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## **Reading Horizons**

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## Reading Horizons

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*There is no more crucial or basic skill in all of education than reading.*

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## **No Child Left Behind: Key Issues and Instructional Implications for Teachers of African-American Children**

Doris Walker-Dalhouse  
Minnesota State  
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*This article presents an overview of five key issues: access to materials; student motivation; teacher preparation; instructional practices; and parent-teacher-student relationships, that must be addressed in effecting change in the academic performance of African-American students. These issues are deemed important if the No Child Left Behind legislation is to impact the teaching and learning of African-American students.*

APPROXIMATELY FORTY-SIX percent of Black and Hispanic children live in poverty compared to 8 percent of Caucasian children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Forty-three percent of African-American families are headed by a single parent as opposed to 18 percent of Caucasian families (McKinnon & Humes, 2000). In single parent families, the poverty rate is 41 percent for African-American children.

In 2001 (NCES, 2001), forty-eight percent of African-American children between the ages of 3-5 were read to every day compared to 64 percent of Caucasian children. Forty-eight percent of children living in single parent homes were read to compared to 61 percent of 3-5 year olds in two parent families. (NCES, 2001)

In spite of the above, African-American communities collectively view literacy as not only important, but as requisite for human existence and "successful survival" (Qualis, 2001). African-American parents living in urban environments have high expectations for their children's success in learning to read. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) conducted case studies on the literacy development of young, urban African-American children living in poverty and found that their subjects had literate home environments with families who supported their literacy development at home and at school. However, the differences between the literacy achievement of African-American students and Caucasian students remain significant according to Au (1998). Au's 1998 assessment was reinforced by the 2000 National Assessment of Education Progress. Reading scores for fourth graders indicated that African-American, Hispanic, and Native American students performed lower than Asian/Pacific Islanders and Caucasian students. Twelve percent of African-American children were reading at or above the proficiency level compared to 40 percent of the Caucasian children. In addition, more advantaged children and children in private schools performed better than less advantaged urban children in public schools (NAEP, 2000). The question is what are some factors associated with low achievement in African-American children and what can be done to help African-American children become successful readers and writers.

This article will focus on some of the important issues that must be considered in understanding the underachievement of African-American

students: access to materials; student motivation; teacher preparation; instructional practices; and parent-teacher-student relationships. The article concludes with implications for change.

### **Access to Materials**

Differential access to literacy has important implications for children's early literacy development. In a study of four neighborhoods with varying incomes, Neuman & Celano (2001) found striking differences between neighborhoods of different incomes. Middle-income children were found to have greater access to a variety of resources (libraries, bookstores, books in the home) compared to lower income children.

Middle class children were more likely to be bombarded with a wide variety of reading material and print in their environment than children from poor neighborhoods. Extensive differences, favoring middle class communities, were found in the number and type of print resources, choice and quality of materials available, and in public spaces for reading (Neuman & Celano, 2001).

Smith, Constantino & Kroshen (1997) in an earlier study on the number of books available in the homes and classrooms of students in two low economic communities and one middle class community, also noted major differences or inequities in the children's access to books. They found that on average middle income children had 99 percent and 99.8 percent more books at home than lower and lowest income students, and 86 percent to 88 percent more books in their classroom libraries than lower and lowest income students respectively.

Neuman & Celano (2001) further found that television sets were more prominent in low-income child care centers than books, and that over 80 percent of the centers did not have book corners, age-appropriate books, and other print materials for young children.

Allington (2001) argues that what was found in school libraries by Smith et al. (1997) and in childcare centers by Neuman & Celano (2001) should not be the case. His reasoning is that "children from lower income

homes especially need rich and extensive collections of books in their school libraries and in their classrooms, if only because these are the children least likely to have a supply of books at home."

In its publication, *Making a Difference* (2000), the International Reading Association asserts that all children have the right to access a wide variety of books and other reading materials in their classrooms, schools, and community libraries. The Association recommends that schools should have sufficient funding to allow them to purchase two new books per student each year for the school library, and that school libraries should contain twenty books per child. It further recommends seven books per child for classroom libraries, with one new book per child added each year.

### **Motivation**

In a survey of 40,000 suburban middle and high school students conducted by the Minority Student Achievement network, a national consortium of 15 school districts considered to be somewhat affluent and racially diverse, race was discounted as a factor in the achievement gap between African-American/Latino and Asian/Caucasian students (Fletcher, 2002). African-American and Latino students were found to be as eager and ambitious about learning as Caucasian and Asian-American students. Although African-American and Latino students were found to have good attitudes toward school, their performance did not equal their Caucasian and Asian-American counterparts. Forty percent of the African-American students and 30 percent of the Latino students reported grade averages of C plus or below compared to 13 and 14 percent of Caucasians and Asians. In contrast 48 and 47 percent of Caucasian and Asian students respectively had grade averages of A minus or higher, compared to 14 percent of African-Americans and 19 percent of Hispanics. The authors suggest that improving the relationship between teachers and students may help to close the achievement gap observed between the African-American and Latino students versus the Caucasian and Asian students.

An ecological approach to the problem of academic underachievement of African-American children in African-American

communities is needed according to Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman & Mason (1996). In a one-year study in which they examined the effects of family (income, parental education, and structure), parenting (maternal support and restrictive control), peer support, and neighborhood risk on the achievement of African-American adolescents, they found that family income, parent education level, and the number of parental figures in the home was not significantly associated with student achievement. Maternal support, on the other hand, was significantly positively associated with adolescents' grades regardless of neighborhood risk. In low-risk conditions, as maternal control became more restrictive, the grades of adolescents decreased. Adolescents in low-risk neighborhoods whose parents gave them greater autonomy had higher grades than those adolescents who had more restrictive parents. However, the reverse was found in high-risk neighborhoods where restrictive control was found to be positively related to grades. The study also found peer support to be positively related to grades for students living in low-risk neighborhoods. Peer support also had no relationship to achievement for those living in high-risk neighborhoods.

The question might be asked, "Are African-American children motivated to achieve?" Literature on the achievement motivation of African-Americans indicate similarities between African-American and Caucasian children in locus of control, sense of competence, expectancies for success, and patterns of attribution for success and failure (Graham & Long, 1986; Graham, 1994). In contrast to Caucasian students, African-Americans have also been found to consistently maintain a high sense of competence after failing. In spite of these findings, the research indicates that there are differences between African-American and Caucasian students in academic achievement. Some researchers attribute these differences to differences in motivation. For example, Spradlin, Welsh, and Hinson (2001) surveyed 185 middle and working class African-American and Caucasian eighth and ninth grade students to determine if student grade point average is affected by student identity characteristics, achievement motivation variables, race, and gender. Identity characteristics included racial identity development and the Ogbu (1998) factor which is based on the premise that involuntary minority students (minorities whose ancestors were brought to the U.S. against their will) are negatively influenced by peers to reject

school and to devalue studying. The variables examined in achievement motivation included academic futility (sense of failure or lack of purpose) academic self-concept, and achievement salience (recognition or prominence). Spradlin et al. (2001) found that the average GPA of both African-American males and females was lower than that of Caucasian males and females. The GPA of African-American males was found to be related to the achievement motivation variables of futility and salience, while the GPA of African-American females was found to be related to racial identity. African-American females were found to have the highest achievement motivation of all of the subjects while African-American males had the lowest achievement motivation. Spradlin et al. (2001) concluded that their findings support Ogbu's (1998) theory of voluntary and involuntary minorities and achievement and Brookover & Schneider's (1975) findings of academic futility and lower levels of academic achievement for minority students. Spradlin et al. (2001) challenge educators and policymakers to acknowledge the importance of the futility effects of tracking, testing, teaching techniques, discipline policies, attitudes of teachers and administrators, institutional and individual racism, etc. on African-American male academic achievement. They also emphasize a strong need for community involvement in helping African-American males to understand how to successfully move through the academic system without feeling that they are being traitors to their race or "selling out."

Group counseling and mentoring programs are recommended to achieve this. A mentoring approach developed by Spradlin (1999) involves three to four mentors and four to six students who meet in small group sessions to focus on the questions and needs of the students. Books, one selected by the student and the second by the mentor are used to structure monthly discussions. Important issues related to the books are then discussed in a book-club format.

Achievement goal theory on the motivation of African-American students in predominantly Caucasian school settings suggests that the schools which emphasize task goals promote Black students' academic success and well-being more than those that emphasize ego goals. Task goals are those goals formulated for the purpose of learning and

improving, whereas, ego goals focus on excelling and doing better than others (Ames, 1992b).

To achieve the goal of creating academic tasks that focus on task goals, Ames (1992a) recommends interesting and relevant or meaningful tasks that are new and diverse. These tasks should actively engage students, personally challenge them and allow them to work in a variety of structures to complete the tasks.

According to Ames (1992a), the authority structure of these task-oriented environments should have students participating in decision-making, leadership, and assuming responsibility for their learning. They should also provide equal opportunities to recognize desired behaviors and achievement in both African-American and Caucasian students and provide positive feedback for exhibiting them. While Ames recommends private acknowledgement of desired behaviors, Martin, Linfoot & Stephenson (1999) believe that public recognition might be beneficial. Ames also believes that students should be recognized for extra effort, improvement, creativity, initiative, and achievement based upon normative standards. Consequently, task-oriented environments are considered important to supporting academic and social goals of public education.

### **Teacher Preparation**

Teacher training has been found to enable African-American students to meet reading standards. The National Urban Alliance launched an initiative in 2000 to train 1,300 of the Seattle, Washington school district's 3,000 teachers in an extensive and broad range of techniques for teaching reading and writing skills. Following the training, literacy consultants coached the teachers in their schools. In 1999 the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) was used to compare the literacy performance of African-American students at the fourth and seventh grades with their performance at the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. The WASL showed that students benefited from literacy trained teachers. They passed the 2002 test at twice the rate of students who spent a year or less with these trained teachers. The pass rate was 26 percent for those who spent two years in the classrooms with literacy trained

teachers and 12 percent for African-American children who did not have literacy-trained teachers. Thirty-one percent of the students who did not spend two years with literacy trained teachers passed the writing portion of the WASL compared to 44 percent for those who did (Bach, 2002).

Do teachers feel that they possess the skills to teach African-American students? Research indicates that the majority of the present teaching force is white and female, in contrast to an increasingly diverse student population. Pang and Sablaln (1998) surveyed 100 preservice and 75 inservice teachers enrolled in multicultural courses to determine their feelings about teaching African-American children. They found that preservice teachers were more positive about their ability to teach, assess, redirect and adjust to the needs of African-American children than the inservice teachers. However, sixty-five percent of the inservice teachers felt that even a teacher with good teaching abilities may not be able to reach African-American youth. Inservice teachers also indicated a strong underlying belief that the African-American community is not supportive of education. As a group, the teachers felt that underachievement of African-American children stems from cultural conflict in communication patterns and dialect between home and school.

