"If It's Not Fixed, the Staples are Out!" Documenting Young Children's Perceptions of Strategic Reading Processes

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe how teachers can foster strategic reading processes in their early literacy classrooms, and how to incorporate a Strategy Perception Interview to assist in documenting students' use and perceptions of these strategies. Descriptions of classroom instruction incorporating literacy strategies and implementation of the Interview are discussed as well as results from the administration of the Interview and specific classroom implications.

This investigation of children's uses and perceptions of reading strategies has been the focus of an action research project jointly conducted between Melody, a first-grade teacher, and Bette, a university professor. The study was conceived from an interesting exchange that occurred while interviewing first graders regarding their preferred reading strategies. Bette was intrigued by the following interchange with Patti, one of Melody's young students (all student names are pseudonyms):

Bette: What do you do when you're reading and get stuck on a word?

Patti: I sound it out.

Bette: How do you know when the word is fixed?

Patti: Because the book has staples. If it's not fixed, the staples are out.

Patti's intriguing answer led us to more closely explore the stated perceptions of young children regarding their reading strategies, possible differences in these perceptions that may exist between proficient and less proficient readers, and instructional implications of these discoveries.

The following article describes one facet of a three-year collaborative study in which we examined how a strategies-based approach to early literacy instruction impacts first-grade students' learning. A particular focus of this study was to determine how young learners describe their own strategy use, as indicated through a Strategy Perception Interview. Descriptions of strategic reading instruction and implications for classroom practices are also provided.

Strategic Literacy Learning

Teaching for strategies is considered a key component of early literacy instruction (Schwartz, 1997). Graham and Block (1993/1994) contend that children who receive in-depth, well-modeled strategy instruction obtain significantly higher scores on standardized tests of reading comprehension, reasoning, and self-esteem. Strategic readers also perform better on informal tests measuring the transfer and application of critical reading and thinking abilities to situations outside of the school context, and are also high performers on informal tests of problem solving and group work skills. In addition, flexibility is considered a hallmark of strategic reading, through which learners adapt their actions as they read (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008).

Readers use a variety of strategies to coordinate cues from different information sources, evaluate their progress, and draw upon options when encountering new and/or difficult text (Schwartz, 1997; Maxim & Five, 1997). Strategy use involves a conscious selection of an approach to solve a problem while reading (Spiegel, 1995), and allows readers to become autonomous in their control of the comprehension process (Dowhower, 1999). Thinking about thinking, or metacognition, is at the core of strategic behavior (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1994). Simply stated, strategies allow children to think in their heads, or practice metacognition, when attempting to make sense out of text (McTague, 1997). Eilers and Pinkley (2006) found that first graders' reading comprehension is significantly improved through the explicit instruction of metacognitive reading strategies. Through this metacognitive instruction, learners are guided as they move from effortful to automatic reading (Afflerbach et al., 2008).

Afflerbach et al. (2008) suggest that the terms "skills" and "strategies" are sometimes used inconsistently or imprecisely. In this study, skills are viewed as units of knowledge that are applied automatically in literacy contexts, such as reading. Paris et al. (1994) suggest that strategies are skills that have been made deliberate. In other words, strategies are skills that have been taken from their automatic contexts so that the reader can more closely inspect them. Strategies can therefore be shared, debated, and analyzed collectively by a community of learners. Afflerbach et al. (2008) define strategies as "deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader's efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meanings" (p. 368). Skills are described as "automatic actions that result in decoding and comprehension with speed, efficiency, and fluency" (p. 368). In effect, skills become strategies when the learner knows how to apply and transfer specific skills and have ownership over their use (Five & Dionisio, 1998). Ultimately, a balance of both the application of skills and employment of strategies is at the heart of proficient reading (Afflerbach et al., 2008).

