

# **The Language and Literacy Spectrum**

A Journal of the  
New York State  
Reading Association



**Volume Seventeen  
2007**



---

VOLUME 17  
2007

## *Co-Editors*

Robert Judge  
College of Saint Rose

Irene Rosenthal  
College of Saint Rose

## *Editorial Assistance*

Judy Teng  
College of Saint Rose

*Published Annually by the New York State Reading Association*



## Table of Contents

### Comments from the Editors

*Robert Judge*

*Irene Rosenthal*

2

### Focus on Practice

*Molly Ness*

Increasing the Inclusion of Reading Comprehension  
Strategies in Secondary Content-Area Classrooms

3

*Noelle Granger*

*Alison Black*

*Jane Miller*

Exploring the Effect of *Reader Response Plus* on Twelfth  
Grade Students with Disabilities' Reading Comprehension  
and Attitudes Toward Reading

14

*Marlyn Press*

*Linda Epstein*

Nine Ways to Use visual Art as a Prewriting Strategy

31

*Karen Cirincione*

*Diane Bosco*

The Upside of State Mandates: Moving the Reading Clinic  
to a High-Need School

40

*Margaret Golden*

Ten Ways to Imbed ELA Skills into the Math Curriculum

47

*Salika Lawrence*

How Literacy Assessments Transform Teachers' Instructional  
Choices: Secondary Teachers Report How They Prepare for  
State Tests

61

### Book Reviews

Book Banter

72



Teaching is one of the few professions that allows a person to constantly renew himself or herself. Every single day there is the opportunity, some would say the responsibility, to create something brand new. It is in this spirit that we, veterans with over sixty years of experience between us, tackled the project of putting together this journal. It was a brand new experience for us, and we learned a great deal. Although the former editors, Clara Beier and Mirra Ginsberg, provided excellent scaffolding, we were engaged in “discovery learning” at every stage of the process. We are humbly publishing the product of this effort with gratitude for the opportunity to participate in such a personally and professionally rewarding process.

One thing that impressed us about the submissions we received was their relevance to the major concerns and issues facing literacy educators today. The current initiative to improve literacy skills at the middle and high school levels is a topic that is well represented here. Our lead article, "Increasing the inclusion of reading comprehension strategies in secondary content-area classrooms," describes how little time is devoted to reading instruction in content area classrooms and suggests strategies that can be used to rectify this. The concluding article, "How literacy assessments transform teachers' instructional choices: Secondary teachers report how they prepare for state tests," provides the other half of the book-end for the journal in that it reports on what is actually happening in secondary classrooms in response to the pressure of state testing mandates.

On the other hand, the article, "The upside of state mandates: Moving the reading clinic to a high-needs school," reports on a positive result of an assessment driven decision. Moving the literacy clinic where graduate students fulfilled their practicum requirement had positive consequences for both graduate students and struggling readers alike.

Two articles provide practical teaching tips that can be easily integrated into one's classroom repertoire. "Nine ways to use visual art as a pre-writing strategy" and "Ten ways to imbed ELA skills into the math curriculum" both offer ideas that can be used immediately and effectively.

The article, "Exploring the effect of *Reader Response Plus* on twelfth grade students with disabilities" describes the impact of guiding student response writing and discussion on the reading comprehension and attitudes toward reading of four students. This article reminded us that regardless of the timeliness of the articles here, there are literacy instructional issues that are truly timeless. If you engage students in thinking about, writing and discussing works of quality literature, you will produce students who are more literate by any testing measure.



## Increasing the Inclusion of Reading Comprehension Strategies in Secondary Content-Area Classrooms

*Molly Ness*

### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents research on the frequency of reading comprehension instruction in secondary content-area classrooms. In 2,400 minutes of direct classroom observation, only 3% of instructional time was allotted to coaching middle and high school readers on the reading comprehension strategies essential to understanding informational text. Finally, suggestions for increasing reading comprehension in such classrooms are provided.

### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Molly Ness is an Assistant Professor in Curriculum and Teaching at Fordham University's Graduate School of Education. Her research interests include diagnosing and assessing struggling readers, reading comprehension, and emergent and beginning fluency.

Today's middle and high schools are flooded with readers who struggle to complete the academic tasks required of them. The Alliance for Excellent Education noted that approximately six million middle and high school students have very low literacy levels that affect achievement and content mastery in all subjects (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Perhaps the most important literacy task for our middle and high schoolers involves reading comprehension. For the purpose of this paper, reading comprehension will be defined as an active, problem-solving process; "Reading comprehension is intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader" (Durkin, 1993, p. 5). The academic importance of instruction in reading comprehension is certain. Students who are taught comprehension strategies such as predicting, questioning, and summarizing improve their reading comprehension scores on both experimenter-constructed and standardized tests (Pressley, 1998; Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996). Though results suggest that secondary teachers can assist students in becoming proficient readers by arming them with a variety of comprehension strategies, the degree to which teachers provide such instruction is unclear.

Echoing the importance of reading comprehension, the National Reading Panel (2000) found research evidence for the following eight reading comprehension strategies.

1. *Comprehension monitoring* in which the reader learns how to be aware or conscious of his or her understanding during reading and learns procedures to deal with problems in understanding as they arise.



2. *Cooperative learning* in which readers work together to learn strategies in the context of reading.
3. *Graphic and semantic organizers* that allow the reader to represent graphically (write or draw) the meanings and relationships of the ideas that underlie the words in the text.
4. *Story structure* from which the reader learns to ask and answer who, what, where, when, and why questions about the plot and, in some cases, maps out the time line, characters, and events in stories.
5. *Question answering* in which the reader answers questions posed by the teacher and is given feedback on the correctness.
6. *Question generation* in which the reader asks himself or herself why, when, where, what, how, and who questions.
7. *Summarization* in which the reader attempts to identify and write the main or most important ideas that integrate or unite the other ideas or meanings of the text into a coherent whole.
8. *Multiple Strategy Instruction* in which the reader uses several of the procedures in interaction with the teacher over the text. Multiple-strategy teaching is effective when the procedures are used flexibly and appropriately by the reader or the teacher in naturalistic contexts. (p. 4-6)

For more than 90 years, literacy researchers have called on content-area teachers to provide explicit reading instruction in their classrooms (Artley, 1944; Bond & Bond, 1941; Burnett, 1966; Gray, 1925; Herber, 1970; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999; Moore, Readence, & Rickelman, 1983; Smith, 1919). This message, however, is not always reflected in instructional practice. O'Brien, Stewart, and Moje (1995) stated that reading instruction may not be widely incorporated in secondary content-area classrooms. There is much room for improvement with regard to reading comprehension instruction in our nation's math, science, social studies, physical education, and fine arts classrooms.

### **Research Objectives**

In the fall of 2006, I set forth to examine the extent to which content-area secondary teachers included explicit comprehension strategies in regular classroom instruction. Additionally, in collecting qualitative data, the researcher hoped to give voice to teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about the instructional need for and the role of reading instruction in content-area classrooms. In examining the instructional practices of four middle school content-area teachers and four high school content-area teachers, the following questions were addressed.

- To what degree do middle and high school content-area teachers incorporate reading comprehension strategies in their science and social studies classrooms? What percentage of classroom time is spent on providing reading comprehension instruction?
- Which reading comprehension strategies are most frequently incorporated into middle and high school science and social studies classrooms?



- What are teachers' attitudes towards the need and usefulness of reading comprehension instruction in content-area classrooms? What factors influence these attitudes?

### Data Collection

#### *Classroom Observations and Data Coding*

Data collection consisted of 2,400 minutes of direct classroom observations in eight middle and high school science and social studies classrooms. Participants included two middle school science teachers, two middle school social studies teachers, two high school science teachers, and two high school social studies teachers. All participants were observed for a total of five hours each, divided into thirty-minute sessions. Acting as a non-participant observer, I coded data into one of two categories: Comprehension Instruction or Non-Comprehension Instruction. Codes focusing on teacher behavior provided information about the nature of classroom instruction with particular regard to reading comprehension, as listed in the table below.

Table 1

Category	Code
Non-comprehension Instruction	Didactic Instruction of New Material (DI-N) Didactic Instruction of Review Material (DI-R) Assignment (AS) Transition (TR) Non-instruction (NI) Participatory Approach (PA)
Comprehension Instruction	Question Answering (CI-QA) Question Generation (CI-QG) Summarization (CI-S) Graphic Organizers (CI-GO) Text Structure (CI-TS) Cooperative Learning (CI-CL) Comprehension Monitoring (CI-MO) Multiple Strategies (CI-MS)

Non-comprehension codes noted typical routines, behaviors, and occurrences in classroom instruction, such as teacher-led instruction of material, the giving and completion of assignments, non-instruction, and transition between shorter instructional segments. Comprehension Instruction codes aligned with the NRP reading comprehension strategies: question answering, question generation, summarization, graphic organizers, text structure, cooperative learning, comprehension monitoring, and multiple strategy instruction. Instruction was coded as Comprehension Instruction when teachers provided explanations of, directions on how to, modeling of, and assignments focused on explicit reading comprehension strategies in relation to text.



While observing the class, I coded teacher behavior in 30 second increments at set time intervals. The 30-second interval was chosen because it contains sufficient evidence of teacher behavior and is shorter than the expected duration of most instructional strategies. The use of set time intervals was intended to avoid the subjectivity of deciding when an activity begins and ends. I began coding at Interval #1, observed for 30 seconds of instruction, then used the next 30 seconds to record observed codes. Each interval was only allotted one code. In instances when multiple codes were observed, I coded for the most prevalent behavior. In addition to recording codes, I also made qualitative notes about the instruction in that interval, including teacher directions, materials used, and student behaviors. This process was repeated for the 30-minute duration of observation. At the conclusion of each observation, codes that appeared during the observation were tallied.

### *Teacher Interviews*

In analyzing the qualitative data collected, I applied a framework set forth by Patton (1990). To answer the third research question inquiring about teachers' perceptions about the instructional need for comprehension instruction, all teachers were interviewed in an open-ended session. Because the nature of the questions could have perhaps influenced instructional tactics of teachers, the interviews occurred at the conclusion of all classroom observations. Questions were open-ended and probed teachers' backgrounds, training, as well as an overview of instructional practices. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, with member checking conducted to ensure accuracy of each interview. In Phase I, informal analysis, I read through interviews. In Phase II, coding, I read through all data sources and wrote analytic memos on data. In Phase III, initial category creation, I gathered potential categories that emerged from data. In Phase IV, category confirmation, I continued the coding process of data to establish positive and negative cases for all of the categories. In Phase V, conferencing, I confirmed categories across multiple data sources and, if necessary, resolved discrepancies with participants through triangulation. Through these efforts, I made sense of teachers' perceptions about content-area instruction in secondary classrooms.

### **Quantitative Results**

Though minimal literacy integration was expected, reading comprehension instruction was quite limited in these eight secondary classrooms. In a total of 2,400 minutes of classroom observations, these secondary content-area teachers allotted only 82 minutes to teach, explain, model, scaffold, and assist students in using effective reading comprehension strategies. Only 3% of instructional time was used to help these adolescent readers make meaning of text through asking and answering questions, summarizing, applying fix-up strategies when comprehension broke down, examining text structures, using graphic organizers, predicting, and clarifying. Thus, over the course of this study, reading comprehension instruction comprised 3% of classroom observations. In order to show how classroom instruction occurred in secondary content-area classrooms, Figure 1 and Table 2 tally and depict the results from classroom observations of all eight participants.





The data indicate that more explicit reading comprehension instruction occurred in middle school classrooms (79 minutes total) than in high school classrooms (3 minutes total). Additionally, social studies teachers were more likely to incorporate explicit reading comprehension instruction (60 minutes) than science teachers (22 minutes). Furthermore, the explicit reading comprehension instruction that was incorporated was limited in its scope; the most heavily relied upon strategies teachers used to build and support comprehension were asking literal questions and having students write summaries of text. Of the eight NRP (2000) reading comprehension strategies, secondary content-area teachers' favored reading comprehension strategy was Question Answering (62 minutes), followed by Text Structure (18 minutes), and lastly Summarization (2 minutes).

Figure 1

**Percentage Breakdown of Classroom Instruction**

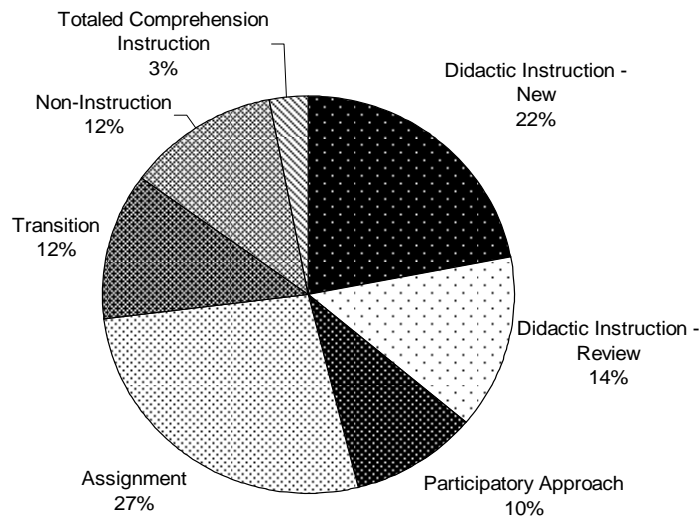




Table 2

Breakdown of Classroom Instruction Across Eight Participants													
Code	Dickinson	Lee	Libert	Miller	Rouse	Shifflet	McCorvey	Wills	Total	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
DI-NI	24	69	43	51	92	69	107	80	535	24	107	66.88	26.947
DI-N	51	43	27	94	73	10	15	24	337	10	94	42.13	29.396
PA	6	63	70	0	20	57	0	13	229	0	70	28.63	29.684
AS	150	64	101	40	76	68	63	76	638	40	150	79.75	33.083
TR	20	46	57	23	35	54	21	29	285	20	57	35.63	14.947
NI	37	8	2	32	3	40	94	78	294	2	94	33.00	35.412
CI-QG	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.00	.000
CI-QA	10	2	0	48	0	2	0	0	62	0	48	7.75	16.611
CI-S	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	.25	.707
CI-GO	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.00	.000
CI-CO	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.00	.000
CI-CM	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.00	.000
CI-TS	2	5	0	10	1	0	0	0	18	0	10	2.25	3.576
CI-MS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.00	.000

### Qualitative Results

The qualitative data suggest that though secondary content-area teachers viewed reading and literacy as crucial to student learning, they were unlikely to provide explicit reading instruction during class time. Teachers viewed covering their content as their instructional priority and felt that covering content and the pressure to reach high pass rates for standardized testing dictated how they taught.

#### Teachers' Instruction and Beliefs: Content Breadth over Depth

In examining the quantitative and qualitative data, it is clear that the secondary teachers in this study saw their major instructional responsibility as covering their particular content in preparation for state standardized tests, and as such, identified themselves by their content area. Of equal importance, secondary teachers did not see reading comprehension instruction as their responsibility, even if it meant enhanced understanding of assigned materials.

When asked about their instructional role, all eight participants explicitly referred to the necessity to cover content. For example, a high school science teacher explained, "Teachers are so test driven. We have an enormous amount of information to pour into students' heads in order to fulfill the yearly requirements of the standardized tests." No doubt the pressure the participants felt about covering content was linked to preparing students for state standardized testing. A middle school social studies teacher noted, "My instructional priority is content with an emphasis on test scores." It was also apparent that the teachers in this study felt the best preparation for the tests was covering content;



teachers did not use classroom instruction to explore test-taking strategies during my fall observations.

With content being a central focus, the secondary teachers in my study often envisioned themselves as the primary conveyors of information. All eight of the classrooms involved in my study followed the teacher-centered transmission model, where teacher talk and lecture was a central focus of instruction. Additionally the majority of classroom instruction I observed followed the three-prong instructional delivery format, known as the Initiation Response Evaluation pattern (Mehan, 1979), which involves teacher-initiated questioning, student response, and teacher evaluation of student responses. The results of this study seem to agree with the literature pointing out the teacher-directed culture of secondary schools. More specifically, the themes of teacher-dominated instruction, of minimal literacy integration, and of the pressure to cover content mirror Wilson's (2000) findings that teachers' beliefs are likely influenced by state testing. It is possible that teacher-dominated classrooms and the current culture of high stakes testing mutually reinforce each other; because teachers in this study felt limited in their instructional autonomy, they resorted to teacher-led instruction.

#### *Content Focus Defines Instruction*

The pressure that teachers in my study felt to cover state-mandated content had a heavy influence on their instructional identities. Jacobs (2002) explained that secondary teachers consider themselves teachers of content areas such as math, history, and science. As such, content-area teachers do not believe that literacy integration is their instructional responsibility (Greenleaf et al., 2001; Jacobs & Wade, 1981). The following quotation from a high school science teacher reveals his sense of self as a content teacher, not a teacher of reading. "I'm not a reading specialist, so I'm not able to do all the things they say. If I did all those things, after a while I'd be a reading specialist and not a science teacher." The data suggest that the teachers in this study did not recognize that "content literacy has the potential to maximize content acquisition" (McKenna & Robinson, 2006, p. 12).

Thus, it appears that participants' sense of themselves as content teachers was influenced by their domain-specific knowledge necessary for preparation for standardized testing. In turn, the pressure to cover content and to prepare students for the state tests influenced the methods of their instruction. Teachers placed such a high value on their domain that they perceived that literacy integration would detract from content-area instruction.

These data align with past research that found "subject-area teachers increasingly view their role as getting across the content of their discipline" (Greenleaf et al., 2001, p. 84). Finally, Alvermann and Moore's (1991) revelation that teachers' beliefs and instructional practices are shaped by contextual factors including adhering to state policies and preparation for standardized tests would appear to apply to the teachers in this study.



### Implications

These results suggest significant trends about the nature of secondary classroom instruction. First, with middle and high school curricula that emphasize breadth over depth, teachers see their major instructional responsibility as covering their particular content in preparation for state standardized tests. Teacher-led instruction of material through lectures, discussions, and films, rather than through direct exposure to print, prevailed in these classrooms. As such, students' had minimal exposure to text and virtually no support for how to comprehend that text. When teachers feel instructional time is best spent by delivering content, reading instruction may hold a minimal role.