Given the above, Ladson-Billings (2000) has poignantly stated that there is an urgency for teacher educators to design programs which prepare teachers to attend to the uniqueness of African-American students. Ladson-Billings believes that African-American students are engaged in a "fight for their lives." Likewise, Fremon and Hamilton (1997) feel that schools are failing to educate a significant number of African-American boys. Fourth grade is the beginning of the downward slide in academic achievement for this population of students as evidenced by lower teacher expectations, discrepant disciplinary challenges, and lower academic achievement. Fremon and Hamilton (1997) cite the need for a united effort by caring adults in the community, home, and schools to ensure that students are provided with a sense of hope as opposed to a cycle of failure. They also emphasize the need for ongoing staff training in cultural, economic, gender, and linguistic issues, along with parent involvement, school outreach, male mentors and instructors, community and after-school extracurricular activities, and school reform. If teacher education programs want to



make changes, Ladson-Billings suggests that they reexamine their admission procedures to identify prospective teachers who want to teach in African-American communities. This action has the potential for providing African-American students with a quality education by teachers who feel comfortable working with them, have positive feelings about African-American culture, and who hold high expectations for their achievement.

### **Instructional Implications**

Culturally responsive teaching strategies which involve connecting classroom patterns of participation and home values are also fundamental for teaching African-American learners. Au (2001) suggests that if the literacy achievement gap is to be narrowed between minority students and majority students, schools must provide minority students with high quality instruction. Students must understand that reading involves higher-level thinking about text, rather than word calling. Additional recommendations for improving the literacy of minority students include: 1.) establishing ownership of literacy as the overarching goal of the language arts curriculum; 2.) recognizing the importance of students' home languages and promoting bi-literacy; 3.) increasing the use of multicultural literature in classrooms; 4.) promoting cultural responsiveness in classroom management and teachers' interactions with students; 5.) making stronger links to the community; 6.) providing students with authentic literacy activities and instruction in specific skills; and 7.) using forms of assessment that reduce bias and more accurately reflect students' literacy achievement.

Strickland (1994) feels that observational techniques should be used to assess African-American and other at-risk populations because they will allow students to demonstrate what they know. Strickland also offers some additional principles and recommendations that can be used to improve the literacy of African-American and other at-risk populations. They are as follows: 1.) providing literacy programs with an emergent literacy perspective that values children's knowledge and recognizes that, like all children, African-American children come to school eager to learn and to please teachers; 2.) using instructional techniques that allow children to demonstrate what they know; 3.)

starting coordinated school and social service intervention programs to prevent reading failure; 4.) using literacy programs that build upon and expand children's language and culture; 5.) encouraging the use of Standard American English (SAE) through exposure to a variety of oral and written texts and oral language activities; 6.) initiating family literacy programs that allow adults and children to view reading as a cooperative social experience; and 7.) providing incentives to attract and keep the best teachers and provide ongoing professional development to acquaint teachers with a way to increase the literacy levels of low-SES African-American children.

Based upon research conducted to examine reading instruction in effective schools and delivered by accomplished teachers in low-income schools, Taylor, Pearson, Clark & Walpole (1999) found that in all of the effective schools, reading was clearly a priority at both the classroom and school level. School factors identified included:

- strong links to parents;
- systematic assessment of student progress;
- strong communication and collaboration within school buildings; and
- the presence of a collaborative model for reading instruction and early intervention.

Significant teacher factors identified included time spent in small group instruction; time spent in independent reading and high levels of on-task student behavior; and strong home communication.

### **Teacher-Student-Parent Relationships**

Another variable to consider in addressing the achievement gap between majority and African-American children is the relationships between teachers, parents, and children. Vondra (1999) feels that relationships are the basis for learning. Interested, caring, and challenging teachers will teach children not only to expect more of themselves, but also to see and believe in their capacity to achieve.

I believe that teachers and their expectations of African-American children are critical to the success of African-American children. As the noted African-American educator, Marva Collins, said, "high expectations for students, good teaching, and positive teacher-student relations are critical for helping African-American children who are at risk for failure." According to Collins, "We as teachers have a powerful influence on what our students learn. More importantly, we as teachers, have a powerful opportunity to continue learning with our students. Teach our students great ideas, great thoughts, and we grow. Raise the standards for our students and we raise the bar for ourselves. Lower the standard for our students and we lower what we take in as well." (Collins, 1999, p. 6)

Minority and low-income children are less likely when compared to middle-class and majority students to have positive relationships with their middle-class teachers (Vondra, Shaw, Swearingen, Cohen & Owens, 1999; Pianta & Nimetz, 1991). The use of prejudicial classroom management techniques with minority students, particularly African-American and Hispanics is well-documented (Sheets & Gay, 1998; Brown, Payne, Lankewich, & Cornell, 1970; Banks & Banks, 1993). The behavior of African-American males is often viewed as more aggressive and severe than their counterparts and similar behaviors to their majority counterparts are more likely to result in more severe punishment (Grant, 1985; Sheets & Gay, 1998) such as suspensions and expulsions (Townsend, 2000; Costenbader & Markson, 1994). Disparate differences in the severity of disciplinary practices for African-American students when compared to majority students have been found to be related to non-achievement, exclusion from courses, feelings of alienation, increase misbehavior, dropping out of school (Irvine, 1990), lower expectations (Garibaldi, 1992), and grade retention (Rodney, Crafter, Rodney & Mupier, 1999).

Rodney et al. (1999) call for a change in the nature of suspension and the school environment of African-American males because suspension has been linked to the poor academic performance of African-American 13-17 year olds. However, grade retention has been investigated as an alternative to suspension and expulsion in order to reduce in-school rebellious behavior and to increase the feelings of

attachment of African-American seventh and eighth grade males to school, but it has not been found to be effective (Gottfredson, Fink, & Graham, 1994).

As previously indicated, socioeconomic differences have also been found to influence disciplinary practices. Frequently, teachers perceive low-income students as having the most behavioral problems (Malone, Bonitz, & Rickett, 1998). As a result, students from working-class or low-income homes, regardless of ethnicity, experience more discipline and control encounters from teachers when compared to middle-class Euro-American students (Appleford, Fralick, & Ryan, 1976; Woolridge & Richman, 1985; and Rist, 1970). These findings correlate with findings that teachers of lower socioeconomic children more frequently use or support the use of corporal punishment, verbal punishment, or suspension when compared to teachers of middle-class students (Lezotte, 1998-1999).

Lezotte (1998-1999) argues that the behaviors that teachers of minorities and lower socioeconomic students see as annoying and/or problematic are often behaviors needed to cope in their world or environment outside of school. Any program which hopes to be effective with these learners must teach students school behaviors as separate from outside behaviors and, more importantly, must be grounded in both structure and choice. The element of choice is important because it moves students from being dependent upon others for controlling their behaviors. Appropriate school behaviors must be clearly identified and probable consequences for not choosing those behaviors clearly stated (Lezotte, 1998-1999).

McMillon and Edwards (2000) investigated the incongruence between the church and the school environment of an African-American child named Joshua. They found that Joshua was exceptionally literate in his Sunday school classroom. He was encouraged to work cooperatively with his peers and allowed to share his knowledge with them to broaden their understanding of issues. In preschool, Joshua's preschool teacher perceived him as socially illiterate. When he attempted to elaborate his peer's responses, his actions were seen as disruptive and he was disciplined accordingly. The cooperative learning environment

of the church classroom and the disciplinary practices of the church school were in stark contrast to that of the preschool. While discipline in the Sunday school class focused on learning together and changing inappropriate behavior which interfered with student learning rather than punishing the individual displaying it, the focus in the preschool was on the individual student's responsibility for learning and inappropriate behavior. Time out or removal from the preschool class was used to reduce the likelihood of reoccurrence of a behavior. When Joshua's mother intervened and taught Joshua how to navigate the boundaries of school, his relationship with his teacher and his peers improved. The researchers concluded that the learning environment of the African-American church is of value to teachers who want to be effective in working with African-American children. They also believe that Sunday school teachers have a responsibility to teach African-American children how to negotiate their school environments.

Other theorists believe that humanistic principles such as respecting students, acknowledging their creativity, and recognizing their skills are necessary for successful management of urban classrooms. It is critical that teachers follow these principles, especially in high-poverty urban schools where teacher-child relations have been identified as the most important aspect of school climate (Slaughter-Defoe & Carlson, 1996).

As early as third grade, Baker (1999) found that for African-American students in an urban setting, the social context of the classroom influenced their assessment of the school environment. Students' perceptions of a caring, supportive relationship with a teacher and a positive classroom environment were related to their overall school satisfaction (Baker, 1999). All children, regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic status or intellect need access to learning environments that provide them with confidence in their ability to learn. Students also need teachers whose actions support a belief in their students' abilities to learn (Strickland, 1998). Strickland's comments have immense implications for teachers working with at-risk African-American students in urban classroom settings. Marva Collins believes that there are an infinite number of possibilities that can emanate from a positive classroom/school environment and that teachers who display high

expectations and who recognize that teaching itself is discipline will be successful (Collins, 1999).

In contrast to disciplinary plans or proposals which emphasize teacher expectations for behavior (Canter, 1976; Lezotte, 1998-1999), the Marva Collins' plan requires students to establish individual expectations for behaviors. Students are challenged to change inappropriate behavior by rejecting negative expectations or situations and supporting teachers in their attempts to control their behaviors. Rather than noting students' infractions with a penalty system, teachers are encouraged to promote student self-reflection (Collins, 1999).

Marva Collins tells children that she expects behavior from them that contributes to the learning process and that benefits other children. She believes that discipline must be done in a caring manner (Collins & Tamarkin, 1982). Teachers are encouraged to express concern and praise, but to also demonstrate tough love and high expectations for student achievement and behavior. Teachers are expected to be frank with students about the negative consequences of inappropriate behavior and to teach them that self-discipline and self-determination are necessary for success (Collins & Tamarkin, 1982).

Teachers who pity or hold lower expectations for low-income African-American children are not helping them. These students should be expected to strive for self-control; and encouraged to analyze and reflect about their behaviors. Writing can be integrated into the reflective process as students are implored to record reasons why they are too intelligent to engage in disruptive behavior. Links can also be made between oral and written discussion, and proverbs can be used to reflect about misbehavior. Appropriate proverbs can be taught, written, and recited as a means of indirectly teaching students to change a disruptive behavior (Collins, 1999). Collins often uses literary classics (i.e. Macbeth) to make real world connections or to help students to understand the consequences of present or future behaviors (Collins & Tamarkin, 1982).

According to Compton-Lily (2000), African-American parents in the urban school where she taught expected teachers to hold high

behavior expectations for their children and to develop caring relationships with their children. These parents felt that a caring and demanding relationship was critical in helping their children to achieve. They expected teachers to teach their children by “staying on their children and not allowing them to play around (waste time).” Staying on children requires the teacher to know the child and to see him or her as capable of achieving.

As parents have expectations of teachers, so too do the children have expectations of their teachers. Compton-Lily (2002) found that the students expect teachers to actively teach them to learn. They also expect teachers to demonstrate that they care. Nieto’s (1966) call for good teaching practices and the existence of positive relationships between students, parents, and teachers in order to overcome the academic difficulties faced by urban children has merit.