Strategies are framed by common cues used in language: graphophonics (sound/symbol), syntactics (structure/grammar), semantics (meaning), and pragmatics (context). Graphophonics refers to orthography, phonology, and phonics while syntax includes the grammatical structures in text. Semantics, which is closely integrated with pragmatics, incorporates what the reader comprehends in a given literacy event as well as her/his social and personal meaning (Goodman, 1994; Goodman & Marek, 1996). In their groundbreaking work on reading miscues, Goodman, Watson, and Burke (1987) refer to semantics as the system of meaning in language, which includes the reader's own personal experiences and how language is used to create meaning for that individual. The pragmatic system refers to the context or situation in which the reader uses language. Proficient use of the language cues involves their dynamic and varied application across literacy experiences. The ultimate goal of strategy use is for students to be aware of and use all cueing systems to make meaning of text (Maxim & Five, 1997).

Because the goals of various reading experiences differ, and because readers bring a depth of experience to each encounter, a wide array of strategies should be taught and used. For example, strategies appropriate for literacy instruction include predicting, visualizing, analyzing, summarizing, synthesizing, monitoring, and activating (Dowhower, 1999; Five & Dionisio, 1998). Self-monitoring and self-correction are excellent indicators of students' inner control in oral reading, as students use their own resources to solve problems with text (Askew & Fountas, 1998). These

teach strategies, engage children in multiple readings, and gradually transfer responsibility for strategy use (Clark & Graves, 2005). Although each of the instructional components is important, instruction should focus on the flexible application of strategies and not a rigid sequence of steps (Fielding & Pearson, 1994). Through a flexible approach to strategy instruction, teachers "teach children many strategies, teach them early, reteach them often, and connect assessment with reteaching" (Afflerbach et al., 2008, p. 371).

Modeling is particularly critical in strategies instruction, as it provides explicit, student-teacher dialogue and helps clarify invisible mental processes for young readers. Modeling also provides repeated opportunities for the teacher and students to explicitly explore the purpose of the task at hand as well as to suggest available options, both of which are necessary for children to read strategically (Paris et al., 1994). Bohn, Roehrig, and Pressley (2004) note that modeling is one of the distinctive hallmarks of effective primary teachers.

Strategies and Assessment

By carefully observing students' reading behaviors, teachers can infer the types of cues and strategies children use (Schwartz, 1997) and this information, in turn, can direct instructional decisions. Assessment tools that include careful observation and anecdotal notes can guide teachers to adjust instruction and make accommodations according to the strengths that students are exhibiting (McTague, 1997). Student-teacher reading conferences also provide an effective venue for strategies instruction as they allow the teacher an opportunity to assess and document a child's processes when encountering new text, as well as provide time for the child to independently identify and practice strategies. Conferences also enable teachers to tailor instruction to meet individual students' needs by differentiating instruction developmentally (Dahl, Scharer, Lawson, & Grogan, 1999).

Running records are another effective way for assessing children's strategy use as teachers listen to individual students read a complete text while recording their miscues (e.g., McTague, 1997). Running records can provide teachers with evidence that a child is monitoring or checking his/her reading strategies, searching for sources of information, and interacting meaningfully with the text (Askew & Fountas, 1998). Including question prompts that assess the child's comprehension of the passage read can be a critical component of the running record as this assists in identifying those learners who can effectively decode text but who do not

understand what is read. The miscues and comprehension responses can then be jointly analyzed to determine which cueing systems and strategies the student uses or neglects. This procedure provides the teacher with a record of the student's internal processing and helps them select text at an appropriate level for the child, analyze how individuals are sorting and relating sources of information, and assess a student's phrasing and fluency.

Strategic Instruction: Melody's Classroom

In Melody's first-grade classroom, literacy instruction focuses on effective uses of varied reading strategies. Her goal is to increase students' awareness of their reading miscues, foster their ability to self-correct, and enable them to independently construct meaning from texts (Bradbury-Wolff & Bergeron, 1998). This first-grade classroom is rich with meaningful texts and includes a focus on environmental print, class- and student-created books, and access to literature on a wide range of topics and levels. Melody's instruction utilizes many components of the Four-Block literacy model (e.g., Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999) as she infuses each of the four Blocks, guided reading, self-selected reading, writing, and working with words, on a daily basis.

