Contextual learning vs. standardized testing: and the winner is ...?

Lorinda Leedom

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Contextual learning vs. standardized testing: and the winner is ... ?

Abstract
Our educational system is currently in the grips of No Child Left Behind and the stress of proving students' abilities via mandated standardized tests. This stress is changing teachers' focus from providing a contextual learning environment for students to passing tests. Six struggling middle school students participated in a summer program where contextual learning and frequent standardized assessment existed together. Through this program, the students' needs were met and data was provided that demonstrated educational gains. This data suggests that authentic real world experiences do not need to be omitted from the curriculum in order to provide measurable results on standardized student achievement tests.
CONTEXTUAL LEARNING VS. STANDARDIZED TESTING:

AND THE WINNER IS...?
This project by: Lorinda Leedom

Titled: Contextual Learning vs. Standardized Testing: And the Winner Is...?

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Abstract

Our educational system is currently in the grips of No Child Left Behind and the stress of proving students’ abilities via mandated standardized tests. This stress is changing teachers’ focus from providing a contextual learning environment for students to passing tests. Six struggling middle school students participated in a summer program where contextual learning and frequent standardized assessment existed together. Through this program, the students’ needs were met and data was provided that demonstrated educational gains. This data suggests that authentic real world experiences do not need to be omitted from the curriculum in order to provide measurable results on standardized student achievement tests.
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**Description**

The purpose of this article is to describe a summer school program. The program utilized newspapers as the primary source of reading and writing activities for six middle school students in a small rural community. The activities represented authentic opportunities for learning to try and reach these students who are in need of extra academic assistance. With No Child Left Behind (NCLB) being such a driving force in schools, it is getting more difficult to focus on authentic learning opportunities. Mandated test performance suggests that "the reform is more about performance than learning, and punishing failure more than rewarding success" (McCaslin, 2006, p. 484). The pressure to pass tests overshadows the process of learning. The following article will examine how contextual learning, authentic real world learning, can coexist with data driven mandates: a meeting of professional conscience and professional mandates.

**Rationale**

Newspapers were used in this summer school program to try and reach a group of struggling learners. These learners were each very different and resistant to using the extra assistance offered during the normal school year. They needed materials that did not appear to be remedial. I wanted materials that would be of interest and beneficial for students. The newspapers gave them an adult medium for working on strategies and are research supported.

Newspapers in Education (NIE) has been around since 1930, now covering every continent with estimates of approximately sixty countries using a program (Vincens Steen, 2001). It is not a new idea by any means. What is the purpose of newspapers in
education? Newspapers are multifaceted. They can touch people regardless of age by providing a variety of topics, connecting people to their local community and world community, and helping people develop an understanding of the world around them. Effective learning environments connect the student to school and their home and community (Melaville, Berg, & Blank, 2006). Newspapers provide authentic and timely experiences that cannot be acquired through a social studies, science, or language arts textbook.

When used in classrooms, newspapers are effective and valuable tools. Research supports an increase in students’ reading interest, reading attitude, reading achievement, writing performance, comprehension, classroom verbal interactions, and enhanced reading frequency in adulthood (DeRoche, 1981; Stone & Grusin, 1991; Wanta & Brierton, 1992; Palmer, 1994). Simply providing the newspaper does not provide the same results as using it as part of the curriculum (Mader, 2004). In a study by the Newspaper Association of America Foundation, it was found that when students become newspaper readers, their standardized test scores shoot up by 19%, and at risk students’ scores shoot up by 29% (Mader, 2004).

**Purpose of the Article Being Published**

This article is being submitted to the *Middle School Journal*. This journal speaks directly to the educator in the classroom. Educators can relate to the idea that a contextual environment is important for students, but NCLB has made standardized scores feel more important than the appropriate learning environment. It will be helpful for others to see an example of how an authentic learning experience can coexist with standardized assessments.
Importance of the Article

A program that utilizes such a strong tool will fit contextual learning framework. The students will be able to find information that they can relate to, find useful, connect them to the school, home, and community, and allow them to work with other students. As a teacher, I will be able to work with the students where they are and encourage them to move beyond. Incorporating assessments that don’t distract or take away from the learning environment will be key.

Research Questions

NCLB feels like an intruder in the classroom. There is great pressure to provide data for the fear of punishment (McCaslin, 2006). When the initial planning for summer school was taking place, I felt enthusiastic, ready to be done with data, and just enjoy the experience of reaching out to a small group of students in need of assistance. Being informed that data was required quickly drained my enthusiasm. Not to be beaten, I was challenged with how can I provide a contextual, authentic, real world, experience for struggling students and meet standards-based data driven mandates? Can contextual learning and data driven standards coexist?
Methodology

**Method to Write and Submit Article**

The following journal article was written to describe a summer school program and the success it had reaching students in need of academic assistance. The *Middle School Journal*, a refereed educational journal, was chosen because it speaks directly to the practitioners in the field in a clear voice and avoids academic jargon (National Middle School Association, 2006). This makes it very accessible and viable for teachers.

