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My Way to America

Paintings and Letters Tracing Our Ancestor's Journeys

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I think that Jack and his family were very brave crossing the Atlantic Ocean to try to find a better life. If I could talk to him I would thank him for his courage and working hard to make a good life for all of his generations to follow.

-Patrick

By writing this story, I realized how easy we have it in 2009 and how hard my great, great Grandma had it in 1907.

-Sawyer

If Karel was still alive, I would thank him for coming to America because if he didn't come, I wouldn't be here today.

-Henry

These are a few of the reflections shared by Tricia Lyons' third graders as they consider what they learned during their 3-month immersion into the study of immigration. Each student clutches their own newly published book of original paintings and letters—a pictorial and written record of one of their ancestor's journeys to America. Many of the students traced the journey of a family member who came to the United States by way of the ship's steering during the late 1800s

through early 1900s. One student writes about her ancestor's voyage aboard the Mayflower. Others recount the journey of a grandparent, parent or even their own recent journey by plane, train, or car. About his own travel to America, Mehan reflects, "I am glad I am here because I don't know what would have happened if I had stayed in the orphanage in Cambodia. My journey was rough but it was worth it. I have a better life."

Integrated Curriculum Immigration Unit

Each student has been immersed in reading about immigration, researching their family's country of origin, and interviewing family to learn about how family members left their homeland to travel to America. Some students bring in old photographs to share after leafing through family photo albums with parents and grandparents. Read-alouds followed by whole group discussions, shared readings in reading group, and reading picture books and chapter books of their own choosing all provide a strong foundation of background knowledge. Guest speakers, either immigrants themselves or parents sharing family stories, make the process of immigration all the more real to these 8- and 9-year old students. Ruella, a school paraprofessional, shares her very emotional personal story of being put on a boat by her Greek father at the age of 19 with 1,200 brides-to-be to travel for 35 days to Australia. The students listened, wide-eyed, some on the verge of tears themselves.

Family stories become all the more real when students are asked to create storyboards tracking one ancestor's journey. These rough pencil sketches require students to begin to visualize their ancestor's journey and thus demand that they think in more detail. What they don't know from family stories, they make up, drawing upon the wealth of background information they have acquired through their reading, guest presentations, and discussions. These rough sketches, however, form just the

skeleton for what will become a sequence of detailed crayon resist paintings by each student. Ultimately, it is their very own artwork that will bring their ancestor's immigration story to life.

Once these stories are drafted using visual elements such as color, texture, shape, and composition to make meaning, reading their pictures helps students access the detail and description that serves to enhance their stories. Oral rehearsal provides an important bridge between their pictorial representations and the written word. Using oral language, students further develop their stories as they read the pictures they have purposefully created. They are now ready to begin writing to each of their thoughtfully crafted paintings.

Throughout this immigration unit, the study of quality literature, and in particular quality picture books, helps students to draft pictures and words purposefully as they consider what colors or perspective they will use to convey a certain mood or what kinds of language will bring suspense to their story or create an authentic voice for their character. Beyond conveying content area information, these mentor texts provide opportunities for students to study how the language of pictures and the language of words can be used to make meaning.

As students craft their stories in pictures first and then in words, third-grade teacher Tricia Lyons and I (the developer of Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art) are pleased with our decision to have the students write a series of letters written from the perspective of their ancestor to a family member or friend back home. These first person accounts of their ancestor's journey, including the trials of going through the process of immigration, lead students to imagine that they are there in the paintings they have created. They become their ancestor, experiencing the journey firsthand. While students' paintings vary in point of view from first person to third person, it is apparent from reading their letters

that they have indeed climbed into their pictures to feel the wind and the ocean spray blowing on their faces as they watch their homeland disappear into the mist or hear seagulls squawking overhead or smell the stench of traveling with hundreds of other immigrants in steerage below the deck. Firsthand accounts of worms and bugs in passengers' food or tales of rats scurrying around below deck capture the students' imaginations and become woven into their own account of their (ancestor's) journey.

