

Snapshot #21

James Lick Middle School San Francisco, California

Kathleen Cotton

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Many of the findings identified in the effective schooling research base pertain to practices which (1) improve students' writing skills and (2) enhance their ability to judge the quality of written material. Some of the relevant classroom and schoolwide practices, as cited in EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING PRACTICES: A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS/1990 UPDATE (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, April 1990) include:

CLASSROOM:

1.1.1 INSTRUCTION IS GUIDED BY A PREPLANNED CURRICULUM

1.3.1 STUDENTS ARE CAREFULLY ORIENTED TO LESSONS

1.3.2 INSTRUCTION IS CLEAR AND FOCUSED

d. Students have plenty of opportunity for guided and independent practice with new concepts and skills.

e. Students are taught strategies for learning and for remembering and applying what they have learned....

1.3.4 STUDENTS ROUTINELY RECEIVE FEEDBACK AND REINFORCEMENT REGARDING THEIR LEARNING PROGRESS

1. Students receive immediate feedback on their in-class responses and written assignments; this feedback is simple and clear to help them understand and correct errors.
2. Teachers make use of peer evaluation techniques (e.g., in written composition) as a means of providing feedback and guidance to students.

1.5.1 LEARNING PROGRESS IS MONITORED CLOSELY

g. Teachers use assessment results not only to evaluate students but also for instructional diagnosis and to find out if teaching methods are working.

SCHOOL:

2.3.2 ADMINISTRATORS AND TEACHERS CONTINUALLY STRIVE TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

2.3.3 STAFF ENGAGE IN ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND COLLEGIAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES

SITUATION

Named for a local philanthropist, James Lick Middle School is located in the Noe Valley neighborhood of San Francisco. It is one of 16 middle schools in the 65,000-student San Francisco Unified School District, which also includes 82 elementary schools and 12 senior high schools.

Approximately 560 students in grades 6-8 attend James Lick. Most do not come from the local neighborhood, but are bused to the school from Chinatown and from the Hunters Point/Bayview area of the city. The ethnic composition of the school is: Spanish-surname - 44 percent; other white - 7 percent; black - 33 percent; Chinese - 5 percent; Filipino - 4 percent; Japanese, Korean, and American Indian - less than one percent each; and other nonwhite - 5 percent. Fully 28 percent of the student population is non-English proficient (NEP) or limited-English proficient (LEP), with most of these students having Spanish or Chinese as their primary language.

Sixty percent of James Lick's students fall below the 40th percentile in reading and mathematics on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills and are thus designated as educationally disadvantaged. Eleven percent qualify for special education services. Nearly half are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

CONTEXT

SERIOUS PROBLEMS, MAJOR CHANGES

In 1982, a lawsuit brought against the school district by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) resulted in a Federal Court Consent Decree. This Consent Decree mandated a variety of improvements, including school desegregation activities, upgrading of school facilities, and increases in student achievement. With the Consent Decree came additional resources to bring about the required improvements.

During the 1987-88 school year, as part of the second phase of the Consent Decree, James Lick began receiving funding to "reconstitute"; that is, to lay off its entire staff and hire new personnel. Current staff members were permitted to reapply for positions at the school, but the reconstitution process resulted in an almost-total turnover of staff. The current principal, Ms. Marylou

Mendoza-Mason, was hired at this time and was instrumental in selecting new staff members.

The James Lick school building was also determined, in 1987, to require extensive renovations to meet the site standards for a Consent Decree-targeted middle school. In addition, asbestos-removal needs at an area high school led the district to move the staff and students of that school into the Noe Valley facility, displacing James Lick students first among three other middle school sites, then to a former elementary school in the Hunters Point/Bayview area, and finally back to the original site in February 1989.

These disruptions caused many families to take their children out of the school, resulting in a 40 percent drop in student enrollment. As noted in a descriptive flyer about the school:

Only through the greatest effort on the part of staff and students have all of the disruptions been dealt with, but not at insignificant cost to the learning process....

Indeed, graphic displays of student achievement before, during, and since the reconstitution/relocation period reveal a drop in academic performance due to the stresses of moving and to changes in student composition. They also reveal, however, greater-than-expected improvements in achievement in the past two years--improvements that are all the more remarkable considering the increase in ethnic minority students, including many with few or no English language skills; James Lick's NEP/LEP population has increased from 18 to 28 percent since the pre-reconstitution days. In addition, overall student enrollment has nearly doubled, indicating a movement toward increased stability and public confidence in the school since it returned to the Noe Valley building.