### **Implications**

Culturally responsive and genuinely caring teachers are needed to ensure that no more African-American children are left behind. (Gay, 1993; Thayer-Bacon 1993; Sanacore, 2004). African-American children need teachers who can combine cultural styles of teaching and learning to create culturally compatible classrooms that provide genuine invitations and opportunities for all students to engage maximally in academic pursuits without any one group being unduly advantaged or penalized (Gay, 1993). Among the genuinely caring teaching literacy practices for African-American children that Sanacore (2004) recommends are that teachers:

- engage them in lively discussions or opportunities for meaningful language interactions and critical thinking
- immerse students in drama to make an emotional response to literature
- instill a lifelong love of literacy
- build resilience or the ability to achieve by helping students to recognize the link between sustained effort and personal and academic success
- support improved home-school connections

The achievement gap between African-American and Caucasian students is a reality. The need to change the situation has to move beyond a dream of equity to the implementation of practices. To do this, we desperately need informed and caring teachers and school administrators who are truly committed to leaving no more African-American children behind.

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## **Why Teachers Buy Books for their Students**

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*Results of this study confirm the paucity of books in classroom libraries and the insufficient school funding for the classroom library. A sample of New York City teachers reported that they spent an average of \$378 of their own money on classroom library books, and received an average of \$143 from the school each year for books and supplies. Teachers listed a variety of reasons for their willingness to buy books. The significance of this study is the demonstration that teachers believe in the importance of books, and they practice what they believe by bringing books into students' lives.*

“FEW OF US QUESTION that books are staples in a learner’s diet. How can it be, then, that every classroom in America doesn’t have a rich library? Why are so many teachers put in the awkward position of spending hundreds of their own dollars on books? Why are we forced to hoard points from our children’s book club purchase?” (Calkins, 2001, pp.31-32)

It is common knowledge that books are important for children’s literacy development. However, teachers and students are not supplied with sufficient books in their classroom.

### **Book crisis**

These days, students are facing increasingly complex literacy demands. Nevertheless, supplying books to teachers and students remains low on many schools’ priority lists. The book budget for New York City school libraries is \$4 per student (Ohanian, 2000). The serious lack of books and how it affects children’s literacy development is well documented (Krashen, 1999; McQuillan, 1998).

### **Well-designed classroom libraries encourage more reading**

Overwhelming evidence indicates that children read more and better when they have more access to books (Elley, 1989; Krashen, 1999; McQuillan, 1998). The classroom library, where books are most easily accessible to all children in the classroom, plays a vital role in providing children immediate access to books. Bissett (1969) found that children in classrooms with book collections read 50 percent more than did children without. Morrow (1991) and Morrow and Weinstein (1982) also found that well designed classroom libraries resulted in more voluntary use of books. Brassell (1999) described how a class of second graders created a library in six weeks - the number of books increased from 78 to 403, student reading increased from 198 to 370 books, and a passion for books developed that was not seen in other classrooms.

### **More reading leads to better reading**

Other evidence also indicates that the more children read, the better they read and the greater their literacy development is. This assertion comes from studies of in-school free reading (Krashen, 2001), case histories (Krashen, 1993), and studies showing increments in vocabulary knowledge after brief exposures to meaningful text (Nagy, Herman and Anderson, 1985).

If access to more books through better classroom library collections leads to more reading, and more reading leads to more literacy development, better libraries should result in more literacy development. This has been demonstrated to be the case for school libraries (Elley, 1992; Lance, Welborn, and Hamilton-Pennell, 1993) and for the number of books available in both the school and classroom libraries (Froese, 1997).

### **Money for classroom libraries**

The importance of access to books is widely acknowledged, and the role that the classroom library plays in providing children the easiest and most immediate access to print is also widely recognized. Yet, a fundamental question remains: Why do teachers purchase books for their classroom libraries with their own funds?

Overall, teachers spent a good deal of their own money in purchasing books for their classroom libraries. According to a Washington Post report (Mathews, 2001), a 1996 National Education Association survey revealed that teachers spend an average of \$408 of their own money on their students each year. Minority teachers, who usually work in more needy schools but earn lower salaries, spend \$454 on average per year. A nationwide study of elementary school teachers' buying patterns and preferences, conducted by Quality Education Data, Inc. (2002), a market research firm in Denver, found that typical K-8 teachers spend \$520 and new K-8 teachers spend \$700 on books and supplies for the classrooms each year. According to the survey results reported in National Post (Vallis, 2002), 79 percent of teachers in Canada use their own funds to buy books.

Much of these teacher expenditures appear to go to the classroom library. In a survey of schools in New York, Allington, Guice, Baker, Michaelson, and Li (1995) found that classrooms with the largest book collections were those in which teachers bought most of the books. Guice, Allington, Johnston, Baker, and Michaleson (1996) also found that 40 percent of the teachers teaching in economically disadvantaged areas in New York State reported that they purchased most of the books in their classroom libraries.

### **Objective**

The purpose of this study is to determine how much money teachers are spending on classroom libraries, and their reasons for these expenditures.

### **Subjects**

Subjects in this study were a sample of convenience. I surveyed one hundred and forty six teachers attending a literacy workshop held at a graduate school of education in New York City. Attendance at the literacy workshop is required as part of professional development. Most of the teachers (81 percent) taught at elementary schools while 19 percent of the participants were middle and high school ESL or bilingual teachers. Seventy-four percent of these teachers taught at low-income urban schools, 22 percent in middle class urban schools and 4 percent in upper middle class urban schools.

### **Methods**

I developed a survey with 10 questions (see Appendix). The participants filled out a short questionnaire, asking if they had a classroom library, had sufficient books in their classroom library, and whether they were given a budget for classroom library. In addition, I asked participants to estimate the number of books in their classroom library, the funding they received for their classroom library, and the amount of money they spent buying books for their students. I used qualitative coding procedures to analyze the open-ended questions on the reasons teachers spent their own money on books for their students. I



coded each response first with conceptual labels to capture the nature of the comments made by the participants; then, I grouped those labeled segments under thematic categories. I then organized those themes into the broader major categories of information presented in the section on reasons teachers buy books for their students.

### Findings and Discussion

Table 1 illustrates that 127 of these teachers reported having a classroom library while 15 did not. These 15 teachers identified themselves as pullout ESL teachers who did not have a classroom, or bilingual teachers who taught in the child's primary language.

Table 1

#### *Responses to classroom library, its collection, and its funding*

Questions	Number of responses			
	Yes		No	
	number	percent	number	percent
Have classroom library	127	87	15	10
Have sufficient books in classroom library (out of 127 having classroom library)	49 (See remark)	39	71	56
Given budget for classroom library	42	29	95	65
Spent own money in purchasing books for their students	133	91	9	6

Remark: The number of books in the classroom considered to be sufficient by the 49 teachers with "sufficient" collections is distributed as follows:

Number of books:	< 100	101-200	201-400	401-600	601-800	801-1000	>1000
Number of teachers:	12	11	16	2	3	2	3

#### How many books are sufficient in a classroom library?

As shown in Table 1, out of the 127 teachers having a classroom library, 71 teachers reported that they did not have a sufficient number of

books, while 49 reported that they had enough books for all students in their class, (Note that for this as well as other questions, not all respondents answered every question). As shown in Table 2, seventy-nine (or 62 percent) teachers reported having less than 200 books and three (or 2.4 percent) teachers responded having more than 1,000 books in their classroom library.

Table 2

*Estimated number of books from teachers who reported having a classroom library*

Estimated number of books in classroom library	Number of responses	
	number	percent
Less than 100	44	34.6
101-200	35	27.6
201-400	35	27.6
401-600	5	4.0
601-800	3	2.4
801-1,000	2	1.4
More than 1,000	3	2.4

Allington and Cunningham (2002) suggest that primary-grade classrooms should have between 700 and 750 titles and upper-grade should have 400 titles. Huck et al. (1993) recommended that classroom libraries should have at least 300 titles as part of a permanent collection with supplementation from a well-stocked school library. More than half of the classroom libraries in this study did not meet this requirement as illustrated in Table 2. Interestingly, almost half of those (twenty-three out of the forty-nine) who reported having sufficient books had no more than 200 books in their classroom. (See remark in Table 1).

Of the two who reported having between 801 and 1000 books, one was teaching a second grade bilingual class at a low-income urban school and did not have a budget for books. This teacher purchased all classroom library books for her class herself, both English and Spanish. Interestingly, the other teacher who reported having between 801 and 1,000 books worked in a middle class urban school and was given a very

generous budget, more than \$2,000 per year for books. Nevertheless, she spent her own money, buying books for classroom use and giving them to students as presents. The majority of the participants indicated that most of their classroom library collection consisted of books they purchased with their own funds.

### **School funding versus teachers' personal resources**

The majority of the teachers (65 percent) indicated that they were not given a budget for their classroom library (see Table 1). Even though 29 percent of the teachers reported having a budget, funding given for both supplies and books was far from sufficient. As shown in Table 3, six teachers (4 percent) indicated that they received funding but that it was less than \$100 while twenty-one teachers (14 percent) reported having \$101-500 per year for books and supplies. Several teachers who reported receiving funding from school mentioned that they did not get this book/supply funding yearly.

One hundred thirty three respondents (91 percent) indicated that they used their own money to buy books for their students (see Table 1), even though only 127 of them had a classroom library. Only nine (6 percent) said they did not spend their own money on books. The amount of money teachers spent out of their own pockets ranged from \$100 to up to \$2,500 per year.

Six novice teachers reported spending at least \$1,000 during their first year of teaching. One teacher wrote, "Even before I started teaching I knew that I was going to have difficulties obtaining books from the school so I started buying my own. Little by little as school has progressed, I have spent money on books from every one of my paychecks." Those who have been in the profession for many years tended to spend less on books: "I spend less each year because my library is growing."

Some respondents wanted to buy books, but were not able to do so. As one respondent wrote: "I did it for the first three months, then I couldn't afford it." Some teachers brought their personal books from home: "I do not have extra money. I buy books for my own children and bring to school what they no longer want."

Table 3 presents details on school funding and the amount teachers spent on classroom libraries. From these data, we can estimate that, on average, teachers spent \$378 on books and received only \$143 (funding for both books and supplies) from the school each year.

Table 3

*Comparison of school funding and teacher personal funding on classroom library collection*

Amount of Money	Distribution of School Funding		Distribution of Teacher Personal Funding	
	number	percent	number	percent
\$0	95	65	9	6
less than \$100	6	4.1	21	14
\$101-\$500	21	14.4	82	56
\$501-\$1,000	9	6.2	23	16
\$1,001-\$1,500	3	2.1	1	0.7
\$1,501-\$2,000	0	0	5	3
\$2,001-\$2,500	1	0.7	0	0

### **Reasons teachers buy books for their students**

I also asked teachers why they spent their own money buying books for their students. They gave several overlapping reasons.

#### *Not enough books in the classroom library*

All teachers responded that they simply did not have enough books in the classroom. Typical responses included: "I do it because I do not have enough books in my classroom for all my students to read;" "If I don't, I'd have nothing for my students." The majority of the participants reported that most of the books in their classroom were old and insufficient, and that they wanted to provide students with a variety of books to choose from and ample exposure to all genres. They needed multiple copies to use in book clubs and for students to take home. They wanted their students to have good books to read and wanted to have an inviting classroom library: "It is important to me to have a rich library

with variations of books. The more books my children see the more excited they get. When I introduce them to new books their eyes light up and all you hear is YEAH and OHHH. I love to see them excited about literacy. The more exposure they have to books the more they will like it and the more they will read and the better they will get at it."

