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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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Teachers as Learners: Professional Development in Early Reading Instruction

Allison Swan
West Virginia University

This study describes the experiences of four elementary teachers as they participated in LEADERS, a professional development initiative in primary reading instruction. The study examined closely how a yearlong high-quality literacy project influenced teachers and classrooms in an urban school. The results revealed that participation had an impact on each teacher in at least one of four categories: knowledge of the reading process, change in instructional practice, reflection on practice, and theory to practice connections.

CURRENTLY, THE EDUCATIONAL community, special interest groups, and political arena are vigorously examining the nature of effective reading instruction delivered by qualified, well-prepared teachers. In a study of elementary reading practices, Baumann, Ro, Duffy-Hester, and Hoffman (2000) asked prominent members of the Reading Hall of Fame what they believed to be the most persistent problem facing today's elementary reading teachers. Not surprisingly, many responses focused on the limited amount of professional knowledge and teacher training at both the pre-service and in-service levels of a teacher's career. The study's respondents acknowledged that many teachers are inadequately prepared to teach, lack knowledge of children and of the reading process, and have limited expertise in reading instruction. Consequently, when asked to identify the most urgent need for reading education in the 21st century, the reading educators rated both pre-service and in-service professional development quite high.

The International Reading Association's *Excellent Reading Teachers* (2000) position statement points out that effective reading teachers have an awareness of social and cultural aspects of learning to read, are knowledgeable in how to teach students to read, and understand how to diagnose reading difficulties in order to meet individual needs. They understand how to scaffold students' learning while employing a variety of techniques, methods, and strategies. Effective teachers also possess attributes of good teaching in general, such as effective teaching pedagogy, classroom management, assessment, and knowledge of developmental spans of children, as well as access to and understanding of current research.

Ultimately, if we want a nation of readers, we must have teachers who know how to teach reading. To meet the literacy goals set forth for all school age children, we must provide opportunities for teachers to participate in high-quality, job-embedded professional development as well as support implementation, change, and reflection over the lifetime of a teacher's career.

Theoretical Framework

Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) emphasized that "providing teachers with information about new instructional strategies does not necessarily result in changes in existing teaching behaviors" (p. 292). Implementation of new practice is more likely when teachers have support systems in place: peer coaches, and planning and reflection time to assess their own teaching of the new practice. Opportunities for planning and self-reflection are central for learning to teach (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Initiatives that present opportunities for teachers to collaborate with colleagues aim to establish such supportive communities of learners (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy 2000; Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet., 2000; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Joyce and Showers, 1995; Snow et al., 1998). Ellis (1993) found that collegial talk played a vital role as teachers attempted to make changes in classroom instruction. Teachers, especially those who are new to the profession or those trying out new strategies/techniques, require a high degree of feedback and support when improving or changing classroom practice (Joyce & Showers, 1995; Snow et. al, 1998).

In her review on teacher change and implementation of new classroom practices, Courtland (1992) examined studies of literacy and writing instruction. Her synthesis of this body of literature generated important assertions about strategies and barriers for implementation and change. She found that projects that supported teacher change provided an ongoing supportive environment, opportunities for reflection, opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, and time for sharing. Projects that encouraged teacher ownership through professional development goal setting also produced successful results. Additionally, the review revealed that workshops focusing on teachers' current and emerging concerns, practice and theory, and teachers' stories of change aided implementation.

As reported in Richardson (1994), criteria used for measuring the degree of implementation of new practices include:

- the percentage of teachers using the strategy or new practice;

- degree of institutionalization of the new strategy or practice;
- degree to which the strategy is carried out in alignment with the way it was taught.

However, teachers do vary in their understanding and degree of implementation to any innovations. Maguire (1990) classified three teaching stances in regard to implementation and change in classroom practices:

- reflective teachers, whose teaching is theoretically based and continually changing and who modify and reflect on the results of their teaching;
- eclectic teachers, who have adopted some practice but are still searching for simple solutions to teaching issues;
- resistant and unreflective teachers, who simply do not understand the practices and choose not to implement.

The following case study presents the impact of participation in a year-long professional development project on practices and beliefs of four classroom teachers from a high-poverty elementary school with low to average student reading achievement.

Methods

The Professional Development Project: LEADERS

LEADERS (Literacy Educators Assessing and Developing Early Reading Success) is a professional development program for primary grade (K-3) classroom teachers. The project was a multi-year (1999-2003), multi-site, Eisenhower-funded grant project that involved three universities and nine school districts representing 19 elementary schools across the state of Pennsylvania. The participating schools had large numbers of students from high-poverty backgrounds and a large percentage of low performing students. Teachers volunteered to participate for one year in various activities, which included a summer institute (30 hours) and Saturday workshops (42 hours), individual

action research projects, and work at the school site with a project staff member.

During the workshop sessions, teachers were provided with demonstrations and modeling of specific strategies and techniques as well as the theoretical basis for the work. In addition, teachers also had the opportunity to discuss and learn about ways to modify instruction to address the different needs of at-risk children. At the schools, a liaison/coach visited the classrooms at least twice a month to demonstrate lessons, team teach, observe teachers trying new strategies, assist with assessments, work with students, provide resources, and plan lessons with teachers. The liaison/coach was knowledgeable in reading and included university faculty, doctoral and Master's students with teaching experience, and veteran classroom teachers on special assignment. Each liaison also assisted a classroom teacher by assessing some of the students using an informal battery of literacy assessments developed at the university. The informal assessment included:

- measures for phonemic awareness
- pseudoword knowledge
- word identification
- writing
- fluency
- comprehension

The classroom teacher and liaison then used these results to make data driven instructional decisions. Finally, each teacher used these results to personalize their experience in the LEADERS project and carry out an action research project later presented at an evening research poster session in June.

Teachers were also supported through peer collaboration. At minimum, the project required a commitment of at least two and not more than five teachers at a school for each year of the three-year project. We facilitated peer collaboration between teachers by providing workshop time for discussion and idea sharing among teachers across

grade levels in a building (e.g. kindergarten teachers working with third grade teachers) and across buildings within the district.

Finally, both the district and school-level administration supported the project. The principals assisted with recruitment efforts, contributed to the teachers' stipend, and donated a number of teacher in-service days, which enabled the participants to meet at the University for workshop sessions. The school principals also committed themselves to the development of the project in their buildings.

