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Transforming Our Practice by Asking “What if...?”

We are pleased to be able to share the 2006 issue of *The Language and Literacy Spectrum* with you. Many thanks go to our authors and to our Review Board for their essential contributions.

This issue begins with a “cautionary tale” where we are reminded of the challenges faced by educators in 2006. Joanne Robertson invites the reader to reflect upon teaching under current legislation, the standards movement, and to ask “what if...?” While reading the articles in the sixteenth volume of *The Language and Literacy Spectrum*, we encourage you to reflect on your practice and to ask yourself how you might transform your practice.

Effective professional development enables teachers to reconsider their instructional strategies and ask “what if?” Susan Kaback shares a case study of one teacher who engaged in long-term, inquiry-based professional development as an avenue for exploring teacher learning. Such professional development is useful in supporting teachers in their attempts at instructional innovation. Opportunities for reflection and transformation of this teacher’s practice are echoed in the action research projects Mary Ellen Levin presents.

One way that literacy teachers have been challenged during these recent years is through increasing pressure to prepare students to perform well on essays included in high stakes tests. A result of this is that many teachers are now expected to use packaged writing programs. Helping teachers to move beyond the all too common focus of test preparation, Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey provide our readers with ten strategies to consider in the teaching of writing. Bruce Saddler’s article complements this, with a focus specifically on improving the writing of sentences. Using multiple strategies will certainly better meet our students’ long-term educational needs.

There is no doubt that good writers learn a lot about writing by reading. Maureen Boyd, Lydia Montgomery, Devon Paterson, and Jolene Schrage write about ways to use collections of children’s literature. They provide valuable strategies for selecting and using quality collections. To help you begin such a collection, several books are reviewed once again in our annual Book Banter column. Alice Sample, who chairs NYSRA’s Children’s Literature Committee, reviews an exciting selection of recently published children’s books that can be used as a springboard for class discussions and investigations.

While children are facing increasing pressure to perform well on high stakes tests, parents are often equally frustrated in their attempts to help. Chinwe Ikpeze describes how a reading clinic provided needed support to parents of struggling readers, resulting not only in helping the children to improve in their reading, but also to improve communication between children and parents.

We have enjoyed serving as co-editors of *The Language and Literacy Spectrum*. It has been rewarding to be a part of the New York State Reading Association. We are pleased to announce that Dr. Irene Rosenthal will be the next editor. We hope that many of you will choose to submit manuscripts from the work you do or to offer to sit on the Review Board. You can reach Irene at ROSENTHI@mail.strose.edu

Enjoy this issue!

Clara Beier
Mira Berkley



Mastering Uniformity: A Constructivist Tale for Standardized Times

Joanne Marie Robertson

ABSTRACT

What if.....?

What if there was a kingdom in which the ordinary was perceived as extraordinary and mediocrity was the standard of excellence? In what ways might this society mold the mindset of its subjects? How might a creative and innovative newcomer respond to the intellectually numbing environment? Would she have the courage to defy conformity and make visible her thinking? Imagine if this fairytale were real.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Robertson is an Assistant Professor at St. John's University. She teaches in the Graduate Literacy Program. Her current research explores students' perception of self-efficacy and early reading and writing development, and the integration of inquiry based instruction and action research projects to support students' critical thinking in the elementary grades.



Joanne Marie Robertson



The icy, blue towers of King Bertram's castle sparkled in the morning mist. Situated atop a glacial mountain range in the Far, Far, Far East, his kingdom seemed to float above the clouds. The king and his subjects considered themselves to be master artisans who could fashion the most uniformly flawless porcelain in the entire world. In order to hide their crafting secrets, they carved their kingdom out of a glacier, creating an impenetrable domain. Over the years, crusaders attempted to scale the heights in hopes of discovering the magic formula. However, the icy cliffs, frigid winds, and fierce snowstorms proved formidable. They were never seen nor heard from again.

No one in the kingdom cared; there were enough of their own kind. There was satisfaction to be derived from solitary distinction, authority, and isolation. There were high standards of excellence to maintain. They believed themselves to be the most knowledgeable. They knew what worked and what didn't. They all agreed upon these truths. They were comfortable in this uniform mindset. That is, until Gwendolyn arrived. She was the first crusader to complete the quest. How she survived the treacherous climb and unyielding climate was a mystery, for she was delicate in stature and build. When the royal guards discovered her at the gates, they believed her to be an ice sculpture.

After reviving her and providing nourishment, the king's courtiers quickly whisked her away to his private chambers for further interrogation. The king was surprised at how astute Gwendolyn was for an outsider. She seemed to know a lot about porcelain crafting. He agreed to let her begin her studies in the Royal Art Academy, but asked that she not disturb the work of his students, who were preparing for the "Grand Showing" of their work.

"Might I be of some help to them?" Gwendolyn asked. "I know how to blend some unusual colors to produce brilliant filigree. I have used this technique many times in my own country."

"No, my apprentices must not be confused with anything new right now," King Bertram replied. "It is critical that they follow proper, proven methods. It's how they've been trained. The patterns for Imperial Vases are all laid out in *The Royal Handbook* – very precise, purely scientific, totally reliable, and devoid of fluff and nonsense!" He handed Gwendolyn the 400-page book, and advised her to read it if she hoped to be successful.

Somewhat confused by the King's adamant demeanor, but possessing an open mind and hoping to learn more, Gwendolyn headed towards the royal studios. On the way, she skimmed through the pages of the *Handbook*. The rationale, rules, procedures, and proven methods for designing and constructing a vase of traditional, imperial quality and grace were simply and clearly outlined. However, she began to frown as she read several sections more completely. They did not seem to make sense, based upon her understandings about the nature of porcelain crafting.

True to her word, however, she did not disturb King Bertram's students as they diligently worked on their vases. Gwendolyn noted how carefully they attended to the methodology outlined in the handbook, and how they proceeded in a step-wise fashion to work the porcelain. She observed how every vase was identical in design and coloration. She learned a few of their names and a bit about their interests, but kept the conversation simple. Gwendolyn did ask, however, if there was an area where she might work on her own little vase.



At the end of the week, Gwendolyn was summoned again by the king.

“My apprentices will soon be ready to present their vases,” King Bertram explained, “Would you like to come?” Gwendolyn accepted, for she was curious about their final pieces. “If they can prove to me,” the king continued, that they have properly followed the rules, as outlined in the Royal Handbook of Designs, and can answer some tough, artistic questions, I will confer the title of ‘Renowned Artisan’ upon them.”

“What types of questions?” Gwendolyn asked.

“They must state their reasons for choosing a particular color, style, or medium, and back their choices with references to the proven methods and research of the Old Masters. Really, it’s very simple, and by the time they’re ready to display their work, they’ve done all the hard work of following procedures. I will share one of my own original creations that day,” the King proudly stated. “Perhaps you would like to bring something you have made?”

On the day of the “Grand Showing,” the apprentices were anxious to please King Bertram and earn their rewards. Along with their titles, was the promise of great wealth, prestige, and prominence in the Academy. In the center of the room upon a large pedestal stood King Bertram’s own impeccable and perfectly prepared vase. It was the only one he had ever created, but people didn’t really talk about that.

One by one, the apprentices began to share their work, systematically reviewing the steps of the process. King Bertram was visibly pleased. The vases were perfect in their uniformity and attention to small details. When all the titles had been officially conferred, the King invited Gwendolyn to share her work.

Gwendolyn placed two vases gingerly upon the floor. The onlookers became silent, for they were curious about her talents as well, and how they would compare to Perfectan standards. They were not to be disappointed, for Gwendolyn’s vase was truly beautiful, but not flawless.

“Please, Gwendolyn,” King Bertram directed smugly. “Share with us the steps you took to create this wonderful piece.”

“Oh, but I’m not finished,” said Gwendolyn. “This piece is still in process. I used handbook methods and procedures for this first part. However, when I am designing a truly significant piece of art, there is a crucial next step I must take.” She threw the vase to the ground, shattering it to smithereens.

Gasps of disbelief were heard. All eyes were upon the obviously deranged newcomer and the fractured porcelain shards lying at her feet. One young apprentice fainted from the tension of the moment, and needed to be revived. Another ran from the room, fearing the consequences. King Bertram clutched at his heart.

“What is the meaning of this?” he sputtered. “Do you seek to ridicule all that we have achieved here in Perfecta? Will you make a mockery of this serious occasion? Perhaps our standards are too high for you?”

“No, King Bertram. Your standards are too low for me,” she answered. Gwendolyn picked up a second vase and began to unwrap it.

“This is ridiculous!” screamed the king. “Guards! Seize her!” But when Gwendolyn unwrapped the second vase, it was clear that she had produced the most amazing piece of porcelain that anyone had ever seen.



“I want to know the meaning of this?” the king demanded. “This vase is certainly more wondrous than the first. Such form! Explain immediately!”

“Gladly, sire,” said Gwendolyn. “I’m hardly ever finished, or ever make anything I consider to be perfect the first time around. The materials here are different from those of my homeland. They did not lend themselves to the methods of the handbook or what I had hoped to create. The studio was crowded and the light sources were dim. I needed to adjust my thinking and methods to transform the piece into this. This vase seemed to create itself as I worked! What I have learned from my conversations with your students is that everything here can be made even better, if you break the original mold to recreate it.”

Gwendolyn rotated the second vase in her hands as she continued. “I learned from my mistakes in this piece. They become my teachers. I learned new techniques. But I must always break my pattern of thinking to arrive at this point.

The designs and colors of Gwendolyn’s vase ran seamlessly into one another. It was the most magnificent of all. “Sometimes I examine the broken pieces of the original vase, deciding what can be reintegrated into a new piece. I review in my mind what I had hoped to accomplish. Then, I cover all the seams and openings in the cracks with gold filigree to join them visually and conceptually. I don’t discard anything when I recreate. I never know when I will want to use something again. No two vases I make are ever the same, and that should be so, for they serve different purposes and represent different ideas. This one,” she pointed to the shards from the first vase that lay on the floor, “was really quite ordinary.” She held up the second vase, “This is better. After I broke a few vases, they became extraordinary.”

Perfectan meteorologists note that on this particular day, the ice began to melt.

Author’s note

I conceive this fanciful story based upon an ancient tale to make the contemporary point that well-documented, classroom based analyses that illustrate and support a comprehensive view of teaching and learning have been abandoned for narrowly conceived, socially and “politically correct” notions about standards, accountability and “research-based” instruction. I refer to the use of “research-based” commercial reading programs endorsed and promoted by government agencies that manage the Reading First Initiatives (e.g. Yatvin, Papp, & Garan, 2003). The 400-page handbook of Perfecta was inspired by the much-misquoted *National Reading Panel Report* (NICHHD, 2000).

Teachers are increasingly asked to follow “scripts” as more and more districts adopt commercial programs. Educational policy in our nation’s schools is increasingly dictated by “far and distant others...whose purpose is not to promote thinking, much less the joy of discovery, but to raise test scores”(Kohn, 2004). Like Gwendolyn, I have been told “not to confuse” apprentice teachers with process oriented approaches to the teaching of reading and writing in the primary grades. For instance, I was asked to provide staff development workshops for teachers using Reading First approved literacy programs in grades kindergarten to three. However, the 90-minute block specified for explicit skills instruction was nonnegotiable. Any reading or writing workshop activities were to be “add ons” and could not be integrated into that time period. The either/or mindset was quite rigid.

In my teaching I often “story” the way to understanding with my students, for stories are powerful meaning making tools. Therefore, I hope teachers, teacher educators, and policy makers will share *Mastering Uniformity* to begin conversations about the impact of federal and state policies upon the



standardization of curriculum and teachers' autonomy to make professional decisions in their own classrooms. I invite the reader to examine the unexamined power differentials embedded within prescriptive and school-centric reform initiatives, in the consideration of issues related to equity, social justice, and critical literacy development. I acknowledge the transactional nature of the reading process (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994), and expect that each reader will respond to this fairy tale in his or her own unique way.

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“Theoretical Inclinations”: How One Teacher’s Beliefs Influenced Reading Comprehension Instruction

Susanne Kaback

ABSTRACT

This article examines the year-long experience of one fourth grade teacher, Anne, as she learned about comprehension strategy instruction and attempted to integrate the approach in her reading program. The goal of the study was to extend current understanding of the factors that support or inhibit an individual teacher’s instructional decision making. The project explored how Anne’s academic preparation, beliefs about reading comprehension instruction, and attitudes toward teacher-student interaction influenced her efforts to employ comprehension strategy instruction.

The results of the study suggest that three factors were pivotal in Anne’s successful implementation of reading strategy instruction: pedagogical beliefs, classroom relationships, and professional community. Research on instructional change generally focuses on issues of time, resources, feedback, and follow-through. The research reported here recognizes the importance of these components, but expands contemporary thinking by showing how, in Anne’s case, a teacher’s existing theories, her relationship with her students, and her professional interaction with peers impact instructional decisions.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Susanne Kaback is an assistant professor of Literacy Education at Elmira College. Her teaching and research interests include authentic, effective professional development in Literacy Education, and the preparation of preservice teachers for embedding literacy instruction in content area instruction.

1/16/03

I enjoyed our visit today. I will do a synthesis lesson next Monday at 10:30 a.m. Hope you can be there. Your feedback is always helpful. Reflecting on my work becomes easier when you ask me questions because you ask questions that set me to thinking.

E-mail message from Anne Barker (a pseudonym), language arts teacher

Meet Anne Barker

On the first day of the professional development workshop I was facilitating with upper elementary grade teachers, I asked each participant to “tell us something we shouldn’t wait to find out about you.” Anne Barker, a fourth grade teacher, told the group, “In my spare time, I am a glass bead artist. Working with glass is a lot like teaching kids. You handle fragile material in volatile conditions, but when you’re successful, the final product is an original and valuable thing.”

Anne was a teacher at Pinewood Elementary, a school that was partnered with the local university in a professional development network. An essential feature of that partnership was the university’s



commitment to offering on-site workshops designed to address a specific pedagogical need identified by teachers as significant to their professional development. The teachers at Pinewood were intrigued by the concept of teaching cognitive strategies to support students' reading comprehension (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). They had been introduced to cognitive strategies such as questioning, predicting, and activating schema at a day-long workshop, but they wanted to know more. Because I was part of the university research team working at Pinewood, and because I was interested in exploring teachers' first experiences using cognitive strategies to teach reading comprehension, I was offered the opportunity to work with Anne and her colleagues.

Anne's facility with metaphor to describe the way she thought about teaching made her an obvious choice when I was selecting teachers to participate in my research. I learned quickly, through her spoken communication and her writing, that Anne had a natural capacity for reflection. In fact, she told me early in our relationship that people often accused her of being "too much in my head". This comment, in particular, led me to believe that Anne would be an excellent candidate for my study of how teachers' beliefs about reading affected the way they thought about cognitive strategy instruction.

As it turned out, my research became a case study of Anne's experience during a six-month period of time when I was the resident researcher in her fourth grade class. This article is organized to begin with a description of the literature that helped frame my research study and then to explain Anne's experience thinking about and planning cognitive strategy instruction.

Framing the study

The literature on reading comprehension instruction is replete with theories and practices recommended to support students' reading achievement (e.g., Barton & Sawyer, 2003; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Pardo, 2004; Pressley, 2000; Tovani, 2004). What it lacks is a description of the way successful reading teachers think and act when they plan and implement comprehension instruction. This article describes one fourth-grade teacher's thinking about comprehension strategies in reading instruction, how her existing beliefs influenced her new learning, and how this combination of new and old information translated to classroom practice.

The question that guided my research was broad. I was interested in building knowledge about the influence of teachers' beliefs on their instructional practice, not testing an existing theory, so I began by asking, "What happens when teachers learn about and experiment with comprehension strategy instruction?" Comprehension strategy instruction is defined as an approach based on research in proficient reader behavior (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Flavell, 1979; Hansen, 1981; Markman, 1977; Palinscar & Brown, 1984; Pearson & Dole, 1987). Students are taught to think like expert readers by learning to use strategies such as visualization, inference, schema-activation, questioning, and summarization as they read (e.g., Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube, 2001). This approach to teaching comprehension has received a lion's share of page space in professional journals and books, and a quick glance at program guides from literacy conferences shows how popular a reading strategies approach is.

Despite the popularity of comprehension strategy teaching, research exploring the impact of this method is puzzling. A review of strategy instruction programs revealed two significant, but inconsistent, patterns. First, studies have documented the benefits to student achievement with the use of strategy instruction in comprehension (Brown, 1992; El-Dinary & Schuder, 1993; Hansen, 1981; Palinscar & Brown, 1984; Pearson & Dole, 1987; Pressley & Wharton, 1998). Second, research has shown that few teachers adopt the approach (Collins, Brown & Newman, 1989; El-Dinary & Schuder, 1993; Pressley, Schuder, Bergman & El-Dinary, 1992; Pressley & Wharton, 1998). What interested me was that the



research base did not satisfactorily explain this failure to successfully connect recommended reading instruction with many practitioners. Why were teachers resistant to a “best practice” instructional intervention?

Further reading, and classroom-based research with upper-elementary and middle school teachers, helped me begin to answer this question. An important catalyst in initiating my research was a study by Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, and Lloyd (1991) in which they explored the conditions that support teachers’ professional development. They found that, in terms of literacy staff development, “the provision of practices without theory may lead to misimplementation or no implementation at all, unless teachers’ beliefs are congruent with the theoretical assumptions of the practice” (p. 579). Further, Shapiro and Kilbey (1990), in a different study, recommended that if teacher development efforts strive to foster congruence between theory and practice, “then teachers must be led to examine the assumptions underlying their beliefs, as well as the beliefs of others. Teachers must learn to question why they are using specific instructional practices and how these practices relate to current theories of literacy development” (p. 63).