Furthermore, results suggest that teachers view literacy integration and reading comprehension support as an additional time-consuming burden, rather than an effective way to improve student understanding and retention of content information. Secondary schools must encourage content teachers to reshape their understandings of reading and writing across the curriculum; only then will secondary teachers begin to see literacy integration as a fruitful opportunity rather than an instructional obstacle.

In addition, the lack of reading comprehension instruction in this study might also be explained by teachers' limited knowledge of what reading comprehension entails. Of the eight research-based reading comprehension strategies discussed by the National Reading Panel (2000), teachers in this study only provided comprehension instruction on three strategies: question answering, summarizing text, and examining text structure. The use of only three reading comprehension strategies may suggest that teacher training and professional development opportunities are not effectively conveying the range of possibilities within reading comprehension strategy instruction. Perhaps if middle and high school teachers understood that reading comprehension instruction can occur in group work, as with Reciprocal Teaching, or can encourage students to note their own comprehension breakdowns, as in comprehension monitoring, they may be more likely to understand the wide variety of effective reading comprehension instructional opportunities in science and social studies classrooms.

#### *How Secondary Schools Can Increase Reading Comprehension Instruction*

The minimal inclusion of reading comprehension strategies would appear to have implications for professional development for in-service teachers, inquiry-based reflective teaching, and the instructional capacities of literacy coaches in supporting content teachers.

*Suggestion #1. Provide meaningful professional development opportunities that convince teachers of literacy integration as an instructional priority.*

To increase reading comprehension in secondary classrooms, schools must critically reflect about the quality of professional development. Of the utmost importance is that professional development helps teachers understand the opportunity and value of literacy instruction in content classes. With meaningful professional development, teachers can begin to understand that literacy integration does not detract from content coverage, but actually improves student comprehension and retention of content. In-



service teachers must have meaningful professional development including mentoring and coaching to allow them to see the realm of possibilities in content literacy, as explained in *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*.

The idea is not that content-area teachers should become reading and writing teachers, but rather that they should emphasize the reading and writing practices that are specific to their subjects, so students are encouraged to read and write like historians, scientists, mathematicians, and other subject-area experts. (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004, p. 15)

*Suggestion #2. Create school environments where teachers critically reflect on their instructional goals and priorities.*

Additionally, secondary schools can provide opportunities for meaningful teacher reflection. Though the majority of in-service professional development opportunities provide teachers with a plethora of reading and writing strategies, these opportunities rarely ask teachers to critically examine how literacy may come to support their instructional goals. When schools create collaborative environments where teachers share their instructional successes and struggles, literacy integration becomes a schoolwide priority, rather than a mere buzzword. Ideas include teacher-led book clubs, where colleagues read and discuss professional development books by authors such as Kyleene Beers and Chris Tovani, or case studies in effective literacy integration in content-area classrooms (Moje, 1996). Through meaningful professional development opportunities which highlight literacy as a crucial means to content acquisition, teachers can begin to critically examine their own instruction and set literacy integration as an essential instructional goal.

*Suggestion #3. Utilize secondary literacy coaches and curriculum specialists to support teachers as they attempt to implement literacy strategies.*

Given the minimal literacy instruction integrated by participants in my study, secondary teachers may benefit from literacy coaches acting as experts in literacy integration. The Alliance for Excellent Education (Biancarosa and Snow, 2004) estimates that 10,000 literacy coaches will be needed to assist the nine million secondary readers who read at 'below basic' levels. If literacy coaches were commonplace in our nation's middle and high schools, content teachers might begin to understand the need for literacy integration across the curriculum. By establishing a collaborative environment, literacy coaches could assist teachers in reflecting on their own instructional practices and beliefs. Literacy coaches have the ability to help secondary teachers understand that reading comprehension strategies do not detract from students' learning of content, but rather assist in their ability to engage in, critically think about, and retain content.

### **Conclusion**

The stakes are high for our nation's middle and high school students; secondary students are expected to read a variety of texts with complex vocabulary and dense



content. Our secondary schools and teachers simply cannot shirk the responsibility of preparing our students for their literacy and academic demands. There are tremendous opportunities for schools and teachers to rise to the challenge; a wide body of research, including professional development journals and books, shows what effective literacy integration in middle and high school content-area classrooms entails. Through improved professional development and collaboration between teachers, literacy coaches, and curriculum specialists, reading comprehension instruction may be a classroom norm, rather than an unlikely occurrence.

### References

- Alvermann, D., & Moore, D. (1991). Secondary school reading. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal & R. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research: Volume II* (pp. 861-884). New York: Longman.
- Artley, S. (1944). A study of certain relationship existing between general reading comprehension and reading comprehension in a specific subject matter. *Journal of Educational Research*, 37, 464-473.
- Biancarosa, G., & Snow, C. (2004). *Reading Next - A vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy: A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Bond, G., & Bond, E. (1941). *Developmental reading in high school*. New York: Macmillan.
- Burnett, R. W. (1966). Reading in the secondary school: Issues and innovations. *Journal of Reading*, 322-332.
- Durkin, D. (1993). *Teaching them to read* (Vol. 6th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Gray, W. S. (1925). A modern program of reading instruction for the grades and high school. *Twenty-fourth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Greenleaf, C., Schoenbach, R., Cziko, C., & Mueller, F. (2001). Apprenticing adolescent readers to academic literacy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 71(1), 79-129.
- Herber, H. L. (1970). *Teaching reading in content areas*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Jacobs, V. (2002). Reading, writing, and understanding. *Educational Leadership*, 58-61.
- Jacobs, V. & Wade, S. (1981). Teaching reading in secondary content areas. *Momentum*, 12(4), 8-10.
- McKenna, M., & Robinson, R. (1990). Content literacy: A definition and implications. *Journal of Reading*, 34, 184-186.
- Mehan, H. (1979). *Learning lessons: Social organization in the classroom*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Moje, E. B. (1996). "I teach students, not subjects": Teacher-student relationships as contexts for secondary literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 31, 172-195.
- Moore, D., Bean, T., Birdyshaw, D., & Rycik, J. (1999). Adolescent literacy: A position statement. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43, 97-112.



- Moore, D., Readence, J., & Rickelman, R. (1983). An historical exploration of content-area reading instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly, 18*, 419-438.
- National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implication for reading instruction: Reports of the subgroups*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Development.
- O'Brien, D. G., Stewart, R. A., & Moje, E. B. (1995). Why content literacy is difficult to infuse into the secondary school: Complexities of curriculum, pedagogy, and school culture. *Reading Research Quarterly, 30*, 442-463.
- Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2 ed.). Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Pressley, M. (1998). *Reading instruction that works: The case for balanced teaching*. New York: Guilford.
- Rosenshine, B., Meister, C., & Chapman, S. (1996). Teaching students to generate questions: A review of the intervention studies. *Review of Educational Research, 66*, 181-221.
- Smith, B. M. (1919). Correlation of ability in reading with the general grades in high school. *School Review, 27*, 493-511.
- Wilson, E. K. (2000). *From university classroom to secondary classroom: An examination of two teachers' beliefs and practices about literacy in the social studies*. Paper presented at the National Reading Conference, Scottsdale, AZ.



## Exploring the Effect of Reader Response Plus on Twelfth Grade Students with Disabilities' Reading Comprehension and Attitudes Toward Reading

*Noelle Granger, Alison Black, and Jane Miller*

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine how reader response journals followed by classroom discussion (*Reader Response Plus*) contributed to students' reading comprehension and to their attitudes toward reading. The study was conducted in a rural school in upstate New York. The twelfth grade class that participated in the study consisted of six students in a special education classroom, four of whom were randomly selected as focus students. As they read the award-winning novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*, by Christopher Paul Curtis, students responded in reader response journals and participated in classroom discussions where these responses were shared. Classroom discussions allowed to consider the perspectives of others and gain new information. Instruments used to collect data include the *Qualitative Reading Inventory-3*, a journal rating rubric, a reading attitude questionnaire, an individual attitude checklist, and field notes

Findings indicate that *Reader Response Plus* contributed to improvements in reading comprehension and attitude. All four of the focus students increased either their independent, instructional, or frustration levels of reading comprehension based on the *QRI-3*. Each student also demonstrated an improvement in reading comprehension based on data collected from rubrics used to assess journal entries. Throughout the course of the study, the students also became more actively engaged with the text and began to participate more during discussion.

### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Alison Black is an Associate Professor in the Division of Education at the State University of New York at Oneonta. Her research interests include children's literature, social justice, and curriculum development for effective teacher education programs.

Jane Miller is a lecturer in the Division of Education at SUNY Oneonta. Prior to joining the university staff, she taught for twenty years in a K-12 rural school as a reading specialist and Reading Recovery teacher. Jane's focus in research has been in teacher education programs to develop effective instruction for at-risk literacy learners.

Noelle Sickler-Granger is a 7-12 special education teacher in a rural school district in Franklin, NY. After completing this study, she plans to continue to work with her colleagues on action research involving differentiated instruction.





In the majority of classrooms today, teachers are faced with greater academic diversity than ever before. Physical, psychological, socioeconomic, and educational factors may lead to problems in a student's ability to learn how to read. The range of reading abilities tends to become wider in each successive grade (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). This range of reading abilities makes it extremely difficult for teachers to provide adequate reading opportunities for all learners. Direct reading instruction does not provide sufficient engaged reading opportunities that will lead to reading growth for many students (Simmons, Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, & Hodge, 1995). When some students are being instructed directly by the teacher, they spend about seventy percent of their time passively watching and listening to the teacher and other students, with little or no opportunity to actually read (Shanker & Ekwall, 2003). To provide these students with the opportunity to become actively engaged in the reading process, teachers must restructure their delivery of instruction. One way to do this would be to incorporate *Reader Response Plus*, as is the case in this study, which consists of reader response journals followed by classroom discussion.

Journal writing has existed for centuries as a way to transmit thoughts and feelings to paper. It seemed to increase in popularity in the 1980s when dialogue journals became a popular way for students and teachers to communicate about books being read in the classroom (David, 1983). Reader response journals are one form of writing that allows students to express their thoughts, feelings, reactions, and questions regarding the literature that is being read (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). This type of journal permits students to construct personal meaning from literature by building on what they know, reflecting on what they have read, formulating opinions, and asking questions. However, the ability to interpret text in a reflective manner is often difficult for students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities in the area of reading comprehension must go beyond simply reading the text. Following the reading of text, they have to write about and discuss the information they have read in order to internalize what they have read. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 states that students who learn effective reading skills early on are more successful than those who do not (United States Department of Education, 2004). Students with disabilities, unfortunately, often have trouble with reading comprehension at an early age (Gunning, 2006). Because of this, they must engage in experiences that will help them respond to literature, increase their comprehension, and facilitate their enjoyment of reading.

The students who participated in this study have a history of reading and writing difficulties. These disabilities include, but are not limited to, reading comprehension and written expression. Reader response journals provided these students with guidance in learning how to respond to literature in a meaningful way. The students were given a list of prompts (see figure 1) that supported their focus as they explored their feelings and reactions to the novels they had read. They were also able to record any questions they had regarding the novels and new information that they had gained from reading them. The students then engaged in a classroom discussion, during which all students were encouraged to share their written responses.



The purpose of this article is to describe *Reader Response Plus*, a reading intervention program that combines reader response journals with classroom discussion. *Reader Response Plus* was designed to provide students with disabilities with increased opportunities for both written and spoken self-expression. Rosenblatt (1938) believed that readers bring different emotions, experiences, and knowledge to reading, and this transaction brings forth different associations with the words, images, and ideas in the text. Because of this variety of associations, all students express themselves differently. Reader response journals allow individuals to make connections to the text.

Vygotsky (1978) stated that children learn by reconstituting prior knowledge as they encounter new information, primarily through collaborative talk with others. He believed that students are capable of attaining a higher level of learning with help, known as the level of assisted performance while in the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky held that a child is capable of performing at a higher level when involved in any type of social interaction, including interacting with peers as equals. Classroom discussions allow students to learn new information and develop improved thinking strategies through the process of sharing thoughts, negotiating with each other, and acknowledging new ideas. As students learn from their peers, they are capable of shifting within their zone of proximal development to attain higher levels of achievement (Vygotsky, 1978). Reader response journals can be used as a basis for encouraging students to share their personal responses with others during classroom discussions. This sharing facilitates the expansion of responses to the literature and broadens their knowledge of the text.

### **Research Base for *Reader Response Plus***

Students who are at-risk in the area of reading comprehension fail to organize unfamiliar material and tend to ask themselves fewer questions while reading (Baker, Gersten, & Scanlon, 2002). Reader response journals provide a structured format for students to record their feelings, responses, and reactions to reading texts. This type of journal provides students with the opportunity to engage in informal, self-directed writing about literature that can be a tool for thinking and self-expression (Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1999). This writing format enables all students to become actively engaged in the reading process in a non-threatening context. Because there is no right or wrong response and because all opinions are accepted, reader response journals encourage learners of all abilities to take risks. In this context, students are not afraid to venture ideas, ask questions, and construct their own personal meanings of what they have read (Wollman-Bonilla, 1991).

It has been suggested that response journals combined with classroom discussion enhances the interpretive comprehension of literature (Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999; Wong, Kuperis, Jamieson, Keller & Cull-Hewitt, 2002; Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1995; Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1999). When classroom discussion takes place after responding to literature in journals, the teacher creates a conversational context that invites students to interact with one another and further extend their reading comprehension. These interactions allow students to express and support their ideas by encouraging elaboration. Ultimately, discussion provides students with opportunities to



become actively engaged with text, which may lead to a deeper understanding of reading material. These discussions also allow students to gain new insights from their peers. An increase in reflective thinking has been found through the combined use of journals and classroom discussion (Song, 1997; Farest & Miller, 1994).

When students are better able to understand what is being read, they are also likely to develop more positive attitudes toward reading. Reader response journals have been shown to increase the reading comprehension of all learners (Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999; Wong et al., 2002). This increase in achievement should affect students' attitudes toward reading because students develop a greater degree of self-confidence when they experience success, ultimately leading them to feel better about the reading process.

### ***Reader Response Plus – Four Case Studies***

#### *Participants*

Students in the twelfth grade class that participated in this study met every day for forty minutes during the 2004-2005 school year. This English 12 class was a 15:1 minimum educational needs self-contained class with an all male population. The teacher-researcher chose a focus group of four students using the process of simple random sampling. This method of sampling was chosen because all of the learners in the target group have disabilities in the area of reading comprehension.

Ted, Adam, David, and Bob (pseudonyms used) had been in a self-contained English class since the eighth grade, and all have special needs in the areas of reading comprehension, reading decoding, and written expression. The reading levels of these students ranged from 3.8 to 9.7. Ted, Adam, and Bob participated in *Reading Recovery* in first grade and were discontinued due to lack of acceleration within the program format. David did not enter the school district until the eighth grade.

#### *Instruments*

The *Qualitative Reading Inventory – 3* (Leslie & Caldwell, 2001) is an informal reading inventory that measures reading comprehension through the answers to implicit and explicit comprehension questions that determine the level of the reader's understanding of text.

A journal-rating rubric (see figure 2) was used to assess reading comprehension as demonstrated through the reflections that students recorded in their reader response journals. An individual attitude checklist (see figure 3) was used to assess students' attitudes toward reading as evidenced during silent reading, journal writing, and classroom discussion.

Field notes were taken on a daily basis throughout the course of the study to record the teacher's observations, student dialogue, and teacher reflections during journal writing time and classroom discussions.

#### *Materials*

The reading material used throughout the course of this study was *The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963* (Curtis, 1995), both a Newbery Honor Book and a Coretta



---

Scott King Honor Book. The characters in this novel are involved in humorous predicaments, but at the same time face real life issues that children continue to face today. The novel explores historical events in a context that allows students to view the Civil Rights Movement through the eyes of this family's firsthand experience.

### *Instruction*

Prior to the research study, the students had no experience with reader response journals. Therefore, the teacher provided the students with a list of possible prompts to respond to approximately a week before the study began (see figure 1). The teacher then modeled by thinking out loud while writing each of the types of responses so the students had knowledge of what would be expected of them. The journal- rating checklist (see figure 2) was also shared and employed with the students so that they were aware of what should be included in the reader response journals.

The week before the onset of the study, the teacher-researcher conducted the pre-test of the *QRI – 3* (Leslie & Caldwell, 2001) and the pre- *Reading Attitude Questionnaire*. The *QRI - 3* was used to indicate the independent, instructional, and frustration levels of the focus students involved in the study. The *Reading Attitude Questionnaire* was given to all students to assess their attitudes toward reading prior to the implementation of the study.

Throughout the six-week research period, students responded to the prompts after silently reading *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*. Daily they silently read a brief portion of the book (approximately five pages) assigned by the teacher. Each student chose a prompt and recorded his response in the journal. Before they could use a specific prompt again, students had to respond to all of the prompts. After they responded to the prompts in their journals, each student discussed his response with the class in a whole class discussion. Independent reading, reader response writing, and classroom discussions continued on a daily basis throughout the course of the study. The teacher completed the journal rating rubric twice a week and the individual attitude checklist (figure 3) once a week during the implementation of the study. The research study concluded with the students' completion of the post-test of the *QRI - 3* and the post- *Reading Attitude Questionnaire*.

### **Results**

Results from the *Qualitative Reading Inventory – 3* and the journal rating rubric demonstrated that *Reader Response Plus* produced an overall increase in reading comprehension for the four focus students. Student scores on the journal rating rubric progressively improved from week one to week six of the study. In the beginning of the study, the journal entries lacked text based details. For example, Adam's journal entries lacked supporting details. Initially very skeptical of sharing with the class, his sharing of responses was very limited. Once Adam began to feel more comfortable, he began to participate more; Adam moved from 1 to 3 in his responses on "details from the book." On March 11, Adam wrote,



When the boys from the South got hit with the apple it would have made me anger. When the one boy ate half of the sandwich that would have told me that his mom was a bad cook. When the boy ate the apple with Kennys spit on it would have made me sick.

On May 12 his response read,

I think whats going to happen next is Kennys going to be swimming in the lake and the Wool Pooh is going to come out of the water and attack him. Then Kenny will scream and byron will hear him but wont think anything happening and Kennys going to drowind. Then there going to save him and live happily ever after like the three little pigs. My mom said not to make flame throghers but i did anyways and almost caught myself on fire.

Teacher prompting not only helped Adam develop his comprehension of the reading material, but also served to extend his elaboration of details.