Content area terms such as immigration, steerage, buttonhook, and trachoma appear in daily readings, spelling lists, and crossword puzzles and become part of students' working vocabulary. Even math and science play a role in this study of immigration. Students experiment with dropping vinegar onto a copper penny to watch it turn green over time. They learn how long it took for the Statue of Liberty to turn from copper-colored to green and then must determine, based on the date of their ancestor's journey and mathematical calculations, what color to paint their own depictions of Lady Liberty. [Editor's Note: The cover of this issue is one of those depictions.] Students must also date each letter they write based on actual or imagined dates their ancestors left their homeland and the probable length of time of their journey.

A photo of each child, dressed as their ancestor and looking tired and hungry after their long journey, is printed in sepia tone and adorns the cover of each student's personal anthology of letters and paintings. An "author's note" at the back of each bound book offers students the opportunity to tell how each is related to the immigrant in their story and what happened to that ancestor once he or she passed through immigration. Many author's notes also include personal insights or reflections such those shared by Mariale: "My story is about me. I am an immigrant. My parents told me the story about when I was a baby. I was only five months old.

I think about how my life would have been different if I stayed in Guatemala.”

These third-graders’ immigration books, once completed, remain in the classroom for some time and become favorite reading material among their classmates. When the books are sent home at the end of the school year, they become treasured family keepsakes. There is no doubt that Makayla’s meme who has been in the hospital for some time will be touched to read Makayla’s closing comments in her author’s note: “I learned how my meme came to the United States of America... I realize now how she felt, how bad and how hungry she was when she was riding in the car. I feel bad about what happened to my meme. I feel happy that she is having a good life. I love her very much!!”

Federally funded research study

This seamlessly integrated reading, writing, social studies, and art project is but one of the many integrated curriculum units of study that grew out of the research validated art and literature based approach to literacy learning: Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art. Now in its thirteenth year, Picturing Writing has been the focus of two sizable research studies and years of analysis of standardized test score data. Currently funded by a U.S. Department of Education Arts in Education Model Development and Dissemination (AEMDD) Grant, the Picturing Writing process is being investigated to determine its impact on the writing, reading, and visual literacy skills of students in grades 1-4 in the Manchester, NH School District, a National Refugee Relocation Center, that offers a richly diverse student body.

This third-grade immigration unit is only one of the many units of study designed to integrate the Picturing Writing process into Manchester’s elementary curriculum. Approximately 750 students in the treatment group, grades 1-4, participate in at least two lengthy Picturing

Writing units of study over the course of each school year. An equal number of demographically matched students within the district (based on percentage of students participating in free and reduced lunch programs and standardized reading assessment scores) serve as the comparison group. Both treatment and comparison groups submit baseline art and writing samples on uniform templates each September and completed stories with one or more accompanying pictures in the spring.

To insure a blind study of the writing, spring writing samples are separated from their accompanying artwork, and the text is typed in a uniform fashion.