As a former middle school language arts teacher, these conclusions struck a chord. I thought about how many in-service days I had “survived” as well-intentioned staff developers distributed piles of handouts describing the “what, when and how” of a new instructional practice, but never the “why”. When I remembered how often the material from these workshops landed in the back of my file cabinet, I wondered why teachers, the instructional architects of the classroom, were never introduced to the theoretical foundation of a new teaching method, nor were they invited to identify their own “theoretical inclinations” (Schoonmaker, 2002). And I began to question whether the absence of this information might explain why sometimes, as Hoffman (1998) explains, “bad things happen to good ideas” (p. 102).

Armed with these doubts, I re-read some of the milestone research that examined teachers’ introduction to and experimentation with a strategies approach to reading comprehension instruction. None of these studies reported sharing with teachers the theories that shaped the method, nor did the articles suggest that teachers were encouraged to explore and compare their existing beliefs about reading instruction with a strategies approach. Instead, I noticed that the prevailing characteristic of articles and books about cognitive strategy instruction was the focus on how successful *readers* think and act as they read. No research concentrated on how successful reading *teachers* think and act as they plan and deliver instruction.

Recognizing this gap in the literature base, I decided to center my research interests on the way teachers learn about and experiment with comprehension strategy instruction. Because I lacked a database of teachers who were “proven” to be successful strategy instructors, my first job was to spend time with teachers who were experimenting with strategy instruction, make judgments about effectiveness, and document what these capable teachers did to find instructional success.

Anne Barker, the teacher quoted at the beginning of this article, is a teacher at a small, rural elementary school in New England. In this article, I describe the year I spent in Anne’s classroom as a university-based researcher working in a professional development partnership with Anne’s school. During this year, Anne and I worked closely in an inquiry-based model of literacy staff development (Richardson, 1994). Anne had chosen to look more closely at her reading program, and was particularly interested in experimenting with a reading strategies approach. By the end of the school year, Anne had become a proficient teacher of reading strategies. Figure 1 provides an overview of the way Anne thought and the way she taught as she learned about comprehension instruction. Below, I describe how each characteristic of her teaching contributed to her instructional success.

**Figure 1.**

How She Thinks	How She Acts
Learning is socially constructed. (Social-constructivism)	Anne designs her literacy instruction to include talk as frequently as possible. Her kind of talk includes "thinking aloud" and storytelling; she creates time for her students to talk with her and one another in the same ways.
Being a reflective reader is an important prerequisite to understanding and implementing strategy instruction.	Anne is deliberate about identifying her own reading strategies in use and she makes this thinking visible during reading instruction.
A reader is someone who decodes with fluency and who uses cognitive strategies to comprehend a variety of text genres.	Anne defines reading broadly and uses flexible teaching strategies to meet all the reading needs of her students. She understands that matching books and kids at an appropriate reading level is crucial to developing fluency and supporting metacognition.
All teachers are reading teachers, at all grade levels, in all subject areas.	Anne's strategy teaching extends beyond the boundary of fiction and language arts instruction. She teaches her students how to apply reading strategies to different genres and in their content area studies.
Familiarity with children's literature is necessary in making wise book selections for teaching specific strategies.	Anne regularly chooses to read children's literature to help her stay current in the field. When she reads she "reads like a teacher of reading" and makes mental notes about the potential of a book for use in a future strategy lesson.
More experienced readers are mentors, less experienced readers are their apprentices.	During anchor lessons, as the "master reader", Anne uses direct instruction techniques to make her thinking visible while demonstrating the strategy use of experienced readers. She provides opportunities for students to collaborate in the same way.
Successful teaching and learning is grounded in a personal relationship between the teacher and her students. (Relational Theory)	Anne is interested in her students' lives and uses her knowledge of them to guide personal and academic interactions. She also uses personal stories to help her students learn about her as a whole person, not just a teacher.
The accurate assessment of reading progress happens with a variety of evaluation tools.	Anne uses students' talk, their body language, their written responses, and their reading project designs, and standardized test measures to evaluate both attitudes and achievement in reading.
Whole class lessons are valuable for introducing new strategies, but students learn at different rates and require individual instruction, guided practice, and independent practice. (Gradual Release of Responsibility Model)	She regularly observes students during independent reading time, and evaluates their written responses to thoroughly assess comprehension progress. She is responsive to students' individual needs by offering individual assistance & practice time.
Everyone in a classroom, including the teacher, is a learner.	Anne encourages questions and the "puzzling through" of solutions. She models this desirable stance of inquiry by showing that she does not "know it all", and she expects students to understand and be comfortable with her fallibility.
Less is more.	She recognizes the importance of spending long chunks of time with one strategy, varying the level of sophistication to avoid wheel-spinning, and showing the application of strategies across the curriculum



Reading is taught not assigned. To teach reading well teachers need to accept the "messiness" of making thinking visible, the unpredictable discussions, and the required time to be thorough in planning sophisticated strategy lessons.

Anne teaches her students to read by offering predictable anchor lessons. She begins a whole class lesson with a focusing question, defines the featured strategy, reads aloud from a hand-picked book, thinks aloud, and engages students' responses.

Anne's story

My work with Anne Barker began in the fall of 2001. Anne had been a language arts teacher for five years, although in the last two years her attention shifted from a focus on developing her writing program to an interest in her reading instruction. "I don't think I'm doing a good job," she confessed when we first met. "I really see that my reading program has a long way to go. My reading instruction has pretty much been nonexistent before this year. You know, I tried a bit last year using some professional resources, but I don't think I have the background that I need to teach the strategies."

Two important influences on her interest in comprehension strategy instruction were *Mosaic of Thought* (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997) and *Strategies That Work* (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000), books assigned to the Pinewood Elementary teachers participating in a series of monthly on-site reading instruction workshops. Anne consulted these books regularly as she planned instruction. She had frequent opportunities to discuss the ideas in these books during our monthly staff development sessions at her school and in our weekly conversations in her classroom and through e-mail dialogue.

During the 2001-2002 school year, I regularly visited Anne's classroom to observe her strategy teaching lessons and to debrief with her about the way she was thinking about comprehension instruction. We also discussed the decision-making processes that contributed to her instructional planning, and her reflections about the way a lesson progressed.

Based on these observations and conversations, as well as classroom artifacts such as student reading assignments, and numerous course writings that Anne completed in her graduate-level seminars in reading, I developed a list of characteristics that defines her approach to comprehension instruction. By identifying these attributes, I hope to initiate a conversation about what it takes, in theory and in practice, to teach reading comprehension strategies well.

How she thought and how she taught

1. *Anne believes that learning is socially constructed.* This philosophy is the axis around which her whole approach to comprehension instruction revolves. Vygotsky (1978) is credited with relating social constructivism to education and his definition of the term is two-fold. First, higher mental functions have their origins in social interaction, and second, language mediates experience (Mariage, 1995). For Anne, these two layers result in distinct classroom practices. She designs her reading instruction to include talk as frequently as possible. These social interactions may take the form of literature circles, drama experiences, reader's theater, one-on-one conferences, or whole class discussions.

Perhaps more importantly, though, is Anne's commitment to acting as a reading mentor for her students. Vygotsky (1978) contributed an important term to the educational lexicon when he introduced *the zone of proximal development*, which he defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). According to Vygotsky's theory, if students apprentice themselves to an adult or more capable peer in performing a new task, eventually s/he will borrow and internalize the more expert person's process allowing independent execution of the task.



Comprehension strategy instruction is heavily dependent on a teacher's ability to create the kind of educational apprenticeship Vygotsky described. Anne is skilled at building such a relationship. During her anchor strategy lessons, when she is introducing a new strategy, Anne uses direct instructional techniques to "make her thinking visible" (Collins, Brown & Holum, 1991) while demonstrating the strategy use of experienced readers. In turn, she expects students will eventually collaborate in similar ways as they begin to master a strategy.

Below is an excerpt from my field notes describing Anne's lesson about the way good readers connect to texts when they read. Her choice to use a children's book was deliberate. She wanted a text that was guaranteed to spark connections for her readers.

December, 2001

The lesson begins with Anne explaining that schema means connecting. She writes the word *schema* on the board and tells the class, "We're going to learn about this word. It's a word I don't think any of your teachers have ever talked about before." She then holds up a book by Mem Fox (1989) titled *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge* explaining to the class that she has chosen it because it's an all-time favorite of hers. She covers the title of the book, but keeps the cover illustration visible while the class guesses what the book is about. After some discussion, they decide it has something to do with old people and they share what they already know about the elderly.

Student: I have a prediction. I think it's about a boy who helps his Grandma with the babysitting because she can't get around as well as she used to.

Anne: What you just did was open your mind up and you found out that you have some schema. You have some information already about old people. What I'm going to do is read this book, and then I'm going to re-read it, and I'm going to show you what a good reader does. I'm going to open up my head and I'm going to try to show you how I make connections.

Through her own modeling of the reading process, Anne apprentices her students to a proficient reader's behavior. When she designs discussion activities that require students to make visible the way they make sense of a text, she is helping them transfer guided practice to their independent use of reading strategies. Anne's belief in socially-constructed learning is the linchpin that holds her reading strategy instruction together.

2. Anne believes that, as a reading teacher, being a reflective reader is an important prerequisite to understanding and implementing strategy instruction. Anne is deliberate about identifying her own reading strategies in use, although coming to this conscious awareness took effort. When she first began learning about comprehension strategies, she explained,

I think I learned from [the strategies], and if as an adult I can learn from the lessons that I'm giving my readers, I think anybody can. There's value in it for everybody. Because a lot of it is--there were things that I did intuitively [while I read] without anybody ever telling me, "You should visualize something. You should make a connection." But having the strategies spelled out in black and white made me more aware of the fact that I was using them and I think I started reading better. As I read a textbook now for a class, I think I'm comprehending better. And if I'm not comprehending, then I slow down and say, "Okay. You just read a paragraph, what are some questions that you have about it? If you didn't understand it, what is it that you didn't understand?" So I can back myself up and do a better job at reading myself.

Anne's personal reading habits, and her recognition that the way readers think is the basis for effective comprehension instruction, supported her in becoming a confident, effective strategies teacher.

3. Anne believes that reading is taught, not assigned. To teach reading well, she thinks, teachers need to accept the "messiness" of making thinking visible, the unpredictable discussions, and the required time to



be thorough in planning sophisticated strategy lessons. Anne understands that a good reader is someone who decodes with fluency and who uses cognitive strategies to comprehend a variety of text genres. In practice, this belief means that Anne defines reading broadly and uses flexible teaching strategies to meet the needs of all her students. She understands that matching books to kids at an appropriate reading level is crucial to developing fluency and supporting metacognition.

An example of Anne's reading teaching, versus reading assigning, is seen in the way she designs predictable anchor lessons followed by small group and individual guidance. Anne begins a whole class lesson with a focusing question, defines the featured strategy, reads aloud from a handpicked book, thinks aloud, and engages student responses. Anne values these whole class lessons for introducing new strategies, but she also understands that students learn at different rates, so she implements a gradual release of responsibility model in her approach to reading instruction. This means she provides individual instruction, offers guided practice, and requires independent practice when she judges a student is ready to work on his/her own. Anne regularly observes students during independent reading time, and evaluates their written responses, to thoroughly assess comprehension progress. Her layered approach to assisting students' learning guarantees that a reader's decoding, fluency, and comprehension needs are met.

It is important to note that along with Anne's belief in the hard work of *teaching* reading is the associated belief that less is more. Anne recognizes the importance of spending long chunks of time with one strategy, varying the level of sophistication to avoid tedium, and showing the application of strategies across the curriculum. Anne often spends four weeks developing one strategy with her readers, and she is amazed at the depth and breadth of her students' reading awareness

4. *Anne believes that all teachers are reading teachers, at all grade levels, in all subject areas.* Anne's strategy teaching extends beyond the boundaries of fiction and language arts instruction. She teaches her students how to apply reading strategies to different genres and in their content area studies.

For example, one morning Anne was reviewing how proficient readers determine what is important in a nonfiction article, and then she planned to talk about synthesis. The class was reading an article from National Geographic for Kids called *Super Croc!* Anne began by asking her class if they knew what the word "inferring" meant. She explained that the day's lesson was not about inferring (it was about synthesis), but she "couldn't let the opportunity pass" to tell them about another proficient reader strategy. One student raised her hand and reminded everyone that they had learned about making inferences when they were studying prediction.

"Remember," she announced to her classmates. "We talked about the difference between inferring and predicting when we read *Bark, George*. An inference is an idea you have about why something happened, but you have to read between the lines to make the inference. With a prediction, you find out the answer for sure when you keep reading."

Anne complimented this student on her explanation, then went on to tell the class that inferring was especially important in nonfiction reading, too. Anne's "piggybacking" of strategies is another notable characteristic of her successful strategy teaching. On several occasions I recorded Anne talking with her class about the nested action of strategy use. In May, 2002, during a particularly rich lesson in which Anne reviewed all the strategies the class had studied, she explained that even though they had studied strategies separately, during "real" reading the strategies readers use are flexible and woven together; no one uses a single discrete strategy step by step as they read. Instead, strategies overlap to support each other throughout a reading episode.

I judged this explanation as evidence that Anne had internalized significant understandings about the research behind proficient reading behavior. She had a firm grasp of the subtleties, recognizing that strategy use is more than a series of clever lessons with engaging texts. It is a coordinated cognitive act.



The work Anne and her students were doing was unraveling the mental ball of activity a reader creates during reading and identifying each strand to study its purpose.

5. Anne believes that familiarity with children's and young adult literature is necessary to make wise book selections for teaching specific strategies. Anne regularly chooses to read children's literature to help her stay current in the field. She once told me,

Oh! I feel awful saying this, but I am guilty of not always choosing books for my pleasure. I tend to pick books that I think my [students] would like . . . The only thing that I choose for myself for personal pleasure aren't novels so much as instructional--I do a lot of art-type work. So, that's why with novels and fictional stories I stick to kids' [books].

While it is not my intention to recommend that teachers looking to fortify their reading strategy instruction forsake all their adult reading pursuits, it is important to recognize the commitment Anne has made to books for young people. She considers this genre as important to her instructional effectiveness as professional resources describing best practice.

Even more important than her knowledge of children's literature is the *way* Anne reads it. When she reads a young adult novel, for instance, she reads like a teacher of reading, making mental notes about the potential of a book for use in a future strategy lesson.

The picture of Anne that is emerging is one of a teacher who reads regularly in a variety of genres, is aware of the processes that support her comprehension, and is opportunistic, that is, she looks for ways to make her reading work for her instructionally.

6. Anne believes that successful teaching and learning is grounded in a personal relationship between the teacher and her students. Anne is interested in her students' lives and she uses her knowledge of them to guide personal and academic interactions. She also shares personal stories to help her students learn about her as a whole person, not just a teacher.

Lysaker (2000) has described a relational theory that aptly describes the affective characteristics of Anne's classroom. The five components of this theory, ritual, physical closeness, shared objects, shared meaning making, and celebration, according to Lysaker, contribute to an environment that supports learning, particularly the risk-taking involved in genuine academic pursuits. Anne's classroom is reflective of relational theory's important principles. From the way she designs predictable, but flexible reading lessons, to the activities her students participate in to support and build meaning, to the festivities that mark important milestones, such as a reading buddy tea party where Anne's older readers shared their strategic lessons with younger peers, Anne's approach embraces the idea that reading teachers "need to focus on what children do within relationships as they work with text" (Lysaker, p. 481).

7. Anne believes that everyone in a classroom, including the teacher, is a learner. I remember the day Anne demonstrated this belief. She had just finished sharing a strategy lesson about visualization with her students. As she read aloud from a text on the seashore, she shared with her students what she was seeing in her mind as she read. At one point, she told them that she had never seen a barnacle so she was having trouble imagining what the creature looked like. She explained that she planned to look on-line after school to find a good picture of a barnacle to help her visualize it.

After class, I asked her if she ever felt uncomfortable admitting to her students that she did not know something. After all, I said, aren't teachers supposed to know it all? Anne's answer was provocative.

I tell them I'm not Einstein, and even Einstein probably had trouble reading at some point in his life, that it's a very human thing and you hopefully continue reading all of your life, right down to the day before you cross that line. That I want to learn, that I like to learn new things, and if I'm having trouble reading it may be because it's something that's unfamiliar to me. It might be something that I don't like.



I might not be focused. I might not be using my skills, and that's a big one. So I can say to the kids, "Okay. So I'm going to sit down and read this a little bit more, re-read," (which is a great thing for the kids to see me do), "and ask myself some questions and see if I can answer them." So it's fine. I think the kids know that I make lots of mistakes. I don't know everything.

Anne's explanation of how she rationalizes being vulnerable with her students is revealing. It suggests an important condition in the strategy teaching approach that is not often considered in research reporting its effectiveness, that is, the kind of intellectual relationships a teacher encourages in the classroom. If strategy teaching is a social-constructivist enterprise, grounded in the apprenticeship model, then the ability of learners in this partnership to tolerate ambiguity is key. Anne was candid when she made her reading behavior visible to her students. Had she been unwilling to appear vulnerable in front of the class, much of the power of the method would have been lost. In fact, I doubt she would have been successful at all.