At the beginning of the study, journal entries contained misconceptions and a lack of understanding of the reading. For example, in March, Bob's journal entry rating as a 2 in "understanding of reading" read, "Rufus see a squirrel in a tree on the other side of the road and said it was fat and dumb. Rufus likes shooting squirrels he said that they tasted good." However in May, his response was rated a 3 and clearly showed his understanding of text,

The part in the story that surprised me was when Kenny, Byron, and Joey were standing at the signs and Byron and Joey went to the public swing and Kenny went to Colliers landing. I though that Byron would be the one to go to Colliers landing not Kenny. I wonder how much trouble Kenny is going to get in. Kenny my get to stay in Alabama with grandma sands and Byron. If Kenny doesn't drowned. This reminds me of when me and my brothers went swimming when we worn't aloud and one of my brothers started to drowned.

Bob's increased involvement during discussion paralleled his growing comprehension of the text and was evident in his written responses.

Initially, Ted made no personal connections to the day's reading. For example, his response in March, rated as a 1 in "personal connections" read,

When the Bus Driver sead "Y'all just sit next to Poindexter, he dose not Bother no one". I think it Decribs Kenny beca Every one thinks he is smarter than others. I think it makes Kenny feel



more relaxed now because he is not going to be pickd on now because the kids are new.

Through modeling and scaffolding, Ted’s May response was rated a 3 and read,

The part that surprised me was when Kenny seen grandma sands he thought she was going to be mean but turnd out to be nice and vary old. but somthing is going to happe when the family leaves By (Byron) there i just know it. By is going to get in truble. Maby Kenny will stay to. When I was little I went to my gradmas and she was really scary and I startd crying.

David’s use of personal connections on a daily basis served as a model for Ted. Ted eventually learned how to make a connection between the events in the book and his prior experiences after others consistently performed this skill during classroom discussions.

Results from the *QRI -3* also demonstrated increases in reading comprehension. All four focus students improved their independent levels by moving up at least one grade level. All of the focus students improved their instructional levels as evidenced by the results of the *QRI - 3*. Two focus students increased their frustration level from pre- to post-test administration.

<b>Adam</b>	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Mid</u>	<u>Post</u>
<u>Level</u>			
2	Ind – 100%	Ind – 100%	Ind – 100%
3	Frust– 38%	Instr – 88%	Ind – 100%
4		Instr – 75%	N/A
5		Instr – 88%	N/A
6		Instr – 75%	Instr - 88%
Upper Middle School		Frust –30%	Frust –50%

Adam’s results on the *QRI - 3* suggest a marked increase in reading comprehension levels. His independent level of second grade stayed the same for pre- and mid-test administration. However, at post-test administration, Adam’s independent level increased to third grade. Mid- and post-test results indicate the establishment of an instructional level for Adam that ranged from levels third-sixth grade. Adam’s frustration level for the mid- and post-test administration went from third grade to upper middle school.



<b>David</b>	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Mid</u>	<u>Post</u>
<u>Level</u>			
2	Ind – 100%	Ind – 100%	Ind – 100%
3	Instr – 75%	Ind – 100%	Ind – 100%
4	Instr – 75%	Instr – 88%	N/A
5	Instr – 75%	Instr – 88%	N/A
6	Instr – 75%	Instr – 88%	Instr – 88%
Upper Middle School	Frust – 40%	Frust -60%	Instr – 80%

The data from the pre-post administration of the *QRI-3* suggests that David's independent and instructional reading comprehension levels increased as a result of the implementation of the study. Results from the pre-test of the *QRI-3* indicated an independent level of second grade, an instructional level ranging from third-sixth grade, and a frustration level of upper middle school. David's instructional level went from sixth grade to upper middle school at post-test administration.

<b>Bob</b>	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Mid</u>	<u>Post</u>
<u>Level</u>			
4	Ind – 100%	Ind – 100%	Ind – 100%
5	Instr – 75%	Ind – 100%	Ind – 100%
6	Instr – 88%	Instr – 88%	Ind – 100%
Upper Middle School	Frust – 30%	Instr – 70%	N/A
High School		Frust – 40%	Instr – 80%

Bob also made improvement in reading comprehension levels as evidenced by the *QRI-3*. His pre-test independent level was fourth grade, his instructional levels ranged from fifth to sixth grade, and his frustration level was upper middle school. Post-test results demonstrate an increase of independent level at sixth grade and an increase in instructional level from upper middle school to high school.

<b>Ted</b>	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Mid</u>	<u>Post</u>
<u>Level</u>			
2	Ind – 100%	Ind – 100%	Ind – 100%
3	Instr – 88%	Ind – 100%	Ind – 100%
4	Instr – 75%	Instr – 88%	Ind – 100%
5	Instr – 75%	Instr – 88%	Instr - 88%
6	Instr – 88%	Instr – 88%	Instr - 88%
Upper Middle School	Frust – 50%	Instr – 75%	Instr – 75%



The data from the pre-post administration of the *QRI – 3* suggests that Ted’s independent and instructional reading comprehension levels increased as a result of the implementation of the study. Results from the pre-post of the *QRI – 3* indicated an independent level of second grade, an instructional level ranging from third to sixth grade, and a frustration level of upper middle school. Results from the post-test of the *QRI – 3* indicated an independent level of fourth grade, an instructional level ranging from fifth to sixth grade, and a frustration level approaching upper middle school.

On the individual attitude checklist, scores for all students increased as the study progressed. Students gradually became more focused when completing tasks, paid more attention to others during discussion, and became more willing to generate and answer questions during discussion.

Field notes consistently supported the improvement of attitudes toward reading for all students throughout the course of the study. For example, when describing his feelings regarding an event in the book, one of the focus students concluded with, “That part was so funny!” and another stated during a classroom discussion, “This book is really starting to get interesting now.”

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

#### *Reading comprehension.*

The teacher attributes an increase of details in the journals largely to classroom discussions. As discussions took place, teacher prompts essentially served to encourage students to elaborate on details. When students shared literal details from the book during discussions, the teacher asked higher-level questions to encourage them to reach greater comprehension. For example, “What do you mean by that?” and “How is this supported in the book?” were prompts used to encourage elaboration and higher level thinking skills. As the teacher asked higher-level questions, students demonstrated greater comprehension. As students were continuously asked to elaborate with details from the book during class discussion, they gradually began to include more details in their journal entries. Similarly, teacher prompts forced the students to provide an example to support their personal connections during discussion; and eventually, students were incorporating these examples in their journals, demonstrating the value of scaffolding in developing higher levels of comprehension.

The teacher attributes the increases in personal connections made by all students to David’s modeling throughout the course of the study. He began to personally connect to text in every journal entry, regardless of the prompt. After hearing his personal stories, the other students began to follow by example. David’s sharing in discussion demonstrated the integral role of discussion as a component of Reader Response Plus. The discussions allowed students to improve their recall of details, learn through the modeling of others, and reach higher levels of text interpretation.

The findings of this study were consistent with other studies using journals combined with classroom discussion (Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1995, Wong et al., 2002). Wollman-Bonilla and Werchadlo (1995) believe that the use of discussion regarding students’ personal reactions not only provides an opportunity for students to





express their ideas, but also allows the teacher to recognize each student's thoughts. This is extremely important for students with reading and writing disabilities, because it provides them the opportunity to elaborate on information through teacher questioning.

Adam demonstrated an increase in performance levels on the *QRI* -3. Adam went from reaching his frustration level of third grade to that of upper middle school. The teacher believes that his growth in reading comprehension may be attributed to classroom discussions. Prior to this study, Adam rarely spoke in class, had a difficult time understanding concepts relating to reading, and lacked details in his writing. As he began to feel more comfortable with sharing during class discussions, teacher questioning during discussions began to help him develop an understanding of the text. As this continued on a daily basis, Adam began to recall details and gradually applied higher level thinking skills. The combination of all of these factors (impact of classroom discussion, increase in comfort level, recall of details, use of higher level thinking) allowed him to improve his journal entries because he was able to use the knowledge he had gained from reading the text.

Bob's reading performance level increased from upper middle school to a high school instructional level. The teacher attributes his increase in levels of comprehension to his change in behavior as the study progressed. At first, Bob demonstrated a lack of interest in class activities (i.e. throwing his journal down) in order to gain the attention of others. As the study progressed, he came to enjoy the events and characters in the book and eventually sought attention through more positive means, such as personal connections and hand gestures to help other students. Bob's transactions with the text facilitated his comprehension of text and helped to develop higher level thinking skills. The teacher believes that Bob's increased engagement in the book and desire for attention through positive means allowed his reading comprehension levels to improve.

#### *Attitudes toward reading.*

Although Adam and Bob's scores decreased slightly on the reading attitude questionnaire, all of the focus students stayed in the same range from pre- to post-test administration. The majority of statements on the questionnaire focused on general attitudes toward reading. Examples of these statements include, "I like to buy books and have a place to keep them at home," "I would like to belong to a book club," "I like to read books before I go to bed," and "I usually read several books over summer vacation." These statements describe activities that occur outside of school. The participants in this study have struggled with learning disabilities in the area of reading and have been educated in a separate location for English language arts throughout their middle and high school years. These factors may have contributed to students not viewing reading as a priority in their life outside of school. However, the results of the reading attitude questionnaire do suggest that the students came to have a better attitude toward the *Reader Response Plus* activities of writing to learn, reading facilitating learning, and classroom discussion. Avila, Pahuski, and Perez (1999) believe that poor self-perception may affect the learning process in relation to reading and writing. In this current study, Adam was an example of this. As this student's comfort and confidence in self



increased, he was willing to answer and reflect on questions, which gradually influenced his reading comprehension levels.

On the individual attitude checklist, scores for all participants suggest an improvement in attitudes toward reading as the study progressed. Johnston and Winograd (1995) found that students who have a negative attitude toward reading often give up or remain passive in reading and writing activities. All of the participants in the study demonstrated a smaller degree of engagement early in the study in relation to the other behaviors included on the individual attitude checklist. However, the students gradually began to demonstrate a greater degree of active participation during journal writing and classroom discussion. For example, at the onset of the study, David did not display enthusiasm toward the book when he was answering questions during classroom discussions. By the second week, David began to answer questions even when he was not called on, suggesting that his attitude toward reading was improving. Field notes throughout the study captured this gradual improvement in enthusiasm and engagement for all of the participants involved in the study.

### *Recommendations*

Prior to the onset of the study, the teacher took various steps to ensure that the participants understood the various components of *Reader Response Plus* and were aware of how they were going to be assessed. Teacher modeling of the responses to literature was an important aspect in providing students with examples of quality responses. For many of the students, the list of prompts asked them to respond to literature in unfamiliar ways such as describing how they are most like a character. The list of prompts also provided students with a structured choice in responding to the literature. The students could choose a prompt, as long as that prompt had not been previously used. This teacher also reviewed the journal rating rubric and the individual attitude checklist with all of the participants prior to implementation of the study to help establish expectations.

Selecting prompts is an important component in the effectiveness of *Reader Response Plus*. Prompts must be chosen that create opportunities for students to share both literal and inferential knowledge. Asking questions during classroom discussions is another central component in the effectiveness of *Reader Response Plus*. The teacher recommends asking students to expand on their answers on a continuous basis. The students are able to reach deeper levels of thinking when they are constantly asked to elaborate on their responses to text and answers to questions through discussion. Some examples of questions to use include, but are not limited to, “What do you mean by that?” “How is that supported in the book?” and “Why do you think the character reacted this way?”

The teacher also recommends creating a way for all students to share on a daily basis by pulling student names out of an index card box. If this had not been done, students may not have made the gains they did because many of them did not share prior to the study.

In conclusion, the teacher strongly believes that the effectiveness of *Reader Response Plus* is also due to the use of quality literature, such as *The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963*. The characters in the book are involved in humorous predicaments,



but at the same time face compelling issues. From the beginning of this study, the students showed true enjoyment when reading and discussing this book. Their enjoyment was evident in classroom discussions and allowed them to create a comfortable and safe atmosphere for sharing, an atmosphere that was instrumental in helping to develop their reading comprehension and positive attitudes towards literature.

*Reader Response Plus* is a reading intervention program that is dependent upon quality literature and teacher prompts. It allows all students to be successful due to classroom discussion, teacher and peer scaffolding, and a safe environment where all opinions and ideas are valued.

*Figure 1*

### Response Journal Prompts



Read today's assigned selection and write a response. Begin each response with the book title and the date of your journal entry. As you use each of the prompts below, please place an X by the prompt so that you will not repeat that prompt.

- ❖ Ask questions about things that confused you in the story.
- ❖ Describe your feelings about certain events (make sure that the reader knows the event you are writing about)
- ❖ Describe your feelings about characters.
- ❖ Copy down a quote from a character and tell why you think it is meaningful
- ❖ Make a prediction about what you think will happen next and explain why you feel this way
- ❖ Tell how you would react to an event if you were one of the characters in the story
- ❖ Describe a part of the story that surprised you and explain why
- ❖ Write a letter to the author or a character
- ❖ Draw a picture that illustrates something that happened in the reading. Write three sentences to describe the picture.
- ❖ The part about \_\_\_\_\_ reminds me of \_\_\_\_\_
- ❖ I am most like the character \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_



Figure 2

Journal Rating Rubric

3 – High      2 – Average      1 – Low

Content/Ideas _____	Responds to the Prompt _____	Demonstrates Understanding of Reading _____
Uses Details From the Book _____	Uses Higher Order Thinking Skills _____	Makes a Personal Connection _____

Ideas or Insights -

Skills to Work On –

Basis for determining appropriate rating:

Content/Ideas – Student stays on topic and responds effectively by using ideas that emerge from the content of the reading

Responds to the Prompt – Student responds in a complete manner to the chosen prompt.

Demonstrates Understanding of Reading – Student demonstrates that they have gained new knowledge from the text.

Uses Details From the Book – Student supports answer with relevant details from the book.

Uses Higher Order Thinking Skills – Journal entry is more than retelling facts. Students own thoughts and interpretations are evidenced.

Makes a Personal Connection – Student discusses personal feelings or reactions to the text.



Figure 3

Individual Attitude Checklist

4 – consistently      3 – frequently      2 – occasionally      1 – not at all

Date						
On-task when writing						
Well prepared to complete task						
Takes time and completes task						
Enthusiastic when writing						
Willing to share journal entries with others						
Pays attention to discussion						
Positively contributes to discussion						
Displays interest and curiosity in the discussion						
Demonstrates enthusiasm toward reading material						
Shows a willingness to generate and answer questions						
Total Points						
Total Points Possible	40	40	40	40	40	40



---

## References

- Avila, J., Pahuski, L., & Perez, L. (1999). Developing language arts skills through the reading and writing connection. Illinois: Saint Xavier University. Master's Action Research Project. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED433549)
- Baker, S., Gersten, R., & Scanlon, D. (2002). Procedural facilitators and cognitive strategies: Tools for unraveling the mysteries of comprehension and the writing process, and for providing meaningful access to the general curriculum. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 17*(1), 65-77.
- Curtis, C. P. (1995). *The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963*. New York, New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.
- David, F. (1983). Why you call me emigrant?: Dialogue journal writing with migrant youth. *Childhood Education, 60* (1), 110-111, 114-116.
- Farest, C.A. & Miller, C.J. (1994). Having written conversations: Dialogues about literature (Journal Code RIEFEB1996). Arizona: Arizona State University West. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED386740)
- Fountas, I. C. & Pinnell, G. (2001). *Guiding readers and writers grades 3-6: Teaching comprehension, genre, and content literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gunning, T. (2006). *Assessing and correcting reading and writing difficulties* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Johnston, P. H., & Winograd, P. (1985). Passive failure in reading. *Journal of Reading Behavior, 17*, 279-301.
- Leslie, L. & Caldwell, J. (2001). *Qualitative Reading Inventory –3*. New York, NY: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1938). *Literature as Exploration*. New York: Appleton-Century.
- Saunders, W. & Goldenberg, C. (1999). Effects of instructional conversations and literature logs on limited- and fluent- English-proficient students' story comprehension and thematic understanding. *The Elementary School Journal, 99*(4), 279-301.
- Shanker, J. L. & Ekwall, E. E. (2003). *Locating and correcting reading difficulties* (8<sup>th</sup> edition). Columbus, OH: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Simmons, D., Fuchs, L., Fuchs, D., Mathes, P., & Hodge, J.P. (1995). Effects of explicit teaching and peer tutoring on the reading achievement of learning-disabled and low-performing students in regular classrooms. *The Elementary School Journal, 95*(5), 387-405.
- Song, M. (1997). The effect of dialogue journaling on writing quality, reading comprehension, and writing apprehension of EFL college students. Korea: Ewha Woman's University. Master's Action Research Project (Eric Document Reproduction Service No. ED410766)
- United States Department of Education (2004). *No child left behind : A toolkit for teachers*. Washington, D.C.: Education Publications Center.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wollman-Bonilla, J. (1991). *Response Journals*. New York, NY: Scholastic Professional Books.



- Wollman-Bonilla, J.E. & Werchadlo, B. (1995). Literature response journals in a first-grade classroom. *Language Arts*, 72(8), 562-569.
- Wollman-Bonilla, J.E. & Werchadlo, B. (1999). Teacher and peer roles in scaffolding first graders' responses to literature. *The Reading Teacher*, 52(6), 598-607.
- Wong, B.L., Kuperis, S., Jamieson, D., Keller, L., & Cull-Hewitt, R. (2002). Effects of guided journal writing on students' story understanding. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 95(3), 179-191.





## Nine Ways to Use Visual Art as a Prewriting Strategy

*Marlyn Press and Linda Epstein*

### **ABSTRACT**

This article looks at the use of art in developing students' prewriting ability. The activities, strategies, and objects used provide students with the background knowledge, motivation, vocabulary, structure, and fluency they need to compose and rehearse written pieces. The article describes research conducted on the effects of combining art with writing instruction. Finally, the article shows how various art activities and lessons help children develop strategies for improving their prewriting by providing a solid base of ideas and text structures at this initial stage.

### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Marlyn Press retired as a reading/literacy teacher on Long Island and is currently an Assistant Professor of Literacy and Special Education at Touro College.

Linda Epstein is an art teacher with the Hempstead School District on Long Island.

The authors have worked on a number of articles involving the use of art as a means of improving literacy instruction, especially as a means of developing writing skills.