The groundwork for this research and article started in the spring of 2006, preparing for summer school. Teachers recommend students who are in need of additional assistance in reading and math, and the students are invited to attend. Attendance is voluntary. As the teacher in charge of summer school, I was responsible for the curriculum.

Rather than provide strictly drill and practice, I wanted to provide a learning experience that would incorporate high interest topics, comprehension strategies, and skills strategies. Newspapers offered that outlet. Newspapers would be the primary reading resource and source for writing topics. They would also be used to provide authentic math problems for the students to solve. The students were assessed to provide a base line and progress for their writing and math computation skills. AIMSweb assessments were recommended by school and area education agency personnel. I read a number of novels to find a good fit for the group. Even middle school students enjoy read-a-louds. I chose *Landry News* because it fit the theme and is quality literature. I also contacted the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* to request a daily copy of the newspaper for each student.
This laid the foundation of the work. The students were hesitant but receptive to the programming, and they showed growth in their writing and math. I was surprised by the outcomes and documented not only the given assessments but I also recorded student responses and interactions each class period. The following article highlights the positive outcomes. The process for submitting the article is included in the appendix.

**Focus area**

The original goals of the summer school program were to give remedial assistance in reading and math. To determine their needs I spoke with the individual students' language arts, math, special education, and Title I teachers. After I analyzed the student population to be served with the information given, writing skills and math computation (basic math facts) were areas that needed the most assistance. Their writing skills were weak; sentence structure, paragraph structure, spelling, organization, and parts of a story. Their math needs varied, some needing much additional practice with basic facts. Reading comprehension was a need for four of the students. The goals of the program would be to improve writing skills, math computation, and reading comprehension. I also needed to provide data and documentation showing the outcome of the program. This presented the research questions that are investigated in the article: How can I provide a contextual, authentic, real world, experience for struggling students and meet standards-based data driven mandates? Can contextual learning and data driven standards coexist?

**Participants**

The summer school program took place in a fifth through eighth grade middle school. The middle school services students from two small communities and the rural
areas surrounding the communities. The population is primarily Caucasian and working class to white-collar workers. Six students responded to the invitation to attend summer school. One boy had just completed fifth grade, three boys and one girl completed sixth grade, and one boy completed seventh grade. A more complete description of their special needs are described in the article under Participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected three times a week for two weeks to monitor student progress and to support the program’s goals. The students were assessed using a math computation and a writing probe suggested by school and area education agency personnel. Both probes were AIMSweb standardized tests.

The math computation probe was a math sheet with addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division problems of varying difficulty. The students were given four minutes to complete as many problems as they could. Each digit that was correct was counted as one point. After scoring the tests, each student would find their errors and share or write a few sentences about what they were doing wrong and how they could work on improving. These skills were used to solve the math problems from the newspaper described in the article. This was also related to the students during lessons; they need basic math facts to solve real problems.

The writing probe was a story starter that students would use to write a story. They were given blank paper, and a story starter was read to them. They would get one minute to think about the story, hear the story starter again, and then three minutes to write. If they paused in their writing, they would be reminded to write the best story that they could. After the writing was scored, the students would find their errors, make
corrections, and discuss how to write it correctly. This practice was related to the articles
that they wrote during lessons: using correct sentence structure, main ideas, organization,
and including details. Mini lessons would be taught on the spot for common errors that
the students were making: doubling consonants before adding suffixes, compound
sentences, run-on sentences, punctuation, and capitalization.

Students were also tested over a novel, *The Landry News*, which was read a loud
to the class. The story focuses on a class creating their own newspapers. Reading
strategies were used throughout the novel. Think-a-louds were the primary strategy
used. Students were also engaged in discussions every day and given the opportunity to
predict, explain cause and effect relationships, and relate the story to themselves.

Observations were recorded daily. Notes were written during work time and
immediately following discussions during transition times. They were compiled and
elaborated on at the end of each class period. These observations included student
interactions, students’ questions and answers, and students’ expressions, behaviors, and
attitudes. These were recorded to help provide a more complete picture that data cannot
fill in. Data does not show the human side of learning which was the most important
aspect of the program. I watched students move from resistant in their writing to asking
for help phrasing or organizing a paragraph. I watched students move from isolation to
working together to share what they had read. I watched students go from silently taking
what was given to them to a community sharing information that was important to them.