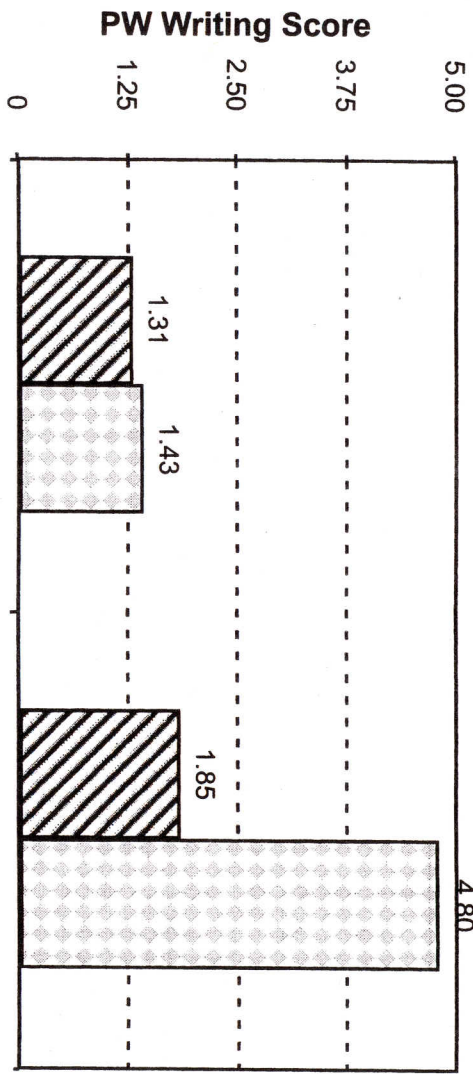
Student names, teacher names and school names are replaced with identification numbers. These ID numbers also include pertinent information such as whether the student belongs to a particular at-risk subgroup. Though identification numbers are used for the scoring of the artwork, by its very nature, the scoring of artwork is not a blind study, since it is apparent by looking at the artwork which spring samples belong to which group. District and state assessments in writing and reading are also analyzed as a part of the study.

Each art and writing sample is scored twice, by two independent raters. After 51 hours of training, inter-rater reliability during the first year of the study is high at 92.5%. With the first year of research findings complete, this study of 1,500 students has documented statistically significant gains in students’ writing and use of visual elements to convey meaning in the treatment group as compared to the demographically matched comparison group (Figures 1 and 2). This finding holds true for all subgroups as well: “at-risk students” (those scoring “below benchmark” on their fall reading assessment), Special Education students, English Language Learners who have been mainstreamed and English Language Learners who are in self-contained magnet classrooms for limited English language speakers (Figures 3 and 4). Findings

Figure 1.

*The difference between comparison and treatment groups are statically significant.

■ Comparison (n=673) □ Treatment (n=692)



Pretest-Posttest Visual Scores Treatment vs. Comparison Group-All Grade Levels

*The difference between comparison and treatment groups are statically significant.

■ Comparison (n=674) □ Treatment (n=688)