*No books at home*

"Reading is important and my students do not get access to books at home." The majority of teachers surveyed in this study (74 percent) taught in low-income communities where books were rarely available at home. "I buy my students books because they are already underprivileged and [I] feel that book is a necessity." These responses are consistent with Feitelson and Goldstein's (1986) findings that 60 percent of the kindergartners in neighborhoods where children did not do well in school did not own a single book. Neuman (1999) also found that school and public libraries in low-income communities tend to be of poor quality.

One teacher reported, "My students like me to purchase books and they like to have adults read to them. If I did not buy books for my classroom library, they would not have access to storybooks. Many of my students do not have books at home and the parents do not take them to the library." As discussed in Constantino's (1995) study, many language minority parents have little knowledge about libraries and seldom take their children to the library.

*Limited or no budget for books*

The majority of the teachers (65 percent) surveyed were not given a budget for their classroom library and teachers felt the need for additional books for their daily teaching: "The school does not provide enough trade books, I need the books for my students and myself for the curriculum." "There is no steady and permanent amount of money for the library. Even if we get funds, it comes too late in the year. Buying my own books is easier than constantly requesting books and getting turned down or put on hold." Teachers discovered that the easiest way to solve this problem is to buy books from out of their own pocket: "I can't

be limited only to what budget allows." "I feel since the school does not give us the resources, we must find an alternative to provide resources for our children."

*Provide students a wide variety of books*

Teachers wanted to provide their students with a wide variety of books "to have something for every child that comes through my classroom and to keep them interested in reading." Teachers reported that what they purchased were picture books, folktales, fairy tales, poetry, fiction and nonfiction, and biographies due to the limited availability of these books at school. One teacher said, "I want my student to get exposed to all types of books - good literature! The final outcome is a reward to me - my students will be exposed to fine quality good books even if it comes out of my own pocket."

One teacher claimed, "As a teacher the greatest legacy I can leave my students is that of a love for reading. This can only be achieved by providing them with the actual literature. They must be exposed to the current and past literary giants so they can read, read, read." Another wrote that it was important "to provide books with literary language instead of basal readers."

Also, due to the changing demographics in the classroom, teachers felt it important to include reading materials relevant to the student population: "Students need books in their levels and interest, and books that they can associate with;" "Books that are given to my class are not relevant to the population that I teach. Therefore, I have to explore and purchase my own materials. To purchase books that children are able to identify with."

Some teachers also identified the need of introducing students to multicultural literature: "to introduce the students to multicultural authors, to expand students' awareness of their culture and authors from their homelands;" "... (buying books) is the only way I can have a library that reflects the children I teach."

### *Ownership*

Several teachers pointed out the importance of children having their own books. An ESL teacher who has taught K-5 for fifteen years at a low-income urban school explained “I buy books for my students because it is important that they have books of their own at home. I enjoy giving them gifts. It encourages them to read and enjoy independent reading.”

### *For the curriculum*

Several teachers indicated that they purchased books to meet the specific needs and specific reading level of their students, “to help them read books on their level.”

Some teachers also mentioned that they needed the books to plan their curriculum and do the lessons: “As I plan my curriculum, I need certain books that are paramount to my lesson.” And “at times, I will need specific books for a lesson and they may not be available.”

Teachers all said that it was very difficult, if not impossible, to teach without good literature: “In order for students to love reading, and learn how to read they need to be immersed in a classroom with books, lots of books.”

### *Updating reading materials*

Many teachers mentioned that books in their classroom libraries were old: “I believe my students need to read current titles.” Another teacher wrote: “I feel that I need good texts as models for my students for good reading and writing. New books are always coming out that appeal to the interest of the readers and writers in my room.” In a study of an urban school library collection, Allington and Cunningham (2002) found that two-thirds of the school library books were purchased prior to 1975 and were more than 25 years old, including the informational and reference texts. Guice et al.(1996) also found that school libraries they studied were stocked with many out-of-date books, published in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The California Department of Education

(2002) reported that in 2000 the average copyright date of books in California school libraries was 1982.

*Need for books in the students' native languages*

Most bilingual teachers indicated an urgent need for native language materials: "They are too difficult to find and too expensive in the catalogue," "They are not easy to come by. If I see something I get it and I don't have to wait for all the bureaucracy to purchase a book and besides, no money is available;" "I purchase books both in English and Spanish but I tend to spend more on Spanish books because they are so limited. I always purchase books when I travel to Latin American countries."

A teacher teaching high school Spanish said, "I need materials to teach Spanish literature, because what the school gets is very poor for the most part. I refuse to use a translation from another language when so much good Spanish literature exists."

Another teacher put it differently: "Many times, I cannot buy books in Spanish at a reasonable price. Therefore, I buy them in English (I translate them to Spanish for reading to the students). I buy all types of genres so that my students can appreciate all types of literature."

These teachers understand the importance of developing primary language literacy as the most efficient means of developing English as a second language (Cummins 1981). They felt the urgency and importance of supplying their children with native language books. According to a study conducted by Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, and Pasta (1991) the average Spanish speaking family with limited English proficient children attending school has only 26 books. Pucci (1994) reported that school libraries in schools she investigated with Spanish bilingual programs had approximately one book in Spanish per child.

*Sending students the message: books are important*

Many teachers mentioned their passion for reading and sharing: "I am a lover of books. I am always looking for books that will excite my



children and will match their passions and interests;" "I spend my own money because I love books and my children love to read too." One teacher mentioned that it was very important to let students know why teachers buy books for them: "I spent my own money because I didn't have enough of a budget from the school and having my students read daily was essential to me. I wanted them to understand that I wasn't just 'preaching' about the importance of books but I wanted them to actually see that I thought it was so important that they read that I was willing to spend my own money to get them adequate reading material. They really responded to this. They were great kids and were so appreciative of the fact that I would buy books for them to read. They understood that I was making the sacrifice and really reacted positively to it."

### **Conclusions**

Results of this study reveal that teachers spend an average of \$378 of their own money per year on classroom library books. It also confirms the suspected paucity of books in classroom libraries. The various reasons for spending personal money on students all point to one common underlying factor: there is an insufficient amount of books available to students in the classroom, and schools do not provide ample resources for developmentally appropriate classroom libraries. Although some schools did provide their teachers funding for book purchasing, the amount of money was generally insignificant. Limited resources can and do serve as powerful constraints on literacy activities. Numerous research shows that better libraries are related to better reading achievement. And, for many linguistic and economically disadvantaged children, school is the most likely source of books. The International Reading Association's (2000) position statement addresses this important issue for classroom libraries that at least seven high-quality books per child should be ensured.

It is therefore recommended that school and school districts should place a higher priority on funding the purchase of books for teachers' classroom libraries. It is the dissatisfaction with their classroom library collection that motivated teachers to spend their own money to stock their classroom library. Administrators and policy makers should, at least, acknowledge teachers' commitment and recognize teachers for

their generous spirit, for their time, and the effort they devote to their students. Teachers should not be taken for granted and should be provided with increased financial support for their pedagogical needs. Teachers should not spend their own money for classroom purposes.

It must be emphasized that recommending more books for classroom libraries does not entail a huge commitment: for the price of one or two computers, a classroom library collection can be significantly enhanced. Moreover, the computers will soon be obsolete, but the books can last for decades.

Furthermore, it is the teacher's understanding of the importance of books in children's literacy development, the urgent need of providing students with sufficient good quality books, and of cultivating the students' love for reading that motivates them to provide, voluntarily, a diverse selection of interesting, quality books for their students. If teachers did not recognize the importance of books in children's lives, they would not sacrifice to purchase books for their students, spending their own money, despite the modest salaries they earn.

Most importantly, it is the teacher's unfaltering dedication to their students and profession that motivates them to go well beyond their regular responsibilities to provide their students with books. The most significant finding of this study, perhaps, is the confirmation of teachers' unwavering commitment to children, their contagious love of books, and the fact that they practice what they believe by bringing books into students' lives.

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## Appendix

### Survey

#### Why Teachers buy books for their students

**The purpose of this survey is to find out why teachers spend their own money buying books for their students and who contribute to the collection of classroom library. All data acquired from this survey will be kept confidential and used for this research only. Thank you for your support for this research!**

1. What kind of school are you working in?
  - a. low income urban school
  - b. middle class urban school
  - c. upper middle class urban
2. What grade and subject are you currently teaching?
3. Do you have a class library? a. Yes      b. No
4. Does your classroom library have sufficient books for all your students? a. Yes      b. No  
  
If yes, how many books do you have in your classroom library?
  - a. less than 100    b. 101-200      c. 201-400      d. 401-600
  - e. 601-800      f. 801-1,000      g. more than 1,000
5. Are you given a budget for your classroom library?
  - a. Yes      b. No
6. If yes, how much funding for classroom library do you usually receive per year?
  - a. less than \$100      b. \$101-500
  - c. \$501-\$1,000      d. \$1,001-\$1,500      e. 1,5001-2,000
  - f. \$2,000 –\$2,500
7. Do you use your own money to buy books for your students?
  - a. Yes      b. No

8. If yes, how much do you usually spend per year?
  - a. less than \$100
  - b. \$101-\$500
  - c. \$501-\$1,000
  - d. \$1,001-\$1,500
  - e. \$1,501-\$2,000
  - f. \$2,000 –\$2,500
9. Why do you spend your own money buying books for your students?
10. What kind of book do you usually purchase (genre and language)? Why?



## **Reflection and Cognitive Strategy Instruction: Modeling Active Learning for Pre-service Teachers**

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*Reading methodology courses, like other courses in college, are often one-dimensional when it comes to instructional delivery systems. Too often, "teacher talk" that elicits far too little reflection prevails. This practice can be changed with activities calling for students to construct knowledge from their experiences, thus following basic tenets of constructivism. The purpose of this article is to discuss how pre-service teachers can be taught to think beyond strategies in methodology and reflect upon language itself. Three instructional strategies - semantic feature analysis, fictitious writing systems activities, and nonsense story analysis - are examples of ways college professors can get students to reflect upon the intricacies of language and thought processes relating to reading and language arts. We discuss how these strategies can help move classes away from lecture-oriented formats that call for too little reflection and integration of students' experiences and knowledge to formats that actively engage students in learning.*



IN COLLEGES OF EDUCATION courses preparing America's future teachers, the dominant approach to teaching, can mirror passive instruction often found in other disciplines, despite education professors' own admonitions to make learning active and reflective, to engage students creatively, and to build on students' experiences. Teacher educators lament about students who do not use what they learn in their foundations, methods, and/or field experience classes, but who slip into a more traditional approach of teaching often oriented toward "teacher telling." The question we ask is simple: Should teacher educators practice what they preach and engage students in making learning an active process, putting these students in situations where they must reflect on teaching and learning? If yes, then what can reading and language arts educators do to move away from the passive mode of "teacher telling" to have prospective teachers actively engaged in learning?

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how reading/language arts methodology professors can more actively engage students in learning concepts and strategies in their courses. Several strategies will be discussed to illustrate how reading and language arts methodology courses can be more active and reflective than they have been traditionally. These instructional strategies, following basic tenets of constructivism, have been tried in our classes and have proven successful in building on what students already know.