Other notable characteristics and improvements at James Lick Middle School include:

- Affiliation with the Theodore Sizer COALITION OF ESSENTIAL SCHOOLS, including implementation of key Coalition principles, e.g., strong academic focus; student demonstration of mastery of essential course content; and building-level control of schedules, teaching materials, and curriculum
- Use of Consent Decree funds for TRIPS TO COALITION SCHOOLS in New York and Pasadena to observe and learn from school staff
- A RESTRUCTURING EFFORT, which has placed all language arts and social studies students in two-hour blocks across grade levels. The restructuring has also provided for two hours of weekly released time for teachers, adjacent to their preparation periods, to facilitate greater collaboration
- An increase in TEACHER INPUT AND INFLUENCE REGARDING SCHOOL DECISIONS, a change which reflects Ms. MendozaMason's management style
- Weekly two-hour meetings designated for staff to work on SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT projects and participate in STAFF DEVELOPMENT

activities--sometimes presented by James Lick staff and sometimes facilitated by outside consultants

- A GATE (GIFTED AND TALENTED EDUCATION) program for sixth graders featuring a team-teaching structure and twice-weekly visits to the San Francisco Exploratorium for a math/science instructional block, as well as honors classes for seventh and eighth graders in math (including algebra), social studies, and language arts
- A TEAMS PROJECT, in which teachers learn to conduct cooperative learning activities in their classrooms
- A MULTICULTURAL GRANT received during the 1989-90 school year which provides resources for putting on a series of festivals highlighting the various cultures represented among James Lick's students--African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latin American, Native American, European American.

Those familiar with the effective schooling research will readily note that these elements--and the program-specific features that follow--are in keeping with findings from this research base.

THE JAMES LICK WRITING PROGRAM

Work undertaken to upgrade students' writing skills and develop their ability to assess written products has been a particularly successful component of the school's improvement effort.

Efforts to improve James Lick's writing program began in 1986, when Consent Decree funds were made available for staff to engage the services of resource people from Project ACCESS, based at the University of California at Berkeley, to assist them in improving mathematics and language arts instruction. ACCESS staff provide training and technical assistance at the schoolwide, grade, and individual classroom levels at James Lick and other selected schools.

The initial goal of ACCESS activities was to enable minority students to improve their academic performance and eventually to enter and function successfully at U.C.-Berkeley; the program now has the more general goal of improving minority student academic performance so that these students will be more successful pursuing whatever educational or career path they may take.

ACCESS staff--and particularly resource specialist Patrick Delaney--have assisted James Lick staff to integrate the language arts and social studies curricula, to utilize a literature-based approach to reading and writing instruction, and to develop curriculum units in writing. They have also worked with both staff and students, teaching them to understand and apply holistic scoring principles to written material.

During the summer of 1990, ten of James Lick's 40 certified staff participated in the six-week summer session of the U.C.-Berkeley-based Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP). In operation since 1972, the BAWP emphasizes an instructional approach that gives attention to all phases of the writing process--

prewriting activities, drafting, revising, editing, and publication of written products. This way of teaching writing contrasts with the older, product-oriented approach that focuses attention only on the final product, the finished composition.

BAWP participants engage in daily writing activities and sharing/critiquing sessions, as well as individual conferences with instructors. Returning to their classrooms, they then implement with their students an instructional program modeled on the activities in which they participated during the summer session. James Lick's recent school restructuring process, which ushered in the use of two-hour blocks for core classes, has facilitated the implementation of sustained writing periods and related activities as called for by the BAWP model.

Students receive instruction in various writing formats. These include the following, which are basic to the repertoire of a skilled writer and, as such, are periodically assessed as part of the statewide California Assessment Program:

- **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INCIDENT.** The writer tells a story from personal experience; the story may include dialogue, names of people or objects, sensory details, feelings or reflections, and other elements.
- **EVALUATION.** The writer states a judgment of something (a movie, book, author, teacher, sports team, consumer object, etc.) and supports the judgment with evidence.
- **FIRSTHAND BIOGRAPHY.** The writer presents a familiar, significant person and characterizes that person through physical description, dialogue, contrasts with other people, specific incidents, or typical activities.
- **OBSERVATIONAL WRITING.** The writer presents observed scenes, events or people, attempting to help readers imagine the observations. The writer's stance is that of an eyewitness reporter or detached observer.
- **PROBLEM SOLUTION.** The writer describes a problem and argues for one or more solutions, emphasizing the seriousness of the problem and importance of solving it.
- **REPORT OF INFORMATION.** The writer presents him/herself as an authority on a subject and provides enough specific details about the subject to characterize it for readers.
- **SPECULATION ABOUT CAUSES OR EFFECTS.** The writer conjectures about the possible causes or effects of events, trends, or other phenomena and seeks to convince the reader of the plausibility of his/her speculations.
- **STORY.** The writer tells an engaging, dramatic story that provides readers with a context, conflict or tension, and a satisfying conclusion. Narrative summary, dramatized incidents, descriptions, character development, dialogue, and other elements may be used.