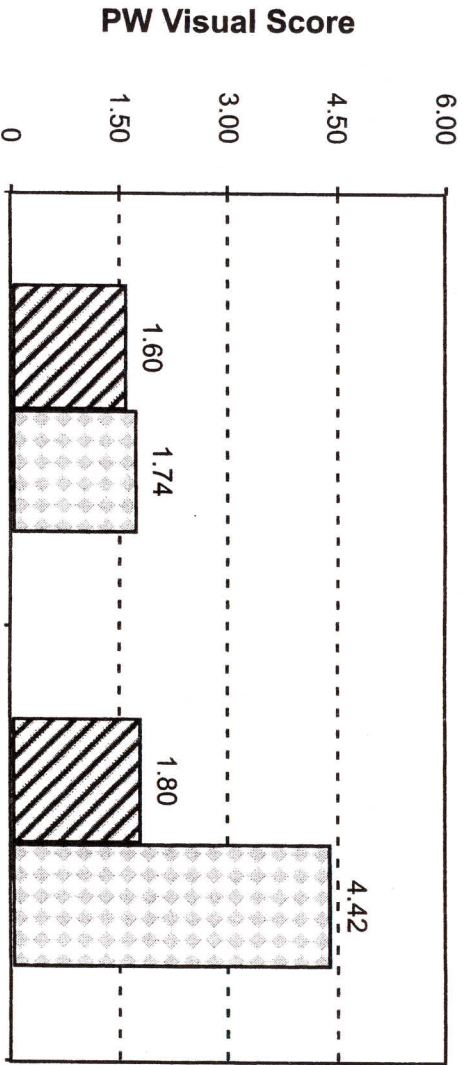
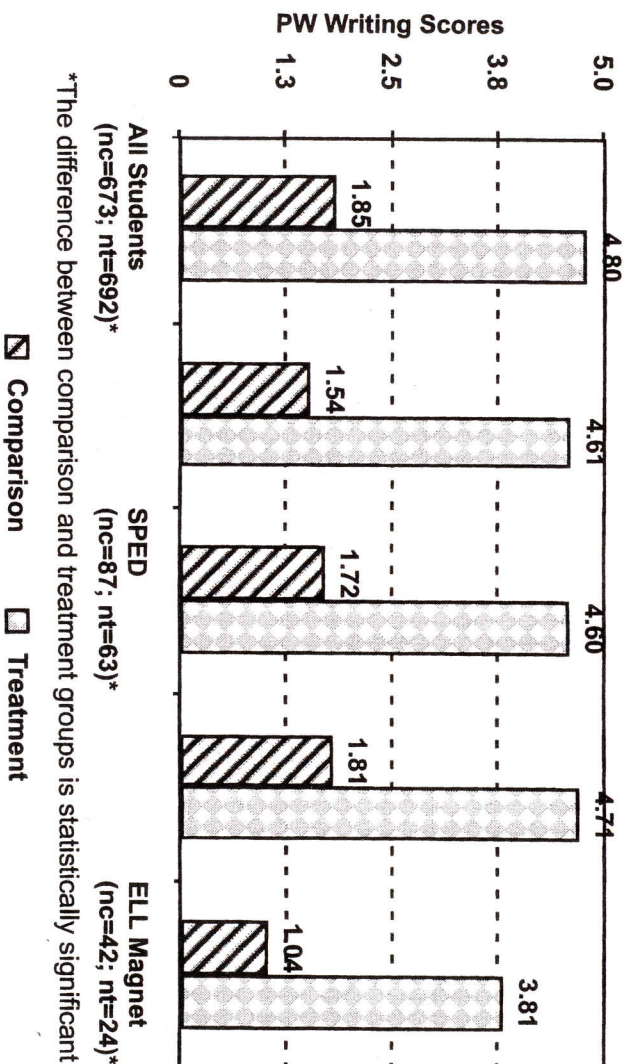


Figure 2

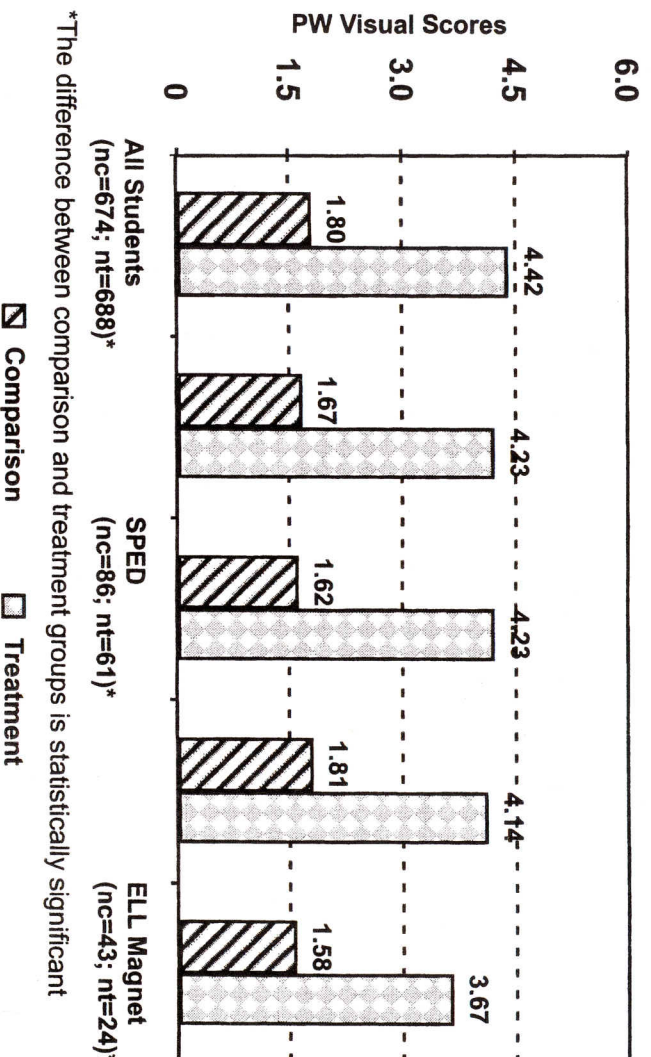
PW Spring Writing Scores, Treatment vs. Comparison Groups - Subgroups



*The difference between comparison and treatment groups is statistically significant

Figure 3.

