity as "a confident view of self as responsible for and in control of improving the literacy learning of self and competency to enact engagements to guide the literacy learning of students" (pp.129-130). The education students were invited to consider the role that teachers "play in facilitating productive discussions that simultaneously serve children's learning needs and content acquisition while also developing their literacy knowledge and skill" (Ford-Connors & Robertson, 2017, p.131).

One parent who participated in the family literacy workshop at the Early Childhood Center with the teacher candidates noted that she needed to spend more time discussing pictures. She mentioned asking questions such as why the illustrator chose to draw certain things; why the child chose to use a particular color; how it makes the reader feel. She thought that by doing this, attention to the material will be sustained the child continues to read. She also explained that she

could ask the child to consider why the author chose to have an event occur in the story. In addition, another workshop participant wrote in the feedback form: “Reading a book is a form of art when read deeply.” Parents who are dedicated to ensuring that their children fulfill their potential as readers, writers, and learners need to be equipped with a repertoire of strategies in order to empower them for success.

*Illustrating concept poetry.* The second case describes the family literacy workshops as part of a local Early Learning College initiative for fifteen local parents and grandparents (see Figure 3). Early Learning College sessions are held at several times throughout the school year at a local elementary school that serves as a gathering place in the community. The average age of the children whose parents, grandparents, and caregivers attending the session range from birth to five years of age.

The program goal ensures that young children in the community are prepared for school and for early literacy learning experiences. The workshops aimed to provide parents with tools and resources so that they are better able to create high-quality learning environments for their children and are more skilled at partnering with teachers when their child enters school. The session goals promoted the continued literacy learning at home. As the workshop facilitator, the professor modeled instructional strategies (see Figure 4) and provided participants with literacy books and materials focusing on environmental print, poetry, shared reading, comprehension skills, and early writing development. The facilitator also outlined various approaches that can be used to enhance young children’s enjoyment of reading and writing.

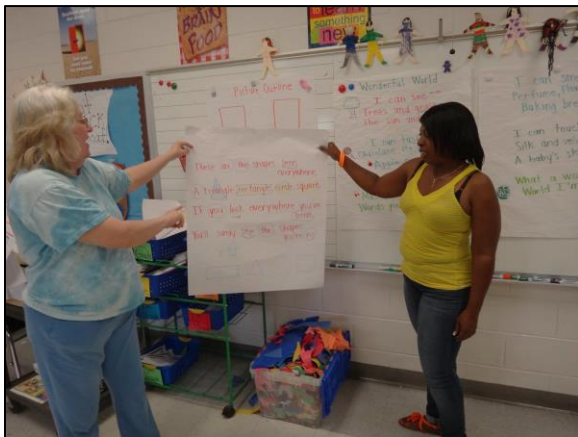


Figure 3. Family literacy workshop participants share their concept poetry illustrations.

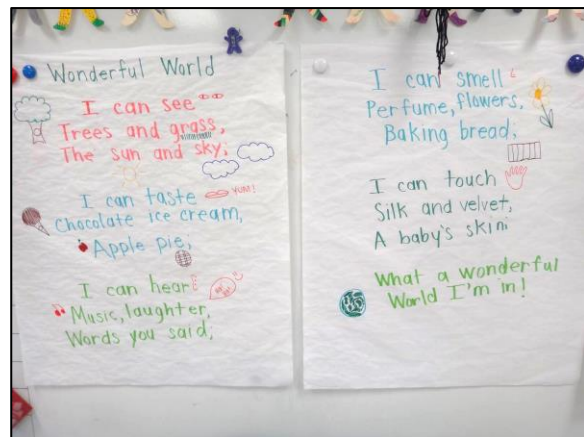


Figure 4. Illustrated "Wonderful World" poem with a focus on sensory details.