Teachers also assign and work with students on the development of "I-Search" papers. These are papers documenting the process followed by students as they develop one of the kinds of written products cited above. In addition to identifying the sources for their ideas, I-Search paper assignments ask students

to describe their personal feelings and responses to the topics they are researching and to the process of learning about those topics. Revealing these personal responses calls for a measure of trust on the part of students, and teachers seek to build that trust by modeling the process--that is, by writing "I-Search" papers themselves and sharing these with their students.

Students draft, revise, and edit their papers in the school's computer center, where they are able to take advantage of the capacity of word processing software to add, delete, and rearrange text easily. They also keep folders containing selected writing samples. These enable them to track their own writing progress, as well as being a useful diagnostic tool for use by teachers in identifying students' writing strengths and needs.

ACCESS staff have instructed James Lick staff in the application of a holistic scoring system utilizing a six-point scale, which they then use in order to assess students' written products. In addition, when students enter James Lick as sixth graders, they, too, are taught the concept of holistic scoring and how to apply the scale to their own and others' writing.

It is a source of gratification to Patrick Delaney and the James Lick staff that students have become skilled users of the scoring system; reviews have indicated a high degree of congruence between the scores assigned by seventh and eighth graders with scoring experience and those assigned by trained staff members. Students' expertise at writing assessment helps them to improve their own writing, as well as making them effective peer reviewers/advisors for one another.

The California Assessment Program (CAP) of the California Department of Education rates writing samples of eighth graders annually. Ratings are assigned for rhetorical effectiveness and use of writing conventions for each of the eight types of writing identified above. In 1989-90, the CAP scores of James Lick's eighth graders were a remarkable 56 points higher than those of the previous year's eighth graders--an increase which translates to one full point on the six-point holistic writing scale.

Principal Marylou Mendoza-Mason, Assistant Principal Judy Giampaoli, and ACCESS consultant Patrick Delaney credit several factors for this impressive growth in student writing skills. They include, in addition to the writing curriculum itself, the teaching skill and enthusiasm of the current James Lick staff, the school's program of staff development, the security provided by a stable school environment, and the sustained periods of time for student writing provided by the recent restructuring effort. It is expected that staff involvement with BAWP instructional strategies will result in further improvement of students' writing skills.

In the following descriptions of classroom practice, one can take note of the validated instructional practices listed in the opening section of this paper as these are utilized by teachers in the course of conducting writing program activities.

PEER RESPONSE GROUPS--GRADE 8

Entering an eighth grade language arts class taught by Jennifer Sliney revealed students quietly working on their current writing assignment, an I-Search paper. Students had read books related to their topics and were now asked to write about their attitudes and feelings toward their chosen subjects.

Ms. Sliney asked them to form two- or three-person response teams. She used an overhead projector to review guidelines for students to use in responding to one another's drafts. Respondents were instructed to use stars to indicate elements of one another's work that they liked, question marks to indicate unclear or irrelevant comments, and asterisks to indicate a need for a better "showing sentence," i.e., a more vividly descriptive one. Students were also instructed to conclude their reviews by noting something about the writer's work that they liked.

Ms. Sliney reminded students that "boring filler" weakens their writing and advised them to delete comments such as, "The reason I chose this topic is..." and instead to begin with something more compelling. As the students worked, Ms. Sliney circulated around the classroom, talking with groups and providing reminders to the whole class as needed.

Toward the end of the class period, Ms. Sliney asked several of the students to read first sentences from their I-Search drafts, now that they had the opportunity to rework these based on respondents' suggestions. Intended to catch readers' attention and inspire them to want to know more, examples of students' first sentences included:

- "Egyptian gods have mesmerized me since I was in the fourth grade."
- "My parents told me so much about Peru that I wanted to learn even more."
- "The 1906 earthquake was devastating."
- "Why are the Native Americans so important?"

Displays on the walls of Ms. Sliney's classroom provided reinforcement for the writing program and showcased examples of student work. One display, called "Have you heard a golden line?", offered examples of vivid, attention-getting sentences. Another presented examples of students' "Who Am I?" papers, in which students practiced using metaphors, describing themselves as animals, vehicles, or geographical features. Several well-written and nicely illustrated student papers concerning the Revolutionary War were also exhibited.

HOLISTIC SCORING REVIEW--GRADE 7

Seventh grade teacher Lloyd Francis reviewed the holistic scoring process with his students, making certain that they understood the qualities and characteristics comprising each of the numerical designations. For example, he reminded students that stories eligible for a "5" or "6" rating are those which: (1) have plenty of dialogue, (2) contain adventure, (3) keep the reader involved, (4) have more than one character, (5) are of substantial length, and

(6) exhibit the positive technical qualities of good paragraphing, accurate spelling, and neatness. The six scale points and their descriptors were also listed on newsprint pages posted at the front of the classroom.