Small-Group Instruction

Melody has found that an effective way to support her students' strategy use is to provide direct instruction through flexible, ability-based literacy groups or "Strategy Circles" (Bergeron & Bradbury-Wolff, 2002). Though not used as the only delivery method for guided reading, small groups provide her with the opportunity to closely match student needs with appropriately leveled materials. Melody uses results from running records, administered monthly during students' self-selected reading block, in two ways – 1), to carefully monitor and assess students' growth and 2), to decide their placement within literacy groups. Eilers and Pinkley (2006) suggest that small group interaction may benefit students' use of reading comprehension strategies, and provide a forum for rich discussion, opportunities for scaffolding, and assessment of students' understandings and difficulties. In a study of struggling readers, Johnson-Glenberg (2000) found that small-group instruction in metacognitive reading strategies significantly improved performances in key measures associated with decoding, comprehension, and cognitive processing.

Small group instruction is encouraged in many different instructional designs. For example, in many classrooms today, instruction is being modeled using a Response to Intervention (RtI) framework, which includes continuous progress monitoring of students' learning which is critical to insure that appropriate instruction and interventions are being implemented (Lipson & Wixson, 2008). This framework often incorporates tiered instruction to supplement the classroom's core curriculum for those students who need specific interventions to better progress toward established benchmarks. Vaughn and Denton (2008) suggest that small-group instruction is important as part of the interventions implemented in an RtI framework, where students are given scaffolded support, assessment is used to monitor growth, and both instruction and texts are based on individual needs.

Strategy Circles

As noted previously, Melody uses small-group instruction or Strategy Circles as a primary venue for supporting students' independent strategy use. At the beginning of the school year, she focuses on the strategies of tracking text to build one-to-one word correspondence, using picture clues, finding chunks in words, and stretching words (e.g., start at the first letter and slide to the end). Melody also guides students to make predictions about the story by discussing the title and cover, as well as picture walks. As the year progresses, and particularly with students already proficient in reading, Melody incorporates more sophisticated strategies that include self-correcting, thinking aloud about the context of the story, and rereading for both fluency and self-monitoring. She selected these focus strategies through careful observation of her students' reading behaviors over time and continues to record and refine her strategy focus in order to provide the optimum instructional support for her young readers.

During small group instruction, Melody takes careful notes regarding the strategies that are introduced, modeled, and spontaneously used by the students. These notations provide her with valuable information regarding the breadth of strategies used by the students, whether new strategies are becoming automatic, and where her subsequent instruction should focus. It also provides her with ongoing feedback regarding the appropriateness of the text level in which her students are engaged.

Modeled Application

Melody makes a concerted effort to model effective reading strategies throughout her literacy instruction as this not only provides reinforcement of the strategies

focused on during small group discussions, but also explicitly models how they can be applied across reading and writing contexts. She often uses her anecdotal notes from the small group sessions to decide the focus for this modeling. One of the most effective venues for this reinforcement has been during daily writing, as Melody constructs a chart story with the children. This is often experiential in nature as she shares her thinking processes. For example, she may demonstrate how she stretches out words that are difficult to spell, and model the importance of rereading her text to insure its cohesiveness.

Similarly, strategies are applied across other literacy contexts as Melody demonstrates how she uses a title and cover to make predictions before reading a story aloud or, when sharing a big book during guided instruction, she encourages students to track the text to develop print concepts. Decoding strategies, including stretching and chunking, are reinforced as students participate in word wall or word-making activities. Through the purposeful use of modeling, students are continuously exposed to a variety of contexts in which strategies can support their attempts at making meaning from text.

