

# Literate Voices Project Evaluation

A Study in a Central Valley High School  
in California

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# Introduction

The Literate Voices Project is an 8-week English language arts (ELA) curriculum designed for students in grades 7–11. Dr. Jyothi Bathina developed this curriculum to actively engage students who may be disengaged and struggling academically in school.

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The curriculum centers around the book *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros, which consists of a series of vignettes—short, evocative literary sketches or scenes. Each week, one specific vignette from the book is chosen as the focus text. Throughout the week, students are immersed in a variety of reading and writing assignments related to that particular vignette. These assignments are carefully designed to build their reading and writing skills, culminating in the creation of an essay by the end of the week. The seven units of study are as follows:

1. “Learning Life Map”—Students create a timeline and conduct critical analyses of life events.
2. “Name”—Students use descriptive writing employing similes, metaphors, and literary devices.
3. “Family”—Students develop character through action, dialogue, and description.
4. “Neighborhood”—Students develop research, compare, and contrast skills. They also address stereotypes.
5. “Love and Relationships”—Students analyze gender roles and relationships.
6. “Heroes”—Students analyze their own lives through a hero’s journey. Students utilize facts instead of opinions.
7. “Dreams”—Students use participatory action research to understand circumstances and articulate goals.

By the conclusion of the project, each student will have written seven essays, one for each of the seven chosen vignettes read from the book. The underlying goal is not only to help students engage with the material but also to enhance their literacy skills.

At the culmination of the project, participating schools compile and publish a book that features the essays composed by students for each of the seven vignettes. This noteworthy initiative has been successfully carried out seven times over a 20-year span, involving four high schools with students in grades 9–11, two middle schools encompassing grades 7–8, and one elementary school.

The adoption of the Literate Voices Project by these schools stems from the belief among educators that it effectively fosters student engagement in the domain of writing, making it a valuable research-based educational endeavor.

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## The Study

This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation conducted by WestEd on the Literate Voices Project. The project was implemented in a large high school located in California's Central Valley that serves approximately 1,900 students. Ten ELA teachers participated, with four in the 9th grade, three in the 10th grade, and three in the 11th grade. Additionally, an English Language Development (ELD) teacher worked with students in grades 9–12. The intervention successfully covered grades 9 through 11.

All teachers effectively implemented six out of the seven vignettes, resulting in the publication of 6 books of approximately 300 pages each. This was slightly fewer than the originally anticipated 10 books. During the publication process, students had the opportunity to choose one of their essays from the six vignettes to include in the final book.

The study was carried out in a Central Valley high school in California, with oversight from the California State University (CSU). The initiative began with a 5-day retreat in Long Beach in January 2023. Following the retreat, teachers incorporated the vignettes into their classrooms.

Each week, teachers convened twice for 45-minute sessions. The high school's administration led one session, and the curriculum developer led the other. Typically, the first meeting each week occurred on Monday unless there was a holiday. During these Monday meetings, a PowerPoint presentation featuring the vignette for the week was shared. The second meeting typically took place on Wednesday afternoon and included the curriculum developer, who offered guidance on vignette implementation.

These Wednesday sessions served as forums for teachers to discuss challenges, share strategies, and adjust their teaching based on student challenges or successes. The school's

literacy coach played a crucial role in refining PowerPoints, conducting classroom observations, and providing project materials.

Each chapter spanned a week, with 2 additional weeks for revising student writing and 1 week for creating cover pages and titles and preparing for publishing. In total, teachers spent 10 weeks at the high school instead of the initially planned 8 weeks. WestEd collected data through teacher surveys, interviews, and student-level data assessment.

The evaluation team aimed to address the following questions:

- To what extent did students participating in the Literate Voices Project improve on standardized ELA assessment? How was the Literate Voices Project implemented in the high school?
- How does the Literate Voices Project impact students' ELA achievement? <sup>1</sup>

## Evaluation Approach

WestEd's evaluation team focused primarily on assessing the improvement achieved through the Literate Voices Project. To measure this improvement, WestEd utilized the i-Ready Assessment, a common tool used for both baseline and outcome achievement evaluations in ELA. This assessment has been proven as a reliable and valid measure of student performance and is shown to consistently match what students are expected to learn throughout the country. The test is approved by the following states to be used as an assessment, instructional resource, or intervention: Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah, and Virginia (Swain et al., 2020). Typically, this assessment is administered to students three times during a school year to gauge their performance.