Constructivism is the foundational theory for the instructional strategies that will be discussed. Marlowe and Page (1998) explain constructivism by saying that:

The main proposition of constructivism is that learning means constructing, creating, inventing, and developing our own knowledge. Others can give us information, we can find information in books, and we can get information from the media, but as important as information is—and it is important—receiving it, getting it, and hearing it does not necessarily equal learning. Learning in constructivist terms is:

- both the process and the result of questioning, interpreting and analyzing information
- using this information and thinking process to develop, build and alter our meaning and understanding of concepts and ideas
- integrating current experiences with our past experiences and what we already know about a given subject. (p.10)

Thus, constructivism forms the theoretical underpinnings of interactive learning and cognitive strategy instruction (Graves, Juel, & Graves, 2001; Harris & Pressley, 1991; Raphael & Englert, 1990). As Kauchak and Eggen (1998) state, "Learners construct their own understanding rather than having it delivered or transmitted to them" (p. 9). These tenets are based on the social learning theory of Vygotsky (1962), which proposes that students acquire new knowledge through meaningful interactions with other people. Vygotsky emphasizes the social, contextual, and cultural nature of learning and considers cognitive development to be the result of social interaction within the environment. The key principle in Vygotsky's (1978) theory, the zone of proximal development, is defined as "the distance between actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 76). According to this principle, students engaged in activities that are too difficult to complete independently will learn best when their learning activities are mediated by a more knowledgeable individual (Gavelek & Raphael, 1996). Social engagement is an integral component of constructivist-based instruction. Tovani (2004) emphasizes the importance of social interaction in her explanation as to why she has students work in small groups. She points out that small group discussion "stimulates higher levels of thinking. . . encourages articulation of thinking. . . helps students remember. . . allows students to make connections . . . [and] see different perspectives, as well as promotes deeper understanding"(p. 90).

The five basic operating elements of constructivism are (Zahorik, 1995):

- activating prior knowledge
- acquiring knowledge
- understanding knowledge
- using knowledge
- reflecting on knowledge

It is the reading/language arts professor's responsibility to incorporate these operating elements into the design of instruction for pre-service teachers.

The following are three examples of such instructional strategies to promote active learning and reflection in our methodology courses for reading and language arts pre-service teachers.

### **Strategy 1: Semantic Feature Analysis (SFA)**

Semantic Feature Analysis uses a multi-dimensional matrix to focus students' attention on differences and similarities between words that fall into a specific category. For example, words that identify means of transportation (e.g., bicycle, jinrikisha, Conestoga wagon, automobile, airplane) might be compared in a matrix where categories of fast speed, fuel propelled, people propelled, large, small, many passengers, and road travel are examined. Using a matrix with the five means of transportation above on one axis and features to be compared on another, students would use a clarification process among the terms/features by employing their prior knowledge and marking an "x" or check mark where terms and features intersect. Where features are not known, a question mark would be inserted, perhaps to be replaced with an "x" or check mark after appropriate explorations have occurred. While the more common modes of transportation (bicycle, automobile, and airplane) might lend themselves to easy comparisons, Conestoga wagon, and especially jinrikisha (ricksha or rickshaw used by those outside Japan, the country of origin), would conceivably call for further explanation.

The expansion of various conceptual categories of schema, the mental network of known knowledge that helps with extended comprehension, is a value of semantic feature analysis (Anders & Bos,

1986; Johnson & Pearson, 1984; Pittelman, Heimlich, Berglund, & French, 1991; Vacca & Vacca, 2005). Semantic feature analysis synthesizes schema theory with practical instructional strategies. Schema theory advocates that knowledge is organized into units known as schemata. Schemata also provides information as to how knowledge is used (Rumelhart, 1980). As students learn, new concepts are linked and organized according to their relationship to pre-existing schema. A form of scaffolding is involved in helping make transitions from known to unknown knowledge. Scaffolding, a key component of effective vocabulary instruction and schema development, provides links and connections that occur only when the existing knowledge is stable, discernible from other, pre-existing knowledge, and directly relevant to the new knowledge (Ausubel, 1963). Through scaffolding, teachers initiate interactive strategies that teach students *how* to learn. As prior knowledge is activated, new concepts are developed through teacher questioning as well as self-questioning strategies, all of which are key constructive components of semantic feature analysis.

For semantic feature analysis to work effectively, content of the activity must be constructed in such a way that there are presumably both known and unknown factors. If content is too readily known, the activity becomes a *recall* activity rather than a *reflective* activity. Going back to the example given on means of transportation, the not-so-common modes of transportation (Conestoga wagon and jinrikisha) would lead to a greater degree of reflection and self-questioning than would the other forms of transportation listed. Another modification of semantic feature analysis that can be made with more mature students (in this case, college students taking a course in content area reading), is to let them help with development of the comparative features.

In a reading class where this activity took place, officially entitled "Supervision and Instruction for Secondary Reading," the main objective of a particular lesson was not just to teach students how to implement the SFA strategy, but rather to illustrate how the strategy leads to reflective and active learning. The professor accomplished this objective by purposefully leading students through the completion of an SFA. Consequently, the students' learning expanded far beyond what would

occur in a situation where the strategy is merely explained, with one or two examples shown.

For this particular lesson, we carefully selected content and focused on comparison of two birds, the owl and the dodo. We placed students in groups of three. Small groups are an important component of reflective instruction. We asked students to review and analyze what they knew about "birds of prey," beginning with a definition for this term and then progressing to an identification of common birds of prey. The discussions in each group were highly engaging and often focused on being precise, such as when participants felt the need for the agreement on the scientific definition of "birds of prey."

Each group completed a semantic feature analysis matrix, leading to a composite matrix (see Figure 1). In general, as anticipated by the instructor, the common features of *owls* were readily known, although this was not the case for the long-extinct dodo. This lack of knowledge about the dodo easily led to new learning since the juxtaposition of pre-existing knowledge of the two species of birds made them excellent subjects for learning about the use of semantic feature analysis. The diverse utility of a semantic feature analysis is readily illustrated when the relationships between word concepts are not easily distinguishable (Nagy, 2000; Pittelman et al., 1991).

The features on the matrix begin with those relatively easy for students to identify. All birds have feathers, thus it is most logical to list this feature first in the matrix. Likewise, it can be expected that students will know that owls are nocturnal creatures and have hooked beaks, yet these particulars may not be known about the dodo bird. These two characteristics opened the door for discussion and led to active engagement in learning more about the remaining features in the matrix. As groups moved to the increasingly unfamiliar features, they consulted available reference materials provided in the setting or available elsewhere (discussed later) in order to complete the matrix. Some students conferred with members in other small groups and, in the process, increased their knowledge.

Figure 1

*Semantic Feature Analysis*

Features Bird											
	Feathers	Nocturnal	Razor-sharp talons	Hooked beak	Bird of prey	Wide wing span	Quick movements	Nests on the ground	Multiple habitats	Binocular vision	Extinct
Owl	➡	➡	➡	➡	➡	➡	➡	?	➡	➡	†
Dodo	➡	†	†	➡	†	†	†	➡	†	†	➡

Code: ➡ = Yes

† = No

? = Don't know

During the completion of the matrix for the semantic feature analysis, the professor encouraged students in each group to explore how vocabulary development took place, to clarify concepts, to raise questions, and to find resources that could answer questions. The professor encouraged these investigations by using specific descriptors such as “razor-sharp talons” and “wide-wing span.” These descriptors led to much discussion with students easily reaching the conclusion that descriptions such as “wide-wing span” reflected more than simplistic

adjectives of large, short, weak, and so on. One student even quipped, "What we need here is the wing span of the pterodactyl (purported to be 23-30 feet)!" Another group member responded with the reminder that this prehistoric creature was a flying reptile rather than a bird.

The discussions that took place during the completion of the matrix led students in the class to discuss the significance of other values of completing the semantic feature analysis on the *owl* and the *dodo*. Students learned two features prompting them to see cause and effect relationships: *dodos* were slow and clumsy creatures, characteristics that led to the demise of this bird in the seventeenth century, and *owls* are quick with their movements, very quiet, and can attack without alerting their prey by sound. Tovani (2004) points out that "good readers use talk and collaboration with peers to extend their thinking about text." (p. 98) The students experienced this truth firsthand as they acknowledged how such discussions expanded schema development and provided authentic opportunities to practice listening, speaking, and higher-order thinking.

To address the feature "nests on the ground," we intentionally inserted a "?" into the space for the owl. According to the matrix's coding system, this symbol indicates an uncertainty as to whether this is a characteristic of an owl. The purposeful use of this symbol created more discussion as well as a catalyst for students to explore the wide array of differences that sometimes exist in the habits of animals within the same groups. Through self-scaffolding research, students learned that *dodos* did, in fact, build their nests on the ground. Students initially were tempted to indicate that *owls* do not build their nests on the ground. However, student-initiated research revealed at least two species of owls that *do* build their nests *on* the ground, Snowy Owls and Short-eared Owls, and at least one species, Burrowing Owls, that build their nest *under* the ground. The next feature, "multiple habitats," provided a natural continuation of this discussion. If the teacher-educator so desired, discussion could be extended to include the vocabulary of geographical features, such as the term "climate."

Semantic feature analysis is a learning strategy that is flexible and can be used easily as a springboard to cross into other academic disciplines (see Figure 2). Students identified this flexibility as they

moved across the matrix to the feature “binocular vision.” Owls only have forward facing eyes and thus do not have peripheral vision. Therefore, to see to their right or to their left, owls must completely turn their heads to that direction. This is an opportunity to integrate vocabulary related to mathematics by exploring owls’ ability to turn their heads 180 degrees in either direction.

This integration of new knowledge is further extended with the feature “extinct.” By reflecting upon previous features, students’ comprehension levels continue to expand as they discuss why dodo birds are extinct. Through this feature students can actively identify the interdisciplinary connections by discussing the time period of dodo bird extinction, approximately 1681, and by connecting this extinction with other important events occurring at that time in different parts of the world. History can be used to help elucidate “how” the demise of the dodo occurred through man’s introduction of new species, such as dogs, and through the hunting of the bird. Science can then be used to link the past to the present through a discussion of recent discoveries of dodo DNA that suggest that the extinct bird, whose scientific name is *raphus cucullatus*, was a member of the pigeon family.

The final feature presented in the matrix is “important to the ecosystems.” As with the “multiple habitat” feature, students can identify the opportunity to extend vocabulary instruction into the areas of geographical features and biology terminology. For example, dodo birds lived on the island of Mauritius, located off the east coast of Africa. Soon after the dodo bird’s elimination from the island, the Mauritian Calvaria tree faced extinction because it no longer had the dodo bird to help spread its seeds. This information introduces geography-based vocabulary such as “island” and “continent,” as well as biology-based vocabulary such as “germination.”

As students moved through the matrix, inquisitive discussion continued among and within the small groups. This discourse was anchored by numerous vocabulary resource materials, such as books and web-based information about owls and dodo birds, and fueled by the students’ desires to connect familiar concepts with unfamiliar terms and to communicate these new constructions with one another. As groups



completed the analysis grid and identified each bird's characteristics, the professor continually provided the students with resources to help them locate unknown information and "scaffolded" as needed, thereby encouraging active engagement.