The workshop began with a discussion about the importance of developing children’s appreciation for language and word play. Jordan, Snow, and Porche (2000) described key points regarding family literacy theory. Drawing on the work of Bus, van Ijzendoorn, and Pellegrini (1995), Hart and Risley (1999), and Scarborough and Dobrich (1994), the author summarized the research demonstrating how literacy-rich home environments contribute to children’s early successful literacy development more than outstanding pre-school and kindergarten classroom environments. Participants practiced reading poems around fundamental concepts such as colors, shapes, and months of the year with a sense of expression. The purpose of selecting these poems was two-fold — both to model reading with expression and fluency as well as to reinforce important early learning curriculum topics. Poems that utilized in the workshop were from *Poetry Place Anthology* (Scholastic, 1999) and *A Poem a Day* (Scholastic, 1997).



After participants read and reviewed the poem, each table was provided with a large sheet of chart paper with segments of the text written in marker. Each group brainstormed how they could best illustrate the message contained in their portion of the poem. This was followed by each group presenting their chart paper illustration to their peers (see Figure 5) and explaining their rationale for drawing attention to other text features (such as placing a square around common sight words and certain key words in the poems) (see Figure 6). For example, when illustrating “The Shape of Things” by Meish Goldish, one group drew a circle, square, and triangle around each of these words when they appeared in the text for reinforcement. One participant stated, “I learned that poetry is very important.” Another participant added, “I liked the interaction in the class, doing the activity just as the child would.”

The workshop facilitator also discussed the importance of “raising a reader” through drawing children’s attention to the environmental print in the world around us and prompting questions to facilitate language development. Hart and Risley (1995) indicated that many economically disadvantaged preschoolers come to kindergarten with much smaller vocabularies than more advantaged children. This uneven start can make learning to read more difficult (McCardle, Chhabra, & Kapinus, 2008). Recommendations included talking about objects that you see in the world around us (shape, color, texture, use) and extending children’s conversation through prompting questions. While conducting art projects, such as illustrating poetry, discuss your choice for selecting a color or explain a rationale for your drawing for a segment of the text. Research shows that children learn vocabulary best when words are presented in a meaningful context or thematically (Harris, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2011).

In the end-of-workshop evaluation form, when asked to “give at least one specific example of new information one learned in the workshop,” one parent noted, “I will use paper to write out poems to hang on the wall and let the children illustrate.” Another parent explained how she learned that “you can draw pictures to go with the words of a book or poem ... to make reading more fun for children.” A third workshop participant noted that he “enjoyed the word play and illustrations of the poem.”

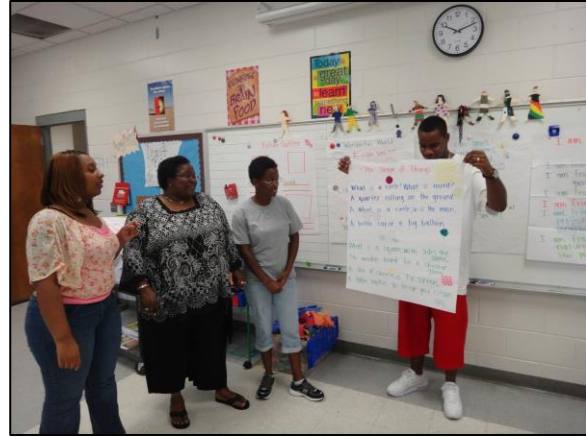


Figure 5. Family literacy workshop participants share their visual literacy applications around “The Shape of Things” poem.