Strategy Perception Interview

In addition to anecdotal notes incorporated into small group sessions and monthly running records of student progress, we were interested in developing an instrument to directly identify students' perceptions of their own strategy use. This instrument is similar to other informal interviews, which often center on a child's interest in or motivation to read, but differs in its explicit focus on students' perceptions of strategies, alignment with explicit cues, and use of actual print materials in its administration. Questions were developed around the four cueing systems so that we could ascertain if children's perceptions of strategy use differed depending upon cues presented (e.g., focus on words/graphophonics versus texts/semantics). It was anticipated that this tool could help us determine at what point students could articulate strategy use in a variety of contexts, which in turn would provide invaluable information for lesson preparation. In addition, Melody wanted to construct the instrument so that she could determine if students were differentiating between strategies and were discerning which were most effective for a variety of types of text. In effect, this tool would identify what proficient readers know about the cueing systems.

The instrument is structured as an informal interview to be administered verbally to individual children (see Figure 1). In each portion of the interview, students

are provided with the opportunity to manipulate authentic text materials and to demonstrate their strategy use. For example, when asking children what they would do when they encounter a difficult word while reading, they are provided with an actual book so that they can model their strategy choices. The concrete nature of this protocol is critical, particularly when working with young learners, as it brings the interview questions into an authentic context.

Strategy Perception Interview

SECTION ONE: PRAGMATICS

[Prior to administration, select three text items in the classroom that would be familiar to the children. It is suggested that one of these items be a trade book. Place the items in front of the children when administering the interview.]

1. What do you do *before* you read?
2. Here are some things from our classroom that you might read. How is selecting [item 1] different from reading a book? Show me how they are different.
3. How is reading [item 2] different from reading a book? Show me.

SECTION TWO: GRAPHOPHONICS

[For the next three sections of the Interview, provide the children with access to a familiar trade book as the questions are posed and answered.]

1. What do you do when you're reading and get stuck on a word? Use the book to show me what you might do.
2. How do you know when that word is fixed?

SECTION THREE: SYNTAX

1. What do you do when you're reading, and a sentence you've read doesn't sound right? Use the book to show me what you might do.
2. How do you know when the sentence is fixed?
3. How does punctuation help you when you're reading? Show me.

SECTION FOUR: SEMANTICS

1. What do you do when you're reading and a *word* doesn't make sense? Use the book to show me what you might do.
2. How do you know when the word is fixed?
3. What do you do when you're reading and you don't understand something in the *story*? Show me.
4. How do you know when it is fixed?

[Conclude the interview by asking the child, "Do you have any questions to ask me?"]

Figure 1. Strategy Perception Interview (Adapted from Bergeron & Bradbury-Wolff, 2002)

The first portion of the interview focuses on the pragmatic or contextual nature of reading enactments as students are asked to articulate the differences between encounters with different types of texts (e.g., lists, charts, books). The remainder of the interview focuses on trade books, which are prominent in Melody's instruction, and possible scenarios that students may encounter when independently reading a text. For example, students are asked to discuss what they would do if they got stuck on a word, encountered a sentence that did not sound right, or did not understand something in the story itself. For each of these scenarios, the students are invited to show the interviewer how they would apply the strategy using the book that is made available, and how they would know when that particular difficulty was fixed.

Methods and Analysis

We engaged in an inquiry of Melody's first-grade students' literacy practices over a period of three years, using a longitudinal case study design in order to address broad questions related to effective instruction. For this particular study, our focus was on the implementation of the Strategy Perception Interview, which was developed as part of Melody's instruction in the use of literacy strategies. As noted by Dyson and Genishi (2005), case study research focuses on "the meaning people make of their lives in very particular contexts" (p. 9). This makes case methodologies a useful line of inquiry when exploring or explaining common experiences (Merriam, 1998), including classroom practices. The data sources and analysis used with case study methodologies includes rich descriptions of emerging themes, inductive analysis, and sorting interrelated data to increase our understanding of the practices under study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

As the broader longitudinal study on effective literacy practices was enacted, we collected data from direct observation within the classroom, individual reflections made by Bette through journaling, informal interviews with Melody, and samples of student work. Data specific to the inquiry on the Strategy Perception Interview, which is reported on in this study, included the interview protocols and notes that Bette took during its administration.