*Results*

Overall the data showed student improvement. Two weeks is a short time to try
and show improvement, but the students did. The data showed that five of the six
students showed a gain in writing, and five of the six students showed a gain in math computation. The student who did not show a gain in writing had a three point drop from her first test to her last, and her average was within one point of her start score. The student who did not show a gain in math computation had the same start and end score, and his average was over one point above that (see Table C, E, F). It is not out of the ordinary for students to move up and down a few points in testing over time. What is important is steady growth. Not only did the data show improvement, but through observation I saw students get excited about reading and writing and having fun with math.

Upon completion of *The Landry News*, the students took a short multiple choice test over the book. The test was from the Accelerated Reader program that is used school wide. All five students who took the test, scored 80% or better. For two of the students, this was a true feat. The sixth student did not take the test. Because of his multiple disabilities, it was not an appropriate test.

*Method Discriminate What Was Included and Eliminated*

The data was summarized for the article. Seeing each score is not necessary to understand that students improved their scores over the two week program. Providing the average helps show that improvement was made. For five of the students their averages were higher than their start scores supporting growth. These scores give an overview of the student without burdening the reader with each test result.

A few observations of students were included to help give a more complete view of the students and to help the reader understand that not all of the successes are measurable by means of standardized scores. Educators understand that to get a student
excited about their own learning is not something that can be measured and placed in a percentile ranking. The program showed success through the data, but also in the way it touched the students.
Volunteering to teach summer school was not something that I expected to be doing. My vision of summer school was drill and practice worksheets lined up on the counter, going from pile to pile each day. Of course, throw in some treats and game time to take the sting out of it. I inquired about summer school and found that my stereotyping was not very accurate and that the position was still open. As a matter of fact it didn’t fit anyone else’s schedule for the summer, so I was flying solo! It was a little daunting considering that in the past, two teachers team taught a group of 12 to 20 students who were there because their parents agreed with their teachers that they needed extra help. Most of them would show up kicking and screaming.

Contemplating different options didn’t take long. There are a number of great novel choices, but picking one to fit a tough audience would be difficult. Using just drill and practice is out, too. I had recently been given a bulky file on using newspapers in the classroom. It occurred to me that newspapers would have something for just about everyone, they’d learn something, and have inexhaustible possibilities for writing opportunities. I could probably even tie a little math into it some how!

That was the start of what ended up being an incredibly rewarding two weeks!

Summer School Requirements

Towards the end of the school year, the teachers create a list for summer school based on who is in the most need of remedial assistance. These students are then invited to attend. It is two weeks long, meeting daily for two hours. I asked for two and a half; I had big plans! I was told to pick the dates and times. Fabulous! Freedom to teach a unit with authentic real world reading, writing, and math! Freedom from data driven, prove
you’re a qualified teacher, and that you have highly proficient students pressures. Wrong. We need data.

Is it possible to collect useful data from such a short program? I do support collecting data on student progress. I do reading, writing, and other assessments during the school year. They are invaluable indicators telling me how the students are doing and what we need to be working on. They’re sort of a pause from regular curriculum. I base my continuing curriculum on the outcomes. Back to my question though: data from a short summer program? Here is the question that I will be exploring. How can I provide a contextual, authentic, real world, experience for struggling students and meet standards-based data driven mandates? The mandated test performance by No Child Left Behind makes it feel like “the reform is more about performance than learning, and punishing failure more than rewarding success” (McCaslin, 2006, p. 484). Can contextual learning and data driven standards coexist?

**Literature Review**

The idea of using newspapers in education is far from new. Looking back into history, on June 8, 1795, the *Portland Eastern Herald* reported that, "Much has been said and written on the utility of newspapers; but one principal advantage which might be derived from these publications has been neglected; we mean that of reading them in schools." Having citizens who are knowledgeable was and is important. Newspapers in Education (NIE) was first started in 1930, and there are programs on every continent (Vincens Steen, 2001). A study by Jan Vincens Steen (2001) was able to verify that there are 52 countries use NIE, and he estimates that it is close to 60 countries. In the United States approximately 67,000 schools use NIE (Palmer, 1994).
Ample research exists to support the use of NIE. It helps show reading and writing improvement (Palmer, 1994), can help hook reluctant readers (National Middle School Association, 2006), provides an adult reading source to boost confidence and self esteem (Pacific Northwest Newspaper Association, 2006), and has a multitude of other benefits.