8. *Finally, Anne believes that the accurate assessment of reading progress happens with a variety of evaluation tools.* She uses student talk, their body language, their written responses, and their reading project designs, as well as standardized measures to evaluate both attitudes and achievement in reading. In one interview, Anne described her ideal assessment.

I think there should be a way for the child to respond to all the comprehension skills. If he's read a piece, he should be able to draw a picture of what he saw as he read. He should be able to make some connection to what he read. He should be able to infer, there should be open-ended questions that ask him how he feels . . . And I'd also want [my readers] to tell me their feelings toward reading. What kind of books they've read, what kind of books they'd like to read, what they like to write. I think that's a piece of it. Maybe who their favorite authors are. I'd also like to know what kind of reading goes on at home. Do their parents read? What kinds of books and materials are around the house? Opinions about reading are important. How they use reading. I want to know if they understand that you have to read to live. You know, can you read a prescription bottle? Can you read the directions on the back of a recipe or can you read how to fix a box of macaroni and cheese? That's all reading and I want to know if they understand that that's all reading.

Anne's description of a comprehensive assessment of student reading achievement suggests that evaluation should be formative (on-going), not summative (occurring once, usually at the end of "learning"), and as individualized as possible. This orientation is further evidence of Anne's belief that reading must be taught and not assigned.

Conclusion

Anne Barker is a successful reading strategies teacher. How did I make this determination? Through interviews and observations I documented the way Anne studied the literature on reading strategies, the way she made instructional decisions, the way she developed a facility for delivering sophisticated reading lessons, and the way she reflected on her practice and continually refined her approach. I also documented her students' enthusiasm for learning about reading strategies, their rapid adoption of strategic language, and their willingness to talk and write about their reading processes with Anne and among their peers. While I did not measure students' reading achievement data, I believe the qualitative data I gathered are compelling. Anne's story, like any case study, is not generalizable in the positivist sense. It does, however, suggest possibilities. Cziko (1992), in an article describing the evaluation of successful bilingual education programs, offers an argument that I adopt when considering the lessons Anne's teaching offers. He writes, "Research can never tell conclusively what will work in all



situations . . . but it can provide illustrative cases--examples of what works” (cited in Wollman-Bonilla, 2002, p.321). Anne’s experience provides a beginning to the consideration of how a successful reading strategies teacher makes instructional decisions and employs them with her students.

In the literature on reading comprehension instruction there are sure to be many more articles describing theories and practices developed to support students’ reading achievement. What I hope researchers and educators will also consider are the demands placed on teachers who choose to adopt comprehension strategy instruction. As Anne Barker’s case suggests, just knowing the *what*, *when* and *how* of strategy teaching is not enough. Teachers need to know *why*, too, and they need to compare this theory to their own beliefs about effective reading instruction. Teaching reading strategies requires familiarity with social-constructivist principles, as well as knowledge of assessment, children’s literature, and personal reading habits. Closer examination of the threads that contribute to solid reading instruction shows how complex the discipline is. We should not underestimate the importance of long-term, inquiry-based professional development as an avenue for exploring teacher learning, and for supporting teachers in their attempts at instructional innovation.

At the end of our research partnership, Anne sent me an e-mail that documents her own satisfaction with (but not the conclusion of) her instructional progress. She wrote, “You said I put a lot of pressure on myself [to teach reading well]. I think I do. . . I really don’t have a life outside this building! I don’t know that I’m a professional, yet, but I feel as if I’m getting better. You know, I’m getting better.”

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Action Research in Literacy: Teacher Inquiry Projects That Answer Questions About Practice

Mary Ellen Levin

ABSTRACT

This article presents ways that the author has been involved in action research, beginning with student teachers for whom action research was a focus during the student teaching semester. With brief descriptions of action research as a part of a professional practice school partnership, the article concludes by presenting action research experiences of graduate students in a literacy certification program.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Mary Ellen Levin, Ed. D. is a former reading teacher and middle school principal. She holds a doctorate from Teachers College Columbia University in Educational Leadership. She has been working in teacher education since her retirement from the public schools in 1999, and is currently the Chair of the Literacy Department at Manhattanville College in Purchase, NY. Her particular research interests are in teacher action research and its role in the Professional Development School. She has presented at several national conferences on related topics, and presented with a Manhattanville colleague at the IRA in Chicago this spring.

Action research, also known as teacher research or teacher inquiry, is an uncomplicated but powerful initiative that teachers can take in their own classrooms to enhance their effectiveness and improve student learning. Readers are likely to want to know “What is action research?” and “How does it work in classrooms?” My aim is to answer these questions with a brief literature review, followed by an account of a variety of investigations initiated and carried out by teachers, including a group of New York State literacy teachers working in elementary and middle schools. Readers will probably recognize, and perhaps be currently experiencing, many of the issues that these teachers chose for their research.

Teacher action research is based in schools. The researcher is an “insider”, with a participant role in the research. It is “intentional and systematic” (Bauman & Duffy-Hester, 2000; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992). Teachers who engage in it pursue action and research (or change and understanding) at the same time (Dick, 1999). The process generally involves the teacher’s identification of a classroom issue and the development of a research question. Ideally, the issue or problem is one “owned” by the teacher, and change is within the teacher’s authority, should the research indicate that change is warranted.

How broad a review of related professional literature the investigator carries out depends upon various teacher-determined factors, including time constraints, interest, and availability of materials. There are studies large and small in books and journals on most literacy topics, and the teacher-researcher often does some reading of the professional literature connected with the problem identified, but often not the extensive literature review required for a university-based study. Since action research is formative, it



is often not appropriate to pre-formulate the issue based on the literature (Stringer, 2004). It is “an emergent process that takes shape as understanding increases” (Dick, 1999, ¶ 2).

Some would argue that all teachers are continually engaged in creation, investigation, and development of their own practice. How does a teacher’s everyday practice that involves working to help individuals and groups and trying out new methods and materials, for example, differ from action research? To answer that question, Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1992) describe intellectual communities of teacher researchers as networks of individuals who enter with other teachers into a common search for understanding in their professional lives. They differentiate teachers who build curriculum through data analysis, for example, from those who sit down together to write curriculum in the traditional way, sharing ideas and experience but no data. Their meta-analysis of action research identified four categories of teacher research, including teachers’ journals, essays that contain issue-oriented analysis, accounts of teachers’ oral arguments and discussions, and “small and larger scale classroom studies based on documentation and analysis, using procedures similar to those of university-based research” (p. 451). Lytle and Cochran Smith categorize literacy questions that were pursued, including “What works?” (in writing conferences and literature study groups) and “What worked?” (in a 12th grade writing workshop and in “untracking” of Advanced Placement English at one high school).

Why should educational research be carried out classroom by classroom, school by school? It appears that educational research doesn’t travel well. Teachers find that research done at another time and in another place, often by university-based researchers, does not meet their needs, nor have they the time, skills, or inclination to read it. Phil Jackson expressed a sea change in the outlook of educational researchers in an AERA address in 1990 (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992), “The dream of finding out once and for all how teaching works or how schools ought to be administered no longer animates nearly as many of us as it once did. In its place we have substituted the much more modest goal of trying to figure out what’s happening here and now or what went on there and then” (p. 465).

Sagor (1992) describes five steps in one model for implementing an action research project: Problem Formulation, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Reporting of Results, and Action Planning. The fourth and fifth steps are particularly relevant to teacher inquiry, as contrasted with educational research in general. Action researchers are in a position to let school leaders, parents, and colleagues know what has been learned, and can plan and carry out improvements or next steps.

A simple research project is designed by the teacher who develops hypotheses about the issue at hand and identifies several ways to test each hypothesis. Topics are as diverse as school life itself, including, for example, instructional methods and materials, uses of technology, social issues, attendance, and relationship with parents. Data are collected during classroom intervention or observation. Data collection may go on for a period as brief as one month or as long as an entire school year. Teachers use test scores, report card grades, student work samples, observation, interviews (with parents, teaching colleagues, and students), surveys, and questionnaires. Hubbard and Power (2003) describe additional sources of data, including teaching journals and notes, classroom artifacts, audiotape and videotape transcription, and photography. Their book features generic forms for use in data collection, interviewing, and self-questioning.

Once data are collected, analysis and reflection are crucial to the action research process, and it is beneficial to have others, at school or outside of it, with whom to discuss findings. Colleagues and parents are often eager to see and hear findings and to help plan for the “action” aspect of the research.

Bauman and Duffy-Hester (2000) examined thirty-four teacher-research studies, to explore the “nature of methodologies teacher researchers have employed in published classroom-based inquiries in literacy” (p. 81). Topics included aspects of the reading and writing process that concern many teachers:



motivation to read, topics to use for writing, and reading and writing groups' functioning. Several were carried out in university methods courses. They explored the general attributes, process, methods and reporting of classroom inquiry, the process of teacher inquiry, teacher research methods, and teachers' ways of writing and reporting classroom inquiry. Significant findings were that teacher research is theoretically productive (over 90% of the studies), that it leads to collaboration with fellow teachers or parents (over 90% of the studies), and that questions evolve and are modified as teachers implement a classroom study (60% of the studies). The latter finding points up the formative aspect of teacher inquiry, with questions and methods changing as issues arise and intermediate findings are produced.

Action research can serve as a staff development tool, since groups of teachers that range in size from pairs to an entire faculty can try new methods and materials and plan to examine the results. It can serve as the focus of a university graduate course, or a district in-service course: teachers study the action research process together, then plan, implement, and report on their classroom research. Action research allows teachers to investigate what interests them, and to shape short-term projects to get answers and make changes.

Action research investigations

After decades of work as a public school teacher and administrator, I have recently spent several years leading university courses and seminars on action research, supervising the implementation of projects, and working in the field doing action research with classroom teachers. My early experiences were with student teachers, who were required to make action research projects a focus of their student teaching semester. In some cases the cooperating/supervising teacher became involved with the student teacher in carrying out the research; in other cases the teacher was just an observer, but obviously an interested observer. These projects addressed many questions at all school levels. It was interesting to note in seminar how eager student teachers were to learn about each other's results, since the group had been discussing each group member's topic from its inception.

They reported great interest in their research at the schools as well. For example, one student teacher reported on the impact on class achievement that included students with learning disabilities. Another, investigated techniques that a substitute might use to gain student cooperation. A third observed twelve English teachers and categorized their methods of discussing literature. Yet another studied the impact of an organizational initiative that paired heritage speakers of Spanish with monolingual English speakers in eighth grade Spanish class.

My next action research experiences were with the faculty of a middle school with whom I worked to develop a professional practice school on behalf of a university in the northeast where I was employed. At this middle school it was convenient – and effective – for faculty members to work together in teams of two or more to implement research projects. “Teacher inquiry groups that conduct action research can help identify student learning issues and help share best practices” (Teitel, 2003, p. 148).

It was interesting for me, as a former middle school teacher and principal, to note the variety of familiar issues administrators and teachers faced, and the research questions they identified. The principal investigated the types of report cards used by other fifth and sixth grade programs, hoping to find one more suitable to the educational philosophy of the school and herself than the one currently in use. Several counselors investigated the efficacy of a guidance program that involved service learning; through the program, students became involved with seniors in their community. Teams of teachers got involved in trying out spelling programs and writing programs. Another team decided to get floundering students



organized—their desks, backpacks, time, and follow-through with assignments with peer models and mentors.

Literacy teachers in the action research process

More recently I taught eighteen graduate students (all teachers) in a literacy certification program at a New York State private college. My first all-literacy action researchers, they faced the particular problems faced by contemporary elementary and middle school literacy teachers in an era of increased testing and a mandate to “leave no child behind”. I wondered what topics would be of most concern to these young teachers. How would they choose to carry out their investigations? I decided to organize their work into whatever categories emerged, hoping that other teachers, reading about the range of topics and methods would be inspired to become action researchers, too.

Problem finding

Following the recommendation of Sagor (1992), the teachers brainstormed about issues in their own practice, and each engaged in a problem-finding dialogue with another teacher, who asked questions and encouraged elaboration, but made no comments or recommendations. Many examined and discarded as potential research topics, concerns over students’ home lives over which they could have little or no influence. The questions took shape, as did ideas for investigating them. Particularly useful was a collection of case studies (Cross & Steadman, 1996) that described university instructors’ action research in their own undergraduate classes, where they faced issues of student motivation, preparation, and student self-esteem that would sound familiar to any elementary or secondary teacher. The instructor in each case study generated several hypotheses about each issue faced, and collected data about each in several different ways. It was helpful for my students to read about each instructor’s problem analysis, formation of a hypothesis, and methods of investigation.

The teachers’ issues took shape, and over the course of several weeks they refined problem statements and research questions. Some decided to observe a phenomenon passively; others investigated through surveys and interviews. Some actively intervened, and changed one or more factors in students’ educational lives. Each teacher-researcher decided upon several ways of collecting data for each research question. This sometimes meant inviting another teacher to become involved. The researcher’s observations were then confirmed or contradicted by another set of eyes on classroom instruction, assessment, or students’ journals.

Trends and topics investigated

The teacher researchers’ questions addressed instructional technology, motivation, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, visualizing, and the writing process. A focus that they seemed to arrive at naturally when thinking of troubling classroom issues is the challenge faced by students with special needs or English language learners. In trying to help every child meet state learning standards, and also to read for information and enjoyment, teachers tend to worry about their most challenged learners. This was certainly true with these teacher-researchers, since a majority of the studies concerned students with disabilities or students with special language needs and issues. I have chosen to describe



individual research efforts that represent some of the recurring themes or categories. They represent a variety of research methods and school levels. Perhaps the reader will recognize familiar issues here.

The more experienced teachers, having taught three to ten years, identified issues of attitude, motivation and interest, while those less experienced, having taught fewer than three years, were more concerned with technique. (This observation was confirmed for me in a multi-school survey of literacy teacher concerns taken by our college literacy advisory group in Spring 2005. There, too, the most experienced teachers identified student motivation as their greatest challenge.)

It is interesting to note that as the literacy field's methods and classroom organization change, issues about our practice change with them. One example is a concern that we now experience about children's motivation to read books that they select, their ability to choose the right book, and their commitment to stay with a book until it is finished. These concerns are possible products of the often pervasiveness of independent reading time in classrooms, of the expanding supply of trade books found in most classrooms, and of the freedom of children to choose their own books. The professional stance now is that when independent reading doesn't work action is needed. Several of these teachers had concerns about the failure of boys to find satisfaction in reading. Although only two teachers focused specifically on boys and motivation, others who worked on providing more variety in reading for their students mentioned boys as a particular target of their efforts.

A general education teacher was concerned that the boys in her third grade class did not read books of their own accord, although the girls in the class spent happy hours with "series" books and other chapter books. Observation and a review of her classroom records confirmed that the problem existed. Her literature review was discouraging: boys lag behind girls in reading for "fun" in every English-speaking country. She did note that families have a strong impact and that boys who see their fathers read are more likely to choose to read. The teacher decided to provide role models for the boys. She invited men, teachers and other school employees, to visit the class and to discuss their own reading habits and preferences. Some of the men were frank about their late discovery of reading for pleasure, sometimes not until adulthood. One visitor talked about how much he likes cookbooks, and likes to try out recipes. The teacher soon found the boys avidly reading the cookbooks that she had in the room. Hearing the sorts of reading preferred by the men, the teacher realized she would need to expand the reading selection in her classroom, to include more non-fiction.

In another study, struggling elementary students were aided by one-to-one scaffolding by the teacher in advance of lessons. In another, an at-risk ninth grader appeared to benefit from similar efforts by a high school English teacher. Thus, similar problems were evident and similar solutions effective in both situations, in elementary school and in high school.

Several teachers used peer buddies or mentors to help students to focus and learn. Two used audiotapes and listening activities to accompany silent reading. Others tried repeated readings in an effort to improve fluency, a current, provocative literacy issue.

Several of the teacher-researchers had no way to create two groups randomly, but wanted to compare two methods. They alternated two or more treatments with the same children, or alternated one or two-week periods of time, providing the treatment and withholding it. Some teachers used tests provided by the textbook publisher to gauge the effects of these treatments. All of the teacher-researchers learned about the potential of this kind of research from hearing their results.

There is renewed use of commercial products in schools and school systems in response to No Child Left Behind. Teachers are left wondering whether they really work and whether they work for all children. Teacher researchers in my classes investigated the effects of several of them. Two teachers, one at the eighth grade level and another at the second grade level, tested commercial programs that used



visualizing as a major component. An eighth grade general education teacher wanted to test methods for promoting student retention of vocabulary. He was prompted by disheartening vocabulary retention statistics in his classroom and a negative attitude in his students toward vocabulary study. His literature review confirmed his impression that vocabulary increase is related positively to both comprehension and fluency.

He decided to try an alternative, a multi-sensory approach called Vocabulary Anchors (Winters, 2001), to what he called the “memorize and forget” technique by which vocabulary is frequently learned and soon forgotten. The teacher at first provided his 72 students pictures to connect with each of their vocabulary words; later, the students found their own pictures. Before each weekly vocabulary quiz, the teacher asked students to predict how well they would remember the week’s words. Although their confidence was not great, their grades soared relative to their grades before the technique was used.

The second grade special education teacher had been trained in a program called Visualizing and Verbalizing (Bell, 1991) and decided to try it with four of her students to see whether this technique would increase their comprehension, which was poor. Looking at a picture the teacher could not see, students described it using a series of function words such as what, size, color, and shape (Bell, 1991). They later developed pictures of their own with details about the “what” word. They gained vocabulary knowledge and new concepts and their comprehension on tests and in everyday classroom situations improved. This teacher discussed her results with her instructional team members, who all had students as challenged as the four in the study. Since all of the teachers had not had the training for Visualizing and Verbalizing, they decided to fit some semantic webbing into their everyday classroom program to build concepts.