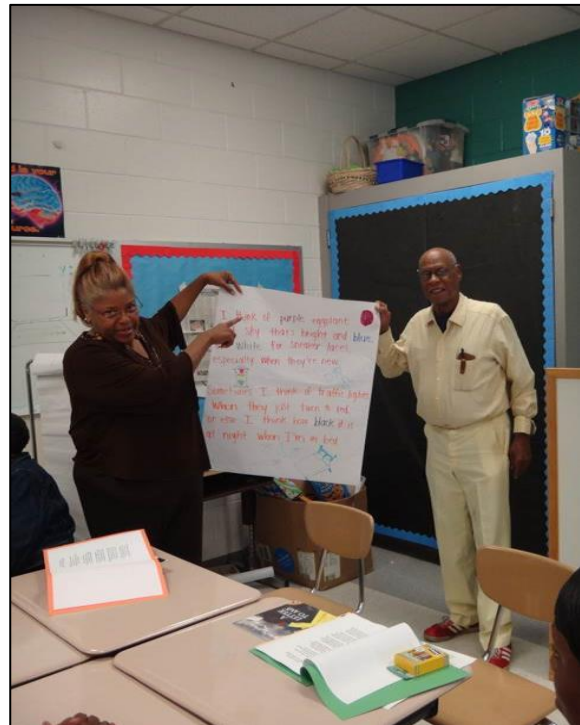


Figure 6. Family literacy workshop participants discuss their rationale for illustrating a portion of the poetry text.

*"I am From" images to poetry.* The final element of the literacy workshop focused on "I am From" poems, which were inspired by George Ella Lyon's "Where I'm From" template (1999). The author reviewed sample sentence with the participants and continued by sharing a few lines of a sample "I am From" poem. Then, the participants were invited to review the sentence starters and take a few moments to compose a couple of lines of their own for the "I am From" poem. Also, they were encouraged to select five images from cell phone photos as inspiration. Finally, the group discussed how this activity could be a valuable language development tool as parent and child wander around their home collecting ideas and gathering images in composing their own original "I am From" poem (see Table 1). The workshop concluded by discussing how this activity would facilitate children's language development skills and instill pride in both parent and child given their backgrounds.

Table 1. "I am From" poetry Brainstorming Chart

Item/ Individual/ Place to Photograph	Location of the Item/ Individual/ Place
You	
Everyday items found in your home	
An object that is specific to your home	
Plant/ flower/ tree that is found at your home	
Trait that belongs to your family	
Favorite saying or a favorite album cover	
Family tradition	
Map of where you were born	
Photo of your home	
An object that represents your nationality or heritage	
Family foods	
Family member(s)	
Object(s) that you associate with family member(s)	

Fifteen family literacy participants were given disposable cameras and asked to take photos that reflected their authentic selves. After a two-week period, photos from each participant were developed and pasted in their writing notebooks (see Figure 7). The photos provided a source of inspiration in composing the participants' original "I am From" poems. Writing workshops on how to "paint a picture with words" facilitated the participants' ability to describe the snapshots and their feelings towards these images. Participants crafted and composed the final drafts of their poems in their writing notebooks for sharing with their families. The notebook served as a forum to document the writing and creative writing process as well as encourage future writing endeavors.

Sentence starters were used to facilitate participants' poetry writing included the following items:

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (an everyday item in your house)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (detail about home-smell, taste, or feel)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (plant or flower)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (family tradition/family trait/family habit)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (family members)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (things you were told as a child)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (family foods)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (family ancestry/nationality/place)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (family mementos, pictures, treasures)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (song or saying)

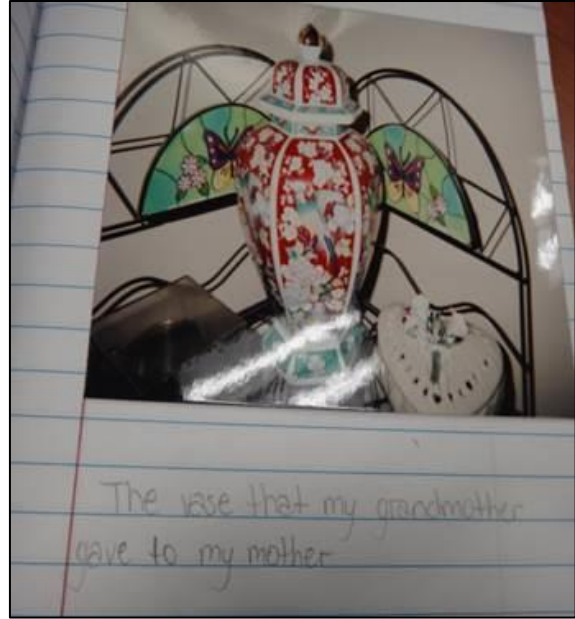


Figure 7. Photo image to inspire “I am From” poetry writing in journal.