Interview Administration

The Strategy Perception Interview is structured so that it is both interactive and open-ended to allow for children's spontaneous responses. The Interview was

administered to Melody's entire first-grade class during the end of the second and fourth quarters of three consecutive school years. This timeframe was selected to allow these young readers the opportunity to participate in the modeling and use of a variety of strategies before the Interview was administered and, with the final assessment being shared at the end of the year, provide an opportunity to demonstrate growth. This assessment was given to 63 children (30 girls and 33 boys) over the duration of the study. 92% of the participants were White, 6% were Black, and one of the children was Asian. These demographics reflect those of the community in which Melody teaches.

The Interview was first piloted with two of Melody's more proficient readers as this allowed for an assessment of the tool's wording and ease of administration. In order to avoid frustrating children who were not yet reading conventional texts independently, two readers were selected who had already demonstrated, through an initial running record, that they were proficient at the first-grade reading level. Both children answered each question prompt with ease, and were able to report on a variety of strategies used during reading. Once the pilot was completed, to provide consistency, Bette conducted the remaining interviews in a quiet corner of Melody's classroom. This was not a problem as by the time of its administration, the students were accustomed to having Bette in the room and participating in their instruction. Consequently, the children appeared to be at ease with the interview process. When conducting the interview, Bette used materials that were familiar to the children as they were part of their daily literacy experiences. For example, in the first part of the interview, the children were asked to compare three texts, a book that Melody had recently shared aloud, a ring of words related to a recent unit of study, and a poem they had learned which was displayed in the classroom. As the interview questions were posed, Bette prompted each child once for additional responses. The term "strategies" was not used during the interviews in order to avoid having the children simply recite a list of strategies they were learning as part of their guided reading or strategy circle instruction. Additionally, it was decided not to use either audio or video recording so that the children would not be unnecessarily distracted. Instead, Bette recorded the children's responses in writing as the interviews were conducted.

Data analysis was initially conducted as each set of interviews was completed, and then comparisons were made between administrations (e.g., comparing students at the beginning and ending of the school year, and comparing students' responses across each of the three years of the study). Student responses were compared by

individual child, level of reading proficiency, and year of administration. Reading proficiency was determined by running records, which Melody administers to all of her students monthly. In order to determine trends within the data, both researchers reviewed Bette's notes to generate emerging themes. Consistent with constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), these broad themes were also confirmed through a collaborative analysis of secondary data sources, including informal interviews, classroom observations, and students' work.

The administration and analysis of the Strategy Perception Interview found that this instrument was useful in identifying young learners' perceptions regarding the strategies that they believed they used when reading independently. As will be discussed, it was also evident through some of the children's responses that there was at times an interplay between what children self-reported as strategies used during reading and those enacted while independently writing. This fluidity between reading and writing was surprising, and suggests that these young readers possessed an unanticipated level of sophistication in how they approached literacy as the combined practice of reading and writing. In addition, the concrete nature of the instrument's protocol provided students with the opportunity to manipulate the texts with which they were engaged, enabling them to model their practices in a non-threatening context that mirrored their Strategies Circle instruction. It is also anticipated that the alignment between this instrument and their classroom-based literacy practices enhanced the level of responses from these young readers.

Results and Future Directions

The Strategy Perception Interview grew out of our interest in investigating young children's self-reporting of strategies used in independent reading contexts and centers on four interrelated cueing systems: graphophonics, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The following study questions were considered when analyzing children's responses: 1) What are young children's perceptions of their own strategy use during reading? and 2) What differences, if any, exist in strategy perceptions between proficient and less proficient readers? Our results, based on these guiding research questions, are provided below. As these questions are considered, we hope to generate instructional implications for early literacy teachers to consider within their own classrooms.

Question 1: Overall Perceptions

When combining the responses from all the children across the duration of the study, it was found that rereading, decoding, and seeking assistance were the most common strategies reported. The decoding category includes such word-level strategies as sliding to the end of the word, chunking word parts, and stretching out individual phonemes, all of which were modeled by Melody. The three common categories were consistent across all years of the study as well as across different levels of readers.

