

Health and Literacy

Janet K. Hankins, NBCT
Eastside Elementary School
Clinton, MS

Health literacy is the capacity of an individual to obtain, interpret, and understand basic health information and services, and the competence to use such information and services in ways which are health-enhancing.

Joint Committee on Health Education Standards (1995)

Why health and literacy? What do the two have in common? Much more than one would think at first glance. In fact, the students of today will be in a “heap of trouble” if we as educators do not take the time and initiative to teach our students how making the wrong personal health decisions right now in their present lives could adversely affect their future lives.

But, in all honesty, when I was told that I would be responsible for teaching health literacy, I began thinking, “Oh no, one more thing added to my already overcrowded plate! How am I going to handle this additional requirement, especially with the recent budget cuts, the possible increase in student/teacher ratio, and the accountability for teaching the objectives for the MCT2? How is all this going to be feasible?” But then I chided myself, “No, health literacy is not just one more thing; it is one of the most important gifts I could give my students. What good is knowledge if one cannot enjoy a healthy, productive life?” So, imagine my excitement when I recently had the opportunity to attend a **HEAP of Books** (Health Education Assessment Program) Pilot Project Training in my school district sponsored by the Office of Healthy Schools.

The purpose of the **HEAP training** was to show me, an educator, how to teach health topics and skills while increasing the literacy of my students, thus making better use of my already limited instructional time. One of the most impor-

tant things I learned was that health skills are generic and can be applied to any health issue or topic.

The thing I like about the **HEAP literacy** project is the fact that it gives us as educators the opportunity to increase our capacity to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment in order to improve each student’s health literacy through improved health instruction. This is done in a two-fold manner: through a resource handbook and a secure web-based system that allows its members to access an online item bank, develop and edit assessment resources, and to support online testing of students. It is a work in progress. The site is constantly updated whenever new book recommendations are made. There are even forms that can be accessed in order for teachers to submit their own book recommendations and lesson plans.

Using Literature to Teach Health: A Guide to a HEAP of Books was created by Sandra Klarenbeck, a health education specialist, and Joanna R. Jones, a reading specialist. Together they have provided a way to identify specific books to use when planning, teaching, and discussing health content topics and health skills. The recommended book selections cover grades K–12 and can be used by both health and reading literacy educators. Health

Literacy skills are integrated throughout the recommended books. Reading comprehension skills are practiced as health content is taught. Students get exposure to grade-appropriate expository text and extensive instruction in reading skills and strategies.

The **HEAP of Books** training helped me make connections between the health knowledge and the skills my students should achieve in order to become health literate and the books I integrate into my students’ daily lessons on reading and writing. At the conclusion of the training I had a better understanding of the health education standards and the supporting teaching materials that are available to assist teachers in developing that understanding. The training gave me a better insight into the connection between health and reading in developing health literacy. I also gained resources to use in the classroom that would assist me in implementing health and reading.

HEAP of Books is definitely for teachers who are interested in increasing student literacy in their classroom. It is a viable instructional tool for health literacy that is easily aligned to the Mississippi Language Arts competencies. My suggestion, start exploring that “**HEAP**” of books!