Draft stories students had written were then returned to them with scores and comments included. Students looked over their papers and began making notes for the next day, when they would go to the computer lab and revise their stories based on reviewer's comments. As students were pursuing this activity, Mr. Francis circulated around the room, making positive comments to individuals and praising the class as a whole for their recent work. "You really outdid yourselves on this last assignment," he said, calling attention to the impressive number of high scores received by students' stories.

Like Mrs. Sliney's classroom, Mr. Francis's classroom walls displayed student work and other items that contributed to a positive learning environment, e.g., a list of story elements and their definitions and posters depicting the scientific, political, social, and artistic contributions of people from various ethnic backgrounds.

When asked if they liked to write stories and, if so, what kind of stories, students gave a variety of responses, including:

- "I like writing in this class most of the time."
- "I like writing fairy tales the best."
- "I don't like writing by hand, because my hand gets sore, but I like writing stories about space on the computer."
- "I don't like it that much, but if I become a secretary, I might have to write a lot, so it's ok."

COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN AN ADVANCED ESL CLASS

Most of the students in Glorine Johnson's seventh grade English-as-a-Second-Language class had been receiving ESL instruction for two years and thus had quite a good command of English. About half these students were native speakers of Spanish, and half were native speakers of Chinese.

This classroom, too, was decorated with colorful displays of students' writings, drawings, and worksheets. Classroom rules and other lists were posted, written in English, Spanish, and Chinese. Many reference books, including picture-dictionaries and thesauruses, were available.

A participant in James Lick's TEAMS project, which provides training in conducting cooperative learning activities, Ms. Johnson was engaged in helping her students to develop academic, social, and audience skills in cooperative groups. This being the second day of a lesson involving reading, question-answering, writing, and reporting, students were working in their groups to prepare reports on the subject of the American Civil War. Within each group, every student was responsible for conducting research to answer one or two questions and then contributing their answers to the final group report.

Asked if working in a group helps them with their writing projects, students gave answers ranging from "Yes, because you can help each other," to "I don't like it when people on my team won't do their part," with most students giving positive responses.

During the report-outs, representatives from the different groups read their groups' reports, while Ms. Johnson gave the listeners pointers on practicing good audience skills--watching the speakers and applauding them at the end of their reports.

BAWP STRATEGIES IN A BILINGUAL ESL CLASS

Mallorie Baron, a teacher of Spanish-speaking NEP and LEP students, faces challenges like those presented to many teachers in bilingual classes: "I teach reading, language arts, math, social studies, and science," she says, "all in both English and Spanish, to kids at different grade levels and different levels of English language ability."

Commercial posters and student drawings and written products were displayed in Ms. Baron's classroom, with most of the pictures labeled in Spanish. In keeping with the current schoolwide focus on ancient Egypt, pictures of Egyptian scenery, architecture, and artifacts decorated the room. Special prominence was given to a recent article in the local bilingual newspaper, *MISSION LIFE*, which pictured James Lick students, including some from this class, with their responses to the question, "How do you feel about the war in the Persian Gulf?"

Of the four cooperative learning groups pursuing a story-writing activity, three were working in English and one, an NEP group, was interacting in Spanish. Ms. Baron indicated that each of the groups working in English included a balance of stronger and weaker English language skills among its members.

Groups received initial instructions in both English and Spanish. When speaking English, Ms. Baron acted out what she wanted students to do and used expansive gestures to enhance her meaning. While students pursued their writing projects, Ms. Baron circulated around the room, answering questions and giving reminders about features of English grammar and spelling, e.g., "Remember that the days of the week begin with capital letters....When we use i-n-g words, we also have to use the verb 'to be'...I am going, you are going."

A participant in the 1990 summer BAWP training, Ms. Baron uses many BAWP activities with her students. For example, students working in their groups could be seen developing and posting "story maps" and "story boards," which picture characters and events that they would then describe in their stories. Student drawings picturing figures of speech (e.g., a broken heart), were displayed with their English and Spanish captions. Ms. Baron also maintains writing portfolios containing selected examples of student written work to track development and identify areas needing extra attention.

Toward the end of the class period, representatives from the groups working in English reported on the stories they were preparing, with Ms. Baron giving

them encouragement and praise for their efforts.

At the time of this visit to James Lick, district budgets were unusually tight and many teachers were facing layoffs. Despite these stresses, commitment to helping James Lick's students learn successfully was evident among all staff members observed and interviewed.

More information about James Lick Middle School and its writing program is available from Ms. Marylou MendozaMason, Principal, or Ms. Judy Giampaoli, Assistant Principal, James Lick Middle School, 1220 Noe Street, San Francisco, CA 94114, (415) 695-5675.

This publication is based on work sponsored wholly, or in part, by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education, under Contract Number RP91002001. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of OERI, the Department, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

November 1991