The overall objectives for teachers' growth included:

- improved content knowledge in reading;
- ability to design and implement lessons that reflect best practice;
- ability to administer, interpret, and use authentic assessment results for identification of difficulties and measurement of progress;
- ability to organize classrooms in ways that facilitate literacy growth of all students;
- involvement of parents in the education of their children;
- development of technology skills.

A balanced approach for reading instruction was advocated emphasizing content including:

- phonemic awareness
- phonics
- comprehension
- fluency
- vocabulary
- writing

Teachers documented their efforts by keeping notes and journals, sharing their experiences with other teachers in the project, and measuring student achievement through observations, informal assessments, and interviews.

School Context

Greene Elementary (pseudonym) is one of 54 elementary schools in a large urban school district. The school served students in grades K-5. The student population for the school year of this study was 338, with 38 percent African American and 62 percent Caucasian students. The school's percentage of free and reduced lunch was 79 percent, and therefore qualified it for Title 1 school-wide status. At minimum, each elementary teacher was required to plan for sixteen, 40-minute blocks of reading/language arts per week. Greene Elementary used a basal anthology series for whole group reading instruction and supplementary materials for small group instruction. The year of this study marked Greene Elementary's second year of participation in the LEADERS project.

Participants

The participating teachers included a kindergarten teacher, first grade, second grade, and fourth grade teacher. Although participation remained completely voluntary, the principal did recruit and encourage these primary teachers to participate. All four teachers had varying levels of educational teaching experience with a range of 6-20 years and a mean of 12.5 years. All four were Caucasian females. All but the fourth grade teacher had taught in the building for at least five years. At the time of the summer workshop, the fourth grade teacher was slated to teach first grade. Two days before school started, the school reassigned her to a fourth grade position, but she still wished to continue with the project.

Data Collection and Analysis

This qualitative study relied on descriptive case study research methods to explore changes in literacy practices. According to Yin (1994), case studies are the preferred method when events occur naturally, or cannot be altered or controlled "especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p.1). Data for this study were collected within the classroom settings

during the entire school year. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) refer to these ongoing visits as "living among participants" (p.342). The two main sources of data were teacher self-reporting and researcher documentation and fieldnotes. Instruments included classroom observations protocols, field notes, interviews, self-report literacy practice logs, focus group transcripts, and LEADERS project documentation.

Analysis occurred on a recursive basis and was conducted simultaneously while collecting data. Miles and Huberman (1984) simplify this type of data analysis into three categories:

- data reduction, which refers to the "process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the 'raw' data";
- data display, which is "an organized assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action taking";
- conclusion drawing/verification (p.22).

This ongoing analysis shaped subsequent visits and frequently set the agenda for future visits.

Portraits of Four Classrooms

In the late spring of 2000, four teachers from Greene Elementary voluntarily agreed to participate in the LEADERS project. The contract they signed asked that they attend workshop sessions during the 2000-2001 school year, agree to work with and be observed by a site liaison/coach, implement new classroom strategies, administer student assessments, and complete an action research project focusing on literacy instruction in their classrooms. Throughout the year-long project, all four teachers from Greene Elementary attended all seventy-two hours of the project's workshop sessions. Additionally, all four made themselves available for communication either at school, over the phone, or via e-mail. During the year, the teachers were introduced or reintroduced to strategies for effective reading instruction and the

theories, research, and knowledge base from which the strategies derived. We encouraged the teachers to implement these new strategies and techniques and provided them with support to do so. The four teachers each made decisions on what, how, and when to use this newly acquired information in their classrooms. The following section presents the stories of the four teachers from Greene Elementary. Each vignette describes the teachers' background, classroom environment, and focus/action research project.

Nancy's Classroom: Kindergarten

Nancy taught full-day kindergarten at Greene Elementary during the year of this study and, in fact, has been one of two kindergarten teachers at the school for the past nine years. Nancy's class included twenty-two children—twelve boys and ten girls. Her print-rich classroom displayed student work prominently on the walls and frequently in the outside hallway. In the center of her room sat a large carpet square where most of her instruction took place. On one side of the carpet, a poster-board-sized piece of corrugated cardboard displayed a kindergarten word wall. Posters and wall hangings included school district communication and math standards, student-friendly writing rubrics, and class rules. Nancy's classroom library was a semi-private cove that included beanbag chairs that the students enjoyed and used frequently. For the entire school year, Nancy's two student computers remained inoperable; therefore, unlike the other kindergarten class, her students had no computer access.

Nancy decided during the LEADERS summer workshop, before any assessments were administered and results analyzed, that she wanted to focus on explicit phonics and phonemic awareness instruction. Nancy acknowledged that although the students truly enjoyed the stories from the basal anthology, they needed a strong phonics component that the series lacked. After reviewing the LEADERS assessment data, as well as her own kindergarten diagnostic tests, Nancy realized that phonics and phonemic awareness would not only be an interesting focus for her instruction, but also a necessary one.

Over the course of the year, Nancy implemented a variety of purposeful phonological awareness and phonics lessons. She directed Word Building (Beck & Hamilton, 1996; 2000) lessons or some type of phonological awareness activity (e.g. listen to the words and tell me which doesn't belong: can, start, man) every day. After being exposed to the Responsive Classroom's Morning Meetings (Kriete, 1999) during the summer workshop, Nancy adopted the four-step process (greeting, sharing, group activity, and news and announcements) into her morning routines. It was during this time that she carried out many oral language, listening, and phonemic awareness mini-lessons and activities.

Tara's Classroom: First Grade

During the year of this study, Tara taught first grade, a position she had held in the district for the past nine years. Tara's classroom included twenty-three children—fourteen boys and nine girls. Her print-rich room included a large word wall and an extensive collection of children's books stored on library shelves and in colorful baskets. The district's communication standards were posted on Tara's wall, as well as a variety of student-friendly rubrics and suggestions for reading and writing. Tara displayed a lot of student work on her classroom walls and bulletin boards, both inside and outside of the classroom, and from the ceiling. Her classroom configuration was traditional; the students' desks were lined up in rows and faced the front chalkboard. Tara was a strong proponent of traditional process-product classroom teaching in which she delivered lessons and students reciprocated by performing necessary tasks. Her students completed most of these tasks independently in their seats. Additionally, the students used three computers in the classroom, loaded with reading software, at least twice a week.