Below is a sample poem drafted by one of the family literacy participants:

*I am from colorful vases, passed down from my grandmother to my mother to me.*

*I am from television and mirrors.*

*I am from the beautiful land of cinnamon, brown, and vanilla.*

*I am from roses. The oak tree whose long gone limbs I remember as if they were my own.*

*I'm from cookouts and having fun.*

*I'm from picnics and walks in the park together, and making arts and crafts.*

*I'm from “if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.”*

*I'm from shopping for bargains!*

*I'm from creative Savannah and the hot summers. String beans and chicken legs. Pictures that have a surprising touch to them, in my heart.*

One of the objectives for this project was to encourage participants' creative expression through photography and writing in a meaningful way. Additionally, the project aimed to instill pride among the students given their backgrounds. A final goal was to provide a forum for participants to view writing as an authentic and meaningful experience for personal expression and an inspiration to all for lifelong dedication to the craft.

## Literacy-through-Art: A Study of *The Block*

The collage art by Romare Bearden and poetry by Langston Hughes around a Harlem city block through the text, *The Block* (1995) merits consideration as a framework for content-area visual literacy applications. Eighteen third grade students in a third grade class from an urban school were invited to consider the senses (such as sight and sound) that come to mind as they “take Harlem’s heartbeat, make a drumbeat, put it on a record, let it whirl ...” They were immersed in a unit on city life around the United States as they read about a sequence of scenes highlighting people gathering at a barbershop, at the grocery store, at church, at a local jazz club, and daily life events in an urban neighborhood (see Figure 8).

Through the lens of poetry, the “block” is described as a place where “rituals of life occur and also where lessons about life beyond our own community are learned. The homes above the church, the barbershop, encounters on the side-walk, views through windows, all of the scenes and activities that we associate with urban life are a vital part of Bearden’s block” (Hughes, 195, p. 5).



Figure 8. Illustration of a city block in Harlem (Hughes, 1995, p. 5).

In addition, students noted “awesome adjectives” and “vivid verbs” that bring the poem to life for the reader and created an image in the reader’s head as they read each poem contained in *The Block* (1995). Close reading was introduced as a lens through which the reader sets a purpose for the literacy task, interprets words and phrases, analyzes the structure (visual and text elements), finds patterns and relationships between details, seeks to understand the author’s reasoning and use of evidence, integrates ideas from the text, and promotes connections (Lehman & Roberts, 2013).

As an extension of reading this text, students were invited to reflect on a story that they would like their own collage creation to tell by brainstorming on words/images. This was followed by “stretching the words” into phrases to create a poem. Finally, students were asked to assume the role of “reading detectives” while incorporating adjectives and verbs that bring the poem to life and creating a picture in the reader’s head. Critical literacy “accounts for ways that literacy can be used in the service of self-actualization and social change” (Riley, 2015, p. 418). Hughes’ poetry and Bearden’s collage artwork served as a mentor text that invited students to match words and pictures. As students engaged in literary analysis, they then created their own art and poetry-integrated creative work.



Afflerbach and Harrison (2017) noted that “positive motivation leads to increased engagement, increased engagement leads to continuing reading success, and this on-going reading success leads to increased motivation .... a key to students’ reading achievement is creation of classroom environments in which motivation and engagement thrive” (p. 218). A third grade student described the view of everyday life in Harlem and the creation of one’s personalized collage story evolved over the course of the project. The student stated, “I learned to take my time as I read, think about how the words make me feel and what I understand about what I’m learning .... Then, I use that creativity to design my own neighborhood story.” These new insights gained regarding the project’s impact on students’ identity were celebrated by the group.

## Literacy, Technology, and Creative Writing Applications

A collaboration established between a middle school student leadership team — “Teens for Literacy” — and a local middle grades author, J. J. Parsons, provided a model for a meaningful community-based visual literacy applications. A group of middle school students --- a combination of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade scholars --- are chosen every year to serve as a literacy leadership team at an urban K-8 public school. The students, selected by the school counselor, participated in a variety of literacy-focused activities, such as the Banned Book Week field trip to the local public library in which they researched and read excerpts from once censored literature to library patrons. Other projects included the creation of a school newspaper, a play regarding the ways that we utilize literacy in our everyday lives, video book trailers, and the introduction of local children’s book authors to the school community. From these experiences, middle school students have strengthened their literacy skills and displayed growth as leaders, creative thinkers, and public speakers.