To determine student improvements, WestEd compared each student's baseline achievement, which was assessed at the beginning of the school year, to their outcome achievement, assessed at the end of the school year. It is important to note that 11th grade students' baseline assessments were from the end of their 10th grade year because most of them were not assessed at the beginning of the school year. This specific evaluation aspect was conducted exclusively on students who participated in the Literate Voices Project. To assess the significance of the change, a paired *t*-test was performed comparing students' baseline achievement scores to their outcome achievement scores.

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<sup>1</sup> The impact on student achievement was not analyzed due to a lack of similar control students who did not participate in the Literate Voices Project. A matching design, which is a more rigorous methodology, was going to be employed.

Additionally, the evaluation encompassed an examination of the project’s implementation. This phase involved conducting interviews with educators as well as administering surveys to gain valuable insights into the implementation process.

## Results

The evaluation results unveiled noteworthy findings regarding the impact of the Literate Voices Project. Specifically, students with low achievement who took part in the project exhibited a statistically significant improvement on an ELA standardized assessment. It is worth noting that this evaluation marks the inaugural assessment of the Literate Voices Project.

## Analytic Samples

**Improvement Achievement Analysis.** The student data received from the high school included a total of 1,880 students in grades 9 through 12. Table 1 shows exclusion criteria that were employed prior to any analysis.

**Table 1. Exclusion Criteria**

Exclusion criteria	Number of students excluded	Reason for exclusion
Grade 12	347	The current study focuses on students in grades 9 through 11.
No ELA class listed	70	The evaluation focuses on the implementation of an ELA program meant to improve students’ ELA performance.
No outcome score	337	Students with no outcome score were not included due to no score showing the performance at the end of the year.
No baseline score	501	The baseline score was used to determine the improvement. Students without this score were excluded because they did not have any scores to compare to their outcomes.
<b>Number of students excluded</b>	<b>1,255</b>	
<b>Number of students in the final sample</b>	<b>625</b>	



After the initial exclusions, a total of 625 students in grades 9 through 11 remained in the study. Students were categorized into either the treatment group or the control group based on their ELA class instructors. If a student had an ELA class taught by a teacher who participated in the study and implemented the program, they were classified as part of the treatment group. Conversely, if a student had an ELA teacher who was not listed as a participating teacher, they were classified as part of the control group. The breakdown of students classified in the treatment and control groups by grade level is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Number of Students by Assignment Status and Grade Level**

Participated in Literate Voices Project	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Total number of students
Yes	259	151	145	555
No	16	43	11	70
Total number of students	275	194	156	625

*Note.* Group “Yes” indicates students in the treatment group, while “No” indicates students in the control group.

Of these 625 students, we employed a cutoff by grade level to understand the students with low achievement

The students with low achievement were defined by the distribution of the i-Ready test scores before the Literate Voices Project was implemented. The cutoff point was established as the lowest score in the group of students who did not participate in the Literate Voices Project. The score cutoffs are the following:

Grade 9: 560

Grade 10: 471

Grade 11: 558

A total of 202 students were identified for the analysis, which included 116 from grade 9, 16 from grade 10, and 70 from grade 11.

Further analysis of improvement was conducted for English learners and students assigned to special education as detailed in the Appendix.

**Implementation Analysis.** All participating teachers in grades 9–11 were requested to complete a minimum of two surveys for each of the classes in which they facilitated the Literate Voices Project. In addition, 6 out of the 10 teachers and two administrators were invited to take part in interviews.

The surveys were designed to gather information regarding the implementation of various activities related to the vignettes. These surveys employed a questionnaire format, asking questions to assess the effectiveness of different aspects of the Literate Voices Project.

The interviews conducted were structured to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the Literate Voices Project was implemented in the classroom.

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## Evaluation Findings

### Student Achievement Results

Students with low achievement who participated in the program experienced statistically significant improvements. The results were highly promising, with a paired  $t$ -test revealing their substantial progress. On average, they achieved higher scores on their outcome tests compared to their baseline tests, and this mean difference was statistically significant at the 1 percent level of significance.

To delve deeper into this discovery, a separate analysis was conducted by grade level, as outlined in the Appendix. These additional examinations reaffirmed the initial observation, highlighting those students with low achievement across all three grade levels achieved significantly higher scores on their outcome tests compared to their baseline results. These consistent findings underscore the program's effectiveness in enhancing the academic performance of students with low achievement.

