RESEARCH BASE

Amplify ELA: The research behind the program

Amplify.

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Amplify ELA is designed specifically for the middle grade student, based on extensive research into learning, cognition, and how students develop literacy skills. The program challenges all students to work critically and successfully with complex text, taking into account the specific developmental needs and motivations of this age group. The Amplify ELA curriculum is built on five research-based pillars:

1. A focus on middle grade engagement
2. Text at the center
3. High expectations and strong supports
4. Active, multimodal, and collaborative learning
5. Timely feedback and ongoing assessment

A focus on middle grade engagement

Educating young adolescents is a critical endeavor with unique challenges and opportunities. There are important developmental changes taking place for students during middle school. These years are marked by the need to establish new personal and social relationships and a high degree of curiosity (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). Middle grade students are peer oriented and thrive when given collaborative, social, and experiential learning opportunities (Edwards, 2015; NMSA, 2010). From a cognitive perspective, the middle grades see a wide range of individual intellectual development. More generally, adolescent students become increasingly able to handle abstract concepts; prefer active learning experiences; and are energized by authentic instructional work, or cognitively challenging work that is connected to the world beyond the classroom (Marks, 2000; NMSA, 2010). The National Middle School Association asserts that middle grade education should include relevant, challenging, and exploratory curricula with varied and diverse teaching approaches.

Accordingly, Amplify ELA targets student engagement and leverages adolescents' natural inclinations toward collaboration, exploration, and autonomy. As will be expanded upon in the following sections, this can be seen across the Amplify ELA curriculum in the careful selection of engaging texts, in collaborative activities such as role playing and performance, and in student-led inquiry-based immersive interactive learning experiences, such as Quests.

The Amplify ELA curriculum includes texts adolescents can readily relate to, such as Roald Dahl's mischievous boyhood anecdotes and experiences at an English boarding school in **Boy: Tales of Childhood**, or Sarah-Jayne Blakemore's **Inventing Ourselves: The Secret Life of the Teenage Brain**. Other texts, such as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," compel students with tales of mystery, murder, and intrigue.

When educating middle grade students, it is also important to attend to their unique psychological development. Middle grade students seek to become independent, desire recognition for efforts and achievements, are self-conscious and sensitive to criticism, and generally exhibit a drop in self-competence in academic subjects (NMSA, 2010). In fact, the middle grades are notorious for declines in motivation to read and participate, both in out of the classroom (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Kelley & Decker, 2009; Unrau & Schlackman, 2010). Amplify's curriculum aims to cultivate intrinsic motivation—the inherent tendency to seek out challenges, explore, and learn. Intrinsically motivated students tend to be more persistent and have lower levels of academic anxiety and higher achievement and psychological well-being (Gottfried, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research suggests that individuals have three innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. When these needs are satisfied, it can lead to enhanced intrinsic motivation and well-being

(Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to Ryan and Deci, competence can be fostered by optimal challenges and constructive feedback; autonomy can be promoted through learner-controlled environments that foster student agency and self-direction; and relatedness can be achieved by providing caring, supportive environments to students.

Amplify ELA is intentionally attuned to students' motivational needs. The Spotlight app, a space where teachers can post students' writing, provides an avenue for recognition and celebration of accomplishments. Amplify ELA further promotes competence through differentiated support and frequent feedback as students read and write about complex texts. Student-led discussions and collaborative activities promote autonomy. Last, the Amplify ELA curriculum establishes relatedness through routines that build a collaborative, productive, and empathetic community of readers and writers. For example, a sharing routine helps students give positive and constructive feedback to peers, and over-the-shoulder conferences allow teachers to have personal check-ins with their students to build strong and caring relationships.

Text at the center

Engaging, diverse, and complex texts

Amplify ELA cultivates literacy through rich, multimodal experiences of high-quality texts. Placing engaging rigorous texts at the center of each learning experience, Amplify ELA draws on research demonstrating that effective and useful skill acquisition and knowledge building happens when students are comprehending and analyzing text at grade-level complexity. Each grade includes six core text-based units, and students spend a whopping 75–80 percent of class time working with or writing about the unit text.