Some teachers question the effect of classroom technology on learning and motivation, and also about its possible detrimental effects upon children whose free time is largely devoted to technology. A sixth grade special education teacher, teaching literacy in a departmentalized program, acquired a SMART board for his classroom in September that he used enthusiastically for months. He found by the second semester that his students were no longer motivated to participate in any classroom reading activity that did not involve the SMART board. He hypothesized that there had to be equally appealing activities for his students that did not involve technology and decided to investigate. His literature review produced many articles that touted the positive effects of computer technology and internet exploration, and he discovered a new term: The Miss Rumphius Effect (Leu & Karchmer, 1999), whereby students can become world travelers through the internet like Miss Rumphius in the children’s book by Barbara Cooney (1986). He did not find any research that would help him to wean students from the technology, however. The teacher decided to use lessons at the overhead projector as a second method, and student work with photocopied readings and different colored markers as a third alternative. This third method tested his theory that students do better when they can write in the margins or highlight the text. He developed a questionnaire for his students about their reaction to each of the three experiences, to be administered at the end of each week. He then taught in series, one week at a time, lessons involving SMART board activities, lessons involving the use of the overhead projector, and lessons involving photocopied reading material that students were allowed to “mark up” with highlighter and write comments and questions about in the margins.

To his surprise, he found that students liked the highlighter sessions as much as the SMART board sessions, because they enjoyed using the multicolored markers and writing on the text with pen, and because they could take their work to where they were comfortable, unlike sessions where the overhead projector or SMART board had been used. No students preferred lessons at the overhead projector, complaining that it was too hard to see and too hard for them to write on.



An eighth grade science special education teacher wanted to improve her students' comprehension of science text. Their out-loud reading was halting, and their comprehension was poor. I encouraged her to adopt listening to text while reading silently as one of the treatments she would try, on the assumption that some of her learning-disabled students needed the combination of visual and auditory input. She developed an experiment with three different treatments: student reads alone, reads with teacher support and discussion, and reads while listening to the text on tape. She used each for two weeks. She administered the weekly comprehension tests that the textbook publisher provided, but did not provide an out-loud reading of the test. She found that the listening/reading combination was the most effective.

Another teacher investigated the effect of repeated readings on the fluency of second graders' "cold", out-loud reading. She tried a four-step repeated reading intervention. First she modeled out-loud reading of passages for students. Next she and the students read the passages in chorus. Then the teacher and students re-read the text in chorus. Finally each student had the opportunity to read the text out loud alone. Although students' "cold" reading of new text was not much improved during the six weeks of the intervention, the researcher did note an increase in confidence and an improvement in attention to punctuation following the repeated readings. She planned to continue the repeated readings for the remainder of the school year, to see whether a longer period of time yielded additional gains.

Conclusion

Teachers thought the action research projects changed their practice permanently. They also reported that the activity changed their outlook on classroom issues, and predicted that they would be more likely to grapple with troubling issues, discuss them with colleagues, and think of ways to investigate them. Whether teachers decided to supplement commercial programs, add a variety of reading materials to their classrooms, try new methods, or help a struggling individual student, they were satisfied with their work.

I hope that teachers who read this will undertake their own action research, and hope to read accounts of some of those efforts in these pages in the future or to hear their work presented at the New York State Reading Association's annual conference. To talk online about action research, readers are invited to email me: levinm@mville.edu.

Author notes

I know of no books or articles devoted to methodology in literacy action research specifically, but *The Handbook of Reading Research* (Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, & Barr, 2000) contains a chapter, "Making Sense of Classroom Worlds: Methodology in Teacher Research" (Bauman & Duffy-Hester, 2000) that features a 34-item list of journal articles that report teacher literacy research of all types carried out at all grade levels (p. 80-81). Examples of titles from this list will allow the reader to see that they are accounts of individual classroom studies carried out by practicing teachers:

"Antonio: My student, my teacher. My inquiry begins" (Murphy, 1994).

"Try Reading Workshop in your classroom." (Swift, 1993).

"Appearing acts: Creating readers in a high school English class" (Cone, 1994).

Another chapter from the Handbook, useful for helping the teacher considering single subject research, is "A case for single subject experiments in literacy research" (Neuman & McCormick, 2000).



For a 31-page resource file of recent books on action research and related topics, go to:
<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/biblio.html>. This annotated bibliography supports an on line public program, Action Research and Evaluation Online (AEROL).

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Improving Sentences via Sentence Combining Instruction

Bruce Saddler

ABSTRACT

In this article a method to improve sentence writing ability called sentence combining is explained. The potential effects of sentence combining are related and relevant research summarized. In addition, how to introduce sentence combining practice to a class, key instructional components including oral practice and peer assistance, sources of material and creation of exercises, and grading criteria are discussed.

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When I first began teaching writing in middle school my temptation was to believe that any sentence level writing instruction was a waste of time. “Surely by eighth grade” I thought, “my students must have mastered the ability to create interesting sentences.” However I vividly recall my surprise when I began to examine one of their initial writing assignments of the year – which was a reflective retelling of a recently read short story.

Not only were many of the students writing sentences that were short, simply constructed, and lacking in descriptive words, many used a very repetitive subject-verb-object pattern that gave the impression of immature writing and made their reflections choppy and difficult to read. Others produced massive run-on sentences connected by a long series of “ands” while a few more sprinkled their compositions with a frustrating number of fragments.

I faced a tough decision at that point: how to successfully and efficiently help my students create better sentences. My decision as to how to help my students was compounded by my district’s lack of an adopted writing curriculum and my own thin veneer of ability and knowledge of how to teach writing.

Although I knew how to help writers generate content and correct spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, I honestly lacked the ability to help them improve their sentences. Fortunately I came across a book in our professional library by William Strong titled *Creative Approaches to Sentence Combining* (1986). Strong presented such a compelling case for this method that I was convinced to give it a try.

Why sentence combining?

In Strong’s book I read that sentence combining provides controlled practice in re-writing simple or “kernel” sentences into more complex and varied forms. For example, if a student overuses simple



kernel sentences such as “My dog is short. My dog is brown,” in their writing they can learn through sentence combining practice to change these sentences into more syntactically complex and mature sentences, such as “my dog is short and brown” or “the short brown dog is mine,” depending on what part of the sentence they want to emphasize. Likewise if a student produces sentences that are overly complex or ambiguous, they could reduce (or “decombine”) the sentences back into their basic kernels and then recombine them into a more cohesive and understandable whole.

Sentence combining exercises were also suggested as a way to prompt students to use syntactic options in their writing through practice in consciously controlling and manipulating syntax. Instead of longer sentences, the reported value of sentence combining was in making sentences and whole discourse better through employing a variety of syntactic forms with the end goal being clarity of thought instead of complexity.

Recent research added support for Strong’s ideas.

Saddler and Graham (2005) assessed the effects of a sentence combining procedure involving peer-assisted practice with more and less skilled young writers. Forty-two students in the fourth grade received either sentence combining instruction or grammar instruction. Students were paired for instruction and received 30 lessons, 25-minutes in duration, three times a week for ten weeks outside of their regular classrooms. The results indicated that in comparison to peers receiving grammar instruction, students in the experimental treatment condition became more adept at combining simpler sentences together to create more complex sentences. In addition, for the experimental students, the sentence combining skills they learned transferred to a story writing task, resulting in improvements in writing quality as well as revising ability.

Starting off

I launched into sentence combining practice the following week with the first of my three classes. I introduced sentence combining exercises by explaining that this activity will help them write more interesting sentences that sound better to readers. I suggested that skilled writers often re-work their sentences to help convey their message more effectively and explained that even in my own writing I would often change my sentences around to decide if I could say my ideas in a better way. I showed that when I combined the sentences, I moved words or parts around, deleted or changed words or parts, or added words or parts to the sentences to make them sound better and convey my ideas more clearly.

I then began with a whole class discussion by showing them a simple pair of kernels and modeling how to combine them. I suggested that for these exercises there would usually be more than one combination possible and to not worry about making mistakes because mistakes are really opportunities for learning. Then I explained my reasoning in combining the sentences in the way I chose and why I thought the new combination sounded better.

I then performed several additional combinations while increasing the amount of discussion and quality judgments the students provided and decreasing my own input. My goal was to prompt the students to rely on their own linguistic knowledge they developed from years of hearing and reading our language to decide on the correctness and sound of a combination; which is exactly what I wanted them to do during the composition and revision of their own work.

The ensuing discussion led to some remarkable opinions as to why a certain combination was more effective in relating the author’s message or why adding a word here or there improved the clarity of the message. Even students who seldom spoke before added their ideas to the mix. I was experiencing



what I had hoped, a genuine class discussion of how to be a more effective writer that emanated from the students themselves. I repeated this process with my second and third classes with similar results. I was pleasantly surprised with how rapidly the students were able to comprehend both the mechanism of performing combinations and the rationale for why and how these activities would help them as writers.

Instructional framework

After this introductory session I began all of the subsequent practice sessions with oral practice. I had two reasons for this. First, Strong (1986) suggested that when combining sentences the ear must hear alternatives to be able to choose the sentence that sounds best. I realized that in my own writing I often reread a passage of text out loud to “hear” the sound, so oral practice seemed very natural to me. Secondly, many of my students had very poor handwriting that hindered their ability to write quickly. Practicing orally circumvented this difficulty, saved precious class time, and allowed for additional practice opportunities.

I found that oral practice could be simply and efficiently included through presentation of kernel sentence clusters on an overhead and asking student pairs to discuss the kernels and provide examples of combinations orally only. Suggestions provided by several student pairs were written down by me, read aloud, and then discussed for which more effectively conveyed the authors’ ideas.

Although writing is sometimes viewed as a solitary activity, I believed that much of the potential power of sentence combining exercises resided in playing with language within a group environment of open exploration. I felt that when many students approached an identical writing task, they became aware of the solutions available from other writers close to their level of maturity and experience. So during these oral exercises, I always encouraged group discussions, feedback, evaluation, reflection, and praise.

Following the oral practice, I would pair writers together for a brief partner practice session where they worked together to write out combinations for several additional kernel sentence clusters. The students wrote their responses on a transparency and then presented their versions on the overhead. I would ask for several possible solutions for each problem and thoroughly discuss each.

Sources of material

Although my district did not possess a curriculum for sentence combining, finding sources for the content of the exercises was actually easier than I had envisioned. Initially, I created exercises from the novel we were reading by simply reducing a passage into kernel sentences. Then the kernels were re-written by students working in pairs. The new versions were then read to the class by each pair followed by discussion of the rhetorical effect each version created.

I also found that classroom activities or school happenings could be sources of inspiration, along with the lives and interests of the students themselves. I discovered that newspapers and magazines also furnished suitable content for sentence combining exercises. Many of these sources offered a bonus by providing my students with information on a new concept or reinforcing a lesson from another content area class while practicing writing in mine.

Types of exercises

When developing the exercises I started with two types of clues to facilitate combinations. The first clue was an underlined word, for example:



The wizard possessed many powers.
The wizard was crafty.

This problem resulted in the combination:

The crafty wizard possessed many powers.

The second type of clue I used was a “connecting” word enclosed in parenthesis at the end of the sentence to be combined. For example:

Sam fell over the cannon’s muzzle.

He lost his balance. (because)

These exercises helped my students consider one particular method of combining by prompting them to think about language in a very precise way.

After the students were comfortable with these exercises, I eliminated the clues. Without the clues, the students had to decide what important material in the second sentence to include within the first when the two are combined.

Once I saw that my students were comfortable with combining two sentences, I began to ask them to combine longer sequences of sentences without clues. For example:

The wind rattled the grass.

The grass was dry.

It was on top of the wall.

It made a low, soft, mournful noise.

This group of sentences elicited many interesting combinations and provided a meaningful conversation concerning which of the versions sounded better. For example:

The dry grass on top of the wall made a low, soft, mournful noise as it was rattled by the wind.

or...

Rattled by the wind, the dry grass on top of the wall made a low, soft, mournful noise.

A natural source

Initially, to help sequence the skills I relied on suggestions by Cooper (1973), however I soon turned to my students writing for exercise content by asking them to work and rework their own prose from an under-construction writing piece. I would put a paragraph from one of my students’ writings on the overhead and then as a class discuss ways it could be improved. I teamed my students into pairs and would provide a paper copy of the paragraph to each pair. Then I challenged them to talk together to discover how the paragraph could be changed. After they had written their ideas we would read various versions out loud and discuss how each was different than the original text.

This format allowed practice controlling and manipulating the syntactic options available to them within their actual writing. I believed that using my students’ own work was the most naturalistic way to engage them at their level of need and also provided direct resolution of problems associated with a current piece of writing. In addition, since in any written piece sentences build on one another to create a unified whole, my students could explore the effect a change in rhythm of one sentence may have had on others. Also, since the answer to what makes a good sentence is mostly dependent upon the purpose of that sentence within the context of a composition, allowing them practice selecting options within their own writing just made sense.



What is right or wrong?

During all of the practice sessions the issue that was always the most problematic was gauging “correctness”. My students wanted to establish some objective criteria to help them test the “correctness.” They were more used to being told something was right or wrong rather than being told, “that’s right, but there might be a more effective to say it.”

Although our language does indeed have rules that govern syntax, I believed that belaboring complex grammatical terminology to judge correctness would have been counterproductive. I advocated “effectiveness” as a much better indicator of merit than “correctness”. I felt that gauging effectiveness encouraged risk taking by welcoming “mistakes” as opportunities for discussion and problem solving. Within this context, “mistakes” became sentences that could be formed in better ways than the writer originally attempted. This was especially beneficial for my less-skilled writers who were often unwilling to take risks within their writing. In addition, emphasizing effectiveness helped my students understand that often in writing, there is indeed not one right answer; rather there may be multiple solutions that require introspection to decide the best option.

I found it helpful to aid my students in gauging the effectiveness of responses, through the application of three standards recommended by Nemans (1995): clarity and directness of meaning, rhythmic appeal, and intended audience. Initially, I modeled and discussed the standards then directed student pairs to use the standards to rate each other’s writings.

But are they improving?

Although I felt that my students were improving, I recall one of my colleagues asking me, “What you are doing sounds great, but are they improving?” “Of course,” I replied, but then was left reaching for my evidence to prove my claim. So I began to look for evidence that sentence combining was making a difference and further, exactly what difference it was making. In what ways were my students’ writing changing? Was the time I was taking away from “real” writing activities justified?

Two areas that I noticed immediate quantitative improvements were in the reduction of punctuation errors and the number of revisions. As I had often taught, punctuation helps organize sentence elements. What I did not anticipate was that through the combining-decombining-recombining process my students would have hands on practice using punctuation elements. As they increased the complexity of they’re sentences they learned, for example, that commas were needed to set elements off from one another and the rhythmic appeal commas could create within a sentence. They talked about when and where punctuation was needed and where it was not. Overall, their compositions became much cleaner in terms of less missing punctuation, more correct usage and decreasing number of fragments and run-on sentences.

In addition to the improvements in punctuation, I also noticed an increase in the number of revisions attempted from the first to the final drafts of writing pieces. Before I initiated sentence combining practice my students mainly saw the revision process as one of editing. They seemed to operate under a least effort strategy, meaning, they changed what was easiest to change. So they conducted “housekeeping” by fixing spelling, capitalization, formatting, and perhaps punctuation rather than engaging in what revising should have been, namely molding the sound of text to make a message clearer or providing an audience with what they need to know.

But after sentence combining practice the number of revisions climbed. My students were changing words, adding phrases and clauses, re-working entire sentences – all of the behaviors we had



been practicing. Clearly, in my mind, this meant that they were thinking about how to say things in a different way.

Aside from the quantitative improvements, I also noticed qualitative benefits. Their writing became more enjoyable for me to read. They had far fewer repetitive subject-verb-object sentences and run-ons. Their rhythm improved. The pieces simply sounded better. They now considered how their work sounded to others. They had begun to see that writers do not write for themselves, but for an audience.

Conclusions

These improvements did not occur overnight. Sentence combining was not a quick fix; it took time and effort. I had to dedicate instructional time, but I did not allow the practice to detract from my more authentic writing tasks. I mainly kept the sessions short - no more than 10 to 15 minutes, several times per week. And I kept the practice lively, believing that if the sessions become drudgery to teach, likely they would be even more so to learn.

For me the payoff of sentence combining instruction was finding an efficient method that could be easily interwoven into my regular instruction. For my students the payoff was an activity that helped their writing and was enjoyable at the same time. As one of my students told me, "Man I like this stuff. It don't have no rules, all we do is write!"

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Writing Ideas That Work

Douglas Fisher

Nancy Frey

ABSTRACT

Student writing performance has not appreciably improved in the past decade. While there is evidence that teachers assign more writing than in the past, performance has not kept pace. Three urban schools that experienced significant improvements in students' writing achievement were studied. To glean ideas and examples, the authors observed classroom teachers as they taught writing. In this article, the authors focus on specific instructional strategies used across grade levels by teachers to improve writing performance.

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Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey are faculty members in Language and Literacy Education in the School of Teacher Education at San Diego State University. They are the authors of *Language Arts Workshop: Purposeful Reading and Writing Instruction* (Merrill Prentice Hall, 2006) and *Scaffolding Writing: A Gradual Release Model* (Scholastic, 2007). They can be reached at dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu and nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu, respectively.