The students emailed and used Skype in communicating with Ms. Parsons to learn about her writing process before the school presentation. The “Teens for Literacy” students created a brochure for distribution to their peers about her work, and introduced her to the school community at an assembly. The introductory speech reflects the “Teens for Literacy” students’ voices as they welcomed the author to the stage (see Figure 9).



Figure 9. “Teens for Literacy” students introduce the author to their school community.

*“Welcome 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. We are the Teens for Literacy group that represents ways to get everyone excited about reading and writing at our school.*

*We are lucky to have a real author come visit us at East Broad as part of the Savannah Children’s Book Festival. Her name is J.J. Parsons and she has written a wonderful book called Dead Chest Island (2013). The book describes the adventures of three friends who decide to borrow a boat and search for a tunnel in the Caribbean after they hear a tale about pirates and a cabin boy who are swept into an underwater tunnel on Dead Chest Island.*

*The Teens for Literacy group has been researching the book and came up with some questions to get to know the author better before she came to visit us. We asked Ms. Parsons questions about what inspired her to write the book and about the process of writing the book.*

*Ms. Parsons told us that Dead Chest Island takes place in the Caribbean, where she lived for almost twenty years. One day, she was out boating with some friends and saw the strangest looking island. It looked like a big wooden box partially sinking into the ocean. That was the real Dead Chest Island and she knew that the characters would have an adventure there.*

*We learned that it was a lot of hard work to write the book. Ms. Parsons explained that she wishes that the plots for books would spring into her head and the words for the story would just roll off her fingers at the keyboard. But, that doesn't happen. Usually when she writes, about two-thirds of the way through, she wonders how she could ever hope to complete it. However, she has written enough that she knows she can and will finish if she just keeps going. When she writes, she gets immersed in the story and the characters. She thinks about them all day and even dreams about them at night. The more real they seem, the more ideas she gets. Sometimes, when she doesn't want to think about real life, writing becomes a cozy little hangout.*

*Ms. Parsons told us that it was a winding road to become an author. She always liked to write, but she wanted to become a dancer or an artist. Then, she became interested in computer programming. Her high school English teacher encouraged her to write, and that really inspired her. Today, she is going to share her experiences with us. Let's give a big round of applause and warm welcome to Ms. Parsons, author of Dead Chest Island."*

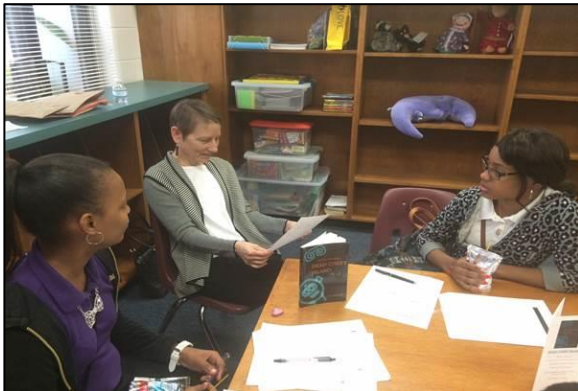


Figure 10. Author provides students with feedback on their visualization writing pieces.

After reading her book and hearing the author speak, the students were invited to a book signing and author celebration in the school library. The author spoke with each student and personally autographed their books. The Teens for Literacy students were inspired to embark on a multimodal creative writing initiative as students continued exercising their imagination (see Figure 10).

The concept of "Reading with Eyes Shut" focuses on using guided visualizations to give reluctant readers a fuller reading experience. This elevated technology-reading initiative presented the students with a new literacy endeavor complete with the pleasure of visualization even if the reader is struggling in decoding the texts.