Unlike the others, Tara had a difficult time selecting an action research project for LEADERS. Her topic changed from writing to sight word development to multicultural literature and back to sight word development. Tara had a well-developed "bag of tricks" and believed that her strategies and techniques for sight word instruction were adequate. She reported using strategies such as working with the computer program, word walls, Word Building, a variety of games using

letter tiles, and sight word bingo. Moreover, Tara's class did get extra support in sight word recognition through the targeted lessons delivered both by the school's reading specialist and an educational assistant.

Susan's Classroom: Second Grade

Susan taught second grade at Greene Elementary during the year of her participation in the LEADERS project and this study. In fact, she had been one of two-second grade teachers at the school for the previous eight years. Susan's classroom included twenty-five students—twelve boys and thirteen girls. The students' desks were arranged into clusters with six desks forming a pod. Susan's classroom included a large carpeted area for group activities and a variety of small work areas crafted for learning centers (e.g. computer area, writing tables). Elements of the literate environment Susan created in her classroom included a large classroom library, pocket charts, and a rocking chair for sharing activities. Her print-rich classroom included a word wall, posters, and wall hangings including district communication standards, writing rubrics, and strategy posters.

After reviewing her class's LEADERS assessment results, Susan decided to focus her instruction on writing, concentrating on creative writing and style elements. Susan wanted her students to use creative language, voice, and originality in their writing, and she wanted to develop mini-lessons to teach such elements. By late December, Susan had planned and delivered a few lessons and worked on creating a plan for her writing project.

After the winter break, during a visit to Susan's classroom on a clerical in-service day, she shared her interest in an article printed in *The Reading Teacher* entitled "Bears, trolls, and pagemasters: Learning about learners in book clubs" (Frank, Dixon, and Brandts, 2001). The article described how a second grade teacher conducted book club discussions in her classroom. Susan was particularly intrigued by the fact that these second grade students were exploring children's literature and discussing their shared responses in a small group format without the teacher's constant presence. Shortly after reading the article and

attending the early February LEADERS workshop on responding to children's literature, Susan had asked to change the focus of her project to developing, implementing, and studying literature circles in her classroom. She wanted to expose her students to children's literature and book talks to motivate them to want to read more.

Over the next three months, Susan developed and incorporated literature circles modeled after the second grade class in the journal article. To meet her instructional goals for literature circles, Susan learned to level the books in her classroom library, determined and defined job responsibilities for the circles, and implemented the new technique. She created mini-lessons on teaching techniques for questioning, exploring author purposes, discussing book parts, and acting appropriately in a group. Susan also modeled higher-level questioning techniques aligned with the type of questions the students would encounter in the upcoming standardized test.

Lilly's Classroom: Fourth Grade

Lilly taught fourth grade at Greene Elementary during the year of this study. She had been employed by the school district the previous year as a first grade teacher in a different building. During the year of this study, she was initially assigned to Greene Elementary to teach in the primary grades, to reduce class size. Two days before school started, and after she had participated in the LEADERS weeklong summer institute, she was reassigned to a fourth grade position at the school. Lilly asked to continue in the LEADERS project, and the coordinators agreed that she could.

Lilly's homeroom class included twenty-four students—eleven boys and thirteen girls. Being new to the building and classroom, Lilly did not have excessively print-rich walls; in fact, they were mostly bare at the beginning of the year. She arranged her students' desks into six pods of four to five desks. She did have three small spaces in her classroom for group work: a computer center with two computers, a reading nook and library, and a general work area with a small table. For a new teacher, she had an extensive classroom library of children's

literature, built mainly with funds from the LEADERS project and her own personal family collection. Lilly leveled her new library using Fountas and Pinnell's Guided Reading (1996) leveling procedure, a project she and other LEADERS teachers at the school took on midway through the school year.

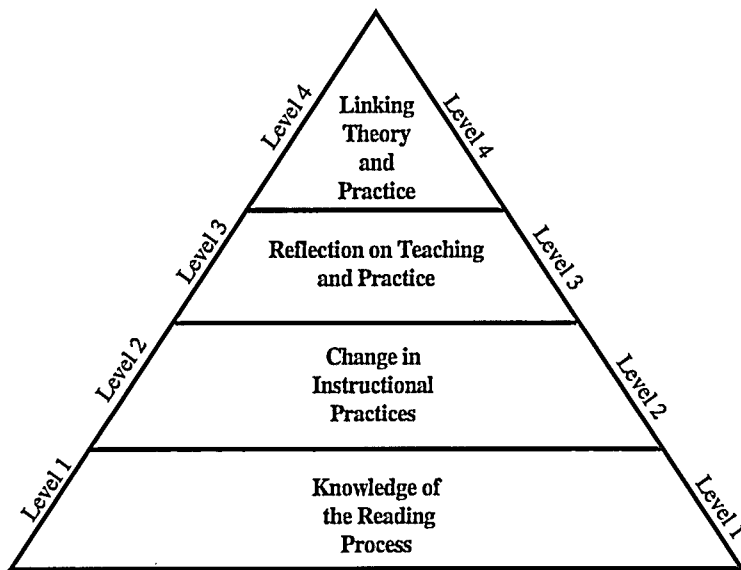
Based on the LEADERS student assessment results, Lilly decided to choose fluency as her focus area for her LEADERS action research project. Near the end of the second marking period, Lilly began systematically to incorporate fluency activities into her traditional reading and language arts instructional blocks. These activities, carried out several times a week, included silent reading, partner reading, and circle reading. Lilly also gathered outside resources and developed an oral reading poetry project designed to have students read poems chorally every day of the week for five minutes. By the week's end, the students would copy the poem from the board and *perform* in the primary classrooms of other LEADERS teachers. Students called themselves *poetry ambassadors*. Additionally, Lilly crafted mini-lessons focusing on selecting appropriate texts, peer coaching for reading, and expressive reading.