Educators, parents, and policymakers alike lament the writing performance of American students. Newspapers and professional journals suggest that writing achievement in the U.S. has not changed appreciably in the past several decades. For example, of the 36 states or jurisdictions that participated in the 1998 and 2002 grade 8 writing National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments, only 16 showed score increases in 2002 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003).

We believe that one of the reasons for this lack of significant progress is that many teachers are unsure how to teach writing. In addition, we believe (and the NAEP data confirms) that students today are given more writing assignments than ever. Unfortunately, these assignments are mostly in the form of independent writing prompts with little formal instruction. As Leif Fearn notes, “we are causing more writing than ever before” (personal communication). In other words, teachers are assigning more writing but are not necessarily teaching it.

The current focus on the workshop approach has provided teachers with opportunities to model writing instructional strategies (e.g., Calkins, 1994; Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998; Frey & Fisher, 2006). However, the power of the writing workshop can be diminished if teachers do not provide quality instruction – instruction that guides students in their writing achievement. The workshop will not be effective if instruction time is only devoted to independent writing and peer feedback. Students must be provided instruction and teachers need a wide range of instructional strategies and ideas at their disposal.

In our work in City Heights, students' writing achievement has “beaten the odds.” The over 5200 students from Rosa Parks Elementary, Monroe Clark Middle, and Hoover High School, 99% of whom qualify for free lunch and 72% of whom speak at least one language in addition to English, perform well above students with similar backgrounds and demographics. Data from the schools (e.g., Fisher & Frey, 2003; Fisher, Frey, Farnan, Fearn, & Petersen, 2004) suggest that teachers in this community do teach writing. For example, the percentage of middle school students who scored the lowest possible score on the state writing exam has been reduced from 78% to 18%. Similar results have been observed at the



elementary and high school levels. In 2004, 58% of the 10th grade class passed the English portion of the High School Exit Exam on the first attempt, up from just 18% in 2001 – a score unheard of in comparable urban communities. Our classroom observations and instructional experiences suggest that there are a number of instructional strategies, routines, procedures, or ideas that teachers need to know and use to ensure that students can and do write well.

We have arranged these instructional approaches according to the level of teacher support and control. The early examples require significant teacher control and this level of responsibility is gradually released to the point that students write independently. The gradual release of responsibility model suggests that the teacher moves from assuming “all the responsibility for performing a task ... to a situation in which the students assume all of the responsibility” (Duke & Pearson, 2002, p. 211). It is also important to note that these instructional approaches are flexible enough to be used with whole class, small groups, and individual students. For each of the instructional ideas, we will present an overview as well as an example of the way in which the strategy has been used.

1. Language Experience Approach

Teachers use the Language Experience Approach (LEA) to demonstrate the speech to print connection for young readers, students who struggle with print, or students who are not motivated to read or write (Ashton-Warner, 1959; Dixon & Nessel, 1983). Generally, this approach requires that the students and teacher have a discussion about a topic. Once the students and teacher agree on a sentence from their conversations, the teacher writes the sentence on chart paper, a dry erase board, or in a student’s journal. In this way, the shared experiences of the class are used to compose text.

This strategy can be used with the whole class, small groups, or individual students. Regardless of the group size, the conversation and oral language development occur first and the writing second. In this way, students see how their talk becomes writing.

For example, in a middle school classroom a group of students was talking with their teacher about the high school basketball team and their undefeated status. This small group had read an Internet page on the history of basketball. As the teacher focused their conversation, they agreed on the sentence, “Naismith invented basketball to keep kids out of trouble, not to make a lot of money,” which the teacher wrote on a dry erase board. Each of the group members then copied their agreed upon sentence into their journals and added two sentences on their own. Jamar wrote (corrected for spelling), “His idea was tight and now everybody plays. We could beat the whole state.”

2. Interactive writing

Based on the Language Experience Approach (LEA), interactive writing allows the teacher to share the pen with students. Again, students have a discussion about a topic and then agree upon a sentence. The difference between LEA and interactive writing is who controls the pen. As stated before, in LEA the teacher writes while students watch. In interactive writing, students take turns collaboratively creating the message (e.g., McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000). Importantly, students complete the writing one word or phrase at a time while the teacher provides additional instruction. This instruction is vital in teaching students how writers make decisions about composition, layout, letter formation, punctuation, grammar, and vocabulary. While interactive writing was first used with younger students, it is appropriate for older students as well because it provides explicit instruction of the ongoing editing process which writers do (Fisher & Frey, 2002).



In a third grade classroom, the students were discussing a recent visit to the Museum of Art. The topic was focused on artists' use of light to emphasize parts of their paintings. The students discussed different artists' work they had seen as well as the textures and styles they liked and didn't like. The teacher guided their conversation and the students eventually agreed on the sentence, "Artists use light to focus attention, show perspective, and stress important points." As the first student approached the dry erase board to write the first word, the teacher said to the group, "What do all sentences start with?" to which the class responded "capital letters!" As the third student approached the board to write the word light, the teacher asked her students, "Do you know any other words that use the -ight rime?" Several students named words including fight, right, and sight. Each time a word was completed, the class read the sentence as written thus far and then completed the remainder of the sentence from memory. This rehearsal allowed the teacher to initiate instruction about layout and punctuation. When a student spelled a word incorrectly (e.g., attention), the teacher asked for another student to check and correct. This process continued until the entire sentence was written on the board. At that time, the students read the entire sentence aloud and began to copy it into their journals. As with LEA, this teacher asked the students to use this as a topic sentence for a paragraph they would compose individually.

3. Writing models

Writing models provide students with a framework for writing. Some models are created by the teacher while others are based on books or other sources of print. For example, a middle school teacher wrote the following on the board:

I was walking home one afternoon when ... I didn't know what to do, so I ... When I tried to ... Thankfully, ... + 3 sentences

Students incorporated their own ideas into this writing framework provided by the teacher. This level of support offers students an opportunity to incorporate their individual ideas into a structure that provides them a certain degree of success. Anthony responded to this prompt by writing the following (with spelling corrected):

I was walking home one afternoon when I was stopped by the cops. I didn't know what to do, so I started to run down the alley. When I tried to jump the fence, I saw a huge dog there. Thankfully, the dog was tied up. But, the cop was on the other side. They caught me. All they really wanted was to tell me that I dropped a book when I crossed the street.

In addition to these teacher-created writing models, books and other printed materials provide excellent models as well. *Somewhere Today: A Book of Peace* (Thomas, 1998) is one such choice. Each page of the book contains a single sentence that starts with the phrase "Somewhere today". After reading the book aloud to students, a fourth grade teacher asked each student to complete his or her own sentence starting with "Somewhere today..." The teacher then turned down the lights, lit a candle, and asked students to share what they had written so they could hear their work in spoken form. The students' individual sentences were then revised as a class poem. The teacher provided instruction about imagery, rhyme and alliteration using the students' original writing.

4. Generative sentences

Also known as "given word sentences" (Fearn & Farnan, 2001, p. 87), this strategy allows students to focus at the sentence level. As many educators know, if students have difficulty composing a sentence, their writing will appear fragmented, incomplete, and amateurish.



In a generative sentences session, the teacher provides students with a word or phrase as well as a placement requirement for the sentence. For example, in a social studies classroom the teacher asked for the following sentences: one that contained *famine(s)* in the second position; one that contained *rights* in the fourth position; and one that contained *constitution* in the final position. Different students produced the following sentences:

Famine:

Worldwide famines threaten peace because hungry people will fight for their lives.
When famine strikes a community, the world must respond.

Rights:

The Bill of Rights provides guidance for how people should be treated.
When our human rights are threatened, we sue the oppressor.

Constitution:

George W. Bush and his politics could destroy our Constitution.
When we need guidance related to our rights as citizens, we look to the Constitution.

Generative sentences sessions allow the teacher to assess both content knowledge and understanding of grammar and vocabulary. In this way, the teacher can provide instruction that is responsive to the writing needs of individuals or groups.

5. Word Pyramids

This is another useful way to encourage students to explore their word knowledge for writing (Fearn & Farnan, 2001). It is a simple strategy in which the teacher gives each student a letter and the instructions to “make a word pyramid”. Starting with the letter they were given, students write a two letter word, followed by a three letter word, a four letter word, and so on. On some days, teachers provide students access to dictionaries under the condition that they know the meaning of each word they use while other days students must create their pyramids from memory and still other days students complete this task as partners. Regardless of the approach, our experience suggests that students “rack their brains”, as one fifth grader said, to find good words. This exercise ensures that students think about different words they can use when they write. A sample word pyramid for the letter N included:

No
Not
Nail
Naked
Nature
Noticed
Nineteen
Napoleons
Narcissism

The activity then moves to the sentence level. Working in pairs or individually, students select words they generated from the pyramid and use them to write sentences. This challenges authors to consider both semantic and syntactic elements to create sentences that are accurate.

6. Power writing

Each of the strategies presented thus far is used in the overall writing curriculum and is not necessarily done on a daily basis. Power Writing, however, should be done daily. The goal of this



strategy is to improve writing fluency (e.g., Kasper-Ferguson & Moxley, 2002). As Fearn and Farnan suggest, the strategy is “a structured free-write where the objective is quantity alone” (2001, p. 501).

We recommend that students complete three 1-minute sessions each day. As we observed in a fifth grade classroom, the teacher can make it a ritual. Ms. Allen has her fifth grade students hold their pens or pencils high in the air until she gives them the topic and then starts the timer. When the timer rings one minute later, students stop writing and count their words. Each time, Ms. Allen begins by saying, “Write as much as you can as well as you can” and then announces the topic. When the timer rings, she says, “Count your words and circle any words you think you have misspelled.” They repeat this two times for a total of three 1-minute sessions. Students then graph their highest score on a piece of graph paper found at the front of their writing notebooks. Ms. Allen often invites them to use their Power Writing for journal entries, for responses to essay questions later in the day, and for homework completion during which they revise their writing and present it in complete paragraphs. Ms. Allen consults their Power Writing graphs as she confers with students providing them with a way to assess their own progress in writing.

The topics range from social studies content – slavery, colonies, or government – to the use of spelling and grammar such as *they’re*, *their*, and *there*. Regardless of the topic or word provided, the goal is for students to write increasingly long responses that can be edited during a writer’s workshop (e.g., Dorn & Soffos, 2001).

7. Found poems

The found poem strategy is excellent for encouraging students to re-read what they have written (or read) for a specific purpose. The strategy can be used with just about any text – from the science textbook to students’ own Power Writing. The task is to re-read the selection and choose specific words and phrases that re-tell the text in an open verse poem format. For example, Jenny wrote the following poem based on her reading and summary writing of *Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story About Brain Science* by John Fleischman (2002). The opening of her poem read:

Phineas – the famous patient
A family man – a good man
Survived a rod – a tamping rod
Through his skull – through his brain
Phineas – the famous patient
Became a horrible man – a gambler and cheat

Jenny’s found poem demonstrates her understanding of the text as well as her ability to select key ideas and place them in order to tell the story. As a writer, this found poem assignment encouraged her to look for powerful words and phrases to convey the impact of this tragic event of Phineas’ life.

8. RAFT

Too often students write for their teacher and do not consider the range of audience members who may be reading their writing. RAFT provides a scaffold for students as they explore their writing based on various roles, audiences, and formats (Santa & Havens, 1995). RAFT is an acronym for: Role – what is the role of the writer? Audience – to whom is the writer writing? Format – what is the format for the writing? Topic – what is the focus of the writing?



RAFT prompts can be used for a variety of purposes, from teaching perspective in writing to assessing student understanding of a book. For example, in a unit of study on the various Cinderella stories around the world, the teacher read aloud the picture book *Rough Face Girl* (Martin, 1992) and asked students to respond to the following RAFT:

R Cinderella
A Rough-Face Girl
F Letter
T Our stepsisters

This allowed the teacher to determine whether or not the students understood the similarities and differences between the Cinderella stories they had examined thus far in the unit. In addition, these writers assumed a point of view from the perspective of the protagonists in the tales.

The usefulness of RAFT writing is not limited to narrative texts. Ms. Diaz, a computer technology and business applications teacher, uses the RAFT format to teach students how to apply for jobs. Using an ad for a student clerk position that at least one student will be selected to do, Ms. Diaz asks her students to type their responses to the following:

R a student at John Adams Middle School
A Ms. Renee Garcia, Vice Principal
F Business letter
T I want the student clerk job!

Through this assignment, these students participate in an authentic writing experience that consolidates their knowledge of the business letter format, the job specifications, and the word processing technology.

9. Writing to learn prompts

In addition to learning to write, students must write to learn. As noted by at least one student, “I didn’t know what I thought until I had to write it down.” Writing to learn prompts are a powerful way to encourage students to think – to think about the content they are studying. Different from process writing in which the teacher returns the paper with corrections and the student re-submits the paper, writing to learn papers allow for students to clarify their thinking and for teachers to assess what students do and do not understand.

Fisher and Frey (2004) provide a number of writing to learn prompts such as:

- Yesterday’s news – a review of class from the previous day
- Crystal ball – a prediction of what might come next
- Best thing I learned – a summary or analysis of the best part of class
- Exit slip – a written review of the class completed before leaving the room

Regardless of the prompt, the goal of writing to learn activities is to encourage students to think (Jenkinson, 1988). These writing prompts provide students with the space and time necessary for them to consider new information, make connections with information, predict new information, and summarize what they have learned.

10. Independent writing assignments

Independent writing is the goal of all of our instruction. We want to show students how to respond to prompts in thoughtful ways. Further, we want to ensure that our students can write for a variety of



purposes and audiences. The writing instruction we have reviewed thus far ensures that students will be able to do so.

The final instructional strategy involves the creation of independent writing prompts that are developed for specific writing purposes. For example, *expository prompts* might require that students explain a procedure or explain a phenomenon. *Narrative prompts* provide students the opportunity to recount or tell events from books they have read, their own lives, or their imagination. Finally, *persuasive prompts* require that students convince or persuade someone to do or to believe something.

Writing good prompts is key. Therefore, we often focus on things that matter to students – things that they care about enough to write about. Similarly, we often attempt to incorporate youth and popular culture (e.g., Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999). Examples that connect to lives of students include:

- Describe your ideal crib (house, apartment, or other living area).
- In a letter to the principal, persuade him to maintain or to eliminate the school uniform policy.
- Relate the school motto to your life.

In response to the school motto prompt, a middle school student who is identified as having a behavioral disability wrote:

“Teach me respect, responsibility, and lifelong learning” is our school motto. In the following essay, I will try to express what it means to me.

First of all, respect means to me to treat others how you want to be treated. Have respect for your elders and people around you. That means not to cuss people out, no talking back to teachers, no fighting, bugging, or picking on people. That’s what respect means to me.

Responsibility means to do your chores and remember to feed your dog. Be responsible for doing your homework. Be responsible for your actions and bad actions. Be responsible for getting up in the morning and being on time for school. Be responsible for studying for school and tests, and using good language not bad language. That’s what responsibility means to me.

Lifelong learning means to get to know new things forever. It means doing your work in class and accomplishing goals. You need to learn to read so you can read books, newspapers and applications to get a job. You need a good attitude to learn new things. You will have goals all your life.

I think our school motto is a good motto. It will teach you to be a good person and help you accomplish your goals. Respect and responsibility will help you use good manners. Responsibility will keep you on track. Lifelong learning will help you through your whole life.

Summary

These ten writing strategies are useful for teachers as they provide instruction for their students. However, they do not replace curriculum planning and pacing that must also be considered. In addition, there are multiple assessment and feedback systems, including student grading and statewide writing tests that must be considered in an effective writing curriculum. Teaching writing is a complex task – at least as complex as teaching reading. Simply assigning more writing will not ensure that our students become skilled writers and thinkers. Our students need and deserve quality instruction as they hone their craft; express their ideas, dreams, and beliefs; and understand that their words can change the world. The ideas presented in this article, when taken together and arranged in a “gradual release of responsibility” model, are likely to significantly influence the ways in which students write.



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Purposeful Collections: Exploiting the Potential of Children's Literature in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Purposefully selected collections of literature can extend, contrast or illuminate an experience or perspective to effectively exploit the potential of children's literature to shape curriculum and engage student learning. This paper offers a practical framework for creating purposeful collections of literature. As an illustration of this process, we have formulated two guideline acronyms, SIMPLE (guidelines for identifying a theme) and CRITERIA (guidelines for selecting books), explained within the context of one particular theme: Children and the Great Depression.

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The power of a book to entertain and inform readers is well documented by theorists and practitioners alike (see for example, Langer, 1995; Nystrand, 1997; McMahon & Rafael, 1997; Rosenblatt, 1978/94). Good children's literature draws the reader in, inviting the reader to envision a world that may offer further insight into real world understandings, or allow exploration of another world or time. Individual books not only offer the reader a window into an outside view of a new experience or perspective but also prompt the reader to explore personal feelings as a mirror reflecting the reader's situations or own ways of thinking (Galda & Cullinan, 2006).



As classroom teachers, we are well aware of the potential power of books to engage our students; and so we take great care both in the selection of read alouds for the class as a whole and in introducing appropriate books to each child for individual reading. As teachers, we understand that a well-chosen book encourages students to explore and make sense of their world. The “right” book can provide context to scaffold understanding of concepts, social norms or power relations (Ching, 2005). Literature can serve as a catalyst for engaged student talk and provide a creative interface with existing knowledge (McVee, Dunsmore & Gavelek, 2005).