Amplify ELA's text-centered pedagogical approach begins with text selection. A major factor in improving adolescent literacy is the quality of the texts students are assigned to read. Research suggests that students should work with a rich balance of fiction and informational text to build knowledge of both world and word (Willingham, 2006). Studies also stress the importance of including a variety of engaging texts that appeal to culturally diverse students (International Reading Association & National Middle School Association, 2001; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). Amplify ELA puts careful consideration into its text selections, prioritizing texts that reflect a range of cultures, ethnicities, and experiences and ensuring that they are sequenced appropriately so that students continue to build knowledge as they progress to the next grade. Amplify ELA texts cover a wide range of subject areas—from magical realism to neuroscience, and from Greek mythology to the Space Race—and include a rich representation of genres that includes novels, plays, poetry, memoirs, and other full-length texts. Providing students with domain-specific complex texts enables them to build critical literacy skills and gain necessary content knowledge (Hirsch, 2006; Willingham, 2006). This type of instruction also enables them to meet the reading demands they will encounter across their education in various disciplines (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). In particular, primary sources (i.e., original documents such as letters or speeches) enable students to consider a firsthand experience, which is critical for deep understanding of texts (Morgan & Rasinski, 2012). Challenging primary source documents such as the Gettysburg Address or Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave encourage students to grapple with issues of historical, political, and cultural importance. Moreover, engaging with texts that build content knowledge speeds and strengthens reading comprehension, and facilitates a number of critical thinking skills (Willingham, 2006).

Additionally, quality writing can serve as a model (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983). Studies indicate that a student's writing is influenced by the books they read, whether by an emulation of the writer's style or the genre more broadly (Eckhoff, 1983); an incorporation of the literary traits and details (Dressel, 1990); the borrowing of plots, characters, or structure (Lancia, 1997); or the use of imagery often found in poetry (Langer & Flihan, 2000). As students read, they come to understand that writers carefully craft a text so that the reader finds it worthy of reading (Graves, Tuyay, &

Green, 2004)—and in crafting their own writing, students develop their own voices as they think about the effect they intend to have on the reader (Graves, 1983).

While the types of texts students work with in Amplify ELA are varied, what remains constant is a dedication to ensuring that students are working with grade-level complex texts. Text complexity is defined by factors such as the vocabulary used, the complexity and coherence of sentences, the organizational structure of the text, and students' background knowledge of the topic (Shanahan, Fisher, & Frey, 2012). The texts featured in Amplify ELA have been measured with a quantitative score in the form of a Lexile, as well as analyzed for "softer" measures of complexity such as student background knowledge. Over the course of a school year, students will practice their close reading skills with increasingly complex texts. An increasing set of states' standards set the goal for all students to be able to "comprehend texts of steadily increasing complexity as they progress through school" to prepare students for college and career success (National Governors Association, 2010). Research suggests that the ability to answer questions associated with complex texts is correlated with better performance in college (ACT, 2006). Importantly, in order to ensure that students can access and learn from and with these complex texts, Amplify ELA's rigorous curriculum includes the types of strong instruction and support that will build students' skills and stamina in reading and comprehension.

Close reading instruction

Research shows that strong early literacy skills do not simply develop automatically into the more complex skills students need to succeed in the middle grade classroom and beyond (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Academic literacy is more than simply being able to read; it involves making inferences from text, differentiating facts from inferences, making links between texts, and summarizing key information from texts (Torgesen, Houston, & Rissman, 2007). A successful reader is one who can easily navigate narrative texts as well as content-area texts with deep understanding (Marchand-Martella, Martella, Modderman, Petersen, & Pan, 2013). Amplify ELA's effective instruction in reading comprehension includes close reading exercises, read-aloud activities, use of charts or digital apps to explore the text more visually, and many discussions with teachers and classmates. Close reading—the intensive analysis of high-quality text "in order to come to terms with what it says, how it says it, and what it means"—is a key component of college and career readiness (Shanahan, 2012). Close reading to build background knowledge and analyze the details of a passage is important because it forms the basis for larger analysis and understanding of the overall text. Close reading instruction is linked to significant gains in reading proficiency and students' self-perceptions around reading, particularly for struggling readers (Fisher & Frey, 2014).