Results

Effects on Classroom Teachers

The study's results are presented through an aggregated summary of teacher change, highlighting individual differences, and a brief discussion of the LEADERS project's impact at the school.

Three of the four teachers at Greene Elementary were high implementers of strategies and techniques. The fourth teacher, who reacted favorably to the techniques and strategies, choose not to try anything in her classroom. Participating in the LEADERS professional development project had an impact on all four teachers from Greene Elementary. This impact can be best represented in a hierarchical framework.



The first classification, level 1, is designated for the teachers who increased their knowledge base and understanding of the reading process. The second level of the hierarchy, level 2, is earmarked to include teachers from classrooms where changes in instruction occurred. For this classification, the term change includes not only adding new practices but also modifying or removing existing instructional practices. The third level of the hierarchy, level 3, is comprised of teachers who, over the course of the year, systematically and consistently reflected on their teaching. The fourth and highest level of the hierarchy, level 4, is designated for teachers who insightfully reflected on the theoretical connections between the reading process, students' responses, and classroom instruction.

Unlike the other three teachers in the study, Tara, the first grade teacher, did not implement any new strategies or change her existing classroom practices. Tara's aversion to trying new approaches in her classroom had very little to do with the LEADERS project and almost everything to do with the lenses through which she viewed her teaching, students, and career over the course of the year. Tara felt "involuntarily" volunteered or obligated to join LEADERS when her principal asked her

to participate. She did not believe that the project changed her teaching much, but she also admitted that not too much could have helped her. Tara went through the school year in a self-described "burn out" phase and at times truly disliked her job. However, she participated in all workshop sessions and her knowledge of the theory and methods used to teach primary readers was enhanced and reaffirmed through readings, discussion, and workshop session presentations. She best exemplifies level 1, increased knowledge of the reading process.

Nancy, the kindergarten teacher, increased her knowledge of the reading process, and she also changed her classroom practices, thereby reaching level 2. She implemented many of the new techniques almost as quickly as she learned them. Nancy modified and restructured many of her existing practices (e.g. new approaches connecting student journal writing and phonemic awareness). Her decision to incorporate new strategies into her repertoire was geared completely toward meeting the needs of her students. Although Nancy's classroom instruction continued to reflect a child-centered curriculum, there was more focus on preparing the students to meet the literacy skills needed for first grade.

Susan, the second grade teacher, also increased her knowledge of the reading process and changed her classroom practice to meet the needs of her students. She added new instructional techniques and also removed a few from her repertoire of strategies. While making these changes, Susan consistently spent a great deal of time thinking and reflecting on the how and why of her own classroom practices and therefore reached level 3. By participating in the LEADERS project, Susan ended the year with a greater understanding of her own teaching methods and classroom instruction and a renewed commitment to teaching. Susan also recognized changes in her own teaching, particularly with regard to the role she played as teacher or central figure within the classroom. She became more aware of the importance of a more child-centered, constructivist approach. Allowing the students to generate questions, lead discussion, and shape their own learning experiences was a change from the teacher-centered classroom.

Lilly, the fourth grade teacher, also increased her knowledge of the reading process, changed her classroom instruction by creating and implementing new teaching techniques for fluency based on reflections on her students and her teaching repertoire. She too consistently monitored her practices and was able to define and refine why she did what she did in her classroom. Lilly, however, also made higher-level connections between her students, classroom practices, teaching beliefs, and an overall picture of the reading process. She attained level 4 because she linked reading practice and theory. Lilly's reflections included high-level hypotheses of how both strategies learned and her classroom instruction were connected to the reading process. For example, although her focus project was designed to incorporate fluency strategies, she found herself engaged in lengthy deliberations about fluency's relationship to comprehension, vocabulary, and motivation for reading. Again, Lilly was the teacher with the least years of classroom experience, yet her outgoing personality, free spirit, and independent thinking contributed to her open mindedness and positivity about teaching and learning. Her interest in the reading process was piqued. In fact, during the yearlong project, she applied to the University's reading specialist certification program.

Effects at the School

Given the importance of the school context as an integral part of the professional development project, findings of the impact the project had on Greene Elementary are described. One of the most promising results was the relationship building nurtured and strengthened through the year of the project. The teachers from Greene Elementary recognized the importance of collegial contact with each other; they saw each other as a support system in which they could share experiences and ideas. They participated in activities in and out of school with a common goal of improving practice in order to increase student achievement. They made classroom instructional decisions based on the results of the informal student assessment results. Their conversations at school often bypassed social, storytelling conversations and included more academic talk about reading, instruction, and students.

Also, three of the four teachers in this cohort, along with five other primary teachers from Greene elementary, teachers who made up the Year 1 and Year 3 LEADERS cohort groups, decided to start a literature study group at the end of the project's year-long duration. The group wanted to extend their professional learning by getting together to discuss books and articles on beginning reading instruction. This group decided in the summer of 2001 to meet weekday evenings every six weeks and as of summer 2003 continues to do so. In addition, three of the teachers also collaborated and developed a home and school, parent and teacher involvement project.

Conclusion

Consistent with recommendations from previous studies of professional development, the design of the LEADERS project reflects the need to provide educators with a model "in which teachers confront research and theory directly, are regularly engaged in evaluation of their practice, and use their colleagues for mutual assistance" (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p.11). The teachers who participated in the LEADERS project were provided the most up to date research in literacy as well as practical applications for classroom instruction. Site liaison/coaches, school administrators, and their peers supported them in the process. During the year, a common thread—the LEADERS project—linked all four teachers. These teachers created and developed a strong in-house support system for themselves and established a strong community of learners. Through decision-making, reflection, and increased collaboration with each other, three teachers took advantages of the unique opportunity to take ownership of their own professional learning and development. This ownership was empowering and served to strengthen the teachers' beliefs in their own efficacy and professionalism.

Courtland (1992) points out though "even after participation in long-term projects in which educators have opportunities for ongoing professional development, they will vary in their conceptual understanding of learning, their practices, and their degree of commitment to the innovation" (p. 546). Given the fact this project was

rooted in high-quality design variables, teachers still made personal decisions ranging from attending workshop sessions, to extending a hospitable welcome to the University site coach/liaison, to implementing new strategies. The findings from this study, similar to current research, again show that teachers will respond differently to the same experiences based on the decision-making rooted within their personal and professional situations and beliefs about teaching and learning.