More specifically newspapers cover a variety of subjects that can be connected to all areas of curriculum. They introduce and utilize useful vocabulary that students will encounter again verses the isolated vocabulary that is taught for specific lessons. They build language, reading comprehension, critical thinking, problem solving, oral expression, and listening skills (Hopkins, 1998, 2005). Newspapers help develop informed citizens. The current events help students understand people and issues motivating them to continue to pay attention and explore more about the news. Newspapers supply a clear, concise writing style to serve as a model. They offer topics that open up communication between students and parents. Students are eager to talk with their parents and mimic the news reading habits helping them to participate in adult conversations. Newspapers also open up great opportunities for group instruction, discussions, and debates. They supply purposeful follow-up writing activities.

Participants

Eighteen students were invited to attend summer school. Six students responded affirmatively. Each has different needs, but one common thread was a weakness in writing abilities. Three of the students have been labeled as special needs, and the other three are not labeled but have significant weaknesses. Pseudonyms have been provided for each student.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kale</th>
<th>Kale has just completed fifth grade. He receives Title I services. His reading is approximately one grade level low with very weak comprehension skills. His mother informed me that he has difficulty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsey</td>
<td>Lindsey has just completed sixth grade. Her reading is approximately grade level with weak comprehension skills. She receives resource assistance for language arts, social studies, and science. She attends math in a special ed classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connor</td>
<td>Connor has just completed sixth grade. His reading is approximately grade level with weak comprehension skills. He has ADHD. His organization and ability to perform are so hampered by this that his sixth grade teacher kept a home-school journal to help him try to stay organized and caught up with work. Math skills are average.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>Caleb has just completed sixth grade. His reading is above grade level with strong comprehension. His math is average. His writing is very weak: spelling, grammar, and writing structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis</td>
<td>Davis has just completed sixth grade. His reading is above grade level with strong comprehension. His math is average. His writing is very weak: spelling, grammar, and writing structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Sydney has just completed seventh grade. He receives all instruction in the special ed classroom. He is also instructed in social skills, self help skills, and work skills. Sydney is deaf, autistic, has behavioral disabilities and other mental disabilities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Program Goals

The goals of the activities presented were straightforward. The students were given opportunities to practice math facts to strengthen their math skills and to use these skills in realistic situations. A novel was shared with the group using comprehension strategies to help students relate more with newspapers and tie together all of the activities in class. Newspapers were read and discussed to develop comprehension skills, give reading material of interest for all, present topics of discussion and debate, and supply models and ideas for writing. Writing was emphasized to develop and reinforce the students' insufficient writing skills.

Program Implementation

We started each day with math. There were various methods of practicing with flash cards daily and a few generic worksheets that their regular math teacher provided. We also used the newspaper to provide math opportunities: pricing with ads, making purchases, figuring the price of placing ads, and the value of a page of classified ads. One of the activities involved looking at a Menards' ad that had patio sets on sale. We estimated and then found the price of buying the pieces individually and compared it to the set price. We discussed what was the best deal and why. They found the price of buying all of the extras that match the set and how the wording can be misleading. Caleb and Davis kept us all entertained by racing each other to find the answers and teasing each other when one was wrong. It seemed to help the others relax and not feel so put on the spot with their own computations. Sydney enjoyed these activities. One of his favorite pastimes is shopping.
I emphasized finding errors and explaining why the error was made (in math and writing). I explained to them that recognizing their own mistakes and being aware of them would help them self correct and understand better. Not only would they discuss it, I would have them put their thoughts in writing. This was difficult the first time; they lacked the confidence in this new group to take a risk. Caleb and Davis were vocal enough I knew I could count on them to break the ice.

After math we read *The Landry News* by Andrew Clements. The story follows two main characters, a number of minor characters, the progress and the development of a class newspaper, and ethics: reporting the truth in a merciful way. We created webs that were left on the board for the duration of the book for a number of characters to help keep track. There were prepared discussion questions and questions that developed as we read. By the third day, students were asking if we were going to read; they were enjoying it. Towards the end of the book, I used a different colored marker and explained to the students that Cara and Mr. Larson had gone through some changes. What is different about them now? Explain. As we were adjusting our character webs, one of the students commented that we really couldn’t tell about the changes that had and were taking place without making a web for the newspaper that the characters had developed. We didn’t have one. Well, what would we put on that web? Great group discussion and participation! We were even able to tie the book to our writing a number of times during the two weeks!

Every day, there was free exploration of the newspaper. I would go through and read the headlines and try to find articles that I thought were intriguing. I would point them out to the students. Each one may or may not spark a conversation. By the third
day, I didn't get much of a chance to do this; the students were. They would find articles that they were interested in, or that they thought that someone else would be. During free exploration there'd be a few minutes of quiet, then the conversations would start! They were sharing what they were reading about! This was also a good time to discuss vocabulary that we came across.

