



## PICTURE THIS: CREATING PATHWAYS TO LITERACY THROUGH ART

BY BETH OLSHANSKY

Today is my second coaching session in Doreen Duhaime's first-grade classroom at Webster Elementary School in Manchester. During the first coaching session, I read *The Sun's Day* to her first-graders. Following a literature discussion in which Olivia notices that, "The sky changed color on every page," and Kathryn observes, "That's because it was a different time of day!" These eager young artists and writers begin crafting their own time-of-day books using simple crayon resist painting techniques. The objectives: As a sequencing tool, to embed the notion that as one turns the pages of a book, time passes, and as a writing project, to support students in developing a sense of setting and mood in a piece of writing through expanding their use of descriptive language. Now, with their sunset paintings placed in their easels stands, they look intently at the pictures they have painted with care as they try to come up with "silver dollar words" to tell what the sun is doing. As relaxing music plays in the background, Doreen and I wander around the classroom, peering over the shoulders of these emergent writers. I am struck by how focused every single first-grade student is on this day in early October. Doreen acknowledges that this is the only activity in which she sees *all* of her students so completely engaged. Even those who typically struggle with words stay unusually focused as they write. I make note of two students, a girl and a boy, whose writing stands apart from the others. Their sentences are imaginative and complex, displaying a greater sophistication than their

peers. Arianna (name changed) creates compound sentences, unusual for a first-grader in early October. Alex (name also changed) figures out how to embed an adjective before the noun in one sentence, creating a sentence structure that is more complex than the simple one that was modeled. Both have used personification in their writing. As I walk around the room, I am thinking ahead to the Group Share to follow. I often invite students whose work I hope will inspire their classmates to share.

During the Group Share, I place each student's painting in the Artist's Frame (one at a time) and ask each artists/writer to sit in the Artists/Writers Chair, a seat of honor. Classmates are instructed to stare at the picture in the Artist's Frame while the writer reads the words that he or she crafted to go with that painting. Arianna reads her piece first. Immediately a hand shoots up. Then another. Matthew can't contain his excitement—he saw the clouds in Arianna's painting moving! Oliver saw the grass swaying. Katie thinks that Arianna's words made the painting look like it has "come alive." Upon request, Arianna reads her sentences again. Before you know it, several more students have experienced the magic of bringing words and pictures together and are now busy hypothesizing about how "the magic trick" works. Next Alex shares his work. Again his classmates marvel at the magic he has made. They claim they actually saw his fiery sun sinking!

This Group Share, the first writing share of the year, proceeds better than anticipated. Yet afterwards, I am left with a gnawing feeling. I begin to question my choice of students to share. Should I have chosen the two students who were clearly the top writers? Why didn't I select those students whose self-esteem would have been given a much-needed boost by offering them a chance to share? After all, my overriding objective is always to support those students who struggle.

I share my concerns with Doreen. I tell her that I regret having chosen the two top writers to share. Doreen grins. "Those aren't my top writers," she informs me. "Actually, they are among my lowest." I pause as I digest this new piece of information. Then I too grin. Once again I am reminded of the power of pictures and this art-based approach to literacy learning I have developed. It truly does level the playing field, reaching out to *all students* to ensure their success.

The next time I visit Doreen's classroom, during an Art Share, I consciously invite a student to share whom I know is receiving regular reading support from the school reading specialist. With his painting placed in the Artist's Frame, this young boy is so tickled to be sitting in the Artist's Chair, he can barely utter a word. He sits there grinning from ear to ear. I know this too was an important choice.

### Two Decades of Development

Over the past two decades, the Center for the Advancement of Art-Based Literacy at the University of New Hampshire has had the good fortune of working in collaboration with dozens of schools and school districts across the state and country developing and refining two art-and-literature-based approaches to literacy learning: Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art and Image-Making Within The Writing Process. Picturing Writing is the simpler crayon resist based approach to writing which Webster Elementary is currently adopting school-wide; Image-Making is a more complex and more dynamic collage-based approach which uses hand-painted textured papers created by each student to literally construct story.

