



The Power of Peer and Near-Peer Efforts

By Jonathan D. Mathis and Jolon McNeil

A principal's toolkit includes various instructional and management strategies that aid in creating conditions for student success. At the core, this includes communicating a shared vision and cultivating a culture in which the activity of learning is palpable and achievement is the norm. Even as these conditions are created, the success of the learning community can also be attributed to distributed leadership—how others are empowered to make a difference throughout the school. Of interest are the involve-

ment, work, and influence of peer and near-peer efforts. In this article, we highlight a pilot effort designed to incorporate the power that resides within student voice and activity in schools as it pertains to leadership and literacy.

During the winter months of 2017, the National Elementary Honor Society (NEHS) commenced a pilot program of stories collected in *The Watson Anthology*. The goals and structure of this program primarily advance proficiency and mastery

of English Language Arts (ELA) standards. A secondary priority is the focus on youth leadership development, student voice, character development, and chapter engagement. More than 300 schools were invited to participate, and students from nearly 50 chapters submitted more than 400 stories describing how Watson (the NEHS mascot) comes to know, understand, display, and/or teach others about the pillars of NEHS membership—scholarship, service, leadership, and responsibility.



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The forthcoming phase of the pilot includes an intentional focus on youth leadership development through literacy. *The Watson Anthology* features stories told through the lens of NEHS student members, a perfect tool for a near-peer literacy experience. NEHS student members will be able to utilize stories from the anthology to begin conversations with students in grades 4 and below, about the pillars. As a read-aloud effort, chapter members would pair up with a classroom once a week and facilitate reading and reflective activities, thus allowing students to track individual learning and literacy skill development among listeners. This design approach highlights three important concepts: self-efficacy; articulation and retention; and relevance and relationships.

As school leaders develop or implement the read-aloud companion to *The Watson Anthology*, we continue to reflect on those three concepts and offer the following questions for consideration:

Self-efficacy

How might the presence of an upper elementary student shape the academic self-concept of younger students? In what ways do students see their successes, or potential, in others? How might student-published works create expectations or outcomes for younger students?

From these questions, we want to create experiences in which students see themselves as possible contributors to new knowledge. We want students to see their potential, as learners and leaders, while also creating a space for deep acquisition of the pillars.

Articulation and Retention


For the near-peer readers, how does a read-aloud program support their communication skills and retention of content? For the near-peer listeners, what about this experience becomes familiar and adds in retaining important concepts and depth to their interpersonal skills?

Our focus here remains dualistic—we wish to ensure that the reader advances to mastery in effective communication and content awareness, while empowering younger students to uncover and understand content aligned to the ELA standards. We want students to see power in sharing what they know as a means of building their academic confidence and desire for future learning.

Relevance and Relationships

What are the experiences or routines that can be created to best highlight the importance of near-peer leaders? How can near-peer literacy support a culture of achievement throughout the entire school? In what ways do students communicate the value and importance of near-peer efforts?

We want to harness the influence of peers and the importance of relationships to communicate the imperative of achievement as it pertains to literacy and youth development. We believe that student voice is crucial to supplemental instruction engagement, especially with a focus on the NEHS pillars.

Ultimately, as is the focus of NEHS, we view a near-peer approach as a means to support efforts that fortify a culture of achievement in learning communities. The use of peers to celebrate effort and mastery proves that it is possible. For students in need of supplemental instruction, peers reiterate expectations and norms expressed by school leaders. As such, this culture advances the efforts of the instructional team, while reaffirming the recipient of the peer modeling and the power of the peer setting a positive example. 

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