Every day they were to pick an article that they would end up sharing with the class. Some days I picked the topic or section, others it was a free choice. Underlining or writing right in the paper, they were to find the main idea and supporting details. After one of our discussions, the students decided that finding the who, what, why, when, and where was a good way to hit the main ideas. I saw that Kale was having difficulty finding these things, so I would work one-on-one with him before everyone shared. It made it easier for him to take his turn sharing. Sometimes we wrote summaries for what was found, other times it was just discussed.

After free exploration, I asked the students which stories interested them the most. The responses were recorded. What did they all have in common? They all related to them in some way: an interest or hobby, the weather, things they knew a little about already, and local news. We made a list of local news stories that we might like to know more about. Kale finally raised his hand and suggested the fire that took place six weeks ago in town. He said his mom used to own a shop that was in the small strip mall. I prompted him with a few questions and listened. I told him that he knew a lot more about it than me, and it would be an excellent story for him to cover! I had heard a number of community members asking where the businesses were going and if they'd rebuild. He shrugged his shoulders and looked down at his desk when I said that. His
smile actually reached his eyes. This was the most I’d heard the boy say all week! He actually smiled and wasn’t sitting there looking at me blankly! While we discussed main ideas and supporting details, the blank look remained missing.

I helped the students find their information, and they found quite a bit of it themselves. Kale brought in answers to the questions that we’d developed. I was so excited that he was working outside of class! I was even able to send him outside (with another student) to get the scoop on the work going on over at the water tower. I had talked to the crew supervisor the day before, and I could see the boys from my window the whole time. This was definitely a benefit of being in a small rural community.

Each article written went through proofreading, peer editing, teacher editing, and then was word-processed to be saved for future reference. The writing steps were so important for these students and took a lot of the class time. Putting their thoughts and ideas down on paper was a real struggle. They had summaries, editorials after discussing fact/opinion, local news articles, and a holiday story. Summer school ended right before Father’s day, so I’d given them a list of summer holidays since not all of the students live with their fathers. They were to pick a holiday, give a brief history, and explain its importance. To help meet their creative side, each designed a coupon for their father or significant adult, also: 1 ticket for the races, packing for vacation, mowing the lawn, a car wash, and my favorite - 2 mole killings. Apparently moles were a real problem out at their place, and his father was not having much luck keeping up with the moles.

The last day of summer school they created their own newspapers. I demonstrated how to open a document, set up the header for a title, make columns, and cut-and-paste. I gave them each a handout with the directions and turned them loose on
the computers. They used the articles they had written, edited, and saved. All of the students had different levels of expertise using computers, so they created puzzles using Puzzle Maker, added clip art, and helped each other as they waited to have questions answered and copies approved. The energy in that room was almost tangible.

**Standardized Assessments**

The recommended assessments from the school personnel and the area education association are the AIMSweb assessments. They are easy to administer and score. They provide an approximation of where the students are in the given area. Two different AIMSweb assessments were given:

1. **Math computation.** The students were given four minutes to complete a math sheet that has a variety of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division problems of varying difficulty.

2. **Writing mechanics.** The students were given a blank sheet of paper. They were read a story starter and given one minute to think. They were then read the story starter again and given three minutes to write. For a list of story starters, see Table D.

A third assessment administered to the students was over the novel that was read aloud to the class. The book was read over seven class days and discussed each day. On the eighth day the book was reviewed and the students took an Accelerated Reader test over the book. It is a short multiple-choice test.

**Outcomes**

The AIMSweb math computation was given three times a week. I explained to the students that the purpose was to practice basic math facts; they are the basis for
almost all math that we do in and out of school. Math facts were referenced when we used the newspaper to solve story problems that can be encountered in real life, not just school. All of the students showed growth. Caleb scored the same on the first test as on the last test. His average score was slightly higher than his ending score. It is normal for students to vary as they improve. Excluding Caleb, the improvement ranged from 9 digits to 32 digits, with an average improvement of 19.4 (16.2 with Caleb). For an explanation of scoring, see Tables B and C.

The AIMSweb writing was given three times a week. I explained to the students that the purpose was to practice writing, be creative, and get their brains activated. When the actual time was up, I would have them draw a line and continue the story under the line. We really focused on practicing writing the best story that they could. They were then given the option to share their stories. After I had proofread and corrected the stories, we would look at their strengths, weaknesses, and improvements. It was also the source of mini lessons for all six students. Five of the students showed an improvement ranging from 2 to 25 written sequences, with an average improvement of 14 written sequences. Lindsey did not show improvement, and her average was within 1 of her first assessment. Lindsey’s poor spelling skills hindered her in scoring higher. For an explanation of scoring see Tables A and C.