Over the years, I have noticed that many struggling readers are, like myself, visual or kinesthetic learners. Words just are not their medium. However, give visual and/or kinesthetic learners visual and kinesthetic tools for supporting their literacy learning, and watch out. Based on my two decades of observations, I have come to expect that struggling readers and writers can and will succeed using this alternative pathway into literacy learning. You will be amazed at the depth of thinking these students exhibit and their ability to harness oral and written language, language and thinking that may otherwise not be available to them.

This is not just my personal observation however; teachers tell me this all the time. When I run into them at the copy machine or in the hallway, they can't wait to share their latest surprise about what Johnny, their "lowest student" has just written using the art-based literacy methods. Of course, I am pleased to hear their reports, but I am not surprised. I have come to expect this.

We have also had the opportunity to document these results through quantitative research and standardized test score data. In 1993, following a study of 377 first- and second-grade students in three New Hampshire schools in three different school districts, Image-Making Within the Writing Process (the first art-based literacy model I developed), was validated by the US Department of Education's Program Effectiveness Panel as an "innovative and effective literacy program" based on research conducted in 1991-1993. Students exhibited significant gains in writing using the Image-Making process as compared to demographically matched comparison groups. ([www.picturingwriting.org/effectiveness/html](http://www.picturingwriting.org/effectiveness/html)).

In 1997-1998, a second research study investigated the impact of a year-long art-and-literature based approach to writing that combined Picturing Writing and Image-Making methods. This study involved 500 first- and second-graders across three states (NH, HI, and TX). Significant gains in students' writing were documented as compared to gains made by demographically matched comparison groups. (See Figure 1).

These research findings led to Main Street School in Exeter applying for and receiving a three-year Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) Grant (1999-2002) to adopt Picturing Writing and Image-Making school-wide and integrate them into their language arts, science, and art curriculum. This school-wide adoption made it possible to gather standardized test score data on entire grade levels regarding the impact of Picturing Writing and Image-Making on reading and writing skills. Following two years of school-wide implementation, Title I and Special Education at the Main Street School achieved the unthinkable. *Second grade Title I and Special Education students outscored the national average of regular education students in reading* (Figure 2). *Exeter's third-grade Title I students outscored the State average of regular education students in writing* (Figure 3). Title I and Special Education students have consistently outscored their Title I and Special Education peers across the State since school-wide adoption began in 1999 (Figures 4 and 5).

### Why Art Improves Reading and Writing

For many administrators and classroom teachers, placing art at the center of the writing process may seem counter-intuitive,

especially given today's pressures created by No Child Left Behind. The fact that we have documented tremendous gains in reading and writing skills, particularly for those at risk, may seem perplexing. Yet, particularly now, with the pressures to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), it may be worthwhile to consider just how and why art offers such a powerful tool in literacy learning. After all, many of the students who are targeted by NCLB have already proven they do not learn effectively using traditional verbal modes of instruction.

Many of our struggling readers and reluctant writers are visual and/or kinesthetic learners. Many teachers already recognize that their low performing students do not work

words and pictures work together to tell the whole story. They offer a wealth of opportunity for language study, not just the language of words but the language of pictures as well!

Expanding upon literature-based teaching practices now recognized as part of quality writing instruction (Fletcher and Portalupi, 1998 and Ray, 2004), the Artists/Writers Workshop model uses quality picture books to speak to our diverse learners in the classroom in a language they all will understand. While discussion about the text may be similar to what occurs in more traditional literature-based classrooms, the study of the language of pictures (how the illustrator uses pictures to convey key literary elements such as setting, mood, problem, solution, and ending) is remarkably

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well with words. Many will also tell you that those same students who struggle with reading and writing and do poorly on standardized tests, love to draw. This tells us something important, they are visual learners! They think in pictures, not in words.

The art-based literacy methods developed by this author are founded on these basic assumptions and recognize the power of pictures to provide critical tools for developing, expressing, and recording ideas. Unlike the art materials typically available to students in the classroom (colored pencils, crayons, and markers), which are used to illustrate writing *after* it has been completed. This method: 1) restructures the writing process to engage students in picture-making *before* they write for students of all ages) and 2) provides students with a richer selection of art materials. The richer the art materials, the richer the thinking; the richer thinking, the richer the ideas embedded in the pictures; and the richer the pictures, the richer the language and story ideas available to students when they read their pictures for detail and description.

