



It's Lit!

**Curating Community & Connection
through Cross-Grade Literary Circles
in Middle School**

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Opening Activity

Read and analyze several versions of one story

Close reading

Compare and contrast

Archetypal story pattern---re-interpretation in multiple modes

Our Context (at a glance)

- BCMS is a 6-8 middle school, close suburb of Philadelphia
- 20% of our total students are identified as gifted (average 75 per grade this school year)
- Most students in Cross Grade Lit Circles earned 99% ile on grade level Degree of Reading Power test / All advanced on ELA PSSA
- Language arts classes are heterogeneously grouped
- Gifted Support Teachers offer Grade-Level Literary Circles as extension opportunities (once per four-day cycle)
- A few years ago, we established **Cross-Grade Literary Circles** to further meet students' needs



<p style="text-align: center;">The Core or Basic Curriculum</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">The Curriculum of Connections</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">The Curriculum of Practice</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">The Curriculum of Identity</p>
<p>The Core Curriculum is the foundational curriculum that establishes a rich framework of knowledge, understanding, and skills most relevant to the discipline. It is inclusive of and extends state and district expectations. It is the starting point or root system for all of the parallels in this model.</p> <p>The Core or Basic Curriculum:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is built on key facts, concepts, principles, and skills essential to discipline • Is coherent in its organization • Is purposefully focused and organized to achieve essential outcomes • Promotes understanding rather than rote learning • Is taught in a meaningful context • Causes students to grapple with ideas and questions, using both critical and creative thinking • Is mentally and affectively engaging and satisfying to learners • Results in evidence of worthwhile student production 	<p>This curriculum is derived from and extends the Core Curriculum. It is designed to help students encounter and interact with the key concepts, principles, and skills in a variety of settings, times, and circumstances.</p> <p>The Curriculum of Connections is designed to help students think about and apply key concepts, principles, and skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a range of instances throughout the discipline • Across disciplines • Across time and time periods • Across locations • Across cultures • Across times, locations, and cultures • Through varied perspectives • As impacted by various conditions (social, economic, technological, political, etc.) • Through the eyes of various people who affected and are affected by the ideas • By examining links between concepts and development of the disciplines 	<p>This curriculum is derived from and extends the Core Curriculum. Its purpose is to help students function with increasing skill and confidence in a discipline as professionals would function. It exists for the purpose of promoting students' expertise as practitioners of the discipline.</p> <p>The Curriculum of Practice asks students to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the nature of the discipline in a real world application manner • Define and assume a role as a means of studying the discipline • Understand the impact of this discipline on other disciplines and other disciplines on this discipline • Become a disciplinary problem solver rather than being a problem solver using the subject matter of the discipline • Understand and use the discipline as a means of looking at and making sense of the world • Develop a means of escaping the rut of certainty about knowledge • Comprehend the daily lives of workers or professionals in the discipline: working conditions, hierarchical structures, fiscal aspects of the work, peer or collegial dynamics • Define and understand the implications of internal and external politics that impact the discipline • Value and engage in the intellectual struggle of the discipline • Function as a producer in the discipline • Function as a scholar in the discipline 	<p>This curriculum is derived from and extends the Core Curriculum. It is designed to help students see themselves in relation to the discipline both now and with possibilities for the future; understand the discipline more fully by connecting it with their lives and experiences; increase awareness of their preferences, strengths, interests, and need for growth; and think about themselves as stewards of the discipline who may contribute to it and/or through it. The Curriculum of Identity uses curriculum as a catalyst for self-definition and self-understanding, with the belief that by looking outward to the discipline, students can find a means of looking inward.</p> <p>The Curriculum of Identity asks students to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on their skills and interests as they relate to the discipline • Understand ways in which their interests might be useful to the discipline and ways in which the discipline might serve as a means for helping them develop their skills and interests • Develop awareness of their modes of working as they relate to the modes of operation characteristic of the discipline • Reflect on the impact of the discipline in the world, and self in the discipline • Think about the impact of the discipline on the lives of others in the wider world • Take intellectual samplings of the discipline for the purpose of experiencing self in relation to the discipline • Examine the ethics and philosophy characteristic of the discipline and their implications • Project themselves into the discipline • Develop self in the context of the discipline and through interaction with the subject matter • Develop a sense of both pride and humility related to both self and the discipline
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Gifted readers benefit from.....

- learning opportunities that help them develop greater insights into the subtleties of literary selections, understanding nuances of meaning, and navigating advanced-level content.
- a balance between choice reading selections and teacher/peer encouragement to broaden their reading repertoire and consider a broader range of genres and styles than they may select on their own.
- opportunities to discuss literature and foster metacognitive thinking during reading, critical analysis of text, relating literature to other cultural contexts or events, and consideration of multiple perspectives.
- access to challenging literature which presents “advanced vocabulary, sophisticated themes, and abstract or metaphorical concepts” (Wood, 2008).
- flexible grouping based on reading level and interest.



Figure 1. Components of a reading program for gifted and talented readers.