The National Academy of Education recommended adopting the standpoint "teaching is a complex practice and the continuous learning of teaching across the teacher's career is an integral part of that perspective" (1999, p.8). In response, we need to nurture a culture where teachers are comfortable taking risks and updating practices and one in which teachers recognize the absolute necessity of such actions. While taking a closer look at the systems we have in place in our schools regarding teacher quality, we must also cultivate the notion of professionalism and commitment to lifelong learning – more strongly than has been done in the past. The teachers who are committed to lifelong learning and reflective teaching need to contribute to this mission by serving as role models and mentors to others. For the teachers less willing, we need to provide more in-depth mentoring, coaching, and opportunities for ongoing reflection of teaching practice. Just as we would not give up on the challenging second grade non-reader, we also can not give up on teachers who seem to have lost their desire to change, to modify or to adjust instruction. By establishing a supportive community of learners with common goals, focusing on all teachers, school cultures have the possibility of witnessing a shift from models that reflect teacher isolation to models of teacher inquiry, collaboration, and collegiality - a powerful combination that has positive implications for teacher change, school culture, and student achievement.

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The Use of Humor In Vocabulary Instruction

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We investigated the effects of humor on vocabulary instruction in a study with 84 seventh grade students from an ethnically mixed, middle-class, Northeastern, suburban school district. The experimental group received a series of lessons for vocabulary words for which we provided humorous contexts. The control group received a series of vocabulary lessons for the same words in typical, non-humorous contexts, based on guidelines from a standard reading textbook. Following each lesson, we administered identical assessment tests to each group. An examination of pre- and post-test scores revealed that students in the experimental group significantly outperformed their control group counterparts on tests for which we provided humorous vocabulary lessons. The study is examined in light of engagement theory within a motivational theoretical perspective.

THE INSTRUCTION OF VOCABULARY is critical in literacy education. Students' vocabulary knowledge is closely related to their ability to comprehend what they are reading (Foil & Alber, 2002). Furthermore, the depth and breadth of word knowledge help sharpen individuals' communication skills so that they may render their messages with clarity, precision, and eloquence (Johnson, 2001). As educators, our responsibility to our students is to look closely at the process of vocabulary instruction. How we impart word knowledge should not only ensure a sound understanding of vocabulary, but should inspire a curiosity about words. Such curiosity, once implanted in the minds of children, may motivate a lifelong passion for the central component of communication and language, our vocabulary. The importance of vocabulary instruction and the consideration of words are made more compelling by the understanding that, ultimately, it is the skill with which we use words that draws listeners closer and leads them to consider the messages we have to impart.

Given the importance of vocabulary to reading proficiency, it is surprising to learn that there has been a dearth of inquiry into effective vocabulary instruction over the past thirty years, and that only recently have educators begun to re-examine methodology and theory in this realm (Blachowicz and Fisher, 2000). The primary areas in which recent research has been conducted studies (Foil & Alber, 2002; Harmon, 1998; Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999; Smith, 1997; Yeung, 1999; Mckeown, 1993; Miller & Gildea, 1987; Misulis, 1999; Rhoder & Huerster, 2002; Johnson, 2001; Nagy & Scott, 2000) include:

- the effectiveness of direct versus indirect dictionary-based vocabulary instruction;
- the role of scaffolding in vocabulary instruction;
- vocabulary instruction based on structural analysis;
- vocabulary instruction based on analogies;
- the role of context in vocabulary instruction, and
- the role of computers in vocabulary instruction.

The primary findings from these studies indicate that there is no single best method of vocabulary instruction, and rather, that students seem to achieve best when a variety of instructional methods are used (Burns,

Roe, & Ross, 1999). Furthermore, it appears that vocabulary instruction in the classroom is most effective when both direct and indirect instructional techniques are used, and when students are actively involved in constructing meaning in a variety of contexts (Smith, 1997). A thorough approach to vocabulary instruction is one that supplements direct instruction with a variety of printed materials and that provides students ample time to read them (Davis and McDaniel, 1998).

Humor

With regard to the concept of humor, aside from the identification of humorous literature as a popular genre for students' reading, the role of humor in literacy instruction has not been widely recognized. A review of the literature regarding vocabulary instruction, for example, reveals that humor has not been a variable that has been previously studied. In contrast, a review of the literature on the topic of humor suggests that this variable may very well be an important one with the potential to affect many areas of teaching and learning.

The role of humor has been investigated in studies of physiological, emotional, social, and cognitive functioning. An activity that is colored by humor often produces a physical response of some form, be it a smirk, smile, giggle, or outright laughter. This stimulates a physiological response that decreases stress hormones such as serum cortisol, dupac, and epinephrine, as well as growth hormones in the blood (Berk, 2000). Additionally, "laughter diminishes stress and pain and can increase antibodies that help fight disease and combat anxiety" (Clarke, 2002). Clark also reports that laughter, "can change and lower heart rate, lower blood pressure, and decrease stress hormones."

Physiological responses to humor and laughter are linked to emotional responses. For example, several studies note that humor and laughter are linked to decreases in stress responses. Moran's (1996) study looked at a sampling of college health science students. The subjects in the study viewed three separate videos, each representing a different theme. After viewing the videos, subjects' moods were evaluated. Results indicated students' scores on measures of anxiety and depression decreased significantly after exposure to a humor stimulus

(Moran, 1996). Similarly, Goldman and Wong (1997) examined a body of work that supports the idea that students' self-perception is a direct correlate of the level of stress they experience in their daily pursuits. Amongst the reported findings were that the amount of humor students reported in their daily lives was inversely related to the amount of stress that they experienced. Berk (2000) examined the injection of humor, in various controlled ways, into tests administered to undergraduate and graduate students of a statistics course over a six-year period. He reported that the injection of humor reduced anxiety, stress, and tension during test taking. He suggests that the infusion of humor in to the classroom is a viable means of reducing anxiety and improving student performance. A humorous touch in the classroom may also be instrumental in helping motivate an otherwise reluctant learner. Such students often lose inhibitions they may bring to the learning process when material is presented in such a way that their attendant stress is alleviated (Pollack and Freda, 1997).