**Table 3. i-Ready ELA Scale Score Difference for Students With Low Achievement Scores**

Test	Mean	Standard deviation
Outcome	502.81	62.51
Baseline	485.66	57.42
Difference	17.15	58.49
	$t(201) = 4.17$	$P < 0.001$

*Note.* Table 3 shows the results of running a paired  $t$ -test on all students with low achievement included in the data. There were a total of 202 students (116 from grade 9, 16 from grade 10, and 70 from grade 11).

## Implementation Results

The information regarding implementation provides insights into how the school and teachers executed the project and whether it adhered to the intended fidelity. In the case of this project, the fidelity of implementation outcome necessitated that all teachers complete at least six of the seven vignettes, and the majority of students were expected to write an essay each week based on a vignette.

It is noteworthy that all teachers successfully completed six of the seven vignettes; however, none managed to complete all seven vignettes. In approximately 70 percent of these classes (119 classes in total), the majority of students (at least 75% of the class) consistently fulfilled the requirement of completing their essays each week.

A standard weeklong study of a vignette encompassed the following components:

- On Monday, the vignette was introduced to students.
- On Tuesday, students would work on activities that would foster a skill necessary for the culminating essay.
- On Wednesday, students would start writing.
- On Thursday, students would complete their writing.
- On Friday, students would peer edit or revise their essays.

Transitioning from examining the weekly classroom activities, our analysis now shifts to gaining a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions of their instructional methods and the resulting learning outcomes.

In interviews, certain teachers discussed the “Dreams” vignette, noting that despite its extended duration, it proved to be the most impactful for students. This vignette included the Myers-Briggs personality test, allowing students to investigate and plan their desired career paths. The Myers-Briggs personality test aids individuals in comprehending their information-processing and decision-making tendencies (Myers-Briggs Foundation, n.d.). Teachers stressed the importance of using this resource in career research. Teachers felt that the “Dreams” chapter impacted some of the students who had not had a plan for after high school.

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*“I know a lot of students say, ‘I’m not going to college,’ or ‘I’m not going to go to City College,’ but after this project, I have some students who were not planning on going to City College and they’re like, ‘Well, maybe, I’ll try it out.’”*

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Almost all of the teachers (five of six teachers) interviewed expressed enjoyment in implementing the Literate Voices Project. Some teachers noted that each chapter of the project delved into various aspects of the students’ lives. Notably, by the 3rd week, even students who were not typically active writers in class began to write more. Students’ newfound self-awareness and career exploration contributed to a more meaningful and effective learning experience. The following comments by teacher participants illustrate this point:

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*“Students who think they cannot write at all or do not excel in school, they really felt like, ‘Wow, I wrote this. It’s actually good. You know? Yeah.’ And they succeeded, which they don’t see a lot in their life.”*

*“This project being narrative based is again, really powerful in that it kind of gives students who aren’t typically very strong test takers or, you know, maybe their favorite thing is not reading and writing. It gives them a way to reframe what writing is.”*

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Throughout the spring semester, the frequent occurrence of Monday holidays presented certain challenges. There were instances when teachers had just 4 days to cover a chapter.

These shorter weeks, combined with student absenteeism, proved to be significant obstacles that sometimes prevented students from completing their weekly culminating essays.

In the context of the project spanning grades 9 through 11, it is important to note that not all teachers were familiar with the Literate Voices Project initially. However, a sense of camaraderie developed among them as they nurtured a supportive community by convening twice a week to exchange insights into both their successes and their challenges in implementing the project. This collaborative spirit played a crucial role in enhancing the project's overall effectiveness. The following quote from a teacher participant illustrates this point as well:

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*"I mean, the biggest support that we had was each other, like the teachers in general. We helped each other and would bounce ideas off each other when we were confused or concerned with anything."*

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Finally, teachers noted that some of the chapters were emotionally challenging for some students. As a result, students who needed support met with either the social worker or school counselor. From the project's outset, teachers communicated to all students that they were not obliged to work on a chapter if it made them uncomfortable. Consequently, some students made the choice to not work on some of the vignettes, specifically, "Name," "Family," and "Neighborhood." This could have contributed to some students not completing their essays.

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## Conclusion and Recommendations

The evaluation results indicate the project's impact in several ways. Here are a few salient observations:

- Students with low achievement who participated in the Literate Voices Project demonstrated statistically significant improvement in their ELA standardized assessment scores.
- This intervention was implemented successfully in a California high school in the Central Valley encompassing grades 9 through 11.
- Most teachers who were interviewed really enjoyed the Literate Voices Project.