Take a look into two very different classrooms. In both rooms, the lesson is on writing. In both rooms, the students have been taught the content and structure of the text they are to write. The teachers have taught and provided practice in the steps of the writing process. The age, ability level and background of the children are as equal as possible. In both rooms, the children are working on the beginning steps of their writing assignment.

In the first room, children are having difficulty getting started. They cannot get ideas and words on paper. They cannot decide on the order and structure of their paper. They require much help from the teacher. They talk with each other, but their discussions are fruitless. Little writing is actually going on and you can see that the children and teacher are becoming frustrated.

In the second room, the children are easily jotting down ideas and words that they plan to use in their writing. Many students have decided on the order in which ideas in their writing will take place. They are conferring with each other and the teacher, but their discussions are focused and everyone seems satisfied that they are getting where they want to go.

What is the difference in these two classes? In the second classroom, the teacher has used a variety of strategies and activities involving art that have provided the students with the words, ideas and structure for their writing. In the first class, the teacher has not used art to any great extent, and it is evident.



One possible way to increase fluency and interest in writing is by using artistic activities to help students at the prewriting step. Short, Kauffman and Kahn (2000) report that by “giving students a few minutes to quietly sketch or write about a book before gathering for group discussion...they have time to prepare for the discussion by thinking about personal connections” (p. 164). These drawings serve as a rehearsal for writing and help develop fluency ( Miller, 2000). This allows students to rehearse the words they want to use in their writing and remove the difficulties of spelling and vocabulary. Students determine the structure and order of the text they will write at this prewriting stage. Bartel (2005) describes a program where by integrating the fine and language arts, children connect their skills in drawing, play, singing, and dancing with pre-reading and pre-writing activities.

Children who have difficulty with written and/or oral language may find that artistic expression helps them organize their thoughts and rehearse their means of expressing them (Hoyt, 1992). Using the visual arts enables students to gain better eye-hand co-ordination, visual representation skills communicate ideas and expressing thoughts through symbols (Richardson, Sacks & Ayers, 2003). In real life, people move among symbol systems; only in schools do we restrict children to one symbol system (Short, Kaffman, and Kahn, 2000).

This article will look at the use of both student and artist created works of art as pre-writing activities. These activities provide students with the background knowledge, motivation, vocabulary, structure and fluency they need to compose and rehearse written pieces. The article will describe research conducted on the effects of combining art with writing. It will then show how nine specific art activities serve to help children improve their writing by providing a solid base of ideas and a text structure at the prewriting stage. Three aspects of art as a pre-writing strategy will be examined in this article. First, programs that utilize student created art will be described. Next, the article will describe programs that utilize other artist’s work as the stimulus for writing. Finally, the article will describe activities that were used in a classroom setting that combined art and writing through coordinated efforts of the art specialist, classroom teacher and reading teacher. All these programs provided students with improved literacy instruction and resulted in improved pieces of writing.

### **Visual Arts and Writing**

There are numerous connections between art and literacy in general; and visual art and writing specifically. The two systems are visually dependent (Alejandro, 1994). The combining of art and literacy uses multiple intelligences. Children who have difficulty with linguistic intelligence may have strong artistic abilities that can compensate for language weaknesses. The ability to read a work of art can help develop the ability to read and comprehend text (Rowell, 1983).

Art and writing develop in similar stages (Smout, 1990). Prewriting for kindergarten and early first-grade students is often a picture they draw before they write (Poindexter and Oliver, 1999). Much emergent writing is a combination of both drawing and writing. Drawing offers advantages to the novice writer in that art facilitates the exploration of ideas, reduces cognitive demands, and has structural advantages over



---

writing (Caldwell and Moore, 1991). Caldwell and Moore (1991) looked at how both discussion and drawing could be used in preparation for writing and “concluded that drawing is a viable and effective form of rehearsal for narrative writing... and can be more successful than the traditional planning activity, discussion” (p. 107). With this prior research in mind, the article will now describe various programs and activities that have been implemented to use art as a prewriting activity.

#### *Activity 1—Sketch-To-Stretch*

One of the best known pre-writing activities is Sketch-to-Stretch (Seigel, 1984).

This strategy is introduced and modeled by the teacher several times before the students work either individually or as part of a group. After reading, pupils create a sketch based on their understanding of the text. They look for themes, patterns and/or relationships. Sketches serve as graphic organizers and provide rehearsal for discussions as to the accuracy and completeness of each sketch, and how sketches can be improved. Students add text to their sketches providing them with words to use in writing activities.

One of the best known pre-writing activities is Sketch-to-Stretch (Seigel, 1984). Harste, Short, and Burke (1988) describe it as “...a visually representing activity that moves students beyond literal comprehension to think more deeply about the characters theme, and other elements of the story structure and author’s craft in a story they are reading” (p. 34). This strategy is introduced and modeled by the teacher several times before the students work either individually or as part of a group. After reading, pupils create a sketch based on their understanding of the text. They look for themes, patterns and/or relationships. Sketches serve as graphic organizers and provide rehearsal for discussions as to the accuracy and completeness of each sketch, and how sketches can be improved. Students add text to their sketches providing them with words to use in writing activities. Naughton (1993/1994) described a similar activity called “creative mapping” in which the sketch served as a pictorial version of semantic mapping and used an image to organize and convey the meaning.

#### *Activity 2—Image-Making Within the Writing Process*

A second program based on child created art is “Image-Making Within the Writing Process” (Olshansky, 1995, 1997). “This...program integrates children’s visual imagery at every stage of the writing process from the earliest prewriting/idea formulating stage through rehearsal, drafting, revision and preparation for publication. By introducing a variety of simple art materials and methods young author/illustrators have access to visual and kinesthetic, as well as verbal modes of thinking.” (Olshansky, 1995, p. 44). Children are exposed to a series of art explorations using various techniques and materials. They create a portfolio of hand-painted, textured papers. Students examine their abstract-art papers and find images, which serve as inspirations for story ideas. During rehearsal, students cut out images from their textured papers and weave them into a story. Students move around the cut out images and orally describe what they are doing. Their language reflects the textures, designs and emotions within the images. Once students are satisfied with their stories, they paste down their images and



begin to write. The pictures serve as a reminder of the child's words and provide concrete tools for the thinking process.

Research on "Image Making Within the Writing Process" demonstrated how it enriched students' story-making and enhanced their finished pieces. The topics written about were more varied. Story plots were more developed. Stories had a well-developed structure, with beginning, middle and end. Students used more descriptive language. Finally, the stories written and illustrated by students demonstrated fuller expression of ideas and pictures than stories illustrated with colored markers alone (Olshansky, 1995).

### *Activity 3—Writing in the Artists' Workshop*

Ernst (1994), originally a middle school English teacher, became an art teacher due to staffing cuts, which eliminated her position. Her educational beliefs were based on a workshop approach "...where reading, writing and picture making work together to help students learn, think, express themselves and make meaning" (Ernst, 1994, p. 44). Drawing in one's sketchbook served as a meaning-making tool and provided students with ideas and images for later writing assignments. Words added to or incorporated into pictures demonstrated the processes of thinking, planning and discovering that students use and provided needed vocabulary. Combining the visual and written modes helped students develop fluency of expression. By writing about sketches, students were better able to select and plan art projects. Students' writing served as background notes to help them remember what they wanted to do and where they were on their projects. As the sketchbook was a source of ideas, it provided a way of planning ahead and remembering images.

Lessons began with information on artists, their work and artistic techniques. Often, stories were read and the connections between texts and illustrations were discussed. Throughout the year, students were encouraged to use notebooks to record processes and discoveries; and to sketch plans, emotions and interesting images. Initially, students wrote and sketched in response to teacher prompts; but as students developed ideas and fluency, they responded more on their own. Ernst made suggestions as to ways in which students could utilize the sketch journal. They can begin each day by drawing a "daily note" and writing about it to reflect on the previous day's learning. Doing this daily gives students a record of progress throughout the year (Ernst, 1998). Another suggestion was to draw a favorite place (Ernst, 1999). Including words and phrases in the sketch facilitates the planning and rehearsal stages for writing about the place and increases organization and fluency.

### *Activity 4—A Sketch is Worth a Thousand Worksheets*

Reluctant readers may have trouble visualizing what they read. Cox (1991) had high school students draw pictures at the end of each chapter they read and write three to five sentences describing their sketch. Students examined sketches, determined how well they described the material read, and discussed how well their writing described their sketch. At first, many had difficulty writing even a few sentences. They were encouraged to share their pictures and writing to determine which was the best and why. As the year progressed, students were asked to look for different elements, such as



specific words, sensory images, or literary techniques, in the text and to incorporate these elements in their sketches. Students reported the pictures helped remember material and served as a review. The sketches and chapter summary paragraphs made it easier to complete summaries at the end of the book. Writing improved in both fluency and quality.

#### *Activity 5—Integrating Visual Arts, Writing and Reading*

Alejandro (1994) used works by famous artists to prepare students for the Texas State testing program. She was concerned with the time and energy expended on traditional test-preparation activities. As both art and writing are visually dependent, she wanted students to “learn how to see, to interpret data from the world, the canvas, and the page...” (Alejandro, 1994, p 13). Instead of using traditional writing prompts, Alajandro utilized pictures, posters, and other reproductions of great works of art. Students were prompted with the idea that every picture tells a story, what does this one tell you? Beginning with single person portraits, pupils made up stories about the characters imagining what they and their lives were like. Students discussed their ideas and wrote stories about the characters.

Next students explored pictures showing several people engaged in various activities. After observing and discussing the emotions, characters and styles of many pictures, the students made up and wrote stories about individual pictures. In the spring, the children selected four pictures and used them in one story. The students were required to select pictures in different genres and subjects, and to include one picture they did not like. “The resulting narratives were rich and complex, and I am convinced that the element of tension created by the one ‘disturbing’ picture lifted these stories out of the trite, bland, and predictable” (Alajandro, 1994. p. 16). Despite not following the usual test-preparation program, 88% of the students achieved writing mastery, up from 38% the previous year.

#### *Activity 6—Photo Essays*

Photo essays are another means of incorporating visual arts and literacy. Sinatra et. al. (1990) combined photo essays and semantic maps to help culturally diverse middle school students build background knowledge and organize their thoughts prior to writing. This program helped incorporate verbal and visual thought processes. Semantic mapping helped students formulate ideas and the photo essay helped tell the story. Students were assigned a topic and organizational structure. After taking and developing photographs of their topic, students organized the photos according to the various semantic organizers, which served as story-boards for organization and rehearsal. The students revised and edited their work by moving around the photographs. Students used their completed story-boards to write essays. Compared to pre-test samples, the resulting essays indicated better use of mechanics and increased ideas and vocabulary.

#### *Activity 7—Picture Research*

Wildman (1990) used the photo essay to change a research paper into “picture research”. Students researched an historical event by looking through original documents



and other materials with pictures of that event, in this case, the flight of the Kitty Hawk. Pictures were selected and made into slides. Students “read” the information presented in the images and shared ideas with other students. Once “hooked” on the pictures, students began to read texts as well as pictures to learn more. Students determined what they wanted to present in their reports and developed a deeper familiarity with specific ideas and images. They needed to organize research, determine what to present, and develop a means for presenting information visually. Once the pictorial aspect of the project was selected and organized, students wrote the audio accompaniment. Poetry was used as the means for writing text as “poetry expresses an idea with fewer words than prose, yet poetic audio lines would give our presentation a style unlike most professionally made slide presentations.” (Wildman, 1990, p. 56). Students developed their poetry through prompted and non-prompted free writes. Poems were edited and revised as necessary and became part of a total presentation.

### Our Activities

With these programs and activities as the theoretical and practical basis for the use of the visual arts as pre-writing activities, the remainder of this article will describe the activities and projects used to improve the literacy skills of our students. Prior activities (Epstein and Rothman, 1995) have involved the use of both music and art at all stages of the learning process and combined literacy learning with content area instruction. In this study, the focus was solely on the use of art as a first step in the literacy process. The student population included children in second and sixth grades. Most were below grade level in ability. Several students were virtually non-readers. For about one-third of the students, English was not their dominant language. The use of the visual arts, therefore, reduced the conceptual load on these children and facilitated the learning of new vocabulary through multiple symbol systems.

#### *Activity 8—Activities Celebrating A. A. Milne*

The first project celebrated Winnie the Pooh by A. A. Milne. In art class, excerpts from *Winnie the Pooh* were read to the second grade students. Illustrations were used as prompts for students who could not read the text. A sad-looking Winnie the Pooh bear, created by the art specialist from a brown paper grocery bag, was exhibited to the class. The children talked about the story and discussed ways to decorate their bears, including how to create vests for the bears. These vests would open to reveal the stories the children were to write. During discussion of the book, the students drew sketches and the teacher listed on chart paper words the students suggested. This served as brainstorming for the art activity of creating and decorating individual bears, and provided the words to be used in later writing assignments. Students wrote their own stories describing how they would get honey from the honey tree. The students completed their stories and placed them under the vests of the paper bag bears.

Students’ use of adjectives and adverbs in writing improved. Because of their enthusiasm for the project students’ writing was longer and more imaginative. Many original ideas were generated. Students showed greater use of story grammar, and



---

stories had a more defined structure. Creation of the bears and sketches of ideas and words facilitated students' fluency, structure and vocabulary.

### *Activity 9—Harlem Renaissance*

A second project involved sixth grade students. The classroom teacher introduced the class to the Harlem Renaissance as part of Black History Month. In art class, students were introduced to comic strip writing using story-boards and the comic strips “Herb and Jamaal” and “The Boondocks”. Chia-hui Lin (2005) reports that comics serve three purposes in reading classrooms. First, students are interested in them, second, they are economically viable and third, they usually have low readability levels. Students learned a successful comic strip has interplay between the characters or the characters and their environment. Students used pictures placed on the squares of the story board to develop a comic strip of their own, and discussed the type of situations they wanted for their characters. When satisfied, they pasted the pictures on the story boards. Next students researched poems by Langston Hughes and selected lines that would fit the emotion and situation of the first character of their comic strip. Then the students wrote their own dialogue for the second character/object based on the poetry comments of the first character. The writing was revised and edited to student satisfaction and the comic strips displayed for Black History Month.

After completing the comic strip project, a number of students asked if they could write poems with topics similar to those of Langston Hughes. With assistance from both the classroom teacher and the art specialist, these students wrote and illustrated their own Langston Hughes style poems. These poems and pictures were also displayed.

As demonstrated, the comic strip project led to great student enthusiasm as well as improved writing. Both the art and the poems served as models of style for students who could use imitation in an attempt to find their own voice. The use of graphics helped students visually understand the concept of dialogue and helped students organize and structure ideas. These were translated into the written symbol system with proper grammar and punctuation when they wrote dialogue in their own poems. In addition, the motivation created by the original project lead to further practice and improved writing on the part of many of the students.

In summary, review of prior research on the use of art as a prewriting activity has demonstrated its usefulness in developing students' writing skills. The visual arts serve to motivate students, facilitate the development of ideas, provide rehearsal and help structure ideas for later written pieces. Our work with students adds to the information on the usefulness of the visual arts; and, hopefully, provides some additional concrete examples of the types of activities that can be employed to combine the visual arts and literacy.

There needs to be additional research into the effectiveness of the use of visual arts with literacy. This type of program is not only an activity that can be used on occasion to provide variety in instructional methods, but can also provide the basis for an on-going instructional program that integrates the arts in all aspects of the learning process. The more modalities and symbol systems we use in instruction, the more equality of educational opportunity we offer to our students. In addition, while most



---

states have implemented standards for literacy, many are also setting standards for the fine and performing arts. By combining the two, education becomes more integrated and conceptually rich, and students learn and retain more. More hard data is needed to convince those in charge of funding of programs that the arts are not a frivolity or add-on to the curriculum. They are sound tools for educational improvement. Additional studies are needed to verify and extend the knowledge educators already have.

### References

- Alejandro, A. (1994). Like Happy Dreams—Integrating Visual Arts, Writing and Reading. *Language Arts*, 71, 12-21.
- Author. (1995). Using the Creative Art -Experience in Whole Language Classrooms, *Florida Reading Quarterly*, 32, 18-20.
- Bartel, V. (2005). Merging Literacies: A Case Study. *Childhood Education*, 81, 4, 196-201.
- Caldwell, H., & Moore, B. (1991). The Art of Writing: Drawing as Preparation for Narrative Writing in the Primary Grades. *Studies in Art Education*, 32, 207-219.
- Chia-hui Lin. (2005). Instruction Through Communicative and Visual Arts. *Teacher Librarian*, 32, 5, 25-28.
- Cox, B. (1999). A Picture is Worth a Thousand Worksheets. *Journal of Reading*, 35, 244-245.
- Ernst, K. (1994). Writing Pictures, Painting Words: Writing in an Artists' Workshop", *Language Arts*, 71, 44-52
- (1998). Art in Your Curriculum—Art Reflection. *Teaching K-8*, 29, 28-29.
- (1999). Art in Your Curriculum—Every Place Tells a Story. *Teaching K-8*, 30, 30-31.
- Harste, J., Short, K. G., & Burke, C. (1988). *Creating Classrooms for Authors: The Reading Writing Connection*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Hoyt, L. (1992). Many Ways of Knowing: Using Drama, Oral Interactions, and Visual Arts to Enhance Reading Comprehension. *Reading Teacher*, 45, 580-584.
- Miller, Dana. (July 12, 2000). Summer Fun: Using Creative Art to Teach Writing and Reading. Demonstration for South Georgia Writing Project, <http://www.valdosta.edu/sgwp/2000/webunits/dana/summerfun.html>
- Naughton, V. (1993/1994). Creative Mapping for Content Reading. *Journal of Reading*, 37, 324-326.
- Olshansky, B. (1995). Picture This: An Arts-Based Literacy Program. *Educational Leadership*, 53, 44-47.
- (1997). Picturing Story: An Irresistible Pathway into Literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 50, 612-613.
- Richardson, M. Sacks, M. & Ayers, M. (2003). Paths to Reading and Writing Through Visual Arts. *Reading Improvement*, 40, 3, 113.