Cueing System Differences

Although decoding, rereading, and seeking assistance were consistently the most common responses across all groups, we did note differences in the dominance of these responses when comparing them with the cueing systems. For example, when asked what they would do when stuck on a word (graphophonics), the children most commonly indicated that they would decode or sound out that word. When encountering difficulty with a sentence (syntax), children indicated that they would most often reread. And, when having difficulty understanding the meaning of a story (semantics), children indicated that they would seek outside assistance. The differentiation in their responses across cueing systems indicated to us a level of sophistication in strategy use that we did not anticipate. Melody capitalized on this differentiation throughout her instruction, modeling how different strategies are most useful in various situations. Strategies that include stretching and chunking, for example, are more appropriate when trying to figure out an unknown word than comprehending whole texts. Because of the predominance of children's responses indicating that they would "ask someone for help" when they had difficulty understanding a story, we also realized that we needed to focus more on strategies appropriate for text-level meaning, such as predicting and thinking aloud, in order to promote children's strategic independence.

Response Sophistication

While the three primary response categories (i.e., decoding, rereading, and seeking assistance) remained consistent over time and across groups, when comparing individual children's responses over the school year we noticed that the interplay between strategies became more sophisticated. For example, during her initial Interview, Becca, a proficient reader, responded with the following:

Bette: What do you do when you're reading and get stuck on a word?

Becca: I look at the picture.

Bette: What else might you do when you're stuck on a word?

Becca: I try to sound it out.

At the end of the year, Becca's response to the same question prompt became much more sophisticated:

Becca: I sound it out. Then I go back and read to make sure it makes sense. Sometimes I try to find the smaller words.

Bette: What else might you do when you're stuck on a word?

Becca: Sometimes I reread.

Regardless of reading level, each student appeared to become more sophisticated in his/her responses as the year progressed. This growth occurred as Melody continuously modeled a greater variety of strategies in her guided and grouped instruction, and as children were encouraged to practice these new strategies in their independent reading.

Pragmatics

One of the areas of the Interview that provided the most intriguing responses was the first section, which asked questions regarding pragmatics. To tap these perceptions, children were asked to compare how reading a book was different from reading a ring of individual vocabulary words and a class chart of a poem. Most children, and especially those in the first year of the study, responded by describing specific physical characteristics of the items and concepts of print: books have sentences, periods, and capitals; books have pages; the list has a ring; you can hold the list in one hand.

During subsequent years of the study, we made a concerted effort to focus on how readers approach different reading contexts. For example, Melody would model and explain how preparing to read a book would be different from previewing a poem. Although children did still focus on physical elements of the items they were comparing, by the end of the second year of the study the children's responses were markedly more sophisticated and revealed an emerging understanding of how the use of text differs, as the following responses indicate:

- A list is just words telling about a story; you have to imagine the story. A book tells you more about it.

- A book makes sense. A list is just words.
- A book tells you stuff is happening, it tells you stories or tales. A list will help you read the book.
- A chart shows you *how* to read.

Gender Differences

One of the most unanticipated results found was the difference between girls' and boys' responses to seek assistance when stuck on a word or meaning of the story. Overwhelmingly, girls were much more likely to report that they would ask someone for help as compared to their male classmates. During the first year of the study, all of the girls indicated that they would seek outside assistance if stuck on a word or story meaning, as compared with 79 percent of the boys. Despite our attempt to focus more specifically on girls in the second year of the study, and to foster their independence in strategy use, 10 of the 12 girls (83%) studied that year still responded that they would seek outside assistance as compared with 60% of the boys. During the second year of the study, in both the fall and spring Interviews, the girls made 74% of all the total responses indicating that outside assistance would be sought.