In Amplify ELA, students actively work with texts by highlighting, annotating, and gathering facts or evidence as they set out to interpret the many layers of meaning,

structure, craft, and purpose. Then, in classroom discussions, students debate, draw comparisons and contrasts within the text, and collaborate to elaborate and refine their understanding of a text's meaning. Discussions are student-led; students work together to interpret the text, and define and refine their interpretations in groups until the class has developed a shared understanding of what they read. Research suggests that these sorts of text-based discussions improve comprehension (Kucan & Palincsar, 2013)

Reading to write and writing to read

Reading and writing are best taught together. To write well, students need to become skillful readers of texts that can teach them how to further develop their craft (Murray, 1990). Conversely, strong writing instruction and practice improves reading comprehension and fluency (Graham & Herbert, 2010). Therefore, writing and reading activities are highly connected in the Amplify ELA curriculum. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the frequency of paraphrasing activities, where students are asked to recount a text in their own words. This activity challenges students to carefully consider the lexical choices made by writers and the relationships between units of text. In paraphrasing a single word, sentence, paragraph, or multi-paragraph text, students develop a broader ability to restate and summarize what they have read (Kissner, 2006). This also aids their identification of central ideas and themes in texts. When reading literature, retelling a story clearly helps students process and internalize what they have read (Wilson, Gambrell, & Pfeiffer, 1985). Paraphrasing also encourages students to make connections between the text and their prior knowledge (Kintsch, 1998).

In Amplify ELA, writing also goes beyond simply demonstrating understanding. Students are challenged to synthesize, generalize, and interpret the many layers of a text. Effective middle grade ELA curricula must include a focus on writing skills (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). We have adopted and built upon the work of Writers' Express (WEX), a division of the former Wireless Generation (now Amplify), who have been developing an effective writing curriculum for nearly two decades. Each unit and lesson integrates WEX's tested method of writing instruction and prompts, teaching students to write about texts clearly and effectively, followed by extensive practice and feedback that enable students to internalize the skills. Amplify ELA emphasizes the importance of establishing a writing routine by having students write regularly while learning to share and respond to criticism, and by receiving targeted feedback on how to revise and improve upon specific skills. A primary goal that teachers establish at the beginning of the school year is to have all students write a page on one topic, for about 12 minutes. Students in Amplify ELA write regularly for an authentic audience and are given frequent writing prompts to both paraphrase and interpret the texts they are reading.

Vocabulary acquisition

Almost a century of research converges on the fact that vocabulary knowledge plays a critical role in reading comprehension and overall academic success (Baumann, Kame'enui, & Ash, 2003; Becker, 1977; Davis, 1942; Whipple, 1925). As specified by the National Reading Panel (2000), vocabulary instruction should include frequent, varied, direct, and contextualized exposures to words. Further research touts the benefits of rich, deep, extended instruction that involves both definitional and contextual information and specific instruction on word-learning strategies such as using context, word parts, and cognates (Biemiller, 2000; Graves, 2016; Graves & Fink, 2007). Additionally, students should work with texts that provide regular and varied encounters with Tier Two (high frequency and sophisticated words that students often do not know) and academic vocabulary, and practice with these types of words should be rooted in contextual exposure so that students build familiarity with how word definitions shift in relation to their context (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Lehr, Osborn, & Hiebert, 2004).

Amplify's approach to vocabulary instruction encompasses all of these components; vocabulary exposure and practice is deeply ingrained within the Amplify ELA curriculum. Amplify ELA's embedded Vocab App provides students with differentiated content based on their performance in each activity. It continually moves students between grade-level, below-grade-level, and above-grade-level words, providing support for students at all levels within the Core lessons. All words in the Vocab App are drawn from the texts students are reading in their current unit, focusing on Tier Two words students might see across the curriculum and school more broadly. The Vocab App activities ask students to define words in context, rather than to memorize abstract definitions. In addition to work in the Vocab App, the digital curriculum includes Reveal words that have synonymic definitions when hovered over.