- 
- Rowell, E. (1983). Developing Reading Skills Through the Study of Great Art. *Teaching Reading Through the Arts*. John E. Cowen, ed. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Seigel, M. (1984). Sketch to Stretch. *Reading, Writing and Caring*, Cochrane, Scalena and Buchanan, eds., New York, NY: Richard C. Owens, Pub.
- Short, K., Kauffman, G., & Kahn, L. (2000). I Just Need to Draw: Responding To Literature Across Multiple Sign Systems. *The Reading Teacher*, 54 160-171.
- Sinatra, R., Beaudry, J., Stahl-Gemake, J., & Guastello, Francine. (1990). Combining Visual Literacy, Text Understanding and Writing for Culturally Diverse Students. *Journal of Reading*, 33, No. 8, 612-617.
- Smout, B. (1990). Reading, Writing and Art. *The Reading Teacher*, 43, 430-431.
- Wildman, D. (1990). Researching with Pictures. *The English Journal*, 79, 55-58.

#### **Works Cited**

- Milne, A.A. (1926) *Winnie-the-Pooh*. New York, NY: E.P. Dutton, Inc.



---

## The Up-Side of State Mandates: Moving the Reading Clinic to a High-Need School

*Karen Cirincione and Diane Bosco*

### ABSTRACT

In order to comply with the New York State Education Department's (2000) recertification mandates for teacher education programs, the reading clinic of the Master of Science in Literacy Education program at Dowling College, Oakdale, New York was moved to a high-needs school district. This school district was seriously deficient in its pass rate on the NYS English Language Arts tests. The students were predominantly Hispanic, and the census index was 16. This article describes the steps taken to make this move and the challenges, as well as the benefits, of locating the reading clinic in a high-needs school.

### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Karen Cirincione is an Assistant Professor of Literacy Education at Dowling College in Oakdale, New York. Her research interests focus on reader response and the use of multicultural literature with culturally diverse students. She served as the Director of the Dowling College Literacy Center.

Diane Bosco is the Reading Center Coordinator at Suffolk Community College in Selden, New York and an adjunct faculty member at Dowling College. Her research interests center on under-prepared college students, and the relationship between schema and comprehension. She served as the Assistant Director of the Dowling College Literacy Center.

Reluctance to move beyond our comfort zone is a natural response when change is imposed upon us. Paradoxically however, positive experiences often emerge when change occurs. In 2000, the revised New York State Education Department requirements for recertification of teacher preparation programs seemed insurmountable, and the task of complying with them, daunting. Yet the changes we made addressing the mandates have benefited not only us and our graduate students, but a neighboring community as well.

For over twenty years the practicum course/reading clinic of the M. S. in Literacy Education Program at Dowling College had been located at the college campus in Oakdale, New York, where it serviced predominantly Caucasian middle-class children and adolescents. The new requirements for practica courses, however, stipulated that graduate students have experience in high-need schools with socioeconomically disadvantaged students, students who have disabilities, and English language learners (General Requirements for the Registration of all Programs Leading to Classroom Teaching Certificates, Section 52.21 (b) (2) (ii)). To comply with these mandates, we moved the practicum course/reading clinic (Dowling College Literacy Center) to a high-needs school.



---

### The Steps We Took to Move to a High-Needs School

First, via the New York State Education Department's list of high-need schools (Preliminary List of High-Need Districts Eligible for High-Need Supplemental Building Aid Ratio), we determined the high-needs schools in proximity to the college and ultimately selected the Brentwood Union Free School District. Brentwood, a large district with nine elementary schools, four middle schools, and one high school, had been identified by New York State Education Department as seriously deficient in its pass rate on the English Language Arts Tests (*Newsday*, March 18, 2001). It also met other criteria necessary for practicum coursework; it was comprised of predominantly Hispanic students (20.7% African-American, 15% Caucasian, 62.5% Hispanic, and 1.8% other); 19.2% of the students had limited English proficiency; 84.6% of the students received free or reduced price lunch; and the census poverty index was 16 (A Report to the Governor and Legislature on the Educational Status of the State's Schools: Submitted July 2005).

The second step was to explain to the college administrators our plan to move the Dowling College Literacy Center to Brentwood. Because the operating expenses of our program had traditionally been offset by revenue from the children's registration fees, we were not sure if the college would be able to continue to provide its financial support. Understanding that the new state regulations were mandatory, however, they suggested that we compensate for lost revenue through grant money for which we could apply.

A more important consideration for those of us running the clinic was philosophical; we simply were not sure if Brentwood, whose district philosophy of reading instruction was different from that of our M. S. in Literacy Education Program, would be amenable to the partnership. Specifically, Brentwood's K through 3 reading program, *Assured Readiness for Learning* (McGinnis, 1981), placed a heavy emphasis on phonemic awareness training and phonics instruction. Courses in the M. S. in Literacy Education Program, on the other hand, were based on a balanced approach to literacy learning. Our graduate students learned to provide reading and writing activities based on students' interests and, in this context, to teach students reading strategies both as needed and one-to-one. In addition to teaching phonics through direct instruction, they also learned to teach phonetic skills in context while a student is reading.

To determine if Brentwood would be a viable location for our program, we met with Brentwood's Superintendent and the Language Arts Director. When we explained our philosophy of reading instruction, we added that we would also make the graduate students knowledgeable about the *Assured Readiness for Learning* reading program so that our approaches would complement and enhance the children's reading development.

One of the things we were happiest to discuss was our vision for the mutually beneficial partnership we were about to undertake; we would prepare teachers to improve the literacy development of Brentwood students, while Brentwood students would raise their English Language Arts test scores. Unfortunately, we had to add that only English speaking students would be eligible to work with the graduate students, since none were enrolled in a TESL program.

We pointed out that our program included a full-time faculty member who was the director, an assistant director, a program administrator, adjunct faculty members,



---

supervisors, a secretary, and a translator. We explained that during each fall and spring college semester, we would provide Brentwood students with one-hour, individual literacy assessment and instructional sessions, as well as a writing workshop. In addition, we would obtain liability insurance to cover the program and develop registration forms and a brochure that explained the program to Brentwood teachers and parents.

The superintendent and language arts director readily agreed to our proposed plan. The district would provide both a middle school building and the support services necessary--a technology supervisor, janitors, and security personnel--to carry out the program.

### **Meeting the Challenges**

During the five years of the Dowling College Literacy Center's location at the North Middle School, we have experienced both challenges and benefits. When we left the college campus and lost easy access to curriculum resources, duplicating services, video equipment, and a bookstore, we purchased a copy machine, a television/vcr, sets of leveled books, and supply closets for these materials. The district has been very accommodating in providing space for these materials. Storage evolved from a tiny area in an office to a large hallway space to our own small resource room. In return, we share the television/VCR with the school.

Maintaining a large number of available literacy supervisors for a Saturday program and the time required to train them had always been a challenge. Because of the additional travel time when we moved to Brentwood, many of the literacy supervisors did not return, and we had to hire inexperienced supervisors who required on-going training. It also seemed that the move away from the college campus resulted in a loss of the prestige of working in a college. Supervisors would now be working in a public school on Saturday, which was similar to what they did the other five days of the week. The new supervisors we hired to work with us in North Middle School hadn't worked at the college and therefore didn't feel demoted.

Our move to Brentwood's North Middle School resulted in additional responsibilities. In several instances, faculty and staff members disagreed about who should assume these new tasks. Not surprisingly, some wanted to do more, while others wanted to do less. To provide better organization and efficiency, we delineated in writing the job responsibilities of each faculty and staff member.

In some instances, the required number of clock hours that graduate students had to instruct their students became difficult to meet because, due to issues with transportation, work schedules, and baby-sitting, Brentwood students had a high absence and dropout rate. To address the problem, we gave parents a specific attendance policy that included provisions for dropping a student who had more than two absences. When a Brentwood student dropped out, we replaced this student with a student on our wait list, which is maintained by a Brentwood faculty member who serves as a liaison between the college and the school district.

Although we had a translator on Saturdays, and although all our forms and letters for parents were written in both English and Spanish, off-premises communication with non-English speaking parents was sometimes problematic. Since our program secretary



was bilingual, students who needed a translator during the week could contact her for assistance during her regular work hours.

Because other groups including sports teams, P.T.A. and A.A. also used North Middle School on Saturdays, we sometimes lost the use of the cafeteria. More importantly, a security problem arose. On several occasions items were missing from teachers' classrooms and we were questioned. Since supervisors were usually present in the classrooms with graduate students and their students, we did not believe anyone in our program was responsible. With the continued positive impact of the program, Brentwood began to limit outside groups, and on most Saturdays we had sole use of the building, which eliminated security problems.

College administrators do not always understand the complexities of the practicum course in an off-site location and the need for an increased budget for materials/resources and additional staff. On-going dialogue, the Dean's participation in our literacy celebration, and reports of the success of the program helped administrators see the need for a wide range of support.

### **The Benefits for Our Program**

When our practicum course/Dowling College Literacy Center was located at the college, the use of faculty members' offices for literacy sessions created problems for faculty, graduate students and children. Some faculty members refused the use of their offices and others complained that items were not returned to their original locations. The children who attended the program had to go on an elevator to the third floor of a college building to meet the graduate students in small, windowless offices that were usually cluttered with piles of papers and books. In contrast, when graduate students worked with their students in the middle school classrooms, it seemed more like real school to them. Children also had an increased opportunity to see "school" in a positive light because their reading and writing activities were based on their interests.

The middle school provided a consistent setting for our program. When we were located at the college campus, the increasing number of graduate students enrolled in the course necessitated additional rooms for literacy sessions, discussion groups, and seminars. Because the college rooms were also used for other courses and special events, we had to schedule rooms for our program very far in advance of the semester for which we needed them. We often found, however, that the rooms we needed had already been taken, and as a result, our program had to spread to the library and the ceremonial rooms. In the new setting, we could more easily plan ahead, knowing the layout of the school and the number and types of rooms available for use.

The New York State regulations changed certification from K-12 to two literacy certifications, birth through 6<sup>th</sup> grade and 5<sup>th</sup> grade through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. When our practicum course/Dowling College Literacy Center was held at the college campus, the children who attended the program had been predominantly elementary school age. Because the Brentwood School District provided a large population, graduate students could now instruct youngsters in the grade range of their literacy certification.



The most obvious benefit of locating our course/program in a high-need school was that it met New York State Education Department's requirement that we prepare graduate students to work with students who met their population criteria.

The reputation our program has gained in the Brentwood community is a definite benefit. Parents who want their children to succeed in school but can't afford tutoring are grateful for the free reading and writing instruction our program provides. Some families walk to the program to overcome the issue of transportation. Many parents have shared with us their delight in seeing their children's interest in reading the books they bring home. The non-English speaking parents know that a translator is always available, eliminating feelings of alienation or discomfort when they enter the school.

### **The Benefits for Graduate Students**

Since the predominant ethnic background of the graduate students in our program is Caucasian, locating the practicum course in the Brentwood School District afforded them hands-on exposure to varied cultural, socioeconomic, and language issues. One third-grade girl, Tiara, who recently had to live with a foster family because her parents could no longer care for her, attended the program for several semesters. Since each semester we paired the same supervisor with the graduate student who worked with Tiara, the supervisor helped each new graduate student understand Tiara's fluctuating moods and the impact missing her family had on her desire to read and write. We found that it helped graduate students better plan for their students when their supervisor knew the children and their family situations. For this reason, whenever possible, we paired graduate students with a supervisor who knew the children with whom they would be working.

Since the new regulations also required an increase in the clock hours that graduate students worked with their students, we added a one hour writing workshop to our practicum course. The graduate students who were working with two consecutive grade levels (e. g., 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades) participated in writing workshop as one group. Each week a graduate student would model and explain a writing craft lesson appropriate for where the students were in their writing process. Students and graduate students wrote for approximately 20 to 30 minutes and then shared their writing. After the children left, the graduate students and supervisors would reflect on what occurred and plan for the subsequent writing workshop based on the children's needs.

During one writing workshop with third and fourth grade students, a graduate student drew a large heart on the board and wrote in it the memories that touch her heart (Heard, 1981). She then read to the children a story she had written about a special memory. The children discussed their memories, drew hearts with their memories, and then wrote about a memory. Children wrote about pets they once had, a present that was special to them, or friends. Maria wrote about how her uncle had been shot. The room fell silent as we listened to her story. Graduate students and supervisors shared Maria's pain and began to understand some of the difficult issues with which Maria and many other children cope.

Another surprising, writing workshop took place when a graduate student's craft lesson for fifth and sixth grade students included his very visual expression of writing



through a mask. As he donned costumes and assumed the personae of a hula dancer, martial arts expert, and monkey, the graduate student modeled stories from each character's point of view. The children embraced the concept, dug into his bag of wigs, hats and assorted props, and wrote long stories to share. Together this writers' workshop demonstrated the joy of writing to the children and the joy of teaching to the graduate students.

Through their participation in writing workshop, graduate students gained an increased understanding of students with different socioeconomic backgrounds and learned how to present craft lessons for these students' specific needs. Additionally, they learned how to set up a writing workshop in their own classrooms.

We devoted one seminar to displaying and discussing the criteria for evaluating and selecting multicultural literature for specific students. Graduate students learned about the importance of having their students read books about children of their own background. When children don't see themselves in books, they may not relate to books. One graduate student related that Francesca's face lit up as she read *The Cat's Meow* (Soto, 1985), a short chapter book about a Hispanic girl and her cat who speaks in Spanish. Francesca loved her own cat so this was the perfect book to motivate her to read and then to write about her own cat.

On their way to North Middle School, graduate students came to know their students' community—their houses, their churches, their stores, their ethnic foods. Family members who came to pick up and drop off the children often shared some of their life circumstances with the graduate students.

Of all the benefits of the program, the culminating literacy celebration is consistently the most joyous occasion for all. The Brentwood students share with their families, graduate students, the other Brentwood students, and Literacy Center faculty the books they have written and read, and the projects they have created. During one literacy celebration when a nine-year-old read a book he had written describing his love of his family members, the family cried, but everyone else in the audience cried, too. The families then expressed their great appreciation for their sons' and daughters' accomplishments. Reading and writing had mattered.

Graduate students come away from our program with not only their increased understanding of literacy assessment and instruction, but also with genuine literacy experiences shared with others.

Our program continues to evolve, and even though new challenges will arise, the benefits of moving from academia to a public school are worth the potential setbacks. The paradox of change remains true, it would seem. Change is difficult, no doubt, but it is shaped in possibility.



---

### References

- Heard, G. (1981). *Awakening the heart: Exploring poetry in elementary and middle School*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Long Island schools by the numbers: A school-by-school breakdown. (2001, March 18). *Newsday*, pp. K3-11.
- McGinnis, P. J. (1981). *Decoding keys for reading success*. NY: Walker Educational Book Corporation.
- New York State Education Department Office of College and University Evaluation. (2000). General requirements for the registration of all programs leading to classroom teaching certificates, Section 52.21 (b) (2) (ii). Albany, NY.
- New York State Education Department Office of State Aid. Preliminary list of high need districts eligible for high-need supplemental building aid ratio. [http://stateaid.nysed.gov/build/HNlist\\_060805.xls](http://stateaid.nysed.gov/build/HNlist_060805.xls).
- A report to the governor and the legislature on the educational status of the state's schools: Submitted July 2005. *Statistical profiles of public school districts*. The University of the State of New York, The State Education Department, Albany, NY.
- Soto, G. (1987). *The Cat's Meow*. NY: Scholastic.





---

## 10 Ways to Imbed ELA Skills into the Math Curriculum

*Margaret Golden*

### **ABSTRACT**

The author describes 10 classroom activities that are designed to promote reading comprehension and organizational skills in the context of solving math problems. These lessons help students to clarify the information within math problems, identify what operations are necessary, and express their solutions more accurately and precisely. A bibliography of recommended stories with math themes is included.

### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Margaret Golden, a National Board Certified teacher, has 15 years experience in primary education and has been teaching classroom methods at the State University of New York at Oneonta for the last 4 years. She is presently working on an Ed.D. at SUNY Binghamton. As a New York State Math Mentor, she is interested in how teachers teach math so that students may learn math in a conceptual way.

### **Introduction**

Eight year-old Brian can solve arithmetic problems in his head faster than most of his teachers. He's swift, he's accurate, and he's confident. Last year he failed the New York State Math Assessment. How can this be? There is a considerable amount of reading and writing required on this state test. Students need to put their reasoning into words and explain the process. Brian struggles with the English Language Arts (ELA) skills necessary in order for him to tell what he knows about mathematics.

There are many students, like Brian, who excel in mathematical thinking, but who are unsuccessful on the New York State Math Assessment. For these students the problem is not math ability, but rather a lack of reading comprehension and writing expression. This same group of students does not succeed on the ELA Assessment. By designing lessons that ask students to listen, read, and write in math class, teachers can teach and practice ELA skills that will benefit students in both math and ELA classes. Researcher Daniela O'Neill, professor of psychology at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, found a link to narrative skills and math ability (Tenenbaum, 2004). She found that young children with strong language ability scored well on math tests. I am suggesting that by strengthening this link, teachers can help students increase skills in both areas.

The classroom suggestions in this article are designed to help students with weaknesses in one academic area, by using their abilities in the other area to enhance



---

understanding in both. In addition, if these students are taking assessments in math and English Language Arts, the exercises in this article may help increase both test scores.

### Suggestions

#### *1: Analyze Story Problems for Story Elements.*

Story problems, also known as word problems or extended tasks, are a focus of the New York State Mathematics exam at all levels. Most of these math story problems are only a few sentences long, which make them perfect for identifying story elements. Identifying story elements is a skill traditionally taught in ELA classes. By providing students with a method for identifying the story elements, students may ultimately achieve the necessary comprehension of the math story problems used on the assessment exam.

To use this protocol, teachers begin the lesson by reviewing the elements of a story: character (who), setting (where and when), plot (what), and theme (why or so what). The teacher can have the students read the story problem, or the problem can be read aloud. When the story is read aloud, the students are also practicing listening skills. (See suggestion #2.) Students can use the same graphic organizers they use in their ELA classes to record the story elements. As they are identifying the story elements, students will improve comprehension necessary to solve the problem. In **figure 1**, the setting is not important for solving the problem. It is helpful for students to see that all details provided are not always necessary for a story to make sense. Likewise, some stories have information that enhances the story, but is unnecessary for understanding the main ideas.