But if one book is a powerful teaching tool, how much more powerful is a collection of books purposively selected to complement each other? When grouped together, books selected to extend, contrast or illuminate an experience or perspective can more effectively exploit the potential of children’s literature to shape curriculum and engage student learning. An exploration of a particular theme across content can be guided by purposively selected books, or textsets to offer students and teachers both a sense of ownership in, and responsibility for, the curriculum. Working together, both students and teachers propose connections across texts and content, and co-construct knowledge generated through inquiry and discussion. Such an exploration is not predetermined or formulaic as the same textsets can offer “dramatically different results while maintaining the core of district curriculum mandates” (Murray, Shea & Shea, 2004, p.33). Instead, as teachers contingently respond to and build upon student contributions, they can “lead from behind” (Boyd & Rubin, 2002, 2006; Wells & Chang Wells, 1992) to scaffold student learning that actively builds on student interests and needs, in ways that offer fresh and authentic insights. Purposively selected collections of literature offer new ways of addressing the curriculum as each reading of a text presents new opportunities to explore and make sense of a topic. Furthermore, each combination of texts offers connections across texts that shape construction of knowledge. Research indicates that instruction, guided by practices such as going beyond the “one size-fits-all” textbook and selecting multi-genre resources in content areas, promotes not only student motivation and engagement but also improves performance on assignments (see, for example, Murray, Shea & Shea, 2004). Research also shows how literature stimulates engaged discussions, and discussion about literature enhances meaningful connections across content, text and world. (See, for example, papers collected in Gambrell & Almasi, 1996).

How then do we initiate this process of purposefully selecting collections of literature to explore a particular theme or particular content across literary genres? Our experiences as a teacher educator and teacher candidates suggest that while a new teacher may acknowledge that using children’s literature across content is a good instructional practice, there is a gap between knowing this and knowing how to put it into practice. This paper seeks to bridge that gap by providing a practical framework of our process for use as a guide to creating purposeful collections of literature. To that end, the remainder of this paper focuses on our process of identifying a theme and organizing a collection of children’s literature that can be read to or by the class as a whole to capture that theme.

As an illustration of this process, we have formulated two guideline acronyms, SIMPLE and CRITERIA, explained within the context of one particular theme: Children and the Great Depression. We chose this theme to illustrate how trade books can provide powerful cross-content extensions to the curriculum. In this case, The Great Depression (a period taught in social studies grades 4-8), provides a focus for our explication of this process. In all our selections a child’s perspective provides the reader with context for the social studies concept or time period, thus making the concept or time period more accessible and relatable. We also sought to illustrate a range in the degree of explicitness in discussing the period. Importantly, though, each of these texts offers an opportunity to extend connections across curriculum. However, while our texts were chosen with The Great Depression theme in mind, we fully



acknowledge that the same books used in different contexts, or ordered differently, make different issues salient.

Why collections of children's literature?

The potential of an individual book to entertain, engage, enlighten and inform is exploited every day by good teachers as they select books for students to read individually or as a group. A teacher's satisfaction in finding exactly the right book for a particular student can be one of the concrete rewards of teaching. When the student finishes that text, the teacher should have the next one ready to suggest. In the following discussion, the teacher and student discuss books by Rodda (2000-2004), Farmer(2004), and Lowry (1993, 2000, and 2004).

STUDENT: I just finished the last book in the Rodda's *Deltora Quest* series, now what am I going to read?

TEACHER: If you enjoyed that series, then I think you might also like *The Sea of Trolls*.

OR

STUDENT: Thanks for lending me *The Giver*, I liked the characters, but I wish Lowry explained what happened to Jonas after he left his village.

TEACHER: I wondered the same thing myself. You might get some answers in *The Messenger*, but I recommend that you read *Gathering Blue* first.

Good teaching practices incorporate knowledge of students, their interests, and the degree of difficulty they can manage and still read for pleasure. A teacher's goal in offering choices for individual reading selections is to nurture a love for reading – what literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt (1978/1994) calls reading aesthetically: reading for pleasure- an experience which cannot be mandated. This private reader response experience is sometimes publicly shared in writing or speech during class, but the likelihood of such public experiences being an in-depth event is increased many fold when several students have read the same book.

In this paper, we have focused on selecting books that can be read to or by the class as a whole. Discussion stimulated by a particular book or across books can facilitate engaged student opportunities to articulate and revise individual interpretations. Children's literature invites reader response to characters, events and context. A narrative text is value-laden (Bruner, 1986); it invites us to empathize with or judge character behaviors or perspectives. Purposively selected collections of texts can provide different perspectives and contexts for characters and behaviors. Such collections of children's literature can facilitate student discussion of abstract concepts such as power, status and social justice (see, for example, Ching, 2005) as students further examine social norms in relation to their world and themselves.

Our process of identifying a theme and selecting children's literature to capture that theme is detailed below. Our love for acronyms and our teachers' drive to make things easy to remember has resulted in two guideline acronyms (SIMPLE and CRITERIA) for the process of creating purposeful collections and thus exploiting the potential of children's literature in the classroom. We have outlined our process of creating collections so that "you", the teacher, may incorporate this method into your own instructional practices. We begin by offering a simple way for you to tailor a collection of children's literature for your classroom by first identifying a theme.



Choosing a theme is SIMPLE

Start with a familiar/favorite work of literature
Incorporate student funds of knowledge
Make connections to curriculum and learning standards
Plan to make changes! Be responsive to students.
Look for literature to support and extend your theme.
Elicit ideas and feedback from students, parents, and colleagues.

Start with a familiar/favorite work of literature

As a rule of thumb it is always good to start with a text with which you are very familiar. Your excitement and interest is contagious- so if you enjoy a particular book, then you may spark your students' motivation! *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2000) was a favorite of this group and it spawned several possible themes, from the struggles of adolescent girls to migrant worker issues to intergenerational families to power structures. It was set during The Great Depression, and although this factor is backgrounded, the novel provides a context to understand the everyday struggles of people during that time period.

Incorporate student funds of knowledge

If you know your students, then you know how to represent them in terms of characters in texts and themes that are appropriate. For example, students that are struggling with fitting in can benefit from an understanding of sameness as shown in *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993). Often times knowing your students and knowing children's literature means that student needs can be met more powerfully by addressing them less directly. While *The Giver* does not directly address The Great Depression it does provide a forum for understanding economic and power structures by presenting a "utopia" in which there are no economic or social structures.

Make connections to curriculum and learning standards

Literature can offer context and perspective to a particular period in time. A selection could be made to illuminate a particular period connected to the NYS Social Studies curriculum. For example, *The Bread Winner* (Whitmore, 1990) and *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999) are clearly set during America's Great Depression, but the great depression is also the background for *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2000). Literature also stimulates student's literate dialogue and nurtures intertextual connections. Such student practices clearly meet two of the four New York State standards for English Language Arts (Standard 2: Language for Literary Response and Expression and Standard 3: Language for Critical Analysis and Evaluation).

Plan to make changes! Be responsive to students.

We recommend planning the collection in advance, following our criteria below, but then adjusting such plans so as to respond to student contributions. Perhaps the order in which the books are read will change based on student responses, or perhaps another book will be added or one omitted from the collection actually read by the class. For example, if you start with a text such as *Smoky Night* (Bunting, 1994) you may have planned to note racial and socio-economic structures. Perhaps you would have followed *Smoky Night* with *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976) but the students' response to *Smoky Night* may have focused on potentially positive cultural outcomes from tragedy and so instead you follow with *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz



Ryan, 2000) to build further on the student initiated sub-theme. You may still direct an exploration for racial and socio-economic structures but its iteration has changed, taking direction from the students.

Look for literature to support and extend your theme.

Whatever the selected theme, it is wise to have a bank of pre-selected literature from which to draw. The order of the books will depend on student contributions and goals of theme development. For example, seemingly dissimilar texts such as *Encounter* (Yolen, 1992) and *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) can provide different contexts for examining the notions of power and control. The discussion path to that understanding is likely to be rich with student insights and allows students to direct the scope of the classroom discourse.

Elicit ideas and feedback from students, parents, and colleagues.

A thematic collection of children's literature is an organic creation. It is made more meaningful with contributions of its participants. What more powerful way to acknowledge a student than to act upon her suggestion? Discussing connections across literature is a useful practice for teachers and students. Through discussion with colleagues while formulating our theme, *The Thanksgiving Visitor* (Capote, 1967) was suggested by a librarian as a concluding book to our theme on The Great Depression and later *The Dust Bowl* (Booth, 1996) was suggested as a supplemental text.

When not just any books will do...

Having determined a theme, (in this case Children and the Great Depression) how, then, do we as teachers choose from the thousands of books available? To facilitate this selection, we offer the following CRITERIA for a purposeful collection of children's literature:

CRITERIA

Child protagonist
 Represents diverse characters
 Interprets subject matter in a fresh way
 Texts connect to each other in meaningful ways
 Enhances/ deepens understanding of a concept
 Relevance to theme
 Illuminates a new/ Different perspective
 Award-winning literature

Child protagonist

This was a requirement for every book we selected – it was an explicit criterion because we wanted all of our students to feel represented. Exploring the period of the Great Depression from a child's perspective offers students a relevant point of connection to issues that are specific to a child's experience.

Represents diverse characters

We thought that this was important to consider across the collection. Incorporating books that depict a diverse cast of characters, cultures, perspectives, and issues will communicate to students the importance of considering multiple perspectives: the primary purpose of using multiple texts. Above all, we wanted to introduce students to characters that students could both relate to and learn from. Texts, *Smoky Night* (Bunting, 1994), *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976),



Bud, Not Buddy (Curtis, 1999), and *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2000) are some examples. The central characters in each of these texts represent children that students can empathize with and in turn gain a better understanding of thematic concepts. Diversity and perspective are better explored across texts; collections provide potential for moving beyond the stereotype or token cultural experience toward potentially transformative understandings. Examining power and social structures across texts such as *Smoky Night*, *Roll of Thunder*, and *Esperanza Rising* from the perspective of a child invites students to identify important social problems and issues and as they read clarify their values and take reflective actions to help resolve the issue or problem. (A social action approach in Banks & Banks, 1993, p. 209).

Interprets subject matter in a fresh way

This was a driving force behind the themes we chose. We wanted texts that addressed The Great Depression in a less direct but more personal way. Our selections were, therefore, unexpected: *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2000), *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999), *The Bread Winner* (Whitmore, 1990), and *The Thanksgiving Visitor* (Capote, 1967). The political notion of a “Great Depression” is not directly recognized in *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2000) and *The Thanksgiving Visitor* (Capote, 1967), but instead it is the hardships the main characters face in their personal stories that drive the students’ connection to the theme.

Texts connect to each other in meaningful ways

A purposeful collection will offer many opportunities for intertextual connections. Within the above selections for the Great Depression, the concepts of going west to find employment and the idea that children needed to grow up quickly and become providers for their family were showcased in *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2000) and *The Bread Winner* (Whitmore, 1990). Another traceable connection between two books was the idea that even with all the bigger problems occurring during the Great Depression basic children’s struggles still continued. For example, in both *The Thanksgiving Visitor* (Capote, 1967) and *The Bread Winner* (Whitmore, 1990) the protagonists had to deal with bullies and face them on the playground.

Enhances/ deepens understanding of a concept

We felt the dual impact of a narrative text offering a child protagonist’s perspective and struggles enhanced a young reader’s understanding of the Great Depression. For example, the problem of bullying persisted at that time, which provides a context and perspective for the local and national issues at this time.

Relevance to theme

While our selected texts contained explicit and direct connections to the selected theme, we also found more indirect handling of the themes to be very effective. For example, it is not until the end of *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2000) that one realizes that this story took place during the Great Depression. We felt that addressing the theme in multiple ways (across genres, perspectives, and with varying degrees of explicitness) offered a rich intertextuality.

Illuminates a new/ different perspective

For us, illuminating a new or different perspective was critical. Collections of literature can offer narratives with contrasting perspectives, opening eyes to how others think and behave, challenging our personal beliefs and judgments, and providing insight into our own thoughts and behaviors.

Award-winning literature

We attempted to start out all our themes with award-winning books as a guide. From these notable books and our knowledge of other great children’s literature, we formed connections between the books and initial new meaning beyond the original texts. We responded as a new



collection of books was created, as books took on new meaning, and as they were read in concert with other selections. Therefore, while award-winning texts tended to be an appropriate starting point, we did not limit our selections in this way as new texts were introduced to strengthen a collection.

Put ‘em all together and what do you get?

In our selection of texts, we consciously considered varied genres and perspectives. We sought to consider how particular books resonated with others. We noted how the order in which the books were presented shaped what became salient to the students. We observed how sometimes what we considered sub-themes were more the scope of discussion than we expected. This is the beauty of a purposeful collection of children’s literature – it becomes its own entity, affording its own potential to stimulate engaged student thought and discussion. In essence, the teacher can orchestrate the selection of the collection, but not the composing of the dominant themes.

We consider the purposeful selection and ordering of texts to be an important instructional strategy. The effectiveness of this strategy is shaped by the teacher’s knowledge of children’s literature and her ability to appropriately select books that not only meet student and curriculum needs but also engender intertextual connections across and within texts. These connections can stimulate student critical thinking and understanding of context, content or theme. Purposively selected collections of children’s literature can help meet curricular objectives while also providing a space for students to explore and direct the scope of their learning. Indeed, such collections, when coupled with the teacher’s ability and willingness to welcome and accept student contributions and to contingently respond to student needs and interests, can form a shared bed of experience to which members of the class can relate to and identify. Once again, the teacher is key to whether the potential of literature is unlocked.

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Overcoming Reading Difficulty in Clinical Remediation through Effective Partnership

Chinwe Ikpeze

ABSTRACT

This study examined the nature of the partnership between clinicians and parents of two struggling readers at a university reading clinic. Research questions sought to examine the roles of the clinicians and parents in the reading clinic and the ways, if any, their partnership facilitated reading improvement of the children involved. Data were collected through multiple sources and analyzed inductively. The results indicated that after semester-long tutoring, the two students improved in their attitude toward reading and actual reading levels. The improvement was attributed to both intensive tutoring and effective partnership with parents.

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Chinwe Ikpeze teaches courses in literacy at the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr., School of Education, St. John Fisher College, Rochester, NY. Her research interests include parental involvement with struggling readers, use of new literacies and technologies in and out of school, inquiry-based learning and online learning.

One-on-one intervention for children who struggle to read has continued to receive the attention of researchers, educators and teachers alike (Allington, 2001; Gaskin, Laird, O'Hara, Scott, & Cress, 2002; Hiebert & Taylor, 2000; Kibby, 1995; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). It is believed that such intervention helps to customize learning experiences for struggling readers because both the pace and level of instruction can be adapted to the needs of the children (Brown, Morris, & Fields, 2005). Moreover, one-on-one tutoring ensures that struggling readers receive high quality instruction. This is important because most children who struggle to read do not need different curriculum, different goals or standards, but high quality instruction (Allington, 2001; Brown et al., 2005; Gaskin et al., 2002; Snow et al., 1998). In addition to intensive teaching, instruction for struggling readers must be long-term, because the impact of short-term reading intervention fades overtime (Gaskin et al, 2002).

Reading clinics were established by many research universities to offer quality and intensive remedial instruction to students with severe reading difficulties and for the training of literacy professionals (Klenk & Kibby, 2000). Clinical remediation involves one-on-one tutoring to students whose progress in learning to read fails to meet reasonable expectations (Harris & Sipay, 1990; Klenk & Kibby, 2000).

However, the remediation of reading difficulty involves more than intensive instruction. The home remains a very crucial element in any literacy intervention for struggling readers (Leseman & de Jong, 1998; Musti-Rao & Cartledge, 2004). Quality literacy instruction must bring the home, the community and the school into partnership so that mutual respect and reciprocal flow of information are achieved (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996; McCarthey, 2000). In addition, provision of long-term support can be better achieved by sustained parental involvement since parents provide children with social and human capital (Coleman, 1991), literacy opportunities (Leseman & de Jong, 1998) and motivation (Baker, Scher, &



Mackler, 1997). Quality parental support and involvement include: actual or perceived expectations for school performance, verbal encouragement or interactions regarding school work, direct reinforcement of improved academic performance and general academic guidance (Keith, Reimers, Fehrmann, Pottebaum, & Aubey, 1986). However, parental support and involvement will be enhanced when parents work in collaboration with teachers.

Parents as partners

Epstein (1995) presents a model of the ways home, school and community should function as a partnership to influence students' success. An underlying assumption of the model is that children will most likely succeed when they feel cared for and when they are encouraged to do well. Working in partnership with parents of struggling readers is therefore essential because such cooperation will help teachers to understand how the children relate to print outside of the classroom (Epstein, 1995; Lazer & Weisberg, 1996). Parents can also provide teachers with valuable information about their children that can shape instructional methods because they are in a position to discover children's interests and to perceive their emotional reactions toward the reading situation (Lazer & Weisberg, 1996).

An effective collaboration between parents and teachers of struggling readers may help to address problems usually associated with struggling readers such as low self-esteem, poor motivation and attitude toward reading, and behavioral concerns such as disruptive behavior or withdrawal (Baker, 2003; Baker et al., 1997). Poor attitude toward reading might explain the difference in the amount of reading done by struggling and normally achieving readers (Allington, 1983), that results in the "Matthew Effect" syndrome (Stanovich, 1986). The Matthew Effect refers to a situation whereby struggling readers, because they have no interest in reading, read less than proficient readers, and as a result, fall yet further behind their higher achieving peers. Motivation for struggling readers can be achieved through both teacher and parental encouragement (Baker, Dreher, & Guthrie, 2000). Teachers can foster motivation through activities that support meaningful learning and help learners to select books that can sustain their interest and engagement in reading. Motivation can also be enhanced through the use of technology. Studies have shown the efficacy of computers and literacy software in teaching vocabulary, spelling, and word recognition, as well as in providing high motivational influences for struggling readers and writers (Balajthy, Reuber, & Robinson, 2004; Kamil, Intrator, & Kim, 2000).