Amplify Library

Classroom libraries are essential in order for students to become engaged readers (Routman, 2003), especially students who may not have access to books at home. Students with access to classroom libraries read more than those without them (Morrow, 2003). While the Amplify ELA curriculum provides supports for all students to grapple with grade-level texts, the Amplify Library provides books that match student reading levels. Research suggests that students with learning difficulties benefit from repeated practice reading fluently at their own reading levels (Stevens, Walker, & Vaughn, 2017; Therrien & Kubina, 2006). One of Biancarosa and Snow's fifteen elements of effective adolescent literacy programs is diverse text, including those at a variety of difficulty levels (2004). As the authors explain, "Too often students become frustrated because they are forced to read books that are simply too difficult for them to decode and comprehend simultaneously. Texts must be

below students' frustration level, but must also be interesting; that is, they should be high interest and low readability" (p. 18).

Therefore, in addition to the rich texts that sit at the center of each instructional unit, the Amplify Library offers more than 600 books for independent reading. This collection has an expansive range of texts to appeal to all interests, cultural backgrounds, and ability levels. Within that collection, there are 15 curated Archives, each including 10–30 textual and multimedia sources focused around a topic for independent study. There are also fictional and informational texts and primary and secondary sources connected to the ideas and topics within the units, and teachers can choose to direct students to explore them at any time.

High expectations and strong supports

Amplify ELA meets students where they are while maintaining grade-level rigor for all. Through its differentiated instruction model, the curriculum is designed to "provide equity of access to excellence for the broadest possible range of learners" (Tomlinson, 2015, p. 203). Research on differentiated instruction (where students are taught in heterogeneous classrooms with high-quality curriculum and instruction and focused attention on their unique needs) shows broad benefits in student achievement and school satisfaction for a wide variety of learners (Burris & Garrity, 2008; Burris et al, 2008; Cohen & Lotan, 1997).

This approach follows Vygotsky's model of support by ensuring that each student is working within their "zone of proximal development," or the space just beyond what a student could not do independently but is able to do with guidance (1978). In this way, all students are able to work with texts at their grade-band level of complexity and fully participate in classroom culture. Research suggests that achievable difficult goals lead to increased student effort (Locke & Latham, 2002).

Amplify provides six levels of differentiated activities, indicated by a (+) icon in the lessons. For each level of differentiated instructional support, teachers are provided with instructional materials and students are provided with the scaffolds they need in order to complete each classroom activity. These supports and modifications are designed to support a range of English language learners (ELLs), students with special needs, and advanced students.

Reading comprehension supports

To support reading comprehension for ELLs, those with special needs, and otherwise struggling students, Amplify ELA employs text previews as well as varying degrees of simplified language and visual supports for each of its differentiation levels. Text previews are not summaries of texts but rather introductions written at a lower level of complexity that prime students with what to focus on while they are reading. Studies have shown that previewing the text leads to increased comprehension for struggling students, because it helps students build mental representations to interpret text (Graves, Cooke, & LaBerge, 1983) and activates students' background knowledge (Torgesen et al., 2007).

Simplified language in prompts allows students to access complex comprehension skills while working around fluency issues (Chen, 2009; Pang, 2013; Wisconsin Center for Education Research, 2018). While Amplify ELA almost never simplifies the language within the central texts students are working with, the curriculum will occasionally use reduced text or quotes. For students who are struggling with fluency,

the usage of reduced text or quotes allows them to access smaller fluency passages in order to grapple with complex grade-level tasks while working around language acquisition gaps (Chen, 2009; Fishkin, 2010). Visual supports also enable access to comprehension when there are fluency deficits. Visuals foster student engagement, increase comprehension of abstract concepts, and alleviate working memory demands by engaging the visual processing channel (Mayer, 1997; Pang, 2013; Rao & Gagle, 2006).