PW Spring Visual Scores, Treatment vs. Comparison Groups - Subgroups



*The difference between comparison and treatment groups is statistically significant

Figure 4.

A Comparison of At-Risk Students Reaching Proficiency on Benchmark in Spring by Treatment

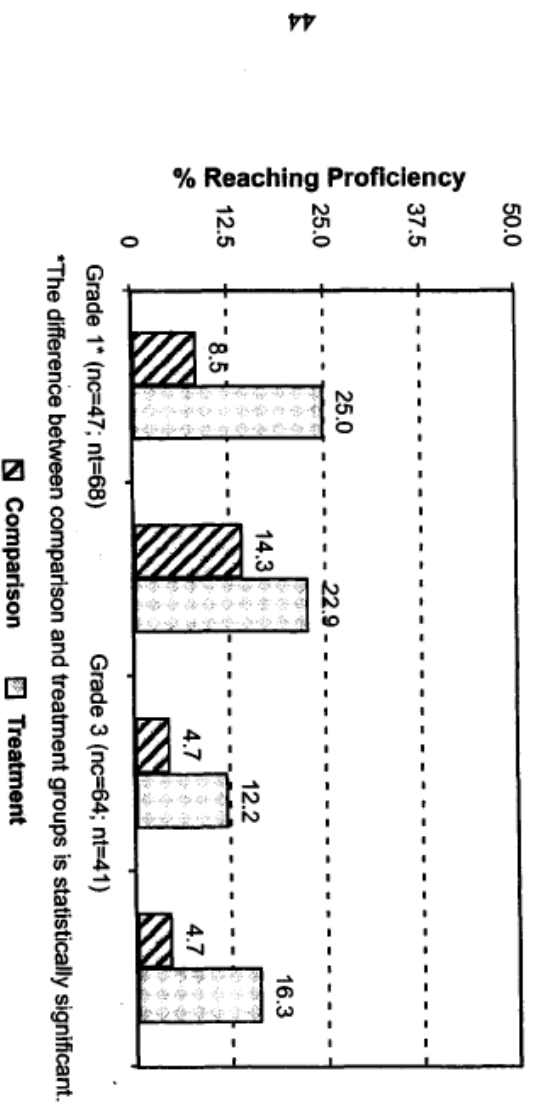


Figure 5.

document that the very students targeted by the No Child Left Behind Act are indeed thriving when they participate in this alternative, art-and-literature-based approach to literacy learning.

District writing prompts also document significant gains made by students in the treatment group as do district reading assessments. Additionally, of the students in grades 1-4 who scored “below benchmark” in reading in the fall based on Running Records assessments, a significant percentage of first and fourth graders scored proficient in the spring. Grade 2 and 3 “below benchmark” treatment students also showed strong gains (Figure 5).

Research findings aside, many of our struggling readers and writers will agree with what first- grader Gerome tells us about why he likes Picturing Writing: “You get to paint and then you get to make up your story and make real books that you can read.”

Beth Olshansky is the developer of Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art and Image-Making Within The Writing Process and author of *The Power of Pictures: Creating Pathways to Literacy Through Art* (Jossey-Bass, 2008). She is the Director of the Center for the Advancement of Art-Based Literacy at the University of New Hampshire. For more information about Picturing Writing or for a complete research results involving Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art or Image-Making Within The Writing Process, a related art-and-literature-based model, visit www.picturingwriting.org.