While parental involvement plays a vital role in the life of struggling readers, there are indications that parents sometimes aggravate the problem of their children who struggle to read through their attitudes and dispositions. Harris and Sipay (1990) observe that when struggling readers start a remedial program, "...parents' continued attitude towards and treatment of the child can significantly influence his/her progress" (p.400). They note that parents of struggling readers are anxious for success, expect too much too soon, and become easily discouraged and emotionally tense when their remedial efforts fail. It is therefore important to sustain dialogue with these parents to ensure that they do not compound the problem of their children. Teachers need to open a communication channel with parents and listen attentively to them to understand their perspectives on their children who struggle with reading (Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999; Lazar & Weisberg, 1996; Nistler & Maiers, 2000). Such interaction may reveal the social pressures and problems parents and children face that may never be understood (Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999). Listening to parents' stories provides teachers not only with vital information for instruction but also for counseling purposes. Parents also need encouragement to believe that they can help achieve success.



Although there has been consistent interest in efforts at intervention for children experiencing reading difficulty, not much attention has been paid to struggling readers receiving one-on-one remediation in university reading clinics. There is a need to highlight the unique roles played by reading specialists and parents as they collaborate to help struggling readers to overcome their reading difficulty. The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of the partnership between clinicians in a university reading clinic and the parents of struggling readers. Specifically, the study addressed the following questions. What roles did two clinicians and two parents in a university reading clinic play during their collaboration? In what ways, if any, did this partnership facilitate reading improvement of the children involved?

Participants and research context

There were six participants in this study: two students, two clinicians and two parents (parents of the two students). These six people were divided into two groups. One group consisted of Karthlyn (female), her mother Commy and her clinician Kobe, while the second group consisted of Jeff (male), his mother Elaine and his clinician Anne. All names are pseudonyms. I interacted with and observed all six participants at a university reading clinic in a public research university in Upstate New York, in the spring of 2003.

Parents brought their children to the clinic twice a week for ninety minutes per session. The two parents (Commy & Elaine) were selected through purposeful sampling, based on the recommendations of clinicians and other clinic staff as exemplary parents who took interest in working with their children and were also interested in collaborating with teachers. Both students were White middle class European Americans. Karthlyn's parents were college graduates and her mother was a special education teacher while Jeff's parents had completed high school. The two clinicians, Kobe and Anne were master's degree students undergoing a required clinical course for reading specialists. During this semester-long clinical training, clinicians collected and examined existing information on personal and educational backgrounds of their prospective students, carried out detailed assessments, and wrote a case study of the children. They then provided one-on-one tutoring and other learning activities to match the needs of the children.

My role in this study was that of a participant observer. I was a doctoral student participating in the clinical practicum so that I could better understand the nature of reading difficulties. It was during that period that I conducted this study. I considered myself both an insider and outsider in this study. As far as participating in the practicum was concerned, I was an insider. I was familiar with some of the parents whose children were receiving instruction at that time. However, as a researcher, I also considered myself an outsider. After my first interview with the participating parents, I shared with them the story of my child who also had a severe reading difficulty. They were encouraged to learn that he overcame the problem and that I played an active role in tutoring and motivating him. Knowing that I had gone through a similar experience, the two parents did not see me just as a researcher, but as someone who understood their plight and with whom they felt very comfortable discussing their children's cases.

Case study 1: Karthlyn and her parents

Karthlyn, at the time she was enrolled in the reading clinic, was a nine-year-old girl and was in the fourth grade in a suburban elementary school. Her family had a history of reading difficulty. Her elder brother, who was then in college, had a diagnosed learning disability and received special education services, and her father also had reading difficulty. Karthlyn was diagnosed with a learning disability in



November 2000. Her mother reported that she “has been a struggling reader since kindergarten.” School reports indicated that she depended on teacher support and constantly needed help to complete most of her assignments. Her classroom was a blended one where there were additional supports through a special education teacher and classroom aides, as well as increased opportunities for small group instruction. Although Karthlyn was friendly and outgoing, she had a short attention span, a record of poor task completion and required a structured and predictable routine. Both school reports and parent interviews indicated that she had a poor attitude toward reading. “She does not want to read because it’s hard for her,” lamented her mother. Karthlyn received instruction in remedial reading and math, had several summers of tutoring and a summer of Reading Recovery. Despite these efforts, she was still struggling with reading both at home and in school. A series of diagnostic tests at the reading clinic revealed that she was reading at the second grade level, two years below her actual grade level. She had severe word recognition and decoding problems, poor application of phonics skills and reading strategies that greatly impeded her fluency and comprehension. Karthlyn’s mother accompanied her to the reading clinic and interacted with her clinician during each visit.

Case study II: Jeff and his parents

Jeff was 12 years old and in the sixth grade when he was brought to the reading clinic. Like Karthlyn, Jeff was also in a special education class in his school. Jeff comes from a family of four, but there was no history of reading difficulty. However, his reading problems started early. “He had always struggled to read as far as I can remember,” his mother noted. A psychological evaluation indicated that Jeff was in the average range of intellectual ability, yet he struggled in most subjects, with failing grades in reading, but at an average level in math. He required additional time and adult supervision to carry out most school tasks. All school reports point to his difficulty with reading and writing and a negative attitude toward reading. Jeff was also shy and withdrawn, lacked confidence, and rarely participated in class. In addition, his comprehension was considerably lower than the other students. Jeff started receiving remedial reading instruction in third grade and small reading group instruction in fifth grade. In school, he received resource room instruction as well as consultant teacher services that were specially designed for individualized or small group instruction in the regular classroom. Clinical diagnosis revealed that Jeff was reading at the fourth grade level. Jeff’s parents and brother usually accompanied him to the reading clinic twice a week and exchanged views with his clinicians at the end of each visit.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection for this study proceeded through series of observations, interviews, informal conversations, field notes and analytic notes. In addition, parental and child involvement inventories were used to collect information concerning the children’s attendance, homework completion, parental involvement and individual efforts by the children. I observed Jeff and Karthlyn’s clinicians three times each as they interacted with the children during their teaching sessions at the clinic. I also attended the meetings between the clinicians and parents at the end of each teaching session. Field notes were taken during each observation. All the participants (parents, clinicians and students) were interviewed during the period of data collection and the interviews were audio taped. The parents were interviewed twice. The first interview lasted about twenty- five minutes each. This interview was held after the parents signed the consent forms to participate in the study. The second parent interview took place at the end of the clinic period and each parent was interviewed for about fifty minutes. Parents’ interview questions



centered on their perspectives on their children's reading difficulty, the challenges they faced working with their children, the strategies they adopted at home, their expectations from the clinic and how they collaborated with their children's clinicians. The clinicians were asked how they collaborate with parents, their teaching/learning experiences in the clinic, the strategies they use and their recommendations to parents. In my journal, I noted the children's learning progress, parental involvement, clinicians' teaching strategies and areas of collaboration.

Data were analyzed by inductive methods using qualitative case study techniques (Merriam, 1998). Audiotapes were transcribed and field notes and analytic notes were thoroughly read to develop detailed knowledge of the data. Initial impressions were noted and the transcripts were reread during which tentative categories emerged. These categories were refined and major ideas and concepts were later used to develop themes. Both triangulation of data sources and member checking were also employed.

Results

Themes that emerged after the analysis of data indicated that clinicians played a critical role in the partnership with parents of struggling readers. Clinicians carried out clinical assessment, tutoring, and counseling services. In addition, they made recommendations for continued literacy supervision and reinforcement. Parents on the other hand, worked on reinforcement, supervision of homework, and motivating the children. Communication and collaboration provided a bridge for this partnership. Both clinicians and parents believed that this collaboration facilitated a positive attitude to reading and reading improvement of the two children. In the following section, I will discuss the roles of clinicians and parents and the importance of communication in the partnership.

The role of clinicians in the partnership

The most important role of the clinicians was carrying out diagnostic assessment of the children. This involved collecting information ranging from educational background, social and family history, psychological assessment, and prior academic intervention. In addition, several standardized tests and reading inventories were administered. Clinicians also conducted interviews with prospective parents prior to the start of the teaching sessions to understand their perspective about their children's reading difficulty. Data from these sources were used to determine the instructional needs of the children and to make other decisions concerning appropriate roles of the parents. They also provided information for tutoring, communication with parents and recommendations for future reading improvement. Tutoring was another major role performed by the clinicians. Karthlyn and Jeff received intensive tutoring based on the goals for their instruction. Karthlyn's clinician worked to develop her word recognition ability, awareness of phonics, word patterns and fluency. Jeff's instruction centered on helping him develop comprehension-monitoring abilities. The children were also involved in other activities in the clinic aimed at increasing their social interaction and confidence in their reading and included a readers' theater and author's chair. Teaching these children in a one-on-one setting helped the clinicians to come to terms with their learning styles and strengths and weaknesses as learners.

In addition, clinicians regularly interacted with parents, by offering advice and suggestions to them on how to work with their children at home. Furthermore, clinicians made recommendations to parents and teachers of the children to use as a guide after the children graduated from the reading clinic. For example, Karthlyn's clinician recommended that her parents and teacher continue to work to increase her sight vocabulary through advanced and extended exposure to words that were contained in the texts



she would read. Others included giving her the opportunity for repeated readings of texts, partner reading, development of spelling patterns, awareness of phonemic generalizations, use of context clues for word recognition, word sorts and “making words”. For Jeff, small group and individualized instruction were recommended as well as extended time to process information. His parents were also advised to help him practice repeated readings to improve his comprehension, and to use other strategies that were found to be successful in the clinic such as use of outlines, webs, vocabulary pretests, questioning and making connections to prior knowledge. Jeff would also benefit from a *variety* of reading materials to include books and also newspapers, magazines, and the Internet especially on topics of great interest to him, such as baseball. To help him with writing activities, Jeff’s clinician recommended that he should learn keyboarding skills as a prerequisite for computer word processing. All recommendations made it clear that parents should ensure that the children read at least thirty minutes each day and continue to be involved with their children’s reading in order to sustain the gains from the clinic.

The role of parents

Parents in this study performed distinctive roles that complemented the work of clinicians. They were highly involved in the tutoring of the children at home. They modeled appropriate reading behavior and reinforced their children’s clinical instruction through paired or partner reading, tutoring, and providing motivation and guidance. Commy helped her daughter Karthlyn to read her word ring everyday and ensured that she practiced other required skills as directed by her clinician. Elaine made sure that Jeff completed his homework and taught him comprehension monitoring skills.

Another equally important role performed by parents was in the area of motivation. Elaine learned to control her aggression toward her son especially when he refused to do his homework. In addition, she encouraged and assured him that all would be well. Sometimes she would go to his room to read, just to show him that she was interested in reading and to encourage him to read. Commy started to dialogue more with her daughter and learned how to improve Karthlyn’s self concept as a reader. Mother and daughter read to each other. The two parents maintained a positive attitude toward their children’s reading problems and communicated regularly with the clinicians.

Bridging clinicians’ and parents’ roles through communication and collaboration

The central ingredient in the partnership between clinicians and parents was communication and collaboration. Clinicians initiated a two-way communication with parents that involved meetings, information sharing, and exchange of ideas and discussion of collective concerns. This became a springboard for building an effective collaboration with parents. These interactions helped to reveal parental concerns, frustrations and home practices that provided valuable information to clinicians. The following excerpts from parents’ interviews helped to highlight some of the concerns of parents and the challenges they faced:

Q: How do you cope with your child’s reading difficulty?

Commy: It’s not easy for me because these kids have been in school all day, have a couple of hours rest and back to the clinic. Needless to say, it is tasking and depressing.

Elaine: It’s hard, it’s hard.... it’s hard because you work all day in the office and at home and the child struggles so hard. Housework is neglected....and there is not really any family time.



Q: What challenge do you face trying to help your child with assigned homework?

Commy: I think selecting books for her is hard. She will like to read longer chapter books because she sees her classmates reading them, but they are not her level. It's a bit of a struggle to get books that are not too difficult or easy for her.

Elaine: It takes him a longer time to get anything accomplished. He gets easily overwhelmed and frustrated.

Q: Tell me if you encounter problems while you use any strategy with your child, and what kinds of problems?

Commy: I have tohelp her figure out the words and sometimes, it's hard to decide whether to tell her the words or make her figure out the strategy. Yes, even though I am a teacher, but the question is how much do we model and how do we use strategies more like a teacher? That's hard for me to decide, so, am always in a quandary.

Elaine: Sometimes he refuses to do what I ask him to do unless it is assigned by a teacher. That puts me really off and I get mad and frustrated. Since I started talking with his clinicians, I have learned to cope with this and things are working out.

Q: In what ways, if any, has the clinic met or not met your expectations regarding your child's reading?

Commy: I came here with high expectations. In a way, they were met but I think the reality is that this is hard work and all hands must be on deck.

Elaine: When I was coming to the clinic, I thought it was going to be a miracle scheme, but now, even though my child is improving, I realize that as a parent, I still need to work hard with the child....

Q: What is your relationship with your child's clinician?

Commy: It's been wonderful and she has been so helpful. Each time I talk with her, I get great new ideas that are helping me with tutoring at home.

Elaine: Great! Anne is wonderful and I'm happy she is teaching my son. We talk often and her advice has been very helpful.

The above excerpts give a glimpse of some parental concerns and the challenges they face as parents of struggling readers. However, with effective communication, some of their fears and concerns were addressed. Karthlyn's clinician, Kobe, described how she interacted with Karthlyn's parents:

My relationship with Karthlyn and her parents is rather open. We talk, we talk ...you know. We spend a couple of minutes depending on what we had at our reading session to talk about what we have been doing, the progress she has been making and her mom and dad pose questions to me and I ask them questions too...You know, it's a very open back and forth communication.

During one of such conversations, Elaine indicated how, out of desperation, she bought a commercial reading program "Hooked on Phonics" for her son hoping it would help him. However, she was advised to discontinue using the program, as it would not help her son, given the nature of his reading problem. With efforts from parents and clinicians, Karthlyn and Jeff did improve in their reading levels, as well as in their attitudes toward reading.

Attitude toward reading and reading improvement

Evidence from the data indicated that after four months of instruction at the clinic both Karthlyn and Jeff developed a positive attitude toward reading and improved their reading levels.



Improved attitude toward reading: Before Karthlyn and Jeff were brought to the reading clinic, their parents reported that they both had very poor attitudes toward reading. This was attributed to the fact that they experienced difficulty with reading and struggled so much that they would rather avoid it. This situation was different at the end of the clinic period under study. Karthlyn's mother, Commy, had this to say concerning her daughter's attitude to reading at the end of the clinic period: I think the clinic has been very helpful. My daughter brings in books and assignments everyday and she has to read them as a matter of responsibility. She is reading way more than before and I can see the improvement. Besides, Karthlyn is now taking the initiative to read by herself, which was a wonderful development.

Commy's observation was confirmed by Karthlyn's comments. A delighted Karthlyn told me during an interview that she had tremendously increased her sight vocabulary. As she put it "I have 120 words in my word bank; I think I am a lot better." Jeff's mother echoed the same thing when she said that her son was definitely reading more at home, had become a better reader, and had more confidence. Jeff also shared a similar view when he said "I like to read more now."

Reading improvement: Several diagnostic tests and reading inventories administered at the beginning and end of the study period showed that both Karthlyn and Jeff improved in their reading levels. The table below shows their performance at the beginning and end of the semester under study.

Table 1

Student	Age	Grade level	Reading problem	Initial Reading level	Final Reading Level
Karthlyn (Female)	9	4	Word recognition	2.4	3.2
Jeff (Male)	12	6	Comprehension difficulty	4.5	6.1

The above table shows that Karthlyn moved from a second grade reading level, 2.4, to a third grade reading level, 3.2, while Jeff moved from a fourth grade level, 4.5, to a sixth grade level, 6.1. The fact that Jeff was able to read at grade level was a significant achievement. Karthlyn and Jeff's clinicians acknowledged that the improvement was not only because of the instruction they received but also because their parents were involved in their learning and worked in collaboration with the clinicians throughout the period they were receiving instruction. The repetition and reinforcement at home helped both Karthlyn and Jeff; otherwise, they would not have improved as much as they did, the clinicians noted.

Discussion and implications

One-on-one tutoring remains one of the most promising strategies for alleviating reading difficulty. However, the efficacy of this approach is enhanced when parents are involved in teaching their children and share vital information with clinicians. Findings from this study suggest that without parental involvement and support, Karthlyn and Jeff may not have made as much improvement as they did, given the severity of their reading difficulties. The findings support earlier observations by Edwards, Pleasants & Franklin (1999) that neither teachers nor parents have complete answers to their children's literacy



problems, but by combining the efforts of both, we get a more complete picture of the children's school and home lives and are better able to plan for effective instruction.