- All teachers implemented six of the seven vignettes, and there were 6 books published of the 10 expected.
- Each book included about 300 pages and will be used as mentor text for students at the high school.
- Teachers felt that students who usually were not the writers in class enjoyed the Literate Voices Project and wrote more often.

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# Implications

## Participants' Perceptions of Success, Challenges, and Recommendations for Implementation

Teachers offered valuable insights and recommendations regarding how they would implement the curriculum going forward. The suggestions encompassed various aspects, including timing, content expansion, resource enhancement, and final project updates.

### Timing and Curriculum Instruction

Some educators expressed that dedicating one vignette per week within a 50-minute daily class was insufficient for effectively introducing the vignette, engaging in related activities, developing the necessary skills for the culminating essay, practicing writing, and providing peer feedback with revisions. As a potential solution, they proposed either adopting a two-period block schedule or extending each vignette over 2 weeks. This adjustment would allow for more comprehensive exploration and skill development.

### Integration With School Curriculum

An intriguing recommendation was to transition the project into a year-round initiative, seamlessly integrated into the school's curriculum. This approach would enable teachers to align new vignettes with the current ELA curriculum. Consequently, students could focus on one vignette at a time instead of engaging continuously for 7 weeks.

## Resource Relevance

Based on the teacher survey and interviews, some teachers felt that some of the resources that were used for the activities were not relatable to students. Teachers felt the resources were outdated. For example, one of the movies that they had to watch for the “Heroes” vignette was *Star Wars*, and most of the students had never watched it before. Teachers suggested replacing materials with more recent, engaging resources that align with the ELA curriculum.

## Enhancing Student Engagement

As for the final product, some students were not excited about publishing, even if the teachers really enjoyed it. To foster greater student enthusiasm, educators recommended exploring online platforms that students frequently engage with, such as TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram. The idea is that students might find more motivation in contributing to these popular online platforms.

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# References

Myers & Briggs Foundation. (n.d.). *Myers-Briggs overview*. <https://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/myers-briggs-overview/>

Swain, M., Randel, B., & Dvorak, R. (2020). *An impact evaluation of reading i-Ready instruction for elementary grades using 2018–2019 data* (Report No. 107). Human Resources Research Organization.

# Appendix

## Additional Improvement Analyses

All improvement analyses are done using only students who participated in the Literate Voices Project.

**Table A1. i-Ready ELA Scale Score Difference for Students With Low Achievement Scores in Grade 9**

Test	Mean	Standard deviation
Outcome	506.20	64.34
Baseline	494.44	53.28
Difference	11.76	56.92
	$t(115) = 2.23$	$P = 0.028$

Note. Table A1 shows the results of running a paired  $t$ -test on students with low achievement scores in grade 9 ( $n = 116$ ).

**Table A2. i-Ready ELA Scale Score Difference for Students With Low Achievement Scores in Grade 10**

Test	Mean	Standard deviation
Outcome	477.00	40.52
Baseline	407.94	55.87
Difference	69.06	66.69
	$t(15) = 4.12$	$P = 0.001$

Note. Table A2 shows the results of running a paired  $t$ -test on students with low achievement scores in grade 10 ( $n = 16$ ).



**Table A3. i-Ready ELA Scale Score Difference for Students With Low Achievement Scores in Grade 11**

Test	Mean	Standard deviation
Outcome	503.10	62.88
Baseline	488.89	51.51
Difference	14.21	53.99
	$t(69) = 2.20$	$P = 0.031$

Note. Table A3 shows the results of running a paired t-test on students with low achievement scores in grade 11 ( $n = 70$ ).

**Table A4. i-Ready ELA Scale Score Difference for English Learners**

Test	Mean	Standard deviation
Outcome	509.62	64.80
Baseline	506.04	66.35
Difference	3.58	57.61
	$t(127) = 0.70$	$P = 0.484$

Note. Treatment students classified as English learners: 128.

**Table A5. i-Ready ELA Scale Score Difference for Students Assigned to Special Education**

Test	Mean	Standard deviation
Outcome	495.04	67.09
Baseline	489.28	62.43
Difference	5.76	45.62
	$t(91) = 1.21$	$P = 0.229$

Note. Treatment students assigned to special education: 92.

**Table A6. i-Ready ELA Scale Score Difference for English Learners Assigned to Special Education**

Test	Mean	Standard deviation
Outcome	482.11	72.71
Baseline	480.78	61.87
Difference	1.32	47.22
	$t(36) = 0.17$	$P = 0.865$

Note. Treatment students classified as English learners and assigned to special education: 37.