Amplify ELA's language production supports include sentence starters or frames, word banks, guiding questions, graphic organizers, and sentence models. Sentence starters and frames assist students with language deficits by modelling appropriate language sequencing, sentence structure, and academic discourse (Donnelly & Roe, 2010; Hutchison, 2018; Mitchell, 2008). Word banks encourage vocabulary development by enabling students to work with complex vocabulary (Mitchell, 2008; Tissington & LaCour, 2010). Graphic organizers maintain rigor within a core curriculum while providing a tool to develop complex schemas and mind maps in order to assist student comprehension of grade-level concepts (Dexter & Hughes, 2011; Fishkin, 2010; Pang, 2013). Similarly, guiding questions and sentence models facilitate schema building, demonstrate correct sentence structure, introduce academic vocabulary, and lead students to deeper understanding of the text (Fishkin, 2010; Hutchinson, 2018).

Amplify ELA further scaffolds students through complex tasks by breaking them down into smaller steps. This strategy helps students by reducing the demands on working memory or processing capacity (Baddeley, 1992). This not only helps students with processing deficits (such as those with learning disabilities), but is also very helpful for ELLs who are grappling with additional language processing in addition to the task at hand (Campbell & Filimon, 2018; Chen, 2009; Daniel, 2007).

In addition to the above supports, ELL-specific supports include think-alouds, simple wh-questions, and additional partner work. For ELLs, the provision of a think-aloud allows them to model their own thinking within new language and to build the skills of code switching appropriately while reading complex, grade-level tasks. Wh-questions provide a scaffold for students to reach the end goal of a complex thought or academic task (Brandes & McMaster, 2017). Additionally, there is ample research supporting the inclusion of verbal instructional practices for ELLs. Amplify ELA therefore includes many verbal experiences for ELLs to increase their language acquisition skills to provide a rich educational experience. Last, ELLs receive alternative vocabulary instruction during typical instruction time, to include important high frequency words that will appear in texts and may be familiar to native speakers but unfamiliar to ELLs.

Differentiation for advanced students

Due to schools' general focus on proficiency, advanced readers are often neglected in the classroom and receive little instruction or support in challenging themselves (Reis et al., 2004; Moon, Brighton, & Callahan, 2002). Advanced readers have the same motivational need for competence that struggling readers do, and if these readers are not challenged with new ideas or given important work, they may become disengaged in the classroom (Moon et al., 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Gifted learners often comprehend ideas more quickly, go into greater depth, and exhibit more varying interests compared with their peers (Clark, 2002). Therefore, research suggests that differentiation for advanced students should include more complex abstractions of material and more in-depth study of major ideas (Maker & Nielson, 1996; VanTassel-Baska, 1993).

Amplify ELA seeks to challenge all students with a rigorous, engaging curriculum. Therefore, in addition to five levels of support for struggling students and ELLs, Amplify ELA includes a Challenge level designed for advanced students. Within this extension opportunity for above-grade-level students, activities might ask students to compare two sections of text, create counterarguments, find evidence to support both sides of an argument, or extend their thinking about a text or topic. Additionally, advanced students are given challenging writing prompts, asking them to read a new text and explain how it compares to what they have been reading and learning.

Active, multimodal, and collaborative learning

Research on effective middle grade curriculum suggests that active engagement is key and that students thrive when classroom activities are social and varied (NMSA, 2010). To provide these learning experiences, Amplify ELA employs a variety of pedagogical styles, multimodal instruction, and ample opportunity for student collaboration.

Explicit instruction

One teaching style used across Amplify ELA's curriculum is explicit instruction. This involves direct teaching, teacher modeling, and guided practice of literacy skills (Marchand-Martella & Martella, 2013). Abundant research supports the effectiveness of explicit instructional practices, particularly for promoting acquisition of literacy skills (e.g., Archer & Hughes, 2010; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Marchand-Martella & Martella, 2013). Moreover, one of Biancarosa and Snow's fifteen elements of effective adolescent literacy programs is "direct, explicit comprehension instruction" (2004, p. 4). In a typical Amplify ELA lesson, students will have 8–18 minutes of direct targeted instruction each day on specific skills within the context of text.