I was very pleased with the scores on the Accelerated Reader test that the students took over *The Landry News*. The book is written at approximately a sixth grade level so it was right on grade level for two of the students and above for the other four. Students do tend to have a higher listening comprehension than reading so it was a good fit for four of them. The daily discussions made it easier to comprehend. It was above Sydney’s comprehension level, but he did enjoy reading along. He was provided with a
copy to accommodate his hearing needs. Caleb and Davis scored 100%, Lindsey scored 90%, and Connor and Kale scored 80%. It was not an appropriate test for Sydney as it was too difficult for him.

Conclusion

The conclusions and insights that I came away with are far more reaching than my original question. I wanted to know if a contextual, authentic, unit could be taught to students with data collection that did not infer with the unit and showed students’ skill improvement. I did not want to teach to the assessment or focus on drill and practice. I wanted to focus on student learning and be flexible enough to go where the students were. Many times assessments and tests don’t allow for that. I was excited to find that I was able to meet the students right where they were, provide learning opportunities, and collect useful data that didn’t take away from the learning. Authentic learning can peacefully coexist with standardized assessments.

The students gained so much through the opportunities given to them. We worked on literacy skills. We read articles, looked at visuals, and deciphered how to interpret the information together. They wrote responses to teacher generated questions and articles to delve deeper into the content. They voiced their own opinions about topics of discussion. They connected to the community when they did the research to learn more about current events in their own community and wrote about them. The excitement that five of them exuded as they chose their own topics and dove right in was exhilarating. Then the pride on all six faces when they saw their own work in print is unforgettable.
What about the data? It didn’t show their confidence grow as they wrote more, their eagerness to learn more about their own topics, or their pride for their own newspapers. It didn’t show that the first week between one and three students did not take their newspapers home with them, and the last week not a single paper was left in the room each day. It did show that their writing and math computation improved. It didn’t interfere with providing an authentic experience; it actually built into helping them understand what they need to work on and how to do so.

Students should be given authentic learning experiences. They are more memorable and help create life-long learners. The newspapers are an excellent way to do that. Students who have used newspapers in the classroom are more likely to continue to read them as adults (Wanta & Brierton, 1992). This continuation will help create informed adults who are concerned with the world around them.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

In my quest for insight as to whether or not contextual learning and standardized assessment can get along, I was slightly surprised by my findings. I assumed that to show results within two weeks, we would need to spend most of the time doing drill and practice activities and that giving the students something different and intriguing was not possible. Thankfully, I was encouraged by a coworker to teach what I thought, as a professional, would help these students and not let the assessments be my main focus. I let the students’ needs come first and used the assessments to help them learn and grow.

In the future I would like to use newspapers in my regular classroom. It would be a great way to get students more involved in their own learning. I would also be interested in seeking other resources and activities that get students involved and motivated to read and write.

Recommendations

It can be frustrating as a professional to make it all come together. Best practice researched probes and assessments are available for teachers’ use. Finding the right one may be difficult. Seek the assistance of administrators and the area education agency when trying to find a fit for your own special circumstances. Colleagues are also an invaluable asset for sharing ideas.

I strongly recommend that teachers not give up hope and give in to the inevitable. It is possible to provide a contextual learning environment that provides for the authentic experiences; building upon their own knowledge, making connections with their home and community, and creating students who seek knowledge about the world around them.
(Center for Occupation Research and Development, 2005). It is possible for this supportive environment to coexist with standards based data driven mandates. Standardized assessments can be used to support curriculum without taking away from the learning environment. Authentic assessments and projects can be used in conjunction with standardized assessments to give a more complete view of the students. As professionals, teachers can satisfy their consciences knowing that they are providing quality learning opportunities for their students while fulfilling their professional mandates to provide proof of students’ achievement via standardized tests.

This program supports earlier cited research. Using newspapers provides reading opportunities to students with different interests and different ability levels (National Middle School Association, 2006). Readers have the world at their fingertips. It opens doors between school, home, and the community (Hopkins, 2004). Actively using these avenues over time can improve standardized test scores for students (Mader, 2004).