To carry out the semantic feature analysis on the *owl* and the *dodo*, the professor exposed students to a wide variety of resource materials that they used with a great deal of enthusiasm. The resources (found in Appendix A) consisted of children's books, video resources, and web-based resources. Some resources were available when the students completed the semantic feature analysis, some additional web materials were available on the Internet for each individual who had access to a computer, and some materials were available in the resource center in the college where this course was taught. Students in the reading class easily grasped the significance of having a variety of materials available for students whom they would one day teach. They could easily see how use of such materials could help students not only build on their knowledge of birds but also greatly extend learning in an engaging atmosphere.

We evaluated the involvement of students in completing the semantic feature analysis on the *owl* and the *dodo* in three ways. One obvious method was to note the participation in the group construction of the matrix used in this activity. The professor observed each student in the class to be totally involved in the activity. The professor in the class mentally contrasted this level of involvement and the learning that took place with past classes taught where semantic feature analysis had only been explained and/or discussed in class. While our experiences indicate that showing and discussing a semantic feature analysis matrix almost always sparks some interest, the interest as well as retention of information does not compare to the activity where students in groups created and discussed the matrix we have shared.

Students' comprehension of the strategy was also evaluated through the course's final examination with an applied question. This question is shown in Appendix B. On this question, students did exceedingly well. With a focus on understanding, the professor of this class was quite pleased with the depth of responses to this type of question rather than

administering three or four multiple-choice questions about semantic feature analysis.

The professor also evaluated the learning of semantic feature analysis through a questionnaire distributed to the students a year after they had been enrolled in the class. In response to the questionnaire, one student wrote that she had done a semantic feature analysis with her students contrasting Iraq, Afghanistan, and the United States. She used features such as religious beliefs, government, lifestyle differences, and recent wars. This same teacher stated that "SFA helps eliminate some of the confusion—because it constantly brings students back to the familiar." Two other teachers who design in-service programs reported that they had introduced semantic feature analysis to teachers who did not know about this technique.

Time would not permit every reading/language arts strategy to be taught in the college classroom as semantic feature analysis was taught in the classroom discussed here. However, other strategies that might be introduced in a more traditional way could be contrasted with the process used in teaching semantic feature analysis. One such strategy is semantic mapping or webbing, a strategy that uses a visual or graphic display to show the relationships among words and helps categorize words (Collins & Cheek, 1993). An example of this strategy is seen in Figure 2, where a semantic map of the dodo is shown. Again, Zahorik's basic elements of constructivism identified earlier (activating prior knowledge, acquiring knowledge, understanding knowledge, using knowledge, and reflecting on knowledge) could be discussed in the contexts of constructivism in operation and expanded learning that reading/language arts teachers should constantly strive for with students in the K-12 setting.

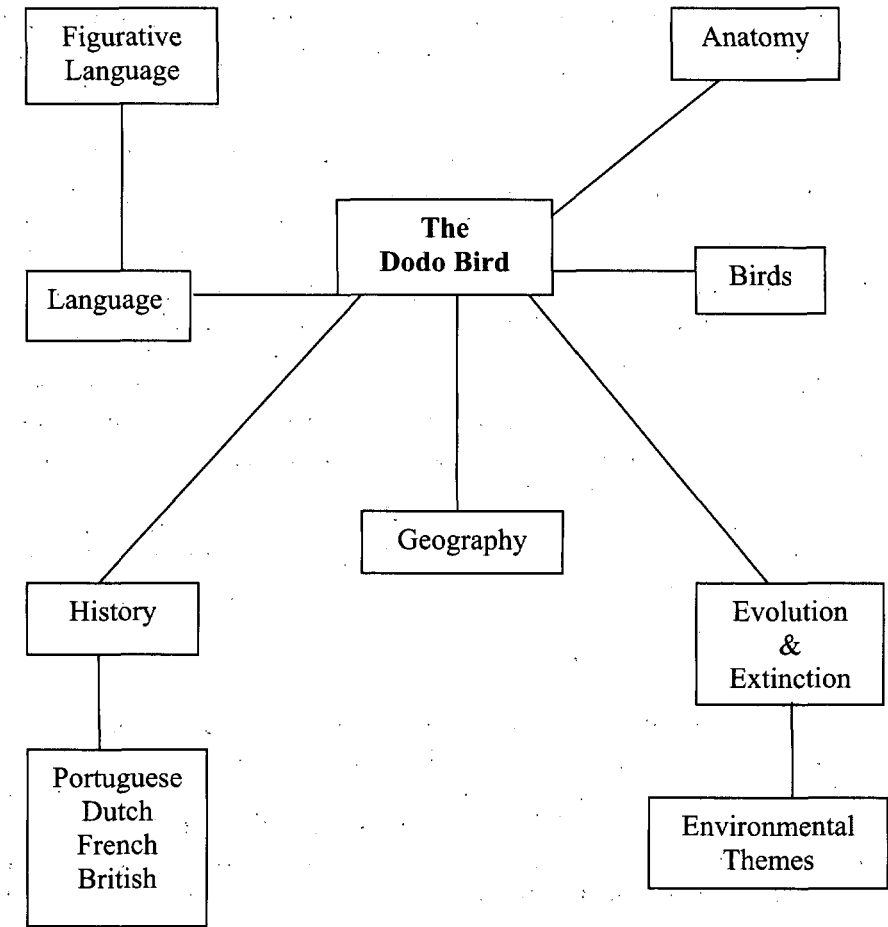
### **Strategy 2: Fictitious Writing Systems**

In both reading and language arts methodology courses, one of the authors of this study has long used a fictitious writing systems group activity to help students (especially undergraduate students) better understand the nature of different writing systems that evolved over time in various parts of the world. In this activity (see Figure 3), four different writing systems are presented. One group uses a system in

which the symbols represent words and concepts. The second group uses a system where symbols represent syllables. The third group presented in the activity uses symbols to represent sounds or phonemes (with and without a one-to-one relationship between phoneme and grapheme). The fourth group uses a system that is similar to another group's but still includes some distinguishing features.

Figure 2

*The Dodo Bird Across Disciplines*



The discussions for this activity never fail to elicit questions about ways to change our alphabet. “Why can’t we have a unique symbol (grapheme) for each of the forty plus phonemes used in our writing? Wouldn’t it be easy to add letters to our alphabet? When words came into use in the English language, why weren’t the symbols used for the sounds in the words changed to the way the sounds were already spelled in English, such as in the French word ‘beau’?”

This constructive activity meets several reflective-based objectives. First, it helps prospective teachers see what children face when they are trying to read symbols that are new to them. Second, it leads students to a better understanding of the alphabetic principle where sounds (not words or syllables) are represented by symbols. It also leads to a better understanding of our own writing system (alphabetic). Finally, it illustrates how some countries use a logographic system (symbols for words/concepts), while others use primarily a syllabic writing system (symbols for syllables). For example, each written character of Chinese represents a unit of meaning while “in syllabic writing systems, such as kana in Japanese and Sequoyah’s Cherokee syllabary, each written symbol represents a syllable” (Peregoy & Boyle, 2004, p. 110). This activity usually takes about 30 minutes for small group discussions, followed by about 15 minutes for a large group discussion of the four points identified above.

### **Strategy 3: Nonsense Stories and Words**

In both reading and language arts methods courses, nonsense sentences and stories are appropriate for helping students see and reflect on the various systems (phonological, morphological, and syntactical) in operation in our language. Students who are quite skilled in using their language sometimes are not aware of the various systems that operate together to make language functional. One of the authors of this study uses the nonsense story found in Figure 4, “Going Lelling,” to promote reflection on the systems in operation in a language. While college students cannot initially talk much about language systems in use, they can rather easily talk about systems in the body (circulatory, digestive, respiratory, and so on) that operate for keeping one alive. The contrast of body systems and language systems is made to:

- identify what is meant by “systems”
- develop the idea that different systems work together for a common purpose

“Going Lelling” is usually presented to students with questions such as: “What did the brimpy yob do?” “Where did the brimpy yob go lelling?” “Who did the brimpy yob meet?” “Why do we pronounce the word *lelling* as if it rhymes with *telling* and *selling*?” “What is the relationship among the words *lell*, *lelled*, and *lelling*?”

Students can, to a point, tell what the brimpy yob did and where he did it because of the way syntax is operating as a system in our language. Likewise, students pronounce the nonsense words in this story rather accurately because of the phonological patterns (or visual graphophonic cueing system) in our language. Students also can tell about the relationship among the nonsense words *lell*, *lelled*, and *lelling* because of the way the morphological system operates in our language.

In using this nonsense story, college students do indeed use their past experiences with sounds, words, sentences, and even story sense in answering questions asked in the worksheet. They also figure out that because the nonsense words in “Going Lelling” are not known by them, they cannot fully comprehend this nonsense story. The activity calls for reflection on the part of the students, with any number of them commenting that they just had not given much thought to language systems in operation. Students’ comments often add up to the old adage of not being able to see the forest for the trees.

### Other Reflective Activities


There are other equally meaningful reading/language arts activities for use in college classrooms that help students build on their past experiences and, in turn, construct new insights and new knowledge. Contrast-compare activities, cloze activities, cause-effect charts, and many other types of activities that prospective teachers use with students they will one day teach can, if made age appropriate for reading methodology and other language arts courses, build on experiences/knowledge of college students. Such activities, interspersed

among class discussions of information about the reading process, organizing for reading, phonemic awareness, phonics, reading-writing connections, etc., make learning more interactive and thus more meaningful.


Figure 3.

### Fictitious Writing Systems

1. The **Unga** people, through hundreds of years, have developed a system to help them communicate with one another through writing and to help them tell their story to generations to come. Some of the symbols for their spoken words are shown below with the meanings of the words (in English) just under each spoken word.

Written words:   
 Spoken words: ugluh gup bupseg mup frad lep ling lingning  
 English meaning: (hello) (girl) (goodbye) (boy) (said) (cat) (light) (lightning)

2. The **Luna** people live between two big mountains, many miles from the **Unga** people. They, too, have developed a writing system that took many hundreds of years to build. Their system is different from the system of the **Unganese**. Here's how the **Lunacans'** writing system looks, along with English translations.

Written words:   
 Spoken words: toglee sep seknok sek fep dap viss vissul  
 English meaning: (hello) (girl) (goodbye) (good) (boy) (said) (light) (lightning)

3. The **Tippa** people are yet another group of people living thousands of miles from both the **Unganese** and the **Lunacans**. Their writing system also developed over hundreds of years. The writing system used by the **Tippalians** is quite different from the systems developed by the **Unganese** and the **Lunacans**.

Written words: hello girl goodbye good boy cat light lightning  
 Spoken words: hēl lō gurl good bī good boi kāt līt līt ning  
 English meaning: (hello) (girl) (goodbye) (good) (boy) (cat) (light) (lightning)

4. Another large group of people, the **Gula** people, live on an island far from the peoples in 1, 2, and 3 above. Their writing system is more closely like the **Tippalians**, but still different. Here are some English words and how the **Gulalites** would write them (in parentheses):

said (sed) dog (d\*g) cat (kat)  
 boy (b@) light (l+t) lightning (l+tni>)  
 fin (fin) man (man) happy (hap=)  
 deep (d=p) okay (ok) dead (ded)

**Which of the last two systems (the Tippa or the Gula) might it be easier to teach decoding? Why? What if our own language had only one symbol for each phoneme that children must learn when they learn to decode?**

Figure 4:

*A Nonsense Story About the Brimpy Yob*

**Going Lelling\***

**The brimpy yob went lelling. It lelled by the ganny. It lelled by the vindy. It lelled and lelled.**

**One day while lelling, the brimpy yob met a zooky hiler. The brimpy yob and the zooky hiler became lapses. Wherever the brimpy yob went, you saw the zooky hiler.**

**Today, you can see the good lapses lelling zad of the loit. They lell by the ganny. They lell by the vindy. They lell and lell. Would you like to go lelling with them?**

\* From *Assessment and correction in elementary language arts* as shown in References.