The social benefits of humor-infused instruction have also been investigated. Specifically, the use of humor by teachers can help establish a positive classroom environment and an atmosphere that is conducive to learning. Humor may imbue students with a feeling of control, in that when teachers show their humorous side, it helps minimize the differences between educator and student and engenders within students a sense of kinship with the teacher (Pollack and Freda, 1997). Kinship is further strengthened when teachers show their students that they can laugh at themselves. Consequently, humor has been found to be an effective means by which teachers can establish rapport with their students. In a similar vein, timely and strategic use of humor can be an effective way to defuse an angry or hostile student.

Finally, we have investigated the role of humor in students' cognitive functioning. In our research, the use of humor promoted creative thinking in children. Our work suggests that when children are confronted with absurd or humorous contexts for the material at hand, they learn to see things from an altogether different perspective. The ability to view situations from multiple perspectives promotes creative thinking and overall cognitive functioning.

In light of the above information it appears that the use of humor is a worthwhile strategy to investigate in the context of vocabulary instruction.

Engagement Theory

A theoretical rationale for the examination of humor as a variable worthy of investigation in literacy research is generated from engagement theory (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Engagement theory, created to explain children's motivation for the task of reading, falls under the wider umbrella of motivation theory which suggests that motivation is a multifaceted construct containing (but not limited to) values such as personal goal-setting, the desire and willingness to pursue a goal in the absence of external reinforcement, and "curiosity, social interchange, emotional satisfaction, and self-efficacy" (Anderson & Guthrie, 1996, p. 1). Like motivation theory, engagement theory has a variety of descriptions (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) but generally includes a vision of students who are eager to pursue the task at hand, actively involved in their work, and enjoy what they are doing. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) propose a definition of engaged readers as "engaged readers in the classroom or elsewhere coordinate their strategies and knowledge (cognition) within a community of literacy (social) in order to fulfill their personal goals, desires, and intentions (motivation)" (p. 404). While this description is helpful in visualizing how engaged students of vocabulary instruction might appear, it is not directly applicable since Guthrie and Wigfield's definition is specific to engaged readers rather than to engaged students in general.

In reviewing the literature on motivation and engagement, Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) write that "motivation is crucial to engagement because motivation is what activates behavior" (p. 406). They describe elements of literacy instruction that have been found to increase motivation for literacy learning such as learning goals that are co-created by teachers and students, the use of meaningful, real-world activities in the classroom, and the importance of choice, social collaboration, and high-quality texts in educational tasks. Other variables that have been found to increase student motivation include success on tasks, and a stimulating, literacy-rich environment in the classroom (Morrow, 2001).

The variable of humor has not been previously examined in literacy research as one that might lead to increased student motivation or engagement, however, the previously cited review of the literature on the topic suggests that humor may be a very motivating factor for students. From a physical perspective, laughter creates biochemical changes in the body that may enhance one's ability to concentrate and learn (Berk, 2000). From an emotional perspective, humor decreases stress and increases feelings of well-being and happiness (Moran, 1996). From a social perspective, student-teacher relationships may be improved when humor is infused into the classroom (Pollack & Freda, 1997). From a cognitive perspective, humor may increase creative thinking in students. When humor is infused into vocabulary instruction the combination of these factors may well allow students to become more motivated about, and more engaged with, the literacy tasks at hand. Theoretically, increased motivation and engagement should be associated with increased vocabulary acquisition performance.

Present Study

In light of the above information, the present study sought to examine how the injection of humor into standard classroom vocabulary lessons would affect students' performance. The hypothesis was that humor-laced vocabulary instruction would have a positive impact on students' learning of vocabulary due to students' higher engagement during this type of instruction.

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of 39 boys and 45 girls aged twelve, in four seventh-grade reading classes. The classes were heterogeneously mixed with regard to reading ability and ranged from two years below to one year above grade level. We chose two classes to comprise the experimental group (N=44) and two classes to comprise the control group (N=40). A pre-test, based on students' average performance on three vocabulary tests, indicated no significant difference between the

experimental and control groups with regard to students' vocabulary test achievement ($t=.684$, $p<.496$).

The public, middle school in which we conducted the study is located in a middle-class, ethnically diverse, northeast suburb of New York City. The ethnic mix of the participants was approximately fifty percent Caucasian, fifteen percent African American, fifteen percent Hispanic, fifteen percent Middle Eastern, and five percent Asian. The socio-economic makeup of the sample ranged from middle to lower-middle class.

As first author and the 7th grade teacher, I implemented all of the described vocabulary instruction in this investigation. At the time of this study I had been a teacher of reading at the 7th grade level for 17 years, during which time my views and approaches to literacy instruction had evolved. My primary belief in teaching reading is that teachers need to help students find connections between what they are reading and their own life experiences, and that if this is well done, ultimately, an appreciation for reading can be nurtured. An additional important dimension of my literacy instruction is the belief that students like to be entertained. Consequently, I strive to create an environment in which my students feel that they are being entertained. Among the many practices that contribute to this end is my daily reading of high quality literature to students. I was completing a Master's degree program in the area of Reading at the time of this study.

Materials

We used those materials stipulated by the curriculum guide for the seventh-grade developmental language skills program at the school, the Heath Middle-Level Reading Program. In two classes, the control group students received vocabulary instruction as is recommended in the Heath Middle-Level Reading Program Teacher's Guide. The other two classes, the experimental group, received humor-enhanced instruction for the same vocabulary words. Examples of lesson plans for the traditional and humor-laced instruction are found in Appendix A.

Following the vocabulary lessons, instructors administered weekly, traditional vocabulary tests to the students. The vocabulary tests, the identical forms of which were administered to all students, were the standard test forms provided in the reading program. All passages on the tests were similar to the contexts provided the control group, i.e., they were straightforward and of a sober nature. The format on the vocabulary tests consisted of close-type questions, requiring the students to choose among their vocabulary words for completion. An example of a vocabulary test is found in Appendix B.