But there is much more to it than that. The language of pictures and the language of words are equal languages for learning. The language of pictures and the language of words should be considered parallel and complementary languages. Quality picture books contain wonderful examples of how

different—and key to the model's success. It speaks to *all* our students. Keep in mind that all young children, from the time they were little, are natural readers of pictures. While study of the pictures enriches all members of the class (and is actually considered a reading comprehension strategy), it engages our low performing students in ways that words alone will never accomplish.

Moving from focused literature study (of pictures and words) to picture-making to reading the pictures to access detail and description to recording those words on paper is a process that makes sense to students. Simultaneously expanding vocabulary through searching for "silver dollar words" in quality literature, through community brainstorming while reading pictures, and by creating community word banks supports those students who do not have rich vocabularies to begin with. These silver dollar words will later help student "paint pictures with words." Through the intricate interweaving of multiple literacies, students are drawn into a naturally engaging and rich process that captivates and supports the literacy learning of even the most reluctant learners.

Marjorie Siegel (1995) explains that providing students with opportunities for transmediation (the recasting of meaning from one sign system to another) deepens students' thinking, and results in increasing their generative and reflective

thinking. As students move from thinking in pictures to thinking in words, they experience the power of transmediation. First grader Chris shares his experience of this curious phenomenon: “I just don’t know what happens. Whenever I go to Artists/Writers Workshop, all sorts of good stuff just pops into my head.” (See Figure 6: Chris’ art and writing.)

In Manchester, newly retired assistant principal and first-grade teacher Merrilee Thissell bubbles over with enthusiasm every time she talks about her experience last year with her first graders at Manchester’s inner city Hallsville Elementary School. “I have taught first grade for thirty years and have tried every writing program in the book. Up until now, I have never found one that works for *all* my students. Last year, my first year implementing Picturing Writing, I witnessed tremendous growth in all my students as writers *and* as readers, even my most needy students thrived. And best of all, my kids *loved* the process. They couldn’t get enough of it.”

Her eyes sparkling, Merrilee recounts with delight the day Manchester’s federal grants agent, her principal, and the Title I Chair made a surprise visit to her classroom. Her students were sitting at circle sharing the lead sentences they had just written to their winter stories. After analyzing several quality leads, their charge had been to write lead sentences that not only provided setting information (which was initially recorded in their setting picture), but also to create a hook.

During the Group Share, a few students were invited to read their thoughtfully crafted lead sentences as their classmates stared at their lead picture, which had been placed in the Artists Frame. Just as the surprise visitors entered the room, Merrilee’s first graders were chanting, “Turn the page! Turn the page,” their acknowledgement that their fellow writer had indeed created a tantalizing hook and “I saw the magic! I saw the magic,” acknowledging that their classmate’s silver dollar words made the pictures “come alive”.

“I have never in my thirty years seen first graders write like this or be so attuned to literature. My only regret is that I waited 30 years to discover this wonderful process. It works for my low readers and writers; it challenges my top students; and it supports those in the middle.” Merrilee proudly grabs one of her student’s published books and begins reading. “And this is not one of my top students.”

Kathy Nelson, second grade teacher at Smyth Road School was slower to warm up to the process. Last year, Kathy waited to launch an art and writing project in her classroom until the week before winter break, “That week when your kids are so wound up that it is hard to get any work done.” On the Thursday before winter break, she found herself asking her students to write to their paintings. “I was blown

away at what my second graders wrote, and on the day before winter break!”

Kristen Beakey and Donna Papanikolau, ELL teachers for grades 3–5 in their self-contained ELL classroom at Webster Elementary share their experiences:

*Our refugee and immigrant students come from all over the world and from very diverse educational backgrounds. We have a wide range of learners, from students who have highly academic backgrounds and excellent learning strategies to students from countries where there is no formal education or in some cases, no written language. You can imagine the challenge of addressing the needs of this hugely diverse population in one classroom. We have found Picturing Writing to be a godsend; it develops basic vocabulary for the newest students and develops descriptive language for all our students. Not only this, Picturing Writing provides a medium for our students to express ideas and communicate non-verbally through artists’ techniques. It allows for a great deal of differentiation. We have found amazing improvements in our students since we began Picturing Writing. Because of this, we incorporate it into all aspects of our curriculum.*

Reading Specialist at Webster Priscilla Drouin couldn’t agree more with the value of this approach for all students:

*Picturing Writing instruction immerses students in rich vocabulary and wonderful art from children’s literature. As a result, even our ELL students and students who are struggling with literacy are successful writing their own books. For these students, something powerful, and almost magical, unfolds as they write. Moving through the process of listening to read alouds, discussing the illustrations in picture books, crafting their own pictures, brainstorming “silver dollar” words, and reading their own art for meaning triggers the descriptive language they need to write engaging stories. Their pride in their work is so apparent and so important to those who are not usually successful using more traditional writing processes.*

### Current Plans

As part of a four-year collaboration between the Center for the Advancement of Art-Based Literacy and the Manchester School District, three Manchester schools are in the process of adopting Picturing Writing school-wide and integrating this art-and-literature-based approach to literacy learning into their language arts and science and/or social studies curriculum. As a federally funded Arts in Education Model Development and Dissemination research project, RMC Research, Inc. in Portsmouth, New Hampshire is conducting a research study to document the impact of this collaboration

FIGURE 1

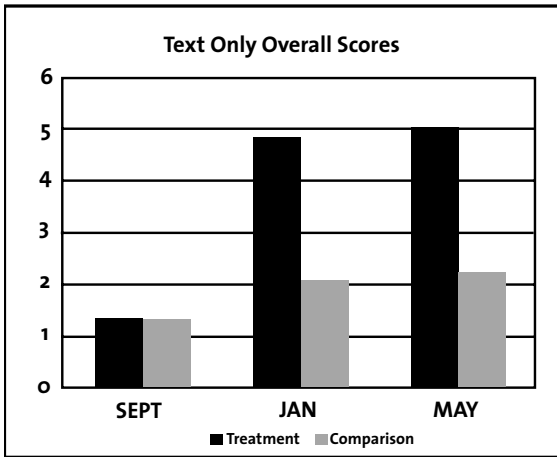


FIGURE 2

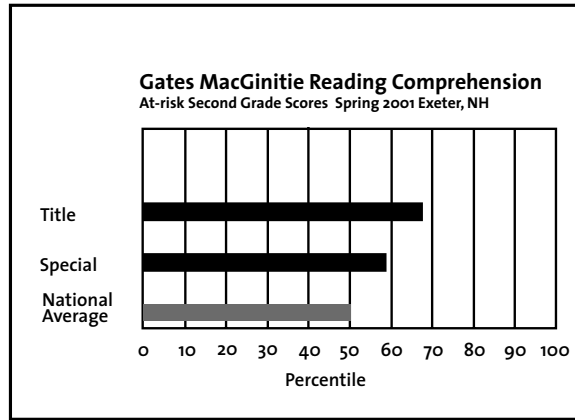


FIGURE 3

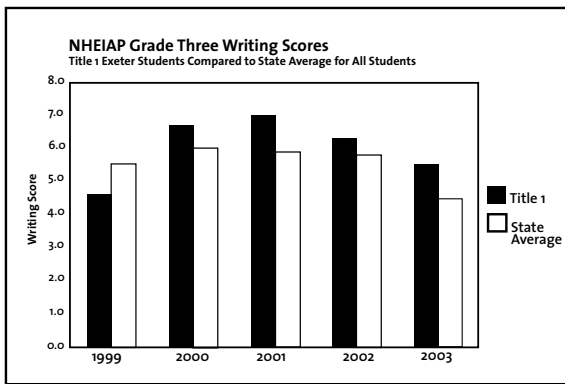


FIGURE 4

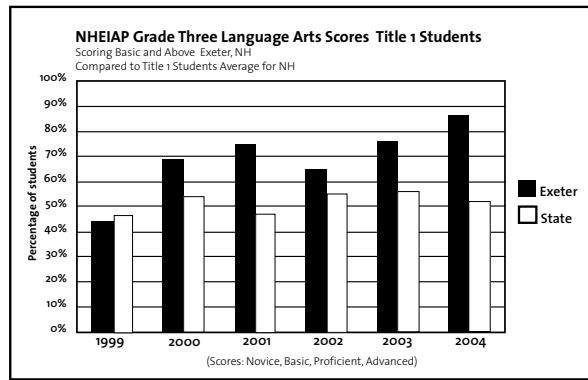
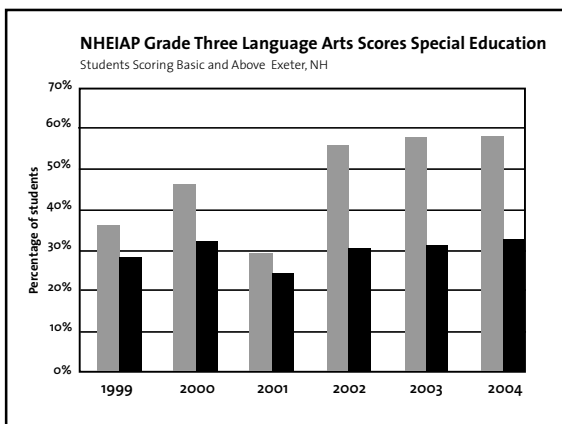


FIGURE 5



on the literacy learning of Manchester's diverse population of students.

The goals of the project are two-fold: 1) to improve reading and writing standardized test scores in this district in need of improvement and 2) to develop art-and-literature-based integrated curriculum units of study designed to support the literacy learning of Manchester's diverse elementary population at each elementary grade level while addressing the state standards.

Ultimately, the project will provide Manchester teachers with a comprehensive system and concrete tools for improving the literacy learning of their diverse population of learners. Given the way the students are responding to the Picturing Writing process—even those who recently arrived from Burundi—those involved in this federally funded pilot program remain cautiously optimistic.

### How Collaborations Work

The Center for the Advancement of Art-Based Literacy has worked collaboratively with schools and school districts across the state to help advance the literacy skills of all students by providing quality professional development and ongoing teacher support. Professional development consists of hands-on teacher-training in which teachers experience the power of this art-based approach to writing for themselves. Teachers leave each workshop with an experiential understanding and a comprehensive teacher's manual for each unit of study they have trained in. Our most successful collaborations have included follow-up training, classroom coaching, in which teachers observe an experienced practitioner working directly with students, followed by after-school