Effective communication and collaboration with the parents helped clinicians to discover certain perspectives, beliefs and practices that were vital in counseling parents. This discussion and interaction also provided insight into home literacy practices of the children and the challenges faced by their parents. For example, during an interview with the two participating parents, they used the words "hard, tasking, and depressing" at various times to describe the challenges they faced as they worked with their children. These challenging experiences may drive some parents into desperate moves and decisions about what they feel would work for their children. An example was the phonics program that Elaine bought for her son, hoping it would help him to read better. However, this happened to be an uninformed action because her son did not have a decoding problem but comprehension difficulty. Phonics software would therefore not be of much help.

Furthermore, the two parents had very high or even undue expectations about the efficacy of the reading clinic. Elaine thought that the clinic "would be a miracle scheme" and all her son's "reading problems would automatically be solved". She later realized that she still had to play a vital role to make this happen. These findings concerning parental expectations and beliefs corroborate previous literature on struggling readers. Harris and Sipay (1990) had noted that parents of remedial readers expect too much too soon, and become easily emotionally tense when their remedial efforts fail. Other studies also stressed the need to listen to parents in order to understand the problems they face and utilize the information for counseling purposes (Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999; Lazar & Weisberg, 1996; Nistler, & Maiers, 2000).

It was noteworthy that both Karthlyn and Jeff were able to overcome poor attitudes toward reading during the period they were at the clinic. This could be attributed partly to the clinicians' ability to sustain the children's interests with various strategies and activities, as well as with a wide variety of reading materials. For example, activities such as reader's theater and the author's chair helped to increase their social interaction, confidence and improved their attitudes toward reading. Poor attitude toward reading was a major reason for the Mathews Effect syndrome (Stanovich, 1986). Overcoming the Mathews Effect was a significant achievement for these struggling readers.

Most studies on struggling readers tend to focus on learners from urban, low income families, many of whom fail to read at grade level (Musti-Rao & Cartledge, 2004; Nistler & Maiers, 2000). This reflects accumulated effects of several at-risk factors which include lack of access to literacy-stimulating environment, or excellent and coherent reading instruction (Snow et al., 1998). Evidence from this study does not support this widely held assumption about struggling readers. Both participants in this study, Karthlyn and Jeff, were not typical at-risk learners because they came from families that provided supportive learning environments, motivation, and had parents with high aspirations for their education. Their parents also worked very hard to help them improve in their reading, yet they still struggled to read. Earlier studies of at-risk readers (Kibby, 1995; Snow et al., 1998) did acknowledge that a number of children without any obvious risk factors also develop reading difficulties. These children, like Karthlyn and Jeff, require intensive intervention efforts such as one-on-one tutoring to help them improve.

The implications for this study are many and varied. The most important one is the need for effective partnerships and collaboration between clinicians or teachers and parents of struggling readers. The effectiveness of such partnerships depends to a large extent, on having each party play the roles expected of them, and in addition, maintain a line of communication. Clinicians or teachers need to initiate this collaboration by inviting parents' perspectives, ensuring constant communication, keeping parents informed of the progress of the child, scheduling meetings and giving specific instruction on how



to reinforce or tutor the child at home. Parents, on the other hand, need to interact with their child's clinician, discuss the child's progress at home and continue to follow the recommendations of the clinicians. They also need to observe their children closely to monitor their reading behavior, strengths, weaknesses and interests. This could provide vital information that will inform the child's instructional needs.

Furthermore, clinicians or classroom teachers should not assume that parents from high socioeconomic status (SES) do not need assistance or that they already know how to handle their children who struggle to read. We are again reminded through this study, the importance of providing guidance and encouragement to parents no matter their social class, race and gender, to help them work effectively with their children at home and have confidence in their role as co-teachers. Advice to parents should be as specific as possible and should include what to read with the child, how much time should be spent, how to respond to mistakes and how to keep reading experiences enjoyable for the child.

Another important implication of this study is to initiate parent education classes in conjunction with clinical remediation. Clinical staff should take the initiative to organize a parents' support group, consisting of parents whose children receive tutoring at the clinic. This group could meet at scheduled intervals to discuss issues relating to the clinic and their children. Discussions could include inspiring stories about successful cases from the clinic, exchange of helpful ideas, appropriate uses of technology and other advice to parents. This is important because parents need to be educated about their roles in the lives of their children who struggle to read and how they can motivate, encourage and model appropriate reading behavior for them. In addition, they need to know how to capitalize on the children's strengths thereby improving their attitudes toward reading and actual reading improvement.

Early intervention for struggling readers, probably as early as first grade (Brown et al., 2005) would be preferable. The earlier that struggling readers receive one-on-one tutoring at a reading clinic, literacy centers or comparable settings, the better their chances to cope with school learning in later grades. With one-on-one tutoring, early and long term intervention, as well as parental involvement, many struggling readers will show considerable improvement.

Conclusion

Reading problems can be complex. A one sided approach may not be the best way to solve the problem. For struggling readers, communication and the exchange of ideas between parents and clinicians are crucial because they enable clinicians and teachers to discover parental expectations, fears, hunches, and unique familial circumstances which may be obstacles to the child's reading improvement. What matters for struggling readers is not only intensive instruction but continual and long term support, reinforcement, and motivation from both teachers and parents.

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BOOK BANTER

The more you read, the more you know.
The more you know, the smarter you grow.
The smarter you are, the longer you stay in school.
The longer you stay in school, the more diplomas you earn...
The more diplomas you earn, the longer you live.

Jim Trelease *The Read-Along Book* (Penguin, 2001)

Spring
2006

Thank you...

authors for creating
and publishers for
supplying these excellent
tools to entice our
children to love reading.

Young Adult

Barry Denenberg, who wrote previously for the *Dear America* and *My Name Is America* series, is the author of many high caliber books written expressly for young adults. His latest book, *Shadow Life: A Portrait of Anne Frank and Her Family* (Scholastic, 2005) is nothing short of compelling. In the first chapters of the book Denenberg describes the pre-World War II Germany where the Frank family lived. The next section, "Hiding," is a fictional diary that evolves through Anne's sister Margot's perspective.

Part three, "Dying," describes daily life in the concentration camps, and "Surviving" reports many statistics—some quite startling—about the camps themselves. Denenberg provides an extensive bibliography and videography for those who want to read further on this well documented topic. This book should be at the top of the list for those studying the Holocaust; also for those today questioning whether this genocide took place. It is a powerful book, difficult to put down.

Absolutely, Positively Not (Arthur Levine Books, 2005) is the sometimes riotously funny book about the life of a 16 year-old who is sure in the first chapter that he is absolutely, positively NOT gay. By book's end he is absolutely, positively sure he is gay. His best friend Rachael is not surprised when he expresses to her the thought he might possibly be gay. She's sure of it and has been all along. After all, didn't he go to a dance with a golden retriever rather than admit to his mother he didn't have a date?! This first novel by David LaRoche handles the topic of homosexuality with warmth and understanding. The psychological dimension—the uncertainty, then the inkling, then the self-discovery—is also superbly



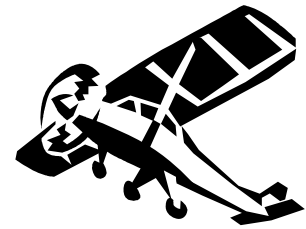
presented. Adolescents will find this novel, because of the author's style and wit, an amusing "coming of age" portrait; they also will find it thought provoking, and will gain insight from reading it.

Middle School and Young Adult

In Dan Gutman's *Race for the Sky: The Kitty Hawk Diaries of Johnny Moore* (Simon & Schuster, 2003) 14 year-old Johnny Moore shares his personal observations and experiences as assistant to those two "dingbatters" from Ohio, Orville and Wilbur Wright. As an eyewitness to the first flight, the teen's account is actually a chronicle of the team's three-year struggle to succeed. Gutman's enthusiastic narrator recounts his tale using regionalisms that carry the reader back to the Kill Devil Hills in North Carolina at the beginning of the 20th century. This work of historical fiction brings the challenge, struggle and drama of first flight to vivid life for the middle school and young adult reader.

Another selection about the Wright Brothers:

We tend to associate the Wright brothers only with their famous first flight in 1903 at Kitty Hawk, but there is much more to their story. *Touching the Sky: The Flying Adventures of Wilbur and Orville Wright* (Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2003) by Louise Borden and Trish Marx describes many of their later accomplishments. For example, during the September 1909 New York City Commemorative celebration Wilbur was asked to give a flying exhibition. This was the first time most people had seen a flying machine. Huge crowds gathered to see the flight and were enthralled by what must have seemed to them science fiction. At virtually the same moment in Europe, Orville was making public flights trying to attract possible investors to form a manufacturing company. In the course of these flights this adventurous brother set many records of the day. He made the first night flight, the longest flight, the highest flight and even flew with the Crown Prince of Germany as his passenger. This book allows the reader to be a spectator at an important moment in history, while also learning something of the individual personalities of these amazing brothers, and of their less well-known accomplishments.



Teachers designing units focusing on the life and culture of the Ancient Egyptians will delight middle school students by introducing them to *Secrets of the Sphinx* (Scholastic, 2003) by James Cross Giblin. Ibatoulline's magnificent watercolor illustrations draw the reader into the mysteries and history, the facts and myths surrounding the fantastical creature standing guard over the pyramids in the Giza Plateau. This rich, non-fiction text covers its topic well, and will mesmerize Egyptologists, both young and old!

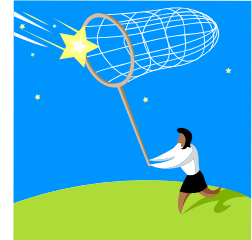


Barbara Kerley's appealing biography of one of America's most beloved poets, *Walt Whitman: Words for America* (Scholastic, 2004), presents a compassionate portrait of Whitman during the Civil War years. Densely illustrated by Brian Selznick, with numerous excerpts from the poet's work interspersed, the narrative reveals Whitman's empathy, respect, and fondness for President Lincoln and the pride the poet felt for his country, along with his abhorrence of slavery. English teachers could well use this biography to create a context in which to read more of Whitman's work, and to prompt a study of his personality and character. History teachers will find it an absorbing study of the age.



Upper Elementary

Another book relating to Whitman, pointing up a different facet of his poetry's influence... Loren Long's illustrated interpretation of the Whitman poem *When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer* (Simon & Schuster, 2004) depicts a young boy's fascination with the stars in the night sky. This vision contrasts with the boy's visit to the planetarium and his attendance at the astronomer's lecture, both of which struck him as dull. A discussion of the poem and the boy's vision offers an opportunity for young readers to consider the power of the imagination. It also offers the chance to appreciate Whitman's ability to evoke, and supremely, to inspire.



Ride Like the Wind: A Tale of the Pony Express (Blue Sky Press, 2004) brings to life this fascinating yet brief period of American history, and *is* brought to life by Bernie Fuchs' wonderfully vibrant oil paintings. The story centers on fictional Johnny Free, an orphan who becomes a rider for the Pony Express. The tale of his adventures and the dangers he encounters on the trail capture and compel the reader to read on. Fuchs mixes in historical information such as the tension between the Paiute tribe and the settlers, bringing added excitement and an element of suspense to the story. Horse lovers will appreciate the special bond between Johnny and his horse, Jenny Soo, who saves his life. Dates and other factual details are included both before and after the story, assuring that this book will appeal to a wide range of ages as both fiction and a chronicle of the period.

When school becomes challenging we all need a friend like *Danitra Brown, Class Clown* (Harper Collins, 2005). This book of poems by Nikki Grimes tells of a very special friendship between Zuri and Danitra. Zuri faces challenges of many kinds through the school year, but Danitra is there to help her in every situation and to make her problems disappear. She encourages Zuri to believe in herself and to be proud of whom she is. Danitra is a wonderful character who is never afraid to be herself, or to stand out in a crowd. She is a "model" character whom young readers will enjoy discussing.

Alley Oops (Flashlight Press, 2005) by Janice Levy approaches the topic of bullying in a clever and unique way. J.J. gets in trouble when he is caught bullying Patrick, the new boy in school. Instead of lecturing, J.J.'s father shares with him that he had himself been a bully as a boy. He remarks that later, when he encountered the person as an adult who he had bullied in school, Mr. Jax finally came to understand how cruel he had been, and how much he had affected the man's life. When J.J. meets Patrick again afterward he discovers they do have a lot in common after all, and they become friends. The story is fast paced and moves quickly from the potentially threatening stage to some humorous episodes the two new friends share, and it offers an unusual approach—and an appealing solution—to the problem of bullying. Sad to say, many children will be able to relate to the bullying theme; this book can perhaps bring them hope, and show them a novel way possibly of coping.

How about taking your students on a field trip to Australia?! In *Top to Bottom Down Under* (Harper Collins, 2005) Ted and Betsey Lewis lead us on a tour from the top of Australia to the bottom. The two Caldecott Honor artists mix realistic, detailed watercolor pictures with playful sketches. The tour is given in a humorous, anecdotal way that makes the reader feel as if traveling along with them, and



quite comfortable in the voyage. Information on Australian animals and the landscape is mixed in with examples of Australian slang. It's a bonzer read! And sure to please.



The story of the subway's history from London's unique underground to New York City's serpentine network is the topic of Larry Dane Brimner's *Subway: The Story of Tunnels, Tubes, and Tracks* (Boyd's Mills Press, 2004). Illustrator Neil Waldman delineates the historical context and portrays important personalities who contributed to the invention and construction of this unique form of public transportation. Sidebars present additional facts about related elements such as the tube, the token, and the "Chunnel" connecting England and France. This is a fascinating account of a subject infrequently studied. Readers interested in the topic will find this work absorbing.

Joe Louis: America's Fighter (Harcourt, Inc., 2005) by David A. Adler is more than just the biography of the famous boxer; it is the story of a period in American culture, and of one man's rise to success against daunting odds. Joseph Lewis Barrow came from a poor family and was born in a time of racial prejudice and segregation. Through his hard work and talent he became heavyweight champion of the world. The story shows how he became first a hero to African Americans and a symbol of hope for his race during the Depression, then later an iconic figure and source of pride to all Americans, regardless of race, when he fought and won against the fighter Max Schmeling of Nazi Germany. Adler conveys clearly Louis's fighting spirit and his unrelenting drive to succeed, and also why he is considered to be among the greatest heavyweight champions ever to enter the ring.

A Bear Named Trouble (Clarion, 2005) by Marion Dane Bauer makes a great classroom read-aloud for upper primary and all elementary grades. The story is about a wild bear and a young boy, and is told from both the bear's and boy's points of view. Ten year-old Jonathan lives close to the Alaska Zoo, where his father is a caretaker. Jonathan loves animals so much he comes to project himself inside their bodies and imagines he can see what they see, and feel what they feel. When Jonathan's favorite zoo creature is accidentally killed by the bear—now named Trouble—Jonathan enlists the aid of the public to get rid of Trouble. Trouble, now, really is in trouble! This is an involving animal story (based on an actual incident where a bear really did break into a zoo). The characters, both human and animal, are nicely drawn and believable. It's a great book for young readers, and for all animal lovers.



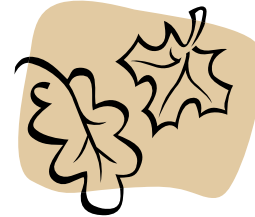
Primary

Who could be a better role model to teach children polite table manners than a dinosaur? Jane Yolen and Mark Teague team up for *How Do Dinosaurs Eat Their Food?* (The Blue Sky Press, 2005). All through this humorous rhyming book dinosaurs display every rude behavior a child could possibly think up. The story puts dinosaurs in a house with human parents who are repelled by their poor manners. Readers who look carefully at the illustrations will find each dinosaur's name—in itself a source of fun.



Happily, by the end of the book the dinosaurs all show impeccable table manners. So then, who wouldn't want to eat like a dinosaur?

Sample the beauty of autumn in New York State with *Leaf Jumpers* (Charlesbridge, 2004), by Carole Gerber. The poetic language and vibrant illustrations demonstrate the joy and beauty of this special season in the Northeast. The narrative describes the shape and color of a variety of leaves, showing each leaf's unique beauty. The bright illustrations and short text will appeal to all elementary levels. Of course the best part of fall for kids, as for the narrator of the story, is jumping into a huge pile of leaves and rolling around! An additional page at the end explains what causes the leaves to change color. This is a wonderful book for young readers. It's informative, and its artwork is outstanding.



Watch out! Mr. Frimdimpy is in charge in James Stevenson's book *No Laughing, No Giggling* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004) and he's very strict! The book is a collection of short and amusing tales. Readers will want to laugh, but have to be careful. If Mr. Frimdimpy catches anyone laughing they have to go back to the beginning of the story. He keeps a close eye throughout the book—until he decides to take a nap. Then, when he's not paying attention, the other characters come together and tickle him. Poor Mr. Frimdimpy breaks his own rule about laughing and he himself has to go back to the beginning of the book. But the book is fun throughout, so maybe that's not such a bad thing.

Families (Hyperion, 2006) by Susan Kuklin is, precisely, a celebration of families. The children of each of the sixteen families portrayed were interviewed by the author and chose the settings in their homes in which to be photographed. These families reflect the cultural diversity in the United States today: mixed-race; families of gay and lesbian couples; large and small families; religious families; families with adopted children. The one thing the author found in common among all the children interviewed for the book was that each one felt safe and loved. At age three one of the children was asked "What do you think it means to be adopted?" The answer: "Adoption means you get picked up and loved." Be sure to find the time to read *Families*. It is more than just outstanding photographs and interviews. It is inspirational. One feels good after reading the book, and realizes there may be hope for us all, after all.

NYSRA Children's Literature Committee

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Debbie Dermady, Kristin Gramlich, Victoria Ring,
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