Procedure

Intervention

Following the pre-test period, vocabulary lessons and assessments during the intervention proceeded on a weekly basis, as is the norm for the program. The classroom teacher introduced words in either their traditional contexts, as recommended by the program teacher's guide, or in humorous contexts created by the teacher. The humorous contexts were often developed around two characters, Mr. Aria, the students' real-life classroom teacher and first author, and fictitious girlfriend, Mildred Fleener. Many of the humorous vocabulary contexts were built around the escapades of these two characters as Mr. Aria, for example, took Mildred on a date to a bottle cap museum in Scranton where their accommodations were a lean-to.

After completion of each lesson, the instructors gave students a vocabulary study guide in which each word was couched, again, in either a traditional (i.e. straight-forward and serious) context or a humorous passage. The definition of the word followed each passage. Students in both groups then used the review sheets as a guide to compose their own contexts for each target word. Furthermore, immediately prior to the administration of the vocabulary test, instructors gave these study guides again and allowed the students to read through them a final time, to refresh the meaning and usage of each word.

We administered vocabulary tests weekly at the conclusion of the lessons for each group of words. As stated previously, we administered identical, traditional vocabulary tests to all students.

We implemented the humor-laced versus traditional vocabulary instruction intervention for four weeks. Following each week of instruction we gave a vocabulary test.

Data Analysis

Vocabulary test scores that had been collected weekly following four weeks of humor-laced versus traditional vocabulary instruction were pooled and examined using a t-test.

Results

Comparing the vocabulary test scores from four weeks of instruction, the mean for the control group was 77.53 (SD=14.74) and the mean for the experimental group was 83.19 (SD=12.51). The effect of humor on vocabulary instruction was statistically significant, $t(326) = -3.76$, $p < .01$, with higher achievement associated with the humor-laced vocabulary instruction.

Discussion

The present work examines the use of the variable of humor, a little investigated topic within the field of literacy research, and its impact on middle-school students' vocabulary achievement as measured by traditional vocabulary test performance. The research reveals that students in the experimental group significantly outperformed their control group counterparts on tests for which humorous vocabulary lessons were provided.

The current investigation extends the existing knowledge base in the field of vocabulary instruction in that research on the relationship between humor-laced vocabulary instruction and students' vocabulary achievement has not been previously published. The work complements, rather than refutes, presently accepted practices in vocabulary instruction, such as the use of semantic webs, analogies, and structural

analysis, by offering a possibility for making these widely accepted practices more exciting to students, i.e. by adding a humorous dimension to such instruction.

We framed the present study from an engagement theoretical stance within a motivational theoretical perspective, which suggests that the students receiving the humor-laced instruction achieved higher vocabulary performance scores because they were more engaged, and therefore more motivated, during their vocabulary lessons than were the students who received the traditional, non-humorous classes. Although we did not use formal measures of engagement in the present study, indications that the students were highly engaged during the humor-laced instruction were visibly noticeable. Humor appeared to decrease stress and apathy in the classroom, diminish the emotional distance between students and the teacher, and create an environment in the classroom that was not only conducive to, but encouraged, academic endeavor. Beyond this, humor in the classroom helped make learning just plain fun. Once the "funny vocabulary lessons" became routine, the experimental group came to anticipate and eagerly await them. For students in the experimental group we perceived a heightened enthusiasm in the classroom on vocabulary days. Those in the experimental group would invariably respond with a measure of anticipation, asking if they were going to do "those funny sentences again." Additionally, from those in the experimental group we noticed, to a large degree, an animated enthusiasm when it came to practicing the words they had learned. When the lesson called for the kids to compose their own sentences, those in the experimental group exhibited an eagerness to not only try and generate sentences even funnier than the teacher's, but to share them with peers. Hence, one may see some additional and unforeseen benefits resulting from the research, namely, the students' motivation to employ their own imaginations and sense of humor in what they might ordinarily have viewed as an exercise in drudgery. Using engagement theory it is suggested that students in the experimental group may have outperformed their control group counterparts because they, by virtue of the funny and fun instruction they received, actively engaged in their vocabulary lessons.

After having planned, constructed, and executed this study, some limitations come to mind. The first is that the present research design, although of a widely accepted quasi-experimental nature, does not allow the researchers to determine that the observed results were not an artifact of the Hawthorne Effect, in which any novel intervention leads to improved performance. To eliminate this concern, a research design that compared two novel interventions rather than one novel intervention and a control situation would have been superior. Additionally, future investigations on this topic could significantly extend the length of the experimental treatment, for example, to that of the entire school year rather than just to a few weeks of one semester. Also consider gender effects that might have contributed to students' performances. Another design revision that could potentially strengthen the work would be to reverse the treatments after a determined period of time, providing the control group with the humorous instruction and the experimental group with the traditional instruction. One would expect to see the trend in vocabulary achievement correspond to the change of instruction for the two groups. A design amendment that added measurable aspects of the engagement dimension of the work would have further strengthened it.

Another limitation to consider is the development of the humorous lessons themselves. Although it is reasonable to expect that most, if not all, children possess a sense of humor, one should not assume that all children find the same things funny. Contexts for new vocabulary which, upon initial consideration we thought worthy of outright prolonged laughter, did in fact receive only the barest ripples of mirth, or were misunderstood by the children altogether. Conversely, contexts thought to be only mildly amusing were, in a word, arresting when the students encountered them in a lesson. As a note of caution for anyone considering further efforts in this area, one would do well, in constructing humorous contexts, to try to place himself on the level of his intended audience.

Despite the noted limitations, it appears that the present study may have shed preliminary light on an exciting, yet under-researched variable with the potential to meaningfully improve many areas of literacy instruction. The fact that we conducted this work at the middle-school level, at which students historically demonstrate decreased levels of

motivation for literacy learning, (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000) further underscores its relevance. Future research with this variable as it applies to many areas of literacy research is recommended.

Conclusion

The pursuit of the effective teaching of vocabulary is a noble one. What greater gift can we give to our students than the tools to enable them to communicate effectively? When we help children amplify the depth and scope of their word banks, we deepen that resource that they will draw from to communicate with others and to impart their messages with precision, clarity, and grace. Ultimately, communication through language is the glue that bonds us together. Without it little else is possible. To a large degree, the quality of our interactions with each other is enhanced by the richness of our vocabulary. Moreover, the English language, when used deftly by one who is attentive to the nuances, subtleties, and evocative power of its words, can be powerful. To help students along the path that will someday lead them to comfort, ease, and command in their use of words is a worthwhile endeavor, and certainly deserving of our attention.