Star Cross'd: Pyramus and Thisbe through the Ages in Literature and Performing Arts

Essential Questions

- How can two different works of similar or different genres be compared/contrasted using the elements of fiction and use of language?
- How do readers follow an idea as it surfaces in the work of different authors, through many texts, across long spans of time?
- What classic themes pervade literature and art throughout history? What makes them timeless?
- How does comparing and contrasting themes from various pieces of literature increase understanding?
- How are stories from other places and times connected with universal experience?
- How might art (specifically literature and drama) reflect and address cultural ideas?



Pyramus and Thisbe Read & Respond

Read the three versions of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe (verse, narrative, re-telling).

Respond to the following questions in preparation for discussion.

1. Which version was your favorite to read and why?
2. What similarities and differences did you notice across the versions?



***Romeo and Juliet* Performance**

Before:

Chorus----read and respond

What do you know about the story?

After:

What connections did you notice to Pyramus and Thisbe?

What themes were addressed?





Star Cross'd Books (Inspired YA Literature): Discussion Prompts

Consider all story elements, such as setting, characterization, plot events, conflict, language, etc:

How does _____ address...

Family

Fate

Love and sexuality





West Side Story

Our introduction:

View [introductory scene](#) from 1961 film

Before seeing the show:

Read chapters 1 and 7 from *Something's Coming, Something Good West Side Story and the American Imagination* by Nisha Berson

After seeing the show:

Read chapter 3 from *Something's Coming, Something Good West Side Story and the American Imagination* by Nisha Berson



Student Reflection & Feedback

1. How did comparing and contrasting themes from various pieces of literature increase your understanding?
2. What did you enjoy about this learning experience?



Star Cross'd: Pyramus and Thisbe through the Ages in Literature and Performing Arts (2016-2017)

- Reading the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe in various formats (verse, retell, narrative).
- Live performance of *Romeo and Juliet* at The Media Theatre
- Cross-grade discussion (analysis of common themes, comparison of different storytelling formats)
- Reading of inspired young adult companion novel
- Online and/or face-to-face discussions (analysis of common themes, comparison of storytelling formats, opinions and reviews)
- Reading & discussion of scholarship about *West Side Story*
- Live performance of *West Side Story* at The Media Theatre



Additional Cross-Grade Explorations

The Diary of Anne Frank (2017-2018)

- Review of visual imagery from and background information on The Holocaust, providing students with cultural context
- Reading of diary, play, and reflective essay
- Live performance at The People's Light & Theatre Company
- Cross-grade discussion/analysis of common themes, comparison of different storytelling formats; related modern-day connections and interpretations (articles, cultural connections)

Leonard Bernstein (2017-2018)

- Reading of biographical excerpts & listening to Bernstein's compositions
- Connection to West Side Story from previous cross-grade study
- *Leonard Bernstein: The Power of Music* exhibit at The National Museum of American Jewish History, Philadelphia



Additional Cross-Grade Explorations

The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged) [Revised] (2017-2018)

- Cross-Grade discussion of Shakespeare's works and influence; individual play reading
- Live performance at Delaware Theatre Company

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime by Mark Haddon (2018-2019 - in development)

- Close reading and math connections (with Algebra II teacher, math class, and lit circles students)
- Essential Questions: How do we perceive the world? How do parents and children come to understand one another? How does literature help us understand ourselves and others?
- Live performance at The Walnut Street Theatre

Julius Caesar (2018-2019 - in development)

- Close reading and social studies connections (grade 6); government and politics (grades 6-8)
- Live performance at The Media Theatre

The Lightning Thief by Rick Riordan (2018-2019 - in development)

- (Re)reading of the novel and self-directed mythology study/teach-in (Edith Hamilton)
- Live performance at The Kimmel Center



How Cross-Grade Lit Circles Benefits our Gifted Readers (Students' Perspectives)

“I think it was really beneficial. Before I had never noticed, or rarely thought to look for the way many more modern texts mimic and take influence older classics. Each author brings their own take on the story, adding layers of depth and complexity each time.”

“The comparing and contrasting enhanced my abilities of analysis as well as a deeper understanding of correlations between books.”

“This was a great way to combine my love of theatre with literature comprehension skills.”

“Fascinating how one piece of literature impacted so many writers.”

“I enjoyed all the different grade levels coming together.”



How Cross-Grade Lit Circles Benefits our Gifted Readers (Teachers' Perspectives)

- Students self-selected participation: can select based on interest.
- Students benefit from sharing observations and ideas with others who may agree with or challenge their perspectives.
- Students' ideas were shared in-person during several class sessions as well as through online discussion so they were able to engage to a degree that is both comfortable and thought-provoking.
- Mixed-grade grouping fostered interactions and leadership opportunities with intellectual peers.
- Co-teaching enabled students to receive feedback from both familiar and unfamiliar teachers, and to establish or continue longitudinal relationships.



Planning & Implementation

- Collaborate with a partner -- co-teaching across grade levels was vital for us
- Begin by searching for available local resources (theatre performances, museum exhibits, guest speakers, etc.)
- Consider student population (gifted needs, related interests)
- Consider curricular needs (extension/enrichment/parallel)
- Select related readings or resources
- Plan discussion times (online and in -person)--collaboration with building colleagues (co-teaching, coordination of pull-out/push-in times, etc.)
- Follow the path that unfolds



Discussion & Questions for Further Thought

- In what ways might elements of Cross-Grade Lit Circles work with your students?
- What cultural resources are available in your area?