**Summary**

“When constructivist thinking is applied to the acquisition of knowledge about teaching and learning, it holds that teachers engage in a process of seeking and making meaning from personal, practical, and professional experiences” (Vacca, Vacca, Gove, Burkey, Lenhart, & McKeon, 2003, p. 10). The constructivist-based strategies presented in this article enable future teachers to analyze and expand upon their own learning and, in turn, become more effective in promoting the learning of their students. There should be more active learning in reading methodology and other language arts courses. Instructional strategies

should be operative, thus leading students to build on their past experiences and reflect on the language they use as well as activities they choose for teaching their own students to read and perform in other language arts.

The semantic feature analysis, fictitious writing systems activity, and nonsense story analysis presented herein are but three of many instructional strategies suited for college students learning how to teach reading, writing, and other language arts. Each creates an open-ended learning community that is invaluable for teachers in training and can help build on the college student's own background of experiences. A firsthand, engaging experience leads to reflection that otherwise might not take place, which consequently enables a deeper understanding of the complex nature of language learning and learning to read.

Because teachers tend to teach the way that they were taught (Clark, 1988; Kagan, 1992; Lortie, 1975), it is imperative that pre-service teachers be actively engaged in their methodology courses as they move through teacher education programs in colleges of education. Concomitantly, reflective practice modeling throughout these courses should enhance the likelihood that teachers will become lifelong learners themselves, a necessity today as teachers meet the diverse needs of an ever-changing population of learners.

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## Appendix A

### Resources

#### *Children's Literature Resources*

- Arnosky, J. (1995). *All about owls*. New York, NY: Scholastic, Inc.
- Baehr, P. G. (1990). *Summer of the dodo*. New York, NY: Four Winds Press.
- Butterfield, M. (1961). *Quick, quiet, and feathered*. Austin, TX: Raintree Steck-Vaughn. 1997.
- Cartwright, A. (1989). *In search of the last dodo*. Boston, MA: Joy Street Books
- George, J. C. (1919). *There's an owl in the shower*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers. 1995.
- Le Tord, B. (1999). *A bird or two: A story about Henri Matisse*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdoman's

#### *Books for Young Readers.*

- Lehan, D. (1991). *This is not a book about dodos*. London: All Books for Children.
- Lehman, J. H. (1991). *The owl and the tuba*. Elgin, IL: Brotherstone Publishers
- Mathers, P. (2001). *Dodo gets married*. New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers
- McKeller, S. (1993). *Counting rhymes*. London: Dorling Kindersly Limited.
- Provensen, A. (1994). *An owl and three pussycats*. San Diego, CA: Browndeer Press.
- Waddell, M. (1992). *Owl babies*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

#### *Video Resources*

- "Amazing Animals: Birds of Prey." (1997). Dorling Kindersly Vision.
- "Birds of Prey." (1999). Discovery Channel Video.

“Owls Up Close.” (1991). Ark Media, Group Ltd.

*Web-Based Resources*

<http://www.birdsmauritius.com/Dodo.htm>

<http://www.davidreilly.com/dodo>

<http://www.dodo.com>

<http://enchantedlearning.com/subjects/birds>

<http://www.birds-of-prey.org>

## **Appendix B**

### *Evaluation Instrument for SFA*

#### Final Exam

Congratulations! You have been appointed to the teaching position of your choice in the school site of your choice. Your new principal is asking that you integrate the following teaching strategy into an interdisciplinary thematic unit that is currently being developed by other teachers on your academic team:

Specifically focusing on Semantic Feature Analysis (SFA), develop a plan for using this instructional strategy with a thematic unit that you already have in place. Please prepare your response so that you clearly demonstrate your understanding of this instructional strategy; make sure that your plan is designed for a culturally and linguistically diverse population and that you use the latest technology available in your design. Finally, your plan should integrate at least three content areas (your choice, of course). If time permits, you might want to think about ideas for community involvement, including parents and extended families when possible.



## **From University to Classrooms: A Preservice Teachers' Writing Portfolio Program and its Impact on Instruction in Teaching Strategies for Writing Portfolios in the Classroom**

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*This article reports findings from an action research project investigating the impact creating writing portfolios has on preservice teachers' understanding of writing portfolio assessment. Participants included 92 preservice teachers enrolled across four different sections of an introductory literacy class. Data sources included: preservice teacher writing portfolios and reflective statements on portfolios; and a Likert style survey designed to collect item response and personal comment data on preservice teacher growth and development with writing portfolio assessment. Data-analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns of student responses in reflective statements on writing portfolios and in-survey questions and comments. Findings indicate that active engagement with writing portfolios significantly and positively influence preservice teachers' competence in and confidence with writing portfolio assessment. Implications are identified and curious issues and lingering questions are discussed.*

THIS ARTICLE REPORTS on findings from a *teacher as researcher* (see Short, et.al., 1996; Patterson, Santa, Short, & Smith, 1993; Patterson, Stansell, & Lee, 1990) project that investigated the impact of participating in writing portfolios on preservice teacher understanding of writing portfolio assessment. It asked two questions:

1. What can we learn about the impact creating writing portfolios has on preservice teacher understanding of writing portfolio assessment?
2. How can we use findings to develop more informed instruction in literacy courses in our elementary teacher education program?

This is the first project in a line of planned *action research* (Power & Hubbard, 1999; Hubbard & Power, 1993) focusing on preservice teacher learning. This research recognizes that all teachers (preservice teachers, teacher educators, and elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers) are learners. As Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin (1995, p. 598) state:

Teachers learn by doing, reading, and reflecting; by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see. This kind of learning enables teachers to make the leap from theory to accomplished practice.

First, we provide background for the project. Then, we situate this project within a body of research investigating the relationship between writing portfolios and teacher education. Next, we describe method, identifying participants, data sources, and data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, we discuss findings and describe curious issues and lingering questions.

### **Background**

We are teacher educators who teach different sections of the same undergraduate course: EDC 329 - Teaching Reading and Language Arts

in the Elementary School. This is the first literacy course preservice teachers take in the elementary teacher education program. This course introduces theoretical background, instructional strategies, and assessment procedures surrounding the six areas of the English Language Arts (NCTE, 1996):

- listening
- speaking
- reading
- writing
- viewing
- visually representing

It also provides experiences that address the New Teacher Standards in the Commonwealth of Kentucky (Kentucky Professional Standards Board, 1993):

- designs and plans instruction
- creates and maintains an effective learning environment
- implements and manages instruction
- assesses and communicates learning results
- reflects and evaluates teaching and learning
- collaborates with colleagues, parents, and others
- engages in professional development
- demonstrates knowledge of content
- uses technology

In addition, this course highlights important concepts and issues related to literacy development. Major concepts include social constructivist learning theory, the writing process, and reader response theory. Major issues involve the role of phonics in reading instruction, basal versus literature-based reading programs, and authentic and alternative (to standardized testing) reading comprehension assessment. While these concepts and issues are important, writing portfolio assessment receives considerable attention in large part because it is a major component of CATS (Commonwealth Accountability Test System), the statewide high-stakes assessment system.



### **Writing Portfolio Assessment**

In 1998, House Bill 53 was passed by the Kentucky State Legislature. This bill called for a redesign of KIRIS (Kentucky Information and Retrieval Information System), the testing and accountability system first implemented in 1990. As a result, CATS (Commonwealth Accountability Testing System) was developed (see *Kentucky Teacher*, 2000). CATS is designed to improve teaching and learning in schools (K-12) and includes a variety of assessments:

- national basic skills tests (CTBS) in reading, mathematics, and language arts
- Kentucky Core Content Tests - multiple choice and open response questions in six subjects
- non-academic indicators of dropout, retention, attendance and successful transition to adult life
- writing portfolios and writing tests
- alternate portfolios for students with moderate to severe disabilities
- accountability - how the pieces "count" in a formula to promote school improvement

Writing portfolio assessment is a major component of CATS. Students in grades 4, 7, and 11 are required to create a writing portfolio that includes several samples of writing:

1. a personal narrative
2. a poem
3. a literary piece
4. a transactive piece
5. an on-demand writing sample
6. a letter to a reviewer

All student portfolios are assessed based on a scoring rubric and given a score ranging from 0-4:

0. Non-performance
1. Novice

2. Apprentice
3. Proficient
4. Distinguished

A major goal of the elementary teacher education program is to teach preservice students about writing portfolio assessment, especially how to teach the kinds of writing that are included in student portfolios.

### **Writing Portfolio Assessment and Teacher Education**

We regard the act of teaching as an art of “thoughtfulness” (Barell, 1995). Teaching is being systematically thoughtful about how to support our own learning, as well as the learning of others (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1997; Fisher, 1995). Much research has been conducted on writing portfolios as a tool to support thoughtfulness in learning and in learning to teach (Campbell, Cignetti, Melenyzer, Nettles & Wyman, 2001; Bullock & Hawk, 2001; Zeichner, 1999; Padak & Rasinski, 1992). Writing portfolios, or “smart portfolios” (Wilcox, 1996, p. 173), act as reflective frameworks that help preservice teachers understand their own belief structure about teaching and learning, reflect on their own ways of knowing, and experience a variety of reading, writing, and sharing strategies (Masciale, 1996). This type of learning helps preservice teachers develop a thoughtful attitude before they ever enter the classroom (Wilcox, 1996; Koegler, 2000). It also helps teacher-educators in that writing portfolios represents a window through which to see preservice teachers’ growth and development over time (Hoover, 1994). This project investigates the impact that creating writing portfolios has on preservice teacher understanding of writing portfolio assessment.

### **Method**

#### *Participants*

A total of 92 undergraduate students participated in this project. All were enrolled in one of four different sections of EDC 329. These sections occurred over a three successive semester period of time. Of these 92, a total of 26 students were enrolled in a section in semester one. All students in this section completed a writing portfolio as part of course

requirements. A total of 15 students were enrolled in a section in semester two. All students in these sections completed a writing portfolio. Therefore, over a three semester period, 77 students in three different sections were assigned writing portfolios and 15 students in another section were not assigned writing portfolios.

### *Data Sources*

We collected data from two major sources:

1. contents in the writing portfolios
2. responses and comments from the student survey

For those completing writing portfolios, students created a portfolio consisting of writing samples based on in-class experiences with the writing process (prewriting, drafting, author's chair, revising, editing, and publishing), and included a narrative, poem, persuasive essay, short story, and letter to the reviewer. The portfolio also included a 2-3 page reflective paper in which students described their personal growth with writing portfolio assessment over time. In addition, a four item survey with comment section was administered at the end of the course. This survey included Likert-style items designed to collect comment data on the impact of writing portfolio assessment on preservice teacher growth and development across four categories:

- awareness of requirements
- understanding of processes
- knowledge of strategies
- need for more information

### *Data Collection*

Those students (n=77) assigned a writing portfolio as part of course requirements submitted their individual portfolio at the end of the semester for instructor review and course credit. In addition, as part of culminating activities at the end of the course, students completed the survey. Students (n=15) who were not assigned a writing portfolio as part

of course requirements completed the same survey, but did so during the semester after they had completed EDC 329.