#### *2: Read Story Problems Aloud.*

When students hear their teachers read aloud, the teachers are modeling “what good oral reading is” (Tierney & Readence, 2005, p. 32). Reading aloud to students can be part of a math class. Math story problems can be read aloud by the teacher as students listen without the story in front of them. In ELA classes, teachers read aloud selections similar in length to the stories on the listening section of the ELA assessments. Compared to the story selection on the ELA exam, the story problems in math class are much shorter. These stories are often only a few sentences long. Therefore, math story problems can provide important practice for students who are struggling to identify story elements by making the process of taking notes of important details easier. Listening to, rather than reading, a math story problem is critical practice for students as it provides practice in listening closely and taking notes quickly while someone else is talking. The methods used to teach note taking should be similar to the techniques learned in ELA class. Students can use graphic organizers, draw pictures or identify and write key words and phrases.



Figure 1

This question is from the New York State Testing Program: Introduction to the Grades 3–8 Testing Program in English Language Arts and Mathematics: Appendix B: Sample Mathematics Questions. (New York State Education Department).

Sam and Jenna have been saving pennies. Sam has 232 pennies, and Jenna has 151 pennies. How many more pennies does Sam have than Jenna?

- A 71
- B 81
- C 121
- D 181

#### Elements of a Story

<b>Characters: who?</b>	Sam and Jenna
<b>Setting: where? when?</b>	Not important Not important
<b>Plot: What?</b>	Jenna and Sam have been saving pennies. Sam has 232. Jenna has 151. How many more does Sam have? We need to compare the number of pennies that Sam and Jenna have.
<b>Theme: Why or So What?</b>	Subtract to find the difference. $\begin{array}{r} 232 \\ -151 \\ \hline 81 \end{array}$

#### 3: Have Students Paraphrase Story Problems.

In order to do well on the ELA assessments, students need to know how to paraphrase. Since the math story problems are short, they are ideal practice for paraphrasing. Paraphrasing will also help students solve a math story problem, because students will learn to focus on the nature of the problem rather than on just the numbers in the story. (See **figure 2.**) “RROARR” is a graphic organizer written using an acronym that shows the necessary steps to solve story problems. RROARR is one form a graphic organizer might take.

- RR = Read and Restate
- O = Organize (Decide on the strategy & the operation)
- A = Answer (Do the necessary calculations to find the answer.)



- RR = Reread and Rethink

The first step is “Read and Restate.” Students paraphrase the story problem. By putting the math story problems in their own words, students are practicing the necessary ELA skill of paraphrasing, a vital step in comprehending the math story problem. (See **figure 3.**)

Figure 2  
**RROARR to Solve Problems**

R & R: Read and Restate	
O: Organize. What strategy will you use to solve the problem? Circle One:	
Draw a Picture	Use Objects, Act It Out
Find a Pattern	Make a Table
Work Backwards	Guess and Check
Make an Organized List or Table	Write an Equation
Use Logical Reasoning	Solve a Simpler Problem
Choose an Operation:	
Addition	Subtraction
Multiplication	Division
A: Answer the Problem	
R & R: Reread and Rework Read again. Highlight the key words in the problem. Make sure your calculations are correct.	



Figure 3

**RROARR to Solve Problems**

The following question is from the New York State Testing Program: Mathematics: Book 2: The Sample Test: 2005: Grade 4: Question #32. (New York State Education Department)

Ronald’s apartment building has 17 apartments on each floor. There are 6 floors in the building. What is the total number of apartments in Ronald’s apartment building?

<b>R &amp; R: Read and Restate</b> Ronald lives in an apartment building. This apartment building has 6 floors with 17 apartments on each floor.	
<b>O: Organize.</b> What strategy will you use to solve the problem? Circle One:	
Draw a Picture Find a Pattern Work Backwards Make an Organized List or Table Use Logical Reasoning	Use Objects, Act It Out Make a Table Guess and Check Write an Equation Solve a Simpler Problem
<b>Choose an Operation:</b>	
Addition Multiplication	Subtraction Division
<b>A: Answer the Problem</b> Prototype of student work shows a drawing with calculations.	
<b>R &amp; R: Reread and Rework</b> Read again. Highlight the key words in the problem. Make sure your calculations are correct.	

4: Ask Students to Tell, Rather Than Show or Write, Their Explanations.

The math assessment requires students to write their reasoning and their process “in words.” Since writing takes more time for most elementary students, a student can get more practice putting these thoughts into words by speaking rather than writing. Speaking well is often a precursor to writing well. As students work, the teacher can mingle with the students. The teacher should ask individual students to explain what they are doing and why. The teacher should know, in advance, what a good answer sounds like. A good answer has details and precise, mathematical vocabulary. A good answer



can explain the process with accurate detail and / or show understanding of the concept. A teacher should continue to talk to the students until each student's explanation is acceptable. Teachers should use a combination of modeling and questioning to help a student attain an acceptable answer.

Teachers need to ask students challenging questions. Challenging questions require logical explanations and precise details. Questions that are asked in math class cannot be just about calculations. Requiring students to explain the process and explain the logic that was used to reach calculated answers is critical. Teachers need to challenge other students to agree or disagree with the student explanations given. When teachers write challenging questions, they may refer to Bloom's Taxonomy so that questions involve learning domains beyond the knowledge and comprehension levels (Dalton & Smith, 1986). "How is this process similar to what we did earlier?" "Do you see another solution to this problem?" "Which solution is better? Why?" These questions are samples of what could be challenging questions.

It is also essential to listen to the answers the students give with a focus on use of precise, mathematical vocabulary. If we average the number of words a student must learn over the course of his or her first 13 years of school, the number is about 70 new words per week (Tompkins & Blanchfield, 2004). For students to learn this many words, they must use them in context, multiple times. As math lesson plans are written, teachers should think about the vocabulary they want to target. Teachers should use these words in their questions and get students to use the targeted vocabulary in their answers. Targeted vocabulary can be displayed and recorded on a "word wall" or in individual glossaries or dictionaries. Just like in ELA class, the teacher needs to identify the words the students need to know. The teacher can also help the students use these words in proper context.

Students can also play "Teacher / Student." In teams, one student can act as the teacher. The other student should take the role of a younger student. The "teacher" is then required to explain, using appropriate, specific vocabulary, the process and concept being taught to the younger 'student.'

##### *5: Write Stories Using Math Data.*

When students study graphing, a teacher can also have them write stories about the graph. The graph in **figure 4** shows how much time Krista volunteered over the course of 6 weeks. Students need to read the graph and write a story that fits the data shown in the graph. Brian, mentioned in the introduction, wrote that Krista volunteered for two hours during both week one and week two. Then Krista went on vacation. She returned to her volunteer job the fifth week, but needed to make up the hours missed. She continued to make up the missed hours during the sixth week. His was only one possible plot that would fit the information given in the graph. When students write stories about the information given to them in graphs, the student practices the math skill of reading the graph for pertinent information and interpreting that information. The student also practices the ELA skills needed to write a story. Both math and ELA skills are practiced.





students with non-fiction writing which can be deconstructed using graphs or charts benefits both ELA and mathematics skills. Students are given exposure to the genre, and they are given an activity that requires comprehension of the selection. In fact, it is the activity of making a graph or chart that enhances comprehension of the non-fiction selection.

As shown in **figure 5**, students read a story about the population decline of African elephants. The information in the paragraph is perfect for the creation of a line graph. Students have to read closely for meaning and accuracy. After the line graph is completed, the students can decide which is the most effective way to present the information: graph or paragraph. This type of lesson can be duplicated with other types of graphs.

Figure 5

### African Elephants

**Problem:** Did you know that African elephants are disappearing at an alarming rate? These beautiful, majestic animals are endangered.

**Task:** Read the paragraph below. Use the information in the paragraph to make a graph.

**Evidence of a Job Well Done:**

- Choice of graph (line graph, bar graph, pie graph, pictograph) makes sense.
- Graph has all required parts: title, title of axes, even intervals starting with zero, correctly plotted data, key (if necessary).
- A ruler is used to graph data.
- All data are accurate.

**Decide:**

- Is the number of African elephants increasing or decreasing?
- The rate at which the elephants are dying is decreasing. Give three reasons that may be responsible for the decrease.
- Can you predict how many African elephants will still be in the wild in 2006? Defend your answer.
- Is the information presented in the graph or in the paragraph more powerful? Defend your answer.
- Which is more precise: graph or paragraph? Defend your answer.
- Which is easier to understand: graph or paragraph? Defend your answer.

African elephants are endangered mammals that live in herds. They are hunted for their beautiful ivory tusks. In 2000, there were 45,000 African elephants still living in the wild. The next year, this number had decreased by 4,000 elephants. The number of elephants still living in the wild, in 2002, was 38,000. Unfortunately, the trend continued. In 2003, the herd was further reduced by 5,000 elephants. In the next two consecutive years, the herds decreased by 2,000 elephants, each year.





*7: Ask Students to Explain, Orally or Written, Why Certain Mathematical Solutions are Illogical.*

When students are asked to explain an incorrect mathematical solution they are given a chance to express logical reasoning. Developing the ability to clearly express ideas verbally will enhance their ELA skills. In **figure 6**, students are asked to read a pie graph that is divided incorrectly. Students need to know how different percentages of a pie graph look. ELA skills are also enhanced when students take this knowledge and express it in words. For example, when expressing logical reasoning, students are encouraged to express themselves rationally and precisely, which enhances their writing skills. In figure 6, there are many ways to discuss the inaccuracies of the graph. Two sections are labeled 25%, yet they are not the same size on the graph. One section of the pie graph is labeled 50%, yet it is smaller than a section labeled 35%. As students practice what they need to say about the graph, they are thinking about number sense, the mathematics of percentages, and logical thinking. By talking and writing about these ideas, students are practicing the ELA skills they will need for the math assessment.

*8: Use Venn Diagrams to Compare and Contrast.*

Venn diagrams are often used in both math and ELA classes in order to compare and contrast information. In ELA classes, the Venn diagram is used as a graphic organizer for students to organize their ideas before a paragraph is written or as a way to organize information from a reading. In math class, Venn diagrams are used more like a graph rather than a graphic organizer. Students put numbers in the graph rather than words. The Venn diagrams show relationships between sets of numbers. Math teachers, like their ELA counterparts, can also ask their students to write about the sameness and differences in sets of numbers. Using **figure 7**, students analyze these sets of numbers to find similarities and differences, and then they write about their findings. It is not enough to just put the numbers in the right place within the Venn diagram; students have to write paragraphs (or essays) defending why they separated the numbers as they did.

*9: Use Literature in Math Class.*

There are many engaging, interesting, and informative children's books that can enhance math understanding. There are many fiction books that have strong math content. Taking time in math class to read these books to students can enhance both their ELA skills and their math skills. Most teachers recognize the benefit of reading aloud to their students. Teachers model the skills that good readers use when they read. By using a combination of modeling and questioning, teachers show students the important role prediction plays in comprehension. Teachers also help students paraphrase, and teachers show students how to make connections to prior knowledge and experience. Teachers do all this to enhance comprehension and to model how good readers read. The same guided reading techniques that teachers use in ELA class can enhance the skills and concepts learned in math class. Students will benefit because they will practice skills necessary to be good readers, and they will be reading about math concepts. **Figure 8** is a list of some of the many books suitable for an elementary math classroom. This list is a combination



of fiction and non-fiction. The list includes topics from each of the five New York State content standards.

Figure 6  
**Pie Graph Challenge**

**Fact:** Pie graphs can be a useful way to understand percentage.

**Problem:** Many people do not know how to read or make accurate pie graphs.

**Challenge:**

1. Study the pie graph below.
2. With your partner, make a list of any errors you find.
3. Using the data, construct an accurate pie graph. Be ready to tell how you decided the size of each piece.

Fourth Graders Favorite Lunches

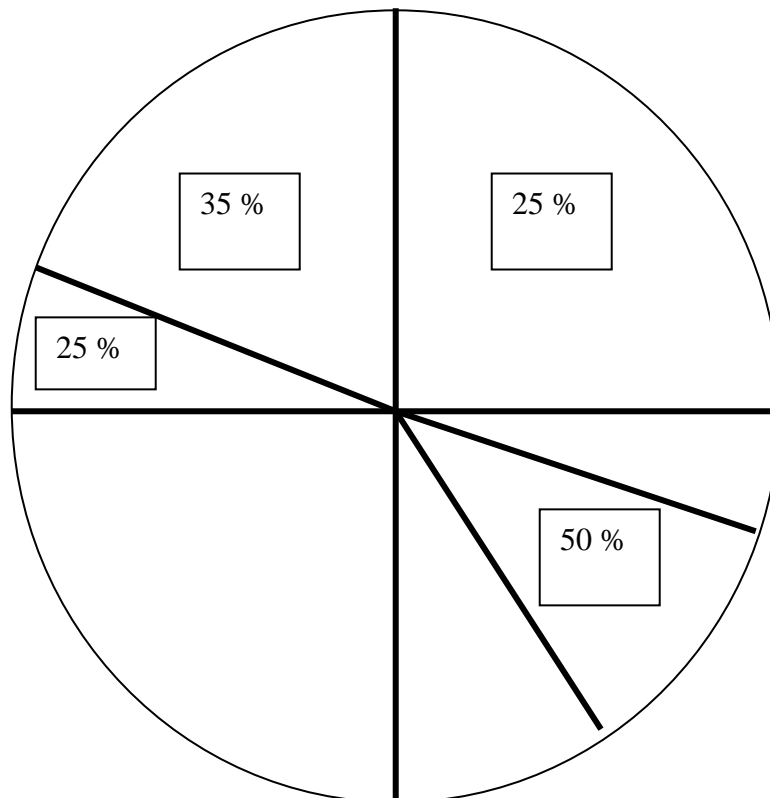




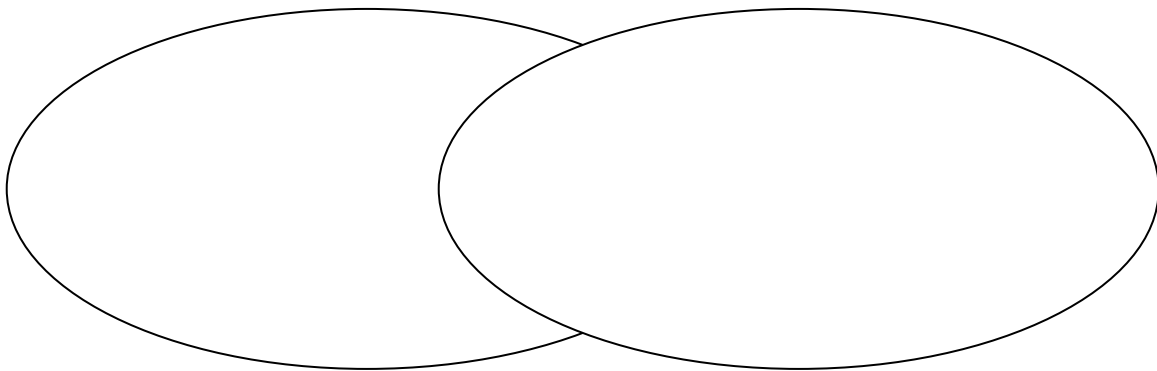
Figure 7

**Compare and Contrast**

How are these two tables the same and how are they different? Record your ideas in the Venn Diagram.

Table A:	IN	3	4	5	6	7
	OUT	6	7	8	9	10
Table B:	IN	6	8	10	4	2
	OUT	9	11	13	7	5

Venn diagram needs to be completed.



In your math journal, write a paragraph describing the similarities of the two groups of numbers.

In your math journal, write a paragraph describing the differences of the two groups of numbers.



Figure 8

**Math Bibliography**

- Adle, David. Fraction Fun
- Aker, Suzanne. What Comes in 2's, 3's, & 4's?
- Axelrod, Amy. Pigs on a Blanket
- Axelrod, Amy. Pigs Will be Pigs
- Ayres, Becky Hickox. Matryoshka
- Burns, Marilyn. The Greedy Triangle
- Friedman, Aileen. The King's Commissioners
- Friedman, Aileen. A Cloak for the Dreamer
- Geringer, Laura. A Three Day Hat
- Greene, Rhonda Gowler. When a Line Bends...A Shape Begins
- Kate, Marilyn. A Day with No Math
- Leedy, Loreen. 2x2 = Boo!
- Leedy, Loreen. Mission: Addition
- Leedy, Loreen. Fraction Action
- Leedy, Loreen. Measure Penny
- Lewis, Paul Owens. P. Bear's New Year's Party!
- McGrath, Barbara Barbieri. More M & M's Math
- Neuschwander, Cindy. Amanda Bean's Amazing Dream
- Nolan, Helen. How Much, How Many, How Far, How Heavy, How Long How Tall is 1000?
- Pallotta, Jerry. The Hershey Milk Chocolate Fractions Book
- Payne, Emmy. Katy No Pocket
- Pinczes, Elinor. A Remainder of One
- Pinczes, Elinor. One Hundred Hungry Ants
- Schuett, Stacey. Somewhere in the World Right Now
- Terban, Marvin. Too Hot to Hoot
- Viorst, Judith. Alexander, Who Used to be Rich Last Sunday
- Zimelman, Nathan. How the Second Grade Got 8205.50 to Visit the Statue of Liberty

*10: Use Your Favorite Graphic Organizer for Math Story Problems.*

Many elementary teachers use graphic organizers in their ELA classes in order to help students understand what they read or put thoughts in order as preparation for writing. "Graphic organizers help students organize and summarize information," (Cunningham & Allington, 2003, p. 88). Graphic organizers can take the shape of webs, feature matrices, and data charts. The same graphic organizers can be used in math class. Students can be asked to fill in graphic organizers for the math story problems they read. The graphic organizer in **figure 9** was used in an ELA class to help students record information they read in a story. The same graphic organizer can be used to analyze math story problems. Using the graphic organizers with the math story problem gives



students a method to practice finding who, what, when, where, why, and so what. The task in math class may be easier than the same task in an ELA class because the math story problems are often quite short. There is less to read to find the required information. This is excellent practice for all students, and it also helps students with ELA deficits to understand the math problem they are trying to solve. Using the same graphic organizer in math class that was used in ELA class may help some students make connections that what is taught in one class should carry over to the other.

### Conclusion

Embedding ELA skills in math lessons can boost students' ability to express themselves more precisely and accurately. Eight-year-old Brian, who was mentioned in the introduction, will benefit in both his ELA class and his math class when the skills required in ELA are taught in math. This may help Brian, and other students like him, listen, speak and write more effectively and increase their test scores.