Active learning

Many think of "active" learning in the physical sense, but when researchers talk about "active learners" they also often consider the mental activity of the student. Consequently, the middle school movement calls for instruction that gets students to actively construct knowledge through problem-solving, questioning, or inquiry (NMSA, 2010). Constructivism is a learner-centered theory that views learning as an individual's active process of making meaning and constructing knowledge (Mayer, 2004). Instructional practices such as paraphrasing, discussion, and close reading are all considered active. In Amplify ELA, students have many opportunities for constructivist, active learning: Students will work on an independent warm-up assignment, write, participate in whole-class discussion, work in small groups, share their ideas, and give feedback to their peers. For example, as students read for meaning, the teacher does not tell them the canonical answer. Instead, students work together to expose a range of interpretations of a given text, and as a group will refine their definition until the class has developed a shared understanding and interpretation of what they read.

Effective constructivist learning environments employ meaningful contexts and involve authentic tasks (Perkins, 1999; Wadsworth, 1996). Inquiry-based or problem-

based learning approaches leverage students' curiosity and autonomy (Nesin, 2012; NMSA, 2010). In these frameworks, students learn content, strategies, and skills through collaborative investigations of authentic problems or questions. The teacher facilitates the process, providing support and content knowledge as needed. In the Amplify ELA curriculum, there are many opportunities for students to role-play characters in fiction or drama, participate in performances such as Readers' Theatre (Poitras, Stimec, & Hill, 2013), or immerse themselves in multi-day team projects called Quests. Quests are problem-based digital learning experiences that exemplify active learning. For example, in the Who Killed Edgar Allan Poe? Quest, students solve a murder mystery by role-playing as various figures in Edgar Allen Poe's life (e.g., Mark Twain, Rufus Griswold) or characters from his works (e.g., Lenore, Annabel Lee, the Raven, the murderer in "The Tell-Tale Heart"). Students play together in teams of two or three and investigate the crime scene, interview other characters, and interpret clues in order to solve the mystery. They ultimately write about who they think is the murderer and explain why, using evidence they collected. During this Quest, students practice their close reading and writing skills to explore characters in Poe's world and relate personally to the materials by assuming characters' attributes, vocabulary, and costumes or props. The final challenge is for students to draft and read aloud an accusation, naming the murderer of Poe by using clues discovered throughout the Quest.

Multimodal instruction

Amplify ELA's effectiveness is maximized when students use the curriculum's many digital tools and affordances. The digital curriculum includes Quests and other visual and video-based depictions of lesson content. By providing many multimodal experiences within a given text, we allow students multiple entry points and help teachers to support that learning. Studies have shown that learning is enhanced when students receive information in more than one mode, such as through images, words, and sounds (Mayer, 1997; Schnotz & Kulhavy, 1994). Materials supplied in several presentation modes can facilitate learning and retention of information, particularly for lower-achieving students (Chen & Fu, 2003).

Collaboration

Educational activities that tap into the middle grade student's drive to establish social relationships with peers enhance both student learning and engagement. While whole-class instruction provides students the greatest access to teaching time, research on effective reading programs clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of collaboration in middle grade classrooms (Edwards, 2015; Nesin, 2012; Slavin, Cheung, Groff, & Lake, 2010). Peer collaboration fosters learning through feedback and debate as students help one another alleviate misconceptions (Damon, 1984).

More generally, studies have shown that cooperative learning paradigms result in greater achievement compared with controls (see Slavin, 1995). Opportunities for students to collaborate and refine their thinking through adult-supported peer discussion drives motivation and fosters strong social and emotional connections among middle grade students (NMSA, 2010).

Within Amplify ELA, there are frequent opportunities for collaboration. As students analyze texts, they break often into paired or small groups to analyze, compare interpretations, and refine understanding. During writing activities, students always share their work with peers and provide one another with constructive feedback. Additionally, student-led activities such as Quests, Reader's Theatre, fishbowl discussions, Socratic seminars, and debates all involve groups of varying sizes and tap into students' innate need for social interaction, and all of these collaborative activities are situated within Amplify ELA's intellectual and supportive classroom culture. This sort of text-based collaborative learning is another element of effective literacy programs; it is important that students not just discuss topics collaboratively, but interact around a text (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004).