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Resources

*Cedar Rapids Gazette*

500 3rd Ave SE
PO Box 511
Cedar Rapids, IA 52406

Puzzle Maker

Discovery School’s Puzzle Maker

http://puzzlemaker.school.discovery.com/

AIMSweb

Writing and Math Computation assessments

http://www.aimsweb.com/index.php

*The Landry News* by Andrew Clements
Glossary

1. Assessment – evaluation, test

2. Authentic – genuine, realistic

3. Contextual learning – This approach to learning and teaching assumes that the mind naturally seeks meaning in context, that is, in relation to the person's current environment (Center for Occupational Research and Development, 2006). This is a learning environment that provides for authentic experiences; building upon students' own knowledge, making connections with their home and community, and creating students who seek knowledge about the world around them.

4. Mandates – directives, required rules or laws

5. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) – A federal reform initiative that supports research-based teaching practices, comprehensive school reform, and mandated test performance.

6. Newspapers In Education (NIE) – Newspapers in Education is an educational program that provides newspapers and lesson plans for classrooms.

7. Probe – evaluate student skills, search for student strengths and weaknesses
## Table A

AIMSweb® Growth Table Written Expression
Curriculum Based Measurement
Multi-Year Aggregate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>%ile</th>
<th>Fall</th>
<th>Winter</th>
<th>Spring</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Num</td>
<td>CWS</td>
<td>Num</td>
</tr>
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<td>Mean</td>
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<td>34</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>StdDev</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<td>Mean</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>StdDev</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Num** = Number of Students  
**CWS** = Correct Writing Sequences  
**ROI** = Rate Of Improvement  
**ROI** is Spring Score minus Fall Score (or Winter minus Fall) divided by 36 weeks (or 18 weeks)

*Writing scores every correct sequence as one point. There are only positive points; there is no subtracting for wrong answers. One correct sequence is counted as two correct words or word and punctuation. For example “The dog barked at our neighbors.” would be scored as 7 points. The beginning of the story is automatically counted as correct as long as it is capitalized and spelled correctly = 1, the dog = 1, dog barked = 1, barked at = 1, at our = 1, our neighbors = 1, neighbors. = 1. Total = 7. If barked had been spelled incorrectly, capitalized, or the wrong tense then dog **barc** and **barc** at would not have counted as a point making it a value of 5.*
**Table B**

AIMSweb Math Computation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>%ile</th>
<th>Num</th>
<th>CD</th>
<th>Num</th>
<th>CD</th>
<th>Fall</th>
<th>Winter</th>
<th>Spring</th>
<th>CD</th>
<th>ROI</th>
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<td>68</td>
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<td>76</td>
<td></td>
<td>773</td>
<td>1043</td>
<td>940</td>
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<td>0.5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>75</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>69</td>
<td>0.4</td>
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<td>0.4</td>
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<td></td>
<td>25</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**AIMSweb® Growth Table**

M-CBM Computation

Multi-Year Aggregate

- **Num** = Number of Students
- **CD** = Correct Digits
- **ROI** = Rate Of Improvement

**ROI** is Spring Score minus Fall Score (or Winter minus Fall) divided by 36 weeks (or 18 weeks)

*Math computation* scores each correct digit as one point. There are only positive points; there is no subtracting for wrong answers.

**Table C**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>First</th>
<th>Last</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>%ile</th>
<th>First</th>
<th>Last</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>%ile</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>77.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Davis</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>79.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>25.8/33.25*</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>48.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsey</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>22.6</td>
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<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>61.5</td>
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<td>Connor</td>
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<td>59</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>39.2</td>
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<td>100</td>
<td>84.3</td>
<td>89.4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>15</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Two scores were taken out of Sydney's average to give a more accurate number. One test he would not write; the other test he did not understand one of the words that his interpreter was signing for him, and he did not let us know until we had already started writing.*
Contextual Learning vs. 34

Table D

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story Starters used for the AIMSweb writing assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M – Every day after school my friends go to the playground and…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W – I couldn’t fall asleep in my tent, I heard a noise outside and …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F – I was fishing in the river when I felt a terrific tug on the line…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M – The noise was getting louder and louder…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W – Yesterday we went for a picnic and…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F - I opened the front door very carefully and…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table E

Timed Writings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>%ile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>&lt;25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>&lt;10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>25.8/33.25</td>
<td>&lt;25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsey</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>&lt;25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connor</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>&lt;50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kale</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
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</table>

*Percentiles based on the grade just completed spring testing standards

Table F

Math Computation

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<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>%ile</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Caleb</td>
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<td>105</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>&lt;90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis</td>
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<td>70</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>&lt;90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
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<td>41</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>68</td>
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<td>&lt;75</td>
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<td>Lindsey</td>
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<td>74</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>51</td>
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<td>Connor</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>&lt;50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentiles based on the fifth grade spring testing standards
Middle School Journal

Guidelines for Authors

Middle School Journal, a refereed journal, is an official publication of National Middle School Association. The Journal publishes articles that promote middle level education and contribute to an understanding of the educational and developmental needs of youth between the ages of 10 and 15. Articles submitted should specifically relate to the theory and practice of middle level education and should speak directly to practitioners in the field. The Journal seeks reports of successful programs, descriptions of effective techniques, thought-provoking essays, and application of research. The editor especially welcomes articles that focus on middle level schooling in urban settings and in rural or small schools.