Figure 9

### *W/H Chart*

Who?
What?
When?
Where?
Why?
How?



---

## References

- Cunningham, P., & Allington, R. (2003). *Classrooms that work: They can all read and write*. New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Dalton, J. & Smith, D. (1986). Extending children's special abilities: strategies for primary classrooms. <http://www.teachers.ash.org.au/researchskills/dalton.htm>
- New York State Education Department. The latest news on grades 3 - 8 testing. New <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/3-8/math-sample/gr4bk2.pdf>
- Stead, T. (2005). Opening the door to a world of possibilities. *American Educator*, 29 (3): 31-33.
- Tenenbaum, D. (2004). Narrative skills linked to math prowess. [http://whyfiles.org/shorties/158math\\_lang/](http://whyfiles.org/shorties/158math_lang/)
- Tierney, R. & Readence, J. (2005). *Reading strategies and practices: A compendium*. New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Tompkins, G., & Blanchfield, C. (2004). *Teaching vocabulary: 50 creative strategies, grades K – 12*. New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.



---

## **How Literacy Assessments Transform Teachers' Instructional Choices: Secondary Teachers Report How They Prepare Students for State Tests**

*Salika A. Lawrence*

### **ABSTRACT**

Literacy assessments are transforming the contexts of secondary instruction. This article reports how literacy assessments are shaping the instructional choices of nine English Language Arts teachers who work in three different states in northeastern United States – New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. Through interviews, the teachers reported that they are finding creative ways to not teach to the test, but most of their instructional choices are being shaped by their perceived expectations of the state exam. On a micro level, the reports documented in this article have implications for secondary literacy instruction, while simultaneously providing a stance for conversations about how teachers can reshape their perceptions of effective literacy instruction on a macro level.

### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Salika Lawrence is a member of the Department of Middle and Secondary Education at William Patterson University's College of Education.

### **Teachers Report How They Prepare Students for State Tests**

As a result of the increased accountability ascribed to the No Child Left Behind policy of 2001, teachers have changed their instructional practices to incorporate more of the content encountered on state-wide standardized assessments. In this context, teachers believe they must “teach to the test” in order to prepare students for success on the standardized test. This paper shares insights I gained through interviews with nine secondary teachers. Although teachers are conflicted about the ways they are asked to prepare students for state-wide tests, some teachers believe that they are finding creative ways to teach beyond the test while others have transformed their practice to integrate test preparation strategies into their English Language Arts curriculum.

According to the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), reading and writing performances on this assessment for White, Black, and Hispanic 12<sup>th</sup> grade students have decreased since 1992 (Grigg, Daane, Jin, & Campbell, 2003). Even with this overall decline, disparities between subgroups show that White and Asian Pacific Islander students continue to have significantly higher reading scores than Blacks



and Hispanics (Grigg, Daane, Jin, & Campbell, 2003). Some research suggests that a possible reason for this gap is that literacy assessments administered to secondary students measure students' literacy proficiencies by how well students "write to inform, to persuade, or to retell a story" (Kern, Andre, Schilke, Barton, & McGuire, 2003, p. 816). A third possible reason, often overlooked, is that students' literacy practices are largely shaped by their experiences in school through the teachers' instructional choices. Therefore, when examining literacy practices in school a close look at the instructional choices teachers make is warranted.

### **Standardized Assessments Shape Literacy Expectations for Secondary Students**

Statewide literacy assessments are aligned to English Language Arts Standards (NCTE and IRA, 1998). These standards advocate that reading and writing be seen as processes and that secondary school students be expected to read books from a variety of genres, produce a report for information, write persuasively, work with peers and teachers, study literature, and interpret texts. Throughout the reading process, students are expected to provide examples from their interpretation of text, make connections between texts and their personal experiences, apply what they have learned from text, and examine text critically (NCTE and IRA, 1998).

Forget, Lyle, and Reinhart-Clark, (2004) believe that adolescents perform poorly on standardized reading tests because they lack basic skills and "what is being measured in their tests is the ability of students to perform higher order thinking while they read" (Forget, Lyle, & Reinhart-Clark, 2004, p. 10), and they receive inadequate test preparation. In contrast, White, Sturtevant, and Dunlap (2003) found that "during the 1998-99 school year... teachers were modifying instruction to include activities that they believed would better prepare their students for the tests" (p. 43). Teachers in White et al's study reported that within their 90 minute instructional block, they do not have time to engage students in critical discussions about tests. Instead the middle school teachers who participated in their study reported that they spend their instructional time covering material that will be on the standardized test by teaching the basics through lower level questions, emphasize memorization, and test taking strategies such as how to bubble and underline. White, et al., documented that teachers use instructional time to help students practice literacy and study skills – writing specific types of essays found on the exam, practicing reading comprehension skills and strategies, practicing how to take standardized tests – that require memorization rather than what they consider higher-level or critical thinking such as comparing/ contrasting, or evaluating texts and information in their writing.

When teachers teach strategies and skills that will prepare students for state tests, standardized assessments such as the NAEP, New York State English Language Arts exam (ELA), and the newly revised Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) are defining the literacy expectations for adolescents in secondary classrooms. For example, the academic tasks found on standardized assessments require that "students ... read and





---

write across a wide variety of disciplines, genres, and materials with increasing skill, flexibility, and insight” (Biancarosa & Snow, 2003, p. 5). As students interact with texts encountered on standardized tests, they are expected to apply content area knowledge and use various reading strategies for comprehension. A closer look at the New York State English Language Arts Test reveals that students’ literacy proficiencies are measured via their ability to:

1. listen to a passage and take notes about what they hear
2. discern important information from erroneous information in the selection
3. make inferences about what they hear in the passage
4. synthesize information obtained from the text
5. make connections between texts from different genres, namely the quote and the listening passages, which were articles in this instance
6. answer questions based on the notes taken during the listening section
7. respond to a writing prompt
8. produce a descriptive narrative
9. answer reading comprehension questions based on fiction, non-fiction, and poetry texts
10. complete graphic organizers that identify character traits
11. respond to short answer questions in which they cite evidence from the text to support their assertions
12. plan and then write an essay using a writing prompt
13. demonstrate knowledge of several writing strategies that goes beyond knowledge of the genre through use of such writing strategies as tone, appropriate word choice, and quotation marks
14. demonstrate their knowledge of the pragmatic uses of language and literacy through their ability to communicate to a wider audience

As a result of these expectations teachers struggle to transform their practices and find ways to help students succeed on standardized tests which evaluate students’ performance in these areas. If tests are aligned to standards and the standards are supposedly guiding classroom instruction, why do many students fail to meet proficiency levels on the standardized assessments year after year?

### **Teachers Frequently Adjust Their Curriculum to Prepare Students for Statewide Exams**

I recently interviewed four high school and five middle school English Language Arts teachers who work in three states – New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts – and who teach students in grades 5 through 12. The average experience for the teachers is 6.7 years. Each was asked to provide a pseudonym to protect their identity. Each interview was conducted separately. Most of the teachers characterized their schools as large urban schools where most of the students are African American and Hispanic, from low socio-economic backgrounds, and who receive free or reduced lunch. I asked all teachers to



bring authentic artifacts from their classrooms (e.g., lesson plans, student work, instructional materials), which would help to document the practices they shared during the 2 hour interview.

I learned that all of the teachers integrated test preparation into their secondary English/Language Arts classes but they did so by incorporating test preparation with English content instruction. Although their respective state exams occur at different times of the year (see Table 1), most teachers reported that they used a combination of strategies in which they taught students skills and strategies for reading and writing, as well as test-taking skills, and periodically exposed students to the standardized tests' expectations.

Table 1

*Grade Level and Month of the Year When Standardized Testing Occurs for Secondary English/Language Arts Teachers in the Study*

State	Grade(s)	Month	
		Middle School	High School
Massachusetts	8, 10	May	May
New Jersey	8, 11	March	October* and March
New York	8, 11	January	January and June

*Note.* \*Students who were retained take this administration of the exam.

Although there were only a few teachers who reported that test preparation is a school-wide initiative in their school, the teachers were asked to change their instructional practices to reflect school-wide expectations for test preparation. For example, Ms. Smith, who teaches in a school with grades 9 through 12 reported that once per week she had to prepare students for the GEPA (Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment) or the HSPA (High School Proficiency Assessment)--the standardized exams in New Jersey. She reported that her school had assigned a HSPA/GEPA instructor to help teachers prepare students for the standardized exam. Ms. Smith said, "it's her job to come into every classroom and teachers teach with her." Ms. Smith indicated that the HSPA/GEPA instructor also "gives . . . her lesson plans" to prepare her students for the standardized test.

Other teachers did not indicate that test preparation was a school-wide initiative, but suggested that they felt "pressured" to get students to pass the state test. One 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Ms. Tony, reported that leading up to the test she incorporated test preparation into her curriculum daily. Ms. Tony reported that prior to the exam students were not provided with options in her classroom because she focused only on preparing for the test. She indicated that after the test students had more options in her classroom. Because she is an 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Ms. Tony shared that she placed more emphasis on



writing than reading, and had specific expectations for students' writing. During the interview, Ms. Tony shared many model essays with me which she had created for the students. She described her test preparation instruction:

I focused a lot on, and I had specific requirements for them with essays. They had to have 5 paragraphs and as far as the paragraphs were concerned the paragraphs had to have no less than 5 sentences. They had to begin with an engaging statement so that the reader would be interested. The moment somebody starts reading your essay, that first sentence needs to be something engaging, something to interest them. And I was very, very hard and strict on them about that. That their essays had to follow that format, that they had to have a proper conclusion, that concluded their whole. That was something that I stressed and I really didn't give them room to do anything other than that.

Teachers also reported using on-going assessment to determine what to teach and re-teach. Most teachers (6 of the 9) reported that they used student work as on-going assessments to determine what to teach students in preparation for tests. Most teachers also shared that they periodically reviewed student outcomes on practice tests to determine what to teach. For example, as a 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher Ms. Smart reflected on her experiences teaching 8<sup>th</sup> grade the year before. She indicated that throughout the year she identified students' strengths and weaknesses and then had them practice strategies they would need for the standardized exam so "there are no surprises" on test day. She stated:

When I had 8<sup>th</sup> grade last year, it was totally different because one, their assessment is in almost in the beginning of the year-- January. And there's no time to waste. I pretty much had to assess where they were with their reading and writing abilities. see where they were, then build from there. And then I base my instruction on that. For example, my students could not write in paragraphs, so here I go again, go back to a 4<sup>th</sup> grade lesson. How to write a paragraph, how to be clear and concise, how to engage the reader. It depends on where the students are.

Ms. Smart indicated that she used formative assessments in reading and writing to identify what to teach based on students' needs, but those needs were determined by expectations she knew would be on the state test. Some teachers reported that they used technology tools in their school to obtain information about students' proficiencies and weaknesses on assessments. For example, Ms. Smith reported:



I'm able to go online and the students are as well, and they can all sit with their laptops in the room and take a practice reading test or practice writing test. I can go right on the computer, click on their name, it'll come up, it'll be scored for me.

Ms. Smith indicated that all the teachers in her school are expected to use the information to provide focused instruction based on the students' needs as they relate to expectations on the test. Like Ms. Smart, Ms. Smith reported that she used student results from the practice tests to guide instruction in reading and writing, so that she can prepare students for the standardized assessment.

The teachers reported that they made specific curricular adjustments by keeping the timeline and content expectations for the state test in mind. For instance, Ms. Smart, a middle school teacher from New York, reported that her program for literacy instruction had been modified because the grade 8 writing assessment occurs towards the middle of the school year, so she makes adjustments to the curriculum content in order to prepare them in time for the test. Additionally, Table 2 shows that Ms. Smart taught her students reading and writing strategies, and note taking (see Table 2). However, because she was guided by the state exam for each grade Ms. Smart's instructional choices were slightly different in each context.

Table 2

*Comparison of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Test Preparation Activities Emphasized, Reported by Ms Smart*

Test Preparation Activities Emphasized	Grade 7	Grade 8
Practice taking multiple choice test	√	
Practice using reading strategies	√	√
Practice using writing strategies/techniques across genre/craft		√
Using on-going assessments to guide instruction	√	√
Practice listening and note taking skills	√*	√
Vocabulary instruction	√	

*Note.* \*Ms. Smart emphasized note taking in her 7<sup>th</sup> grade class because she was aware that it is an expectation on the grade 8 exam.

Ms. Smart's 8<sup>th</sup> grade class received more writing preparation, while the 7<sup>th</sup> grade students had more practice in taking multiple-choice tests and vocabulary instruction. Ms. Smart indicated that incorporating these activities through "strategic teaching" helped prepare students for the reading assessment and helped improve their reading and writing skills. Ms. Smart suggests that "strategic teaching," requires that she teach students strategies in reading and writing to prepare for tests. She explained



You can tell the difference in their reading and their writing. Last year the 8<sup>th</sup> graders that I had in my classroom totally moved, I mean in 5 months. With some real strategic teaching their reading habits changed. They changed as writers.

### **Middle and High School Teachers Show Subtle Differences in Addressing Test Preparation**

Both middle and high school teachers taught students how to make connections between texts, taught students how to understand literary elements of texts, daily test preparation, identifying themes, and provided students with practice exams. Despite the overwhelming similarities in the test preparation activities it appears that the middle school teachers placed more emphasis on teaching their students strategies for reading and writing (see Table 3). In addition, the middle school teachers connected reading and writing strategies by providing opportunities for students to practice using the strategies the learned while reading, in their own writing.

Middle school teachers I interviewed seemed to focus more on strategies for reading and writing, while high-school teachers emphasized extracting meaning from and interpreting texts. Some of the teachers also reported that they taught students test-taking strategies. As indicated on Table 3, teachers taught students how to answer multiple choice questions and note taking. While reviewing a chart she had created for her classroom, during her interview Ms. Bray, a 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher said:

I have posted in the front of the room various questions, the various types of questions--what a “who” question is, what a “what” question is, a “why.” All the students, they’re familiar with the 5 Ws, but when asked as a question, they don’t really understand how to answer it. With them, answering questions on a test as well as their state exam. They’ll give you a “who” answer as opposed to a “what” question. So you know they don’t really answer the questions effectively because they don’t understand what the question is asking.

Similarly, Ms. Smart reported that she taught students how to use the process of elimination when taking multiple-choice tests. She stated:

When the test gets near we focus on the format of the test, meaning multiple choice strategies. How we can eliminate the two definitely wrong answers, [that there is] one answer that might be the answer, but we have to go back to find evidence.

Overall teachers emphasized reading and writing strategies. For example, Ms. Smart taught her middle school students reading strategies, such as making personal



connections to text and between texts, knowing how to figure out unknown words while reading, and engaging in techniques for writing across genres by using published models.

Table 3

*Reading and Writing Expectations for Middle and High School Students*

	Reading	Writing
Middle School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ figure out unknown words encountered while reading</li> <li>▪ go back in the story for examples and evidence to support answers for multiple choice questions</li> <li>▪ make comparisons between different texts by identifying the themes or literary elements encountered in the text</li> <li>▪ answer different types of reading comprehension questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ use the style of your favorite author to engage the reader or write a poem</li> <li>▪ use literary devices found in different published works</li> <li>▪ use the writing process to generate ideas for writing and to revise your work</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ complete practice tests that mirror the state test</li> <li>▪ listen and take notes</li> <li>▪ practice test taking strategies daily</li> </ul>	
High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Discuss reading passages</li> <li>▪ Figure out the meaning/ theme of a poem</li> <li>▪ Figure out literary elements being used by the author</li> <li>▪ Talk about how reading passages are similar</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Write essays</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ complete midterm and final exams use same format as the state test</li> <li>▪ practice test taking strategies daily</li> </ul>	

**Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Beyond the Test**

Some teachers reported that they helped students prepare for standardized tests without directly teaching to the test. It appeared that they accomplished this by asking students to create review games and teaching skills and strategies they believe will lead to long-term literacy skills. Although some teachers thought they were teaching skills and strategies needed beyond the test, I learned that the strategies taught were shaped by the expectations on the state test.

Another interesting trend was that high school teachers reported that they asked students to create review games to prepare for standardized exams. For example, Ms. Brown asked students to create board games based on literary elements discussed in



---

class. She indicated that students had to look “through the chapters of books they read to find examples of different types of literary elements, so that they actually see how it’s used.” Ms. Brown provided opportunities for students to work with peers to create their own “trivia” questions as they examined literary elements encountered in books they had read. Similarly, Ms. Taylor asked students to create games that she called “English Regents Review” games. She explained:

We just went over the ELA [English Language Arts] exam, and the students had to create their own English Regents review game. They were very creative. We had “ELA Plinco.” “Who Wants to Be an English Millionaire.” Wonderful, wonderful games. Then the kids played English hopscotch.

Ms. Taylor reported that for the first time she deviated from “teaching for the test” and asked students to engage in these creative ways to review for the state test. In addition, she reported that in contrast to previous years, her students showed the most gains in literacy as measured on the standardized test because she focused less on the test and emphasized reading and writing skills. She said:

This year, for the first time, I didn’t really focus on teaching for the test. I focused on the skills that they need in order to pass not only this test, but all other exams. I made connections. On the English Regents this is what’s gonna happen. But sitting down and just prepping them for the test, I didn’t do that. I didn’t do it at all. I focused on developing their writing skills, by giving them assignments like this one, the poem, writing in a different point of view. I focused on developing their reading skills, giving them passages and letting them really analyze what they read. Of course I focused on their speaking skills, even though they don’t need that for the English Regents, but I focused on those skills, and you know what? The kids did really, really well with me just focusing on the skills that they needed, rather than saying OK we’re teaching for the test.

Although there were only a few teachers who tried incorporating creative activities to help students review for the state test and emphasized reading and writing skills in their English Language Arts classroom, all of the teachers reported common frustrations about the standardized assessments. As previously mentioned many teachers indicated that they felt “pressure” from the state assessment, and, in some instances, they reported that they made instructional choices that caused them to feel they were teaching towards a test. For example, Ms. Doe facetiously admitted that she is required to do “MCAS [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System] prep 99 percent of the time.



---

So it's not fun." Ms. Bray's comments sum up the conflict shared by most teachers in the study:

Preparing for test prep, and then towards the end of the year, I'm more preparing them for the next grade--what they would need to be in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade or be an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student. Focusing on the test, trying to stay away from teaching towards the test, but it's such an intricate part of what they are required or what they are judged by to be promoted.