Feedback and assessment

Formative assessment is any type of assessment designed to give feedback on student performance that leads to improved learning outcomes (Sadler, 1998). Amplify ELA's curriculum incorporates many such opportunities for students to receive feedback on their work. Research tells us that frequent feedback motivates students, empowers them to be self-regulated learners, and is critical to their success at a given task (Locke & Latham, 2002; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). In this way low-stakes, formative assessment moments provide opportunities for student growth and learning and are critical to academic success (NMSA, 2010; Safer & Fleischman, 2005). For middle grades in particular, emphasis should be placed on individualized assessment and tracking each student's personal growth, rather than on comparison (NMSA, 2010).

These low-stakes assessments are beneficial not just for students but also for teachers: They provide teachers with student performance data on a regular basis to help them determine the effectiveness of their teaching and make decisions about how to improve instruction (Guskey, 2003; Safer & Fleischman, 2005). By reviewing students' performance on specific tasks, teachers can reflect on the criteria, skills, and concepts they aimed to emphasize through their instruction, as well as the effectiveness of particular approaches to helping students learn (Guskey, 2003).

Within Amplify ELA, software tools and rubrics for writing enable teachers to provide students with written feedback and to measure each student's progress. They also auto-assess students' vocabulary acquisition and performance on comprehension tasks called Solos. Additionally, Amplify's unique EAM (embedded assessment measure) auto-scores embedded items across a series of lessons to track students' reading, writing, and language progress. EAMs provide teachers with recommendations on how to best support each student during Flex Days—differentiated days built into each unit where students are assigned specific activities to help them strengthen the literacy skills they are struggling with.

Classrooms should include opportunities for self-assessment and peer-assessment (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The best type of feedback is task specific; addresses a clear, challenging goal; and focuses on process or self-regulation rather than task or self (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Process-focused feedback gives students advice on what to do (e.g., "When revising this paragraph, focus on your use of description words to make your point more clear"), while self-regulation feedback suggests more general habits-of-mind ("Remember to ask yourself 'What is the main idea' as you read"). Conversely, task feedback (e.g., "This is incorrect") and self feedback (e.g., "You are a star!") gives students less actionable information on the task. The type of feedback that fosters learner self-regulation 1) clearly defines the criteria for good performance, 2) is timely, 3) prioritizes specific areas for improvement, and 4) includes opportunities for students to revise and resubmit their work.

With this in mind, Amplify ELA trains teachers with the PSI guidelines for feedback: Feedback should focus on a place, skill, and area of impact. Amplify also prepares teachers to give over-the-shoulder conferences, which are 30-second-to-one-minute moments of formative feedback given while students are working in the classroom. In these moments, teachers are taught to remind students of the relevant skills for the activity and provide a small, actionable goal. (e.g., "Write four sentences of evidence to support that claim.") In this way, teacher feedback follows research-supported best practices.

For writing in particular, the benefits of frequent, ongoing formative assessment are widely recognized (Graham, Harris, & Hebert, 2011). For instance, teachers know that students rarely write well on first attempts, and that writing instruction involves guiding students through multiple opportunities to receive feedback that they can use to revise and improve their writing. Research has shown the positive effects of feedback on student writing, including teacher comments about student writing strategies and reactions from peers about particular aspects of writing (Boscolo & Ascorti, 2004; MacArthur, Schwartz, & Graham, 1991; Schunk & Swartz, 1993). In Amplify ELA, all writing assignments have a peer-assessment component, and students are often given the opportunity to revise their writing on Flex Days, using their own self-set goals.

Conclusion

We know that the middle grades are a critical juncture for students' academic potential. With that in mind, we have built a program that strives to engage students of all abilities and backgrounds in making meaning from complex texts. Our curriculum leverages the utility of the digital world, employing a variety of digital supports and interactions to foster learning and provide feedback. By harnessing adolescents' innate curiosity, social drive, and desire for independence, Amplify ELA has curated a thoughtful and diverse selection of complex texts that prioritizes group- and student-led work and includes a wide variety of supports and scaffolds to ensure that all students can have meaningful interactions with grade-level content. Grounded in learning science and tailored for the middle grades, Amplify ELA is a strong integrated curriculum that promotes a rigorous and riveting classroom culture around literacy for all.

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