The Journal publishes both thematic and general interest issues. Middle School Journal invites articles that have not been previously published and are not under review by any other publication. Manuscripts that do not meet the submission requirements will be returned to the author.

Submission Requirements

Length

Manuscripts, including bibliography and references, should be in the range of 10 to 20 double-spaced pages. Tables, charts, and figures should be kept to a minimum, and if included should be placed at the end of the text.

Format & Style

All text, including title, headings, quotations, bibliography, and references should be double-spaced with 1½" wide margins. The editor strongly encourages the use of subheads which increase readability. The main idea or stance of the article should be apparent in the first few
paragraphs along with its application or relevance to readers. Authors should give special attention in their lead paragraphs to drawing potential readers into the manuscript. For matters of style, authors should follow the guidelines of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (Fifth Edition).

Submission Process

Copies

Submit five clear copies, one with a cover page giving author(s) names, professional affiliation, home and work addresses, telephone, and e-mail. The names of the authors should appear only on the cover page.

Submit to

Middle School Journal, Attn: Cheri Howman, Assistant Editor, National Middle School Association, 4151 Executive Parkway, Suite 300 Westerville, OH 43081. Faxed or electronic submissions are not accepted.

Acknowledgment

Middle School Journal acknowledges receipt of manuscripts by letter. Manuscripts that meet submission requirements will be logged and sent to reviewers. Authors will be notified by letter of this action.

Review Process

Three members of a manuscript review board read and evaluate independently each manuscript. A decision regarding publication will be reached within four months of the date that the manuscript is sent out for review. This decision will be communicated to the lead author. Articles will not be published until a copyright assignment form is received.

Assignment forms will be sent with the letter of acceptance. Authors whose manuscripts are
selected for publication will be asked to submit finished copies including any editorial changes on diskette.

**Editing**

*Middle School Journal* reserves the right to edit manuscripts to improve clarity, to conform to style, and to fit available space.

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*Middle School Journal* has a circulation of over 35,000 and is published five times during the school year — September, November, January, March, and May. *Middle School Journal* encourages manuscript submissions on all phases of middle school education. Manuscripts are initially reviewed by the editor. Each individual manuscript is given a careful reading. Manuscripts that meet the *Journal*'s guidelines are forwarded to a panel of reviewers who are practicing professionals in all phases of middle school education. Author identities are kept confidential. Manuscripts that do not meet the guidelines or are not ready for the complete review process are returned to authors with specific commentary. Often, authors are encouraged to resubmit the manuscript in a revised format or to an affiliate journal.

Contributors should be aware of additional points that influence a positive review at each level. Authors should avoid the following:

- Generalities, excessive adjectives, personal asides, passive verbs, & constructions academic jargon

- References to "this author"

Manuscript references must be in correct APA style. Please consult the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (Fifth Edition). The *Journal* will not consider manuscripts that are undergoing review by another publication or have been previously
published. If accepted, authors must sign a statement that transfers copyright to National Middle School Association. Based upon reviewer comments, the following is a partial list of reasons for the rejection of manuscripts:

- The manuscript relates a personal, not a professional experience. The subject is so overly specialized it would appeal only to a small segment of readers. The material in the manuscript is neither timely nor new in its insights. The manuscript is largely in list format. The manuscript is a research report rather than an interpretation or application of research.

- The manuscript promotes a person or commercially available product.

http://www.nmsa.org/Publications/MiddleSchoolJournal/GuidelinesforAuthors/tabid/405/Default.aspx
Dear Ms Howman:

I am submitting a journal article for your approval. You will find five copies enclosed as requested. I believe that this article is appropriate for the *Middle School Journal*. It is timely and encouraging. I don’t think there is a school left untouched by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the struggle to conform to its mandates. Educators are working furiously to make sure students are performing well on standardized tests often times feeling that providing the best learning environment is left out of the mix.

The article describes a two week summer program for students in need of academic assistance. There were six middle school students, an interpreter for the deaf, and myself, a sixth grade teacher. The learning environment supported contextual learning, and I was able to gather data showing student progress without taking away from that environment. The article shows that contextual learning and standardized assessments can coexist.

Thank you for your consideration. I am looking forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Lori Leedom