discussion groups. Professional development can be packaged as graduate level course offerings in which teacher-training, coaching, and after-school discussion groups enable administrators to apply course reimbursement monies to cover the cost. However these initiatives are funded, offering teachers the opportunity to establish ongoing learning communities to support their evolving practice can serve to reinvigorate an entire school—classroom teachers as well as support staff such as reading specialists, special education teachers, ELL teachers and art specialists.

In school-wide adoptions, following the first year of implementation, in which all teachers and all students participate in introductory level art-based writing units of study, an integrated curriculum school-wide plan is developed, grade level by grade level, so that, by design, students and teachers have the opportunity to deepen their practice while continuing to address New Hampshire state curriculum frameworks in Language Arts and district curriculum in science and/or social studies. In this way, teachers at each grade level are

able to teach what they need to teach in a way that engages all learners. Students are given the opportunity to apply their evolving skills to a carefully designed progression of art-and-literature-based writing projects, each requiring a greater level of sophistication both in art and in writing. Projects range from writing simple descriptive sentences and paragraphs to exploring a variety of poetic forms to story writing to conducting research and then creating research reports or research-based stories. All of these integrated curriculum units of study provide students with dynamic visual tools for developing, expressing and recording ideas.

While projects at Main Street School and within the Manchester School District were supported by federal funds, not all collaborations are born out of large federal grants. The Center for the Advancement for Art-Based Literacy is committed to working with schools and school districts across the State that are interested in trying to meet the needs of diverse learners by adopting our proven art-and-literature-based methods to improve literacy learning. Funded by professional development money, graduate course reimbursement funds, Title I funds, PTO monies, or small grants from local businesses or foundations, we have trained 1,500 teachers across New Hampshire. In this day and age, when NCLB is putting enormous pressure on administrators and teachers to increase the test scores of low performing students, why not try a proven model that will captivate your entire community of learners?

*Beth Olshansky is the founder and director of the Center for the Advancement of Art-Based Literacy at the University of New Hampshire. She is also the developer of two art-and-literature-based literacy models: Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art and Image-Making Within The Writing Process. Her book, The Power of Pictures: Creating Pathways to Literacy Through Art will be available in the spring of 2008. For more information, visit [www.picturingwriting.org](http://www.picturingwriting.org).*

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