The conflict faced by many teachers is that the challenge is whether to focus on what the students need beyond that class and beyond the test by trying not to teach for the test or to help students meet promotional guidelines and prepare them for the next grade."

### **Concluding Remarks**

Through the interviews with the nine teachers and close examination of the artifacts they shared with me, it is evident that teachers are teaching to the test but many (a) are not aware they are doing so because they believe they are emphasizing skills and strategies; (b) teachers are aware they are teaching to the test and make conscious effort to integrate test preparation into the curriculum; (c) are conflicted about how the state test is impacting their English Language Arts curriculum. All teachers I interviewed reported incorporating standardized test preparation into their content instruction and all reported similar frustrations about the challenges of preparing students for standardized tests. However, the teachers who stated that they did not "teach to the test," but taught strategies for reading and writing and informed students how the strategies could be applied to the exam, reported that their students were more successful on standardized tests.

Although the teachers in this study worked in three different states, all of them made instructional choices that were shaped more by the state test. The study documented that these teachers were conflicted because they perceived a disjuncture between their curricular decisions and their stated professional beliefs. This suggests that teachers in the current study believe these conflicting practices may lead to ineffective instructional choices; thus they might feel confined by short-term pressures that inhibit their efforts toward teaching for long-term goals. White, Sturtevant, and Dunlap (2003) found that middle school teachers in their study expressed similar internal conflicts about teaching for the standardized exam. Their research found that middle-school teachers focus more on test preparation because their students demonstrate weak literacy skills that do not meet expectations for the tests so they feel obligated to abandon educational philosophies fostered in graduate school (White, Sturtevant, & Dunlap, 2003). Thus future research might examine how teachers cope with the contradictions between their teaching beliefs and their actual teaching practices.

It is important to note that when teachers changed their instructional focus to what they believed supported the long-term literacy development of their students, they reported that their students performed better on standardized tests than when they tried to





“teach to the test” through isolated test-taking strategies and short-term test preparation. The teachers believe that their students were able to apply what they learned in English/Language Arts to different contexts, transfer skills to different activities, and use their literacy skills in more meaningful ways.

Teachers should spend more time reflecting on their practice and why they are making the instructional choices they do. Through critical reflection teachers will see that their perceptions of not “teaching to the test” closely mirror practices that explicitly integrate test preparation into their curriculum. The teachers herein, believe that they have changed their practice to teach students strategies and skills they will need to succeed beyond the test, however they fail to see that standardized tests have transformed their curriculum to the point where secondary English Language Arts content reflects content on the standardized assessment.

### References

- Biancarosa, G., & Snow, C. (2003). Adolescent literacy and the achievement gap: What do we know and where do we go from here? Carnegie Corporation of New York Adolescent Literacy Funders Meeting Report. Retrieved November 1, 2004 from <http://www.all4ed.org/resources/CarnegieAdolescentLiteracyReport.pdf>
- Forget, M. Lyle, N., & Reinhart-Clark, K. (2004, May 5). *Convincing all teachers to use reading and writing in their classrooms- A successful paradigm: MAX teaching with reading and writing*. Presentation at the 2004 International Reading Association Annual Conference.
- Grigg, W., Daane, M., Jin, Y., & Campbell, J. (2003). *The nation's report card: Reading 2002*. Report from the U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences. National Center for Education Statistics. NCES 2003- 521, Washington, DC
- Kern, D., Andre, W., Schilke, R., Barton, J., & McGuire, M. (2003). Less is more: Preparing students for state writing assessments. *The Reading Teacher*, 56 (8), 816-826.
- National Council for Teachers of English & International Reading Association. (1996). *Standards for the English Language Arts*. Urbana, IL and Newark, DE: NCTE and IRA.
- White, S., Sturtevant, E., & Dunlap, K. (2003). Preservice and beginning teachers' perceptions of the influence of high stakes tests on their literacy-related instructional beliefs and decisions. *Reading Research and Instruction*, 42(2), 39-62.



# Book Banter



Spectrum 2007

## 2007 NYSRA Children's Literature Committee

Pat Shea Bischoff, Suzanne Cecil, Faye Cohen, Debbie Dermady,  
Kristen Gramlich, Alice Sample (Chairperson)

### Young Adult

*Firegirl* (Little, Brown, 2006) by Tony Abbott is a beautiful but sad story that will be hard to forget. Tom, a quiet, somewhat introverted seventh grader describes how the lives of his classmates change with the arrival of a new student who is recovering from being seriously burned. She is extremely disfigured and has to keep returning to the local hospital's burn unit for plastic surgery. Most of the children are afraid to be near Jessica because her burns make them uncomfortable; and Jessica has moved so many times and been through so much that she doesn't really try to be friendly.

This is not a happily-ever-after book. It shows that the reactions of people to disabilities are often a reflection of their own negative experiences and fears. But people can learn (and that's an important lesson in this novel). After only three weeks in Tom's class Jessica changed his outlook and in fact his perception of himself, and his life will never again be the same. Though a Young

Adult novel this book would be appropriate with children from Third Grade up. It would also make a great read-aloud. This is a powerful book that shows that sometimes even the smallest gestures can have a profound effect on someone's life.

Fans of Coleen Paratore's blithe and heart-warming earlier novel, *Wedding*



*Planner's Daughter*, get ready to be blown away by her new book, *Cupid Chronicles* (Simon & Schuster, 2006)—especially those

enjoying a little love in their fiction because *Chronicles* joins two types: a high school romance, and passion for a social cause (keeping the local public library open). Will main character Willa, with help from her friends and community, be able to sort out her love problems and keep Bramble's Library afloat? Will she end having more fun than in



the earlier novel, where happiness turned out to be a bridal gown full of cherry pits? Both Paratore books will be flying off the shelf—right into the hands of young ladies in quest of their own identity through the power of good literature.

Rumor has it that Paratore's next book (*Mack McGinn's Big Win*) will be all boy. She's a talented author who deserves attention. Watch for the new entry soon!

[www.coleenparatore.com](http://www.coleenparatore.com)

Imagine life as an Eighth Grade Middle School adolescent enjoying country life in rural Georgia with Grandma, when all of a sudden Mom, who lives in Chicago, decides it's best for you to move to the city with her.

This is Patrice's situation, as *Standing*

**Patrice isn't alone, standing against the wind.**

*Against the Wind*

(Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2006) opens.

And things get worse from there. Just a few months after Patrice's move to Chicago her mother

is arrested for welfare fraud, and the girl has to move in with an aunt who already has a large family of her own and seems to have little time or money left for Patrice. Besides this uncomfortable domestic situation Patrice also has to cope with bullies and drug dealers on her way to school who harass her about the way she looks—until Monty, a boy in her housing development, befriends her for the sake of his little brother who needs help with his studies. Patrice's only wish and hope is to win a scholarship to a prestigious African

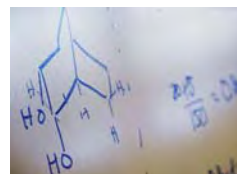
American boarding school in Mississippi, so she can get away from all this. But there's a catch: Patrice's Mom needs to sign the application form. How can Patrice get her mother to sign?

Older sister Cherise promises to help, but is busy with her own life and fails to follow through. Who will come to Patrice's rescue? *Standing Against the Wind* is Traci L. Jones's first novel, and it's a strong, impressive beginning to her career. The characters are well drawn, and the issues and predicaments are credible and involving. This one was hard to put down.

[www.fsgkidsbooks.com](http://www.fsgkidsbooks.com)

Nate arrives home from Middle School one day to find a police car in his driveway. His mind whirls through all kinds of scenarios—all bad. Then, a scene he surely does not want to see: two officers walking his wounded and handcuffed father to their vehicle.

This is the startling opening of Joyce Maynard's *The Cloud Chamber* (Atheneum, 2005). Nate is by turns incredulous and devastated. His father meant everything to him. He was his hero. Over the years they had made time capsules and learned about nature and the stars together. And now there he is—wounded, apparently by his own gun; and arrested. Why? What happened? No one will give Nate any answers nor even discuss the situation with him. He doesn't understand; he doesn't know how to cope. Eventually he learns his Dad is in a mental institution. He knows too that the family is in financial trouble.

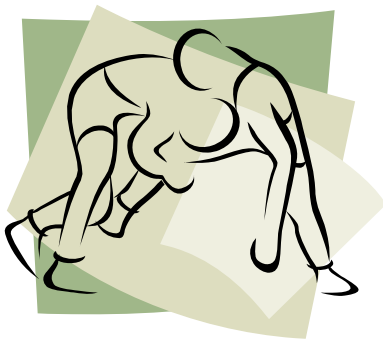




But he also knows he should remain in school. And perhaps he can use his Science Fair project to get to the state finals, which will take place near his Dad's hospital. But Dad was always the one who helped Nate create his projects, and Nate's not sure he can do this one on his own. Joyce Maynard spins a realistic story of the kinds of hardships families have to confront when struck by a bad turn of fortune. Will Nate, with the help of friendships and family, be able to come to grips with his father's illness? Will he be able to finish his "cloud chamber" science project, then win a chance to compete in the state finals? Will he ever get to see his Dad again? *The Cloud Chamber* is an absorbing read and Nate, a convincing and likable character. Young adults of both genders will feel emotionally drawn into his quandaries, hoping for him to succeed. This is a powerful novel which could be used as the stimulus for many kinds of rewarding discussions.

[www.joycemaynard.com](http://www.joycemaynard.com)

*Pinned* (Harcourt, 2005) by Alfred C Martino is an involving story of two High School seniors, from vastly different backgrounds, living in two different New Jersey towns—each of whom loves to wrestle and hopes to win the state championship. Each of the boys is also competitive—though in



different ways; and prepared to make sacrifices to train, practice and unremittingly pursue the championship goal. Author Martino weaves a complex net connecting the pressures of school, growing-up, setbacks and disillusionment, and endless hours of workouts in the gym. We sweat through some of the boys' matches and see the constant effort athletes from any sport must make. The culmination of course is.....guess who the two finalists in the State Championship turn out to be! And unfortunately only one of them can win the title. With any luck, readers of this novel will come away with the feeling that all who participate in sports with such dedication are in effect winners.

Envisioning a novel about three teenage friends who are seniors in High School, why not call it *Boy Girl Boy* (Harcourt, 2005)? That's exactly what Ron Koertge did with his latest Young Adult selection, which takes place in a small town where everyone seems to know everyone else. Larry, Teresa and Elliot plan to escape the constraints of small town life and run off to California to create a new life. And once there (needless to say) they will find jobs and success in the movies.

Larry is struggling to accept his sexuality. Elliot is trying to stand out and believe in himself. Teresa loves each of them as friends (not boy friends) and is the cement that binds the friendship together. This is a very appealing, tender coming-of-age book. Teenagers will respond well to these amiable characters who, like many in that age-bracket, are simply trying to



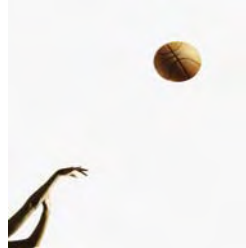
sort things out and make sense of what's happening in their world.

## Middle School

Basketball—Competition—Sportsmanship—Interpersonal relations—Self-realization—Family life—*Basketball (or Something Like It)* (Harper Collins, 2005), has it all!

Nora Raleigh Baskin captures readers from her first page when Hank hears his parents arguing about the basketball tryouts. (He really loves the game, is good at it and wants to play; he wants to try to make the team.) Nathan speaks next. He is the only black kid in Sixth Grade and is tired of people expecting him to be good at basketball because he happens to be black and tall. He *is* black and tall; but he's also uncoordinated! Nevertheless, don't all black kids play basketball? Next we meet Jeremy who has just moved from a big city to live with his Grandmother in a small town. Will he be on the team? After all, don't all kids who come from the city play basketball? And let's not leave out Anabel. When she was younger she had to go to the gym all the time because her brother played basketball. She shot baskets for hours on end and eventually got good at it; still, despite her prowess she grew to hate the game.

This is an engrossing series of stories dealing constructively with stereotypes; and themes like friendship, honor and family. The text is easy to



read, and since each character has an individual chapter to speak there's also a sense of newness and variety, and the overarching storyline moves along quickly. Children from Third grade up will enjoy the diverse perspectives this book presents.

**Everyone should read**  
*Basketball (or Something Like It)*, perhaps especially parents and coaches!  
[www.norabaskin.com](http://www.norabaskin.com)

Those from the Adirondack Mountain area will feel right at home reading the latest in the Adirondack Kids series *Islands in the Sky* (Adirondack Kids Press, 2005); and those not from that area will almost surely get the yen to visit! The well-received father-son writing team (Gary Van Riper and son



Justin) joins with their illustrator-wife/mom (Carol Van Riper) to compose various adventures set in the Adirondack

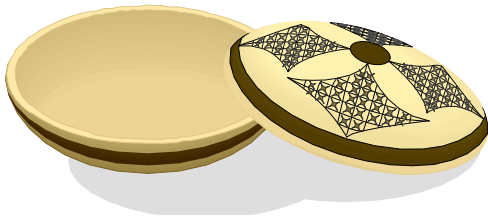
s. This latest has three kids around age ten climbing their first High Peak (over four thousand feet) in the Range.

They're undertaking the outing with Justin's Grandfather, who enjoys camping and climbing and already knows many of the Adirondack peaks. Mix camping out overnight in tents, cooking over an open fire, reports of Black Bears stealing food, star-studded night skies, with three fun loving kids on



their first climbing venture and we've got all the right elements for a great story... which this one is. At the end of each of the Van Riper books there are always some non-fictional facts about the Adirondacks included—"Dax facts." In this one readers learn more about Black Bears, the Alpine zone and the White-throated Sparrow.

*I Lost My Tooth in Africa* by Penda Diakite (Scholastic Press, 2006) is a wonderful way to connect young audiences with another culture through an experience all can relate to. When Amina travels to Africa with her family she is very excited about losing a tooth.



She places the tooth under a calabash gourd so the African Tooth Fairy will bring her a chicken. The vibrant pictures and detailed border-illustrations serve to transport the reader into African culture. The story is also inter-woven with African phrases, traditions and details about daily life, which heightens the sense of authenticity. Many aspects of this book were enlightening; all of it was entertaining.

*My Almost Epic Summer* (G. P. Putnam, 2006) by Adele Griffin is an excellent selection for Middle School students often called upon to baby-sit. It's a fast-paced novel about Irene, a young girl spending the summer vacation babysitting while her friends

enjoy the freedom a summer vacation usually brings. Irene has had babysitting jobs before but this is a daily enterprise, and seems very different from her once-a-week experiences of the past. This is a delightful novel, loaded with unexpected turns, that girls especially will enjoy.

Jean Craighead George tells the powerful story of a young sandhill crane in *Luck* (Laura Geringer Books, 2006). Luck is a rehabilitated sandhill crane who begins a long migration from Texas to Siberia.

En route to Siberia Luck becomes fascinated by the man-made objects he sees below. His parents focus on the fields and rivers so they'll be able to trace



their way back, but Luck is continually distracted by windmills, baby carriages and other human inventions. Luck eventually meets Wise, a female crane, and together they begin the return journey to the Texas marsh. Wise uses the landmarks in nature to navigate, but Luck is confused and gets lost because his "landmarks" have all moved. He finally chances on the windmill where he was originally rehabilitated, and so returns to the girl who had first saved his life.

This is a beautiful story in both words and pictures. In a sense *Luck* has elements of a coming-of-age novel. Other parts bring to life themes of friendship and loyalty, and the emotional





satisfaction of happy reunions. A sub-theme emphasizes our need to live in harmony with nature and not damage the land. The captivating illustrations by Wendell Minor remind the reader of the great beauty inherent in nature. This is a captivating novel that will please readers on multiple levels.

## Primary

*Lilly's Big Day* (Greenwillow, 2006), written and lavishly illustrated by Kevin Henkes, is a hilarious story for young readers. When Lilly's mouse-teacher announces in class that he'll be marrying the school nurse, Lilly is so excited! She imagines herself as flower girl at the wedding. As we might imagine, all kinds of things...happen. This is a fun book that young children are sure to enjoy.

*Mrs. Crump's Cat* by Linda Smith (Harper Collins, 2006) is the sweet tale of a stray cat and a lonely lady. Mrs. Crump is an older woman who lives alone until one rainy day, a beautiful cat appears at her front door. Although Mrs. Crump says she has no use for a cat, she braves the rain to give it some cream. She decides to let the cat stay, just until the rain stops. Day by day she creates excuses as to why the cat should not leave quite yet. As she takes care of the cat she begins to realize how much joy a pet can bring to her life; and she is lonely no more. This is a heart-warming little



book, portraying the gradual bonding of two kindred souls—each in need of the other.

Peter Sis's book *Play, Mozart, Play!* (Greenwillow Books, 2006) is a resourceful way to introduce young children to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. In simple sentences and with detailed pictures Sis tells the story of Mozart's life. Readers are introduced to Mozart as a child genius who could play the piano blindfolded or backwards. The book is a tribute to an amazing talent and to the inspiration and enjoyment his music still provides.

Leslie Helakoski's *Big Chickens* (Dutton, 2006) is a marvelous read-aloud for young children. Four chickens try to



escape from a wolf but keep moving into deeper and worse predicaments, many of them side-splitting. Can the

chickens escape that "big bad wolf"? Children will enjoy the adventuresome text, and especially Henry Cole's inspired, sometimes bizarre illustrations.

Do we know—**really know**—what a million of something looks like? Be prepared to be amazed when you read Andrew Clements' *A Million* (Simon & Schuster, 2006). On the way to eventually counting to a million through various imaginative devices the reader learns some truly head-shaking facts. How





many pencils, for example, would it take to draw a line 100 miles long? And—how far can a gray whale travel in 12 years?

Illustrator Mike Reed has managed to make looking at 1,000,000

dots fun. His illustrations demonstrate many aspects and perspectives of ‘millionness.’ This book is a must-have for libraries and brings to the surface the child in all of us who just likes knowing some neat “trivia” facts.

*By learning to read, our children are given the power of words, the power to express thoughts and feelings, the power to understand one another, the power to learn what they need to know.*

*Thanks to the authors and illustrators for creating these new books, and to the publishers for providing them for our review.*