Question 2: Comparisons Between Learners

One of the original intents of the study was to discover what differences, if any, were observed between those students who were identified as less and most proficient in reading as they described their independent strategy use. In order to make these comparisons, Melody divided her class list into three groups: less proficient, proficient, and highly proficient readers. These groupings were based on children's performances on running records and the corresponding levels of text they could read instructionally. Proficient readers, therefore, were those who were reading at a level appropriate to a typical first grader at that given point in the school year. When comparing the most common responses between the three groups, no differences were found as each group reported that decoding, rereading, and seeking outside assistance were the most common strategies used independently. Some interesting comparisons did emerge, however, in terms of internal versus external locus of control and in the complexity of individual student's responses.

Internal/External Loci

Although it did not occur with regularity, one interesting observation in this study was the focus of some less proficient readers on external factors that they felt contributed to their reading difficulties. Examples of external loci were observed throughout each year of the study. For example, when asked what he did when he got stuck on a word when reading, Antonio noted that he would "just erase the word and correct it." When asked what happens when a sentence did not sound right, Jarob stated that "the author did something wrong." Similarly, when encountering difficulty understanding a story, Brienna suggested that she would "self-correct two times and if it doesn't make sense, I'll tell the author." Although occurring infrequently, these and similar responses by less proficient readers indicated to us that we needed to concentrate on independent strategy use during Strategy Circle instruction to enable these emerging readers to focus on what they could do themselves to affect their success in reading.

Response Complexity

When we began this study, we assumed that more proficient readers would have at their disposal a larger array of strategies upon which to draw when reading independently. We had anticipated, for example, that we would find that the more proficient readers would rely on more different types of strategies or that less proficient readers would respond with fewer strategy examples. However, with the exception of the highly proficient readers, who indicated with much less frequency that they would seek assistance when having difficulty reading, no consistent patterns were found across the three groups of children interviewed. What we did discover, however, was that the complexity within individual's responses differed. For example, compare the responses from Annie, a less proficient reader, and Sarrah, a highly proficient reader, when asked what they would do when reading and they got stuck on a word. Annie's responses:

Annie: I would reread.

Bette: What else might you do if you got stuck on a word?

Annie: Ask the teacher.

Sarrah's responses:

Sarrah: For example, the word "basement." [points to a page in the book] I would start from the beginning of the word. Then I would

see if there were any chunks, like "base" and "ment." I might skip and go to the end. Or think what the word was.

Bette: What else might you do if you got stuck on a word?

Sarrah: I might go to the end of the sentence and reread.

While we did not discover any consistent patterns when comparing groups of learners, the responses of individuals did indicate that, in some cases, the most proficient readers were at times more descriptive in the interplay of strategies to solve a problem. These readers did not necessarily have a larger arsenal of strategies from which to draw, but were able to use strategies to a higher degree of sophistication as compared with their peers who were still struggling with the processes of reading. Janzen (2003) suggests that proficient readers use a variety of strategies, while coordinating strategy use depending upon the task, reader's knowledge, and type of text. This flexibility in strategy use differentiates these readers from their less proficient peers.

Discussion

The Strategy Perception Interview was designed to identify children's awareness of strategies while reading independently. Information gained from the Interview is intended to augment other classroom assessment practices, such as running records, and to assist the teacher by providing a more complete understanding of those strategies that should be focused on in instructional contexts. Throughout this study, we were able to use children's responses from the Interview to guide our instructional decisions and to make better connections between their learning and the application of strategies. Our findings include the following suggestions for other teachers who are implementing strategy instruction into the classroom:

- *Be alert to unintentional gender biases*. We were very surprised to find that, overwhelmingly, the girls in Melody's classroom expressed less confidence in finding independent ways to solve difficulties when reading, and instead responded with much more frequency that they would ask for help if stuck on a word or on story meaning. We often wondered how we might have unconsciously been fostering the girls' dependency, and how to better support them in becoming more independent in their problem solving. Melody continued to model a variety of strategies, think aloud about their

application, and focus specifically on her interactions with the girls in her class to insure that gender biases—though quite unintentional—were not being enacted.

