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Suzanne Jacobs Lipshaw is a children's book author and former elementary special education teacher dedicated to nurturing young minds. As an educator, she was passionate about teaching reading, fostering higher-level thinking skills, and creating leadership opportunities for her students. Her nonfiction picture book The Super Volcano grew out of a year-long, project-based learning unit she embedded into her classroom, bringing natural science and geology to life for her students. Now as an author, Suzanne speaks to students about writing and how kids can make a difference, and she presents at conferences about her innovative teaching strategies that helped engage and motivate struggling readers. Her writing credentials include four nonfiction picture books and her first fiction novel launching February 2026. To learn more about Suzanne visit her website at http://www.suzannejacobslipshaw.com/.

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Adventure in Learning: Using Themed Project-Based Learning to Inspire Young Readers

As a children's book author and former elementary special education teacher, my mission is to motivate, engage (AASL Standard VI), and empower students to realize they are destined to do great things. But no one can do great things in isolation.

TO LIVE UP TO THEIR FULL POTENTIAL, educators and students need to establish meaningful connections and collaborations (AASL Standard III) with experts inside and outside of school. I'd love to say this realization came to me as one big aha moment, but the truth is, it trickled in.

Like most educators, I spend time in August prepping for the next school year. But during the summer of 2012, I struggled with tabling my thoughts as a significant change in curriculum sent my mind racing. Michigan, like many other states, was implementing the Common Core Standards, which included a major increase in the amount of nonfiction text elementary students were required to read. My challenge was to figure out how to engage not only my struggling readers with nonfiction, but also myself as it was not a genre high up in my TBR pile.

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Enter a family vacation at Yellowstone National Park, where I experienced spouting geysers, bubbling mud pots, vibrant hot springs, fascinating flora and fauna, and the massive Yellowstone Supervolcano. During our travels, I met an author who was holding a signing for her two children's nonfiction books about Yellowstone. I shared my struggle, and afterward, she generously gifted me signed copies and the accompanying teaching guides. Inspiration struck—Yellowstone was the spark I needed to engage myself and my students in nonfiction.

That school year, I transformed my classroom into a miniature Yellowstone. Three days a week, my resource room students were taught the reading skills mandated by their IEP and MTSS goals and on "Yellowstone" days they applied those skills to nonfiction books and articles focused on the wonders of the park. To curate (AASL Standard IV) these, I partnered with an expert in nonfiction—our school librarian Marci Howes. The following year, Marci helped me immerse students in all things "Space: The Final Frontier." We were thrilled both themes increased students' excitement to delve into nonfiction, but something was missing.

Enter a Project Based Learning (PBL) course. PBL is a teaching method where students learn by actively engaging in meaningful, real-world projects. The timing was perfect as PBL coordinated with the changing role of educators from "sage on the stage" to facilitators of learning through inquiry (AASL Standard I). But to achieve this, we would also need to cultivate connections with outside experts.

In 2014-15, students boarded an imaginary yellow submarine on a yearlong journey to explore the undersea world! Their adventure began on Jekyll Island, home to the Georgia Sea Turtle Center (GSTC), a facility whose mission is to rescue and rehabilitate injured sea turtles. As an introduction to our sea turtle unit, students were surprised with a virtual field trip to the center. The tour guide, Kira, taught us basic facts about sea turtles, the dangers sea turtles face, and how those found sick or injured are cared for in the center's hospital. One of the first patients we met was Mahi, a juvenile green sea turtle missing her right front flipper.

This was when Kira helped carry out a secret mission—to inspire students to advocate for and help these endangered creatures. Kira explained that Mahi's care was expensive. To help with the costs, people could symbolically adopt Mahi for fifty dollars. Without hesitation

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one student jumped out of his chair, pumped his fist into the air and shouted "Yes! We can do that!" The spark was lit!

We spent several class periods formulating a plan. Students decided to inform our school community about the threats to sea turtles. To accomplish this, they chose to put on a taped "virtual assembly." They were divided into small groups, and with Ms. Howes' added expertise, students gathered information, organized their findings, selected tools, and developed small-group presentations about what we, even in Michigan, could do to protect our flippered friends. Through their research, students discovered that sea turtles in New England were suffering from a dangerous condition called cold-stunning and were getting flown to the GSTC, further motivating students to make a difference.

Students designed a reusable collapsible water bottle with the logo "Protect Sea Turtles" for donations of five dollars or more, introducing the fundraiser at the end of the assembly. The assembly was well received, and donations came pouring in. Our leaders were thrilled to donate over $1,700 to the center.

Once Mahi was adopted, we received biweekly updates about her condition. You can imagine how motivated the students were to get their hands on this piece of reading material. So much so, they wanted to learn about other ocean animals. Again, information was curated, research was underway, and presentations were created showcasing their chosen animal. But this time, our students became the "experts" sharing their knowledge with GSTC employees at a professional development lunch.

Following the pattern of acronyms in education, I dubbed this new teaching method TPBLA—Themed Project Based Learning Approach. TPBLA significantly raised student engagement and motivation along with providing them access to curriculum and their individualized goals in an authentic, fun, and unique manner. Data showed a significant increase in the progress readers made on their goals. Additionally, it increased their ability to deeply explore (AASL Standard V) topics, think critically, and communicate effectively. It also provided students with inherent opportunities to develop and showcase leadership skills. Our students were empowered to do great things!

I retired from teaching, but my passion for nonfiction has only grown stronger. To share the wonders of Yellowstone, I wrote *The Super Volcano: A Hidden Hero Below Yellowstone National Park, shared Mahi's story in Mighty Mahi, and introduced readers to space and engineering in Rugged RAX: The Little Satellite That Could. Throughout this journey, my students and I learned that nonfiction doesn't have to be intimidating—it can be an exciting adventure.*

Now, I hope to inspire librarians to bring this same excitement into their libraries. By creating themed displays, curating nonfiction resources, and supporting inquiry-based projects, librarians can empower students to explore, think critically, and take action in meaningful ways. With a little creativity and collaboration, nonfiction can transform from a required reading task into an unforgettable adventure. I promise, you—and your students—will be awed with the results!

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