### *Data Analysis*

We grounded data-analysis in principles of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and driven by methodology of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978). After collecting, coding, categorizing, and reflecting on the data, we met regularly to share, discuss, and reach consensus about our evolving understandings of the data. We focused on identifying recurring patterns of student responses in reflective comments, as well as patterns of student responses across survey questions and survey comments. The purpose of this analysis was to hear a pattern of group voices. These patterns indicated a general feeling by students as to the perceived value of participating in writing portfolio assessment. Similarly, the purpose of survey comments was to hear individual voices. These voices indicated individual student's personal problems and pleasures of creating their own writing portfolio, and the extent to which the whole experience prepared them to help elementary students create a similar kind of portfolio.

### **Findings**

In this section we present findings from responses to survey questions provided by all participants in this study. In addition, we present findings from survey comments provided by participants who were assigned and completed a writing portfolio.

### *Survey Questions*

Responses were designed in Likert style with four choices: (Strongly Agree (SA); Agree (A); Disagree (D); Strongly Disagree (SD)). Table 1 summarizes responses from survey questions across semesters 1 and 3 completed writing portfolios (77 students). We averaged the percentages for section 1, 3, and 4.

### *Survey Comments*

In addition to responding to four survey questions, students who completed a writing portfolio provided survey comments. We included a "survey comment" prompt on the survey question form. Comments took the form of written reflections on the completion of a writing portfolio over the course of a semester. We identified a total of seven categories from survey comments. These categories represent recurring patterns in the survey comment data and include samples of student written reflections.

1. Participating in writing portfolios helps preservice teachers grow as writers themselves:

From writing a narrative, I felt like I actually grew as a writer. I was able to use more descriptive language and express feelings simply because what I was writing about was so significant to me and affected me so much. If I had chosen a topic that did not affect me as much as this did, then I do not think that I could have written such a meaningful piece.

2. Participating in writing portfolios helps preservice teachers understand what their prospective students will experience when writing portfolios:

As a prospective teacher, I will use the valuable tools I gained when writing my own portfolio to teach the writing process in my classroom. Because I, too, need a great deal of practicing to write, I feel I can relate to the frustrations a student may encounter when creating his/her piece.

3. Participating in writing portfolios helps preservice teachers look at writing from a different perspective:

It will be great to share my work with my students, not to mention the help it gave me in understanding the thought processes a person goes through in writing each of these pieces. In previous experiences I have written each of these

types of pieces in the past; however, writing these types of pieces while thinking about teaching them to children sheds a whole new light on the subject.

4. Participating in writing portfolios helps preservice teachers learn strategies that would help their students through the portfolio process:

Actually having an example of my own writing portfolio pieces will allow me to relate more to students. Whenever they come across a problem that they may be experiencing, I will be able to sympathize with them and understand where they are coming from. I can say, hey, I had the same problems when I was writing and here is what I did to help me get through it.

5. Participating in writing portfolios helps preservice teachers understand writing process issues:

Creating my own personal portfolio was the best way for me to understand what goes into the process of creating a portfolio. It is important for me to understand the writing process because I will be involved in the process when I become a teacher. Whether I am a fourth grade teacher who actually has to put together portfolios for review or a first grade teacher who has to begin introducing the writing process to students, I will still be a part of the portfolio process.

6. Participating in writing portfolios helps preservice teachers address issues of evaluation and grading portfolio pieces:

When we graded the portfolio pieces in class that really helped me become familiar with the fourth grade KERA requirements and guidelines. This also prepared me for grading personal narratives in my placement. I had not ever experienced grading these kinds of writings until now. I now know why teachers get so frustrated by grading these.

7. Participating in writing portfolios is not necessarily helpful:

We learned what types of writing the children are to do. We also learned exactly what these styles of writing looked like. However, I don't feel we actually looked at enough children's pieces from these writing styles. With a few exceptions, we just looked at college-aged students' work. I feel that I already can write these styles very well. I just don't know if I can teach them.

Table 1

Survey Question Responses in Percentiles for Students Assigned & Completing Writing Portfolios

Questions	SA	A	D	SD	NR
1. I understand the requirements for 4 <sup>th</sup> grade writing portfolios	47.5	46.5	6	0	0
2. Doing a writing portfolio helped me understand the portfolio process	48.5	28	17.5	4	0
3. I know several instructional strategies to help students generate portfolio pieces	43	26	28	2	4
4. I need follow-up information on writing portfolios as I continue through the program	36	42.5	12.5	7	4

n= 77

Semester 1 & 3

Sections 1, 3 & 4

Table 2

Survey Question Responses in Percentiles for Students Not Assigned Writing Portfolios

Questions	SA	A	D	SD	NR
1. I understand the requirements for 4 <sup>th</sup> grade writing portfolios	27	33	40	0	0
2. Doing a writing portfolio helped me understand the portfolio process	0	13	0	27	60
3. I know several instructional strategies to help students generate portfolio pieces	27	40	19	7	7
4. I need follow-up information on writing portfolios as I continue through the program	46	26	7	14	7

n= 15

Semester 2

Section 2

### Discussion

As noted earlier, the writing portfolio is an integral part of CATS and teachers are expected to help students create them. The writing portfolio is an important experience for students in the EDC 329 course because it is a tool to support theoretically sound reading and writing instruction. A major requirement of this course is for students to create a writing portfolio, and through the process, come to understand requirements for 4<sup>th</sup> grade writing portfolios, understand the portfolio process, and know instructional strategies to help students generate portfolio writing samples.



For the purpose of this analysis we collapsed the four Likert style items with four choices of responses for each item (Strongly Agree; Agree; Disagree; Strongly Disagree) into two major categories: Level of Agreement (Strongly Agree; Agree) and Level of Disagreement (Disagree; Strongly Disagree). We examined each question to determine if a majority of student responses indicated a level of agreement or disagreement on that item (or somewhere in between). A level of agreement indicated that a majority of students responded with a Strongly Agree or Agree on an item. A level of disagreement indicated that a majority of students responded with Disagree or Strongly Disagree.

The following is an analysis and discussion of survey questions across all three semesters.

On question 1 an overwhelming majority of students who completed a writing portfolio indicated a high level of agreement in understanding requirements for 4<sup>th</sup> grade writing portfolios. A pattern of survey comments supports this agreement: "When we graded the portfolio pieces in class that really helped me become familiar with the fourth grade KERA requirements and guidelines." This understanding represents an "I now know" attitude. That is, students now know and are more comfortable with fundamental requirements of writing portfolios. Similarly, a majority of students who did not complete a writing portfolio indicated a level of agreement in understanding requirements as well. However, more students expressed disagreement than those who completed a writing portfolio.

On question 2 an overwhelming majority of students who completed a writing portfolio indicated a level of agreement that writing a portfolio helped them understand the portfolio process. Three patterns of survey comments support this agreement:

- as teachers of writing ("As a prospective teacher, I will use the valuable tools I gained when writing my own portfolio to teach the writing process in my classroom.")

- as writers themselves of portfolio pieces (“It will be great to share my work with my students, not to mention the help it gave me in understanding the thought processes a person goes through in writing each of these pieces”)
- as writing process teachers (“It is important for me to understand the writing process because I will be involved in the process when I become a teacher.”)

This understanding represents not only an “I now know” but also an “I now can” attitude. That is, students now know and are more comfortable with writing processes in helping others create portfolio pieces, but also can use these processes to write their own. Conversely, a majority of students who did not complete a writing portfolio indicated a level of disagreement in the same assertion. That is, these students did not feel writing a portfolio helped them understand the portfolio process.

On question 3 students who completed a writing portfolio, in general, indicated a level of agreement that they know instructional strategies to help students generate portfolio pieces. One pattern of survey comments supports this agreement: “Whenever they come across a problem...I can say, hey, I had the same problems when I was writing and here is what I did to help me get through it.” This knowledge of strategies represents an “I now can use” attitude. That is, students now know and are more confident with a variety of instructional strategies to help others generate portfolio pieces.

Interestingly, on question 3 we expected that students who were assigned and who completed a writing portfolio as a course requirement would indicate a high level of agreement (strongly agree & agree) about knowing instructional strategies to help students generate portfolio pieces. Conversely, we expected that students *not* assigned a writing portfolio as a course requirement would indicate a high level of disagreement (strongly disagree & disagree) about knowing instructional strategies to help students generate portfolio pieces. Student responses to Question 3 illustrate an anomaly. On the one hand, as Table 1 illustrates, only 47.5 percent of students assigned a writing portfolio indicated knowing instructional strategies to help students generate portfolio

pieces. On the other hand, as Table 2 illustrates, 27 percent of students who were not assigned a writing portfolio indicated knowledge of instructional strategies to help students generate portfolio pieces. In the former case we know students experienced instructional strategies to help themselves complete a writing portfolio, but wonder if they made explicit connections to how they could use these same strategies to help others (elementary school students) complete a writing portfolio. Similarly, we wonder if students who did not complete a writing portfolio (but who are introduced to reading and writing portfolio requirements) made connections between instructional strategies learned in class and ways to help students with different portfolio requirements. This anomaly and explanation requires further inquiry.

On question 4 students who completed a writing portfolio indicated a level of agreement that they need follow-up information on writing portfolios. Students did not identify what specific help they most needed. Similarly, students who did not complete a writing portfolio indicated a level of agreement that they had a need for follow-up information, as well. They, too, did not identify what specific help they most needed.

### **Curious Issues & Lingering Questions**

One curious issue deals with the extent to which students remain positive and knowledgeable about the portfolio experience over time. These data indicate that students are overwhelmingly positive about the writing portfolio experience. Specifically, they identify strategies learned *while enrolled in EDC 329* as highly beneficial, yet they express less positive views on follow-up and even disagree that they know many instructional strategies to support student writing. We find this curious. What happens between the positive attitudes that occur while "doing" portfolios and the negative attitudes that develop one semester removed from the "doing"? How can we prevent this slippage?

Another curious issue is that grade level placement does not appear to impact student knowledge or confidence with writing portfolios. Originally, we suspected that grade placement would be a significant factor. For example, because portfolio evaluation occurs across the Commonwealth of Kentucky in 4th grade (as well as in 8th and 11th), we

suspected that students placed in this grade would see and learn significantly more about the process and product of portfolio development than in other grades. However, based on informal post-placement classroom conversations with students, this hypothesis requires further testing. Specifically, in many cases students report that they do not see teachers in their placement (K-4) implementing the writing process or theoretically sound writing practices. Thus, we question whether preservice teachers are given opportunities to see sound instructional practice, much less given the opportunity to apply what they have learned, about writing portfolios in field experience. Consequently, we are asking: Is there a diminished return on such program requirements?

At this time we plan to continue to collect follow-up data with these groups through student teaching. We continue to ask: What do we do if confidence and attitude about writing portfolios wane over time? Will we see other areas showing a strong need, since so much time in our EDC 329 course is spent on writing? We look forward to these inquiries.

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