- *Model various strategies for different situations.* Melody's young readers seemed intuitively adept at selecting different strategies for various reading difficulties or issues with cueing systems. For example, the strategies they reported for assisting them when stuck on a word (graphophonics) differed from those when struggling with a story's meaning (semantics). To capitalize on this understanding, instruction should focus on how to approach a variety of reading contexts. What strategies are more appropriate for figuring out a tricky word or for when something doesn't seem quite right within the story itself?
- *Focus on strategies for story comprehension.* Across our study, we consistently found that students were most likely to respond that they would "seek assistance" when they encountered difficulty understanding a story. This observation led us to more specifically focus on text-level strategies, such as predicting, thinking aloud, and using picture clues, to enable these young readers to become independent in all aspects of the reading process.
- *Demonstrate the interplay of strategies.* Although initial instruction in strategy use should focus on one strategy at a time, as children's repertoire of strategies expands it is beneficial to model how a number of strategies can be used in concert to figure out difficult text. These interplays need to be modeled and practiced with children, as the teacher thinks aloud about the processes that are being used.
- *Make connections to writing.* With minimal modifications, the Strategy Perception Interview can easily be adapted for use in the writing curriculum. We became acutely aware of the importance of the potential for reading/writing connections through the astute responses of some of Melody's young students. For example, when asked what he would do when a word doesn't make sense, Dillon remarked that, if he was creating the story, he would "write a different word." Similarly, Staci noted that, when authoring texts in class, she would "cross it out and put in a new word." As Melody thought aloud while writing her daily

chart stories, she capitalized on these connections by sharing those strategies she was using to spell difficult words or to insure that her text was meaningful.

Limitations

The Strategy Perception Interview was used as one of many tools to determine these young children's independent use of strategies. When using our observations from these Interviews to suggest instructional implications, however, we are also aware of the limitations of this study. For example, this study focused on a limited sample of children. This study would be augmented by additional Interview responses across a variety of classrooms in diverse learning communities. The text prompts used in the Interviews might have also been limiting. For example, a book, list of words, and poem chart were used throughout the study. It is possible that an individual child may have had different responses to the Interview if a different book, or other environmental print sources more familiar to that child, were used instead. We also recognize that there is a difference between self-reported strategy use and children's actual application of these strategies when reading unaided. It is important that children's responses on the Interview be compared with other measures, such as observation, anecdotal notes, and individual conferences, to ascertain a more accurate picture of children's strategy use and possible implications for classroom instruction.

Concluding Thoughts

The Strategy Perception Interview is one tool of many that has provided us with deeper insight into emerging readers' independent strategy use. The ultimate goal is that when given an array of strategies from which to draw upon, young children have and use the tools they need to approach difficult reading tasks independently. We have found that, with independence, young readers emerge from the literacy encounter with renewed confidence and enthusiasm to "read it again!"

We also recognize that the Interview cannot be used alone, but needs to be incorporated as part of a total assessment system that teachers use to monitor each child's individual and unique abilities over time. One model for instruction, or one mode of assessment, can do little to promote an individual child's unique development. For example, while paper and pencil tests yield important information, alone they are not enough to provide an accurate picture of growth. Likewise, the

Interview without subsequent observations and conferences will be very limited in what it reveals about the individual learner.

As we have continued to refine our focus of instruction on strategy use, we have also become more aware of the critical nature of both modeling and scaffolding within effective literacy instruction. Through modeling, the teacher has the opportunity to demonstrate a variety of ways to approach difficult text in an environment that invites the learner to ask questions, practice, and experiment with new combinations. And, through the impact of scaffolding, we have become more acutely aware of the critical nature of working with each child at that learner's point of difficulty. Strategies will not be practiced independently when a child encounters text that is too difficult or too easy. As young Patti might comment, for the story to be fixed, the "staples" need to be "just right." That includes not only finding what strategies each individual child can most successfully use, but also the right level of text in which each young learner can become fully engaged.

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