In follow-up sessions, students created and recorded visualizations using the *Audacity* application to extend the portions of the text (see Figure 11). Students composed their visualizations by reading their writing with fluency and expression as a performance of their own version of a book trailer.



Figure 11. Students record their creative writing using the *Audacity* application.

Below are two writing samples from students:

#### Sample 1

*Edison trudged through a countless set of crooked stone steps (ba dump, ba dump, ba dump) following Jonathan. It was like climbing towards the elevated stairs as they come towards you - similar to a rollercoaster whirling through the air as you circle around the amusement park. They reached a narrow road, with no sign of life except the dreaded sound of crickets (chirp, chirp, chirp), roughly paved and bordered by low rock walls. Jonathan sat against the wall, enjoying the shade of a tree in the distance, listening to the howls and wheezing of the wind around him.*

#### Sample 2

*Charlotte has bright, fire engine red hair, bursting with strawberry flavor. Goldfish eyes stared out at the world around her. Her personality was very bossy, like Sharpay from *High School Musical*. The bugs are chirping (cha, cha, cha) in the background as she expressed her annoyance with Edison. She rolled her eyes with such energy that there was a fifty percent chance they would become permanently stuck in that position!*

The aforementioned writing initiative helped participating students in developing valuable literary skills and honing their creative abilities. The middle school students branched out to draft descriptive writing assignments that cultivated advanced comprehension skills, connected them together as a community of readers, and inspired their peers to participate in literacy endeavors as they shared their work in the school library. Baugh (2017) noted that a “comprehensive reading program incorporates effective instruction, multiple resources, and a wide variety of experiences to help each student achieve optimal reading progress every year” (p. 229-30).

### Final Thoughts

This chapter outlined strategies for cultivating visual literacy in students beginning in pre-Kindergarten and extending through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The following educational contexts were presented in order to provide a frame-work for implementation of visual literacy strategies. Family literacy workshops for young children; an elementary literacy-through-art curriculum; and visualization/technology applications through creative writing and Audacity with middle school students in an urban school setting were explored throughout the chapter.

Feedback from the family literacy session reflected that more classes like this were needed to help parents reach their children through the lens of visual literacy illustrates the impact and importance of these work-shops. The sessions incorporated a range of objectives — to provide parents with instructional activities to conduct an effective read-aloud; tools to excite their children about reading and writing; and strategies to facilitate early language development. A meta-analysis found a high correlation between preschool language skills and reading competence at the end of first and second grade (National Early Literacy Panel, 2009).

Surveys were distributed before and after each session to assess participants' feelings about integrating the literacy strategies into their home life with their child. Also, written feedback from workshop participants assessed the project's impact. Samples of work-shop participants' quotes affirm the literacy workshop project's positive impact such as:

- "... more excitement when I read to my child...I will color more and draw more with my child."
- "... more descriptive when reading."
- "Interact with child during and after reading the material ... sequence and ask questions after reading with the child."
- "How I can keep my child focused/ engaged on reading stories ..."
- "Making words into pictures (poetry) ... letting pictures tell the story."

The following quote from a workshop participant resonated with me. She wrote the following: "Reading a book is a form of art when read deeply." Parents and educators who are dedicated to ensuring that their children fulfill their potential as readers, writers, and learners need to be equipped with a repertoire of strategies in order to empower them.

Kentner (2015) stated that "maybe it's time we rethink the image of our students reading into something that better fits the world they live in" (p. 640). In addition, Zenkov and Harmon (2009) described re-search reflecting students' attitudes about the perceived irrelevance of school-based literacy tasks that teachers assign. In response, these authors related how they sought to become "teachers who trust youth enough to engage them with our literacy tasks in ways exceeding the expectations of these young adults and society in general" (p. 575). These visual literacy initiatives were guided by similar tenets. The case studies presented in this chapter serve as powerful lenses to support educators and parents as they strive to facilitate students' personal and academic success. These insights facilitate the ability of education professionals to examine how to better prepare students and their families for the demands of a twenty-first century world that rewards "sustained inquiry and an opportunity ... to practice the discipline of close observation" (Coleman, 2012, p. 1).



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