The technique of creating vocabulary lessons laced with humor seemed to succeed on two levels. First, as evidenced by the test scores gleaned in this study, such an approach appeared beneficial in affecting students' short-term retention of meaning and usage of new vocabulary. Beyond this, however, we observed that the students in the experimental group enjoyed their vocabulary lessons. We heard laughter and lightness in the classroom on vocabulary day, which the children came to eagerly anticipate. It appeared evident that the students in the experimental group thought that they were having fun in the classroom, without necessarily realizing that their achievement was being facilitated. This is the kind of instruction, one might argue, that is, especially for children on the middle school level, the very best kind.

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Appendix A

Vocabulary Review- Week 1 Traditional

Charley Trippi, a Hall-of-Fame halfback who played for the Chicago Cardinals in the 1950's, had his career ended by a vicious hit – an elbow to the jaw by another Hall-of-Famer, John Henry Johnson. These were the days before facemasks, and Trippi's jaw was broken in five places, and his nose was shattered. (nasty, savage, fierce)

The empty canoe drifted down the river, past the rocks and the rapids and under the overhanging tree limbs. It came to the crest of a waterfall, teetered for a moment on the very edge, and then went over. (rocked, wavered, balanced)

The football team was clearly inferior to the team it was about to play. The players, however, were inspired by the words of their coach. The powerful, emotion-packed speech given by their head coach motivated them to go out and play beyond their abilities. Not surprisingly, they won the game. (inspired, filled with emotion)

After the rainstorm, the usually crystal-clear waters of the bay became so murky that a person swimming underwater and wearing goggles would not be able to see two feet in front of him. (cloudy, unclear)

During WW II, the allied forces made good use of amphibious landing craft when storming beaches in the Pacific and during the invasion at D-Day. These boats, which could be launched from troop carriers and could navigate deep waters, could actually drive up onto the beachheads. They were called Higgins Boats, named for the New Orleans ship-builder who developed them, and many believe they turned the tide of battle to the allies' favor. (adaptable to both land and water)

The burglar triggered the alarm while trying to slip into the rear window of the jewelry shop. In a flash, police surrounded the shop, and the would-be jewel thief was apprehended. (set off, activate)

The man took his worn-out billfold from the back pocket of his jeans, and from it plucked his last dollar bill. Then, with trembling fingers, he handed it to the clerk to buy a lottery ticket. (wallet)

As a young man, my grandfather traveled extensively through the south. He worked, for a time, on a tobacco farm in North Carolina. He picked oranges in a grove in central Florida. He managed hotels in Mississippi and Alabama, and finally he worked as a brakeman on the Georgia-Southern railroad. I'm surprised he doesn't have a southern accent. (at great length)

Vocabulary Review - Week 1 Humor-Laced

"For your information," said Otto to his friend Mort as the two sat dropping water balloons out a second-story window on unsuspecting passersby, "I did NOT need training wheels on my bicycle until I was 14. That's nothing but a vicious lie." (nasty, savage, fierce)

Carla was teetering on the brink of a nervous breakdown. Consequently, when Milton dressed up in a Howdy Doody costume and came leaping out at her from her bedroom closet late one evening, it pushed her right over the edge. (rocking, wavering, balancing)

"Mr. Aria is all excited about taking me on a date to one of his favorite places, the bottle cap museum in Scranton," explained Mildred Fleener to her sister Bernice. "He thinks it'll be a great time, but somehow I just can't get too motivated about looking at a bunch of old bottle caps. To me, it's about as exciting as watching paint dry." (inspired, filled with emotion)

Mr. Aria reached into the murky depths of his fiendish, evil, sinister, and diabolical mind to produce the killer homework assignment of all time. (cloudy, unclear)

Carlton looked fondly upon his younger days when he used to torment his sister, Irma. Ah, yes, there were those happy occasions when he'd put a snake into her lunch box. Nothing could top the times, however,

when he'd put some amphibious animal, like a frog or a salamander, under her pillow. (adaptable to both land and water)

Mr. Aria smelled the aroma of fresh fish as he strolled past the seafood market one fine April morning, and it triggered in his mind the romantic dinner he had prepared for his beloved Mildred the previous Saturday: sardine sandwiches on rye toast with onions and spicy brown mustard. What a guy! (set off, activate)

Curtis found a billfold in the middle of the 7th grade hallway, and when he looked through it and saw that it was bulging with ladies' phone numbers, he knew that it couldn't possibly belong to Mr. Aria. (wallet)

Don't let those thick glasses fool you. Myron is quite a fascinating fellow. You'd never know it to look at him, but he is a leading expert on the history of shoelaces. He's read extensively on the subject—just about every book he owns deals with it. Got a question about shoelaces? Myron is your man. (at great length)

Appendix B

Vocabulary Test - Week 1

Although I have traveled _____1_____ in the United States, having visited just about every single state, my favorite place to visit is still Oregon. I spent four unforgettable years at the University of Oregon in Eugene, and whenever I drive along those coast roads and smell the fragrance of the fir and cedar trees in the misty rain, it _____2_____ memories in my mind of my college days.

A single piranha fish attacked a calf standing in knee-deep water in a tropical stream. This _____3_____ a _____4_____ attack by dozens of others swimming nearby, and as the fish attacked in a violent frenzy, the shallow water became _____5_____ with blood, flesh, and fragments of bone.

Mike lost his job and, after months of being unemployed, was _____6_____ on the edge of poverty. He was about to give up all hope, when he remembered the words of his grandfather, who once told him that it's okay to get knocked down, as long as you get back up. These words helped _____7_____ him to begin a lengthy search for new employment. His _____8_____ efforts paid off and he was ultimately rewarded by acquiring a much better job than the one he had been fired from.

While most people seem to like carrying a wallet, I find this to be a bit bulky, so I prefer instead to use a _____9_____. Oh, sure, I can't carry my driver's license or credit cards around with me, but I usually just leave those in my car.

I am always _____10_____ to do well in school by the thought that if I earn good grades, I'll someday be admitted into a good college, which will enable me to one day enter the profession of my choice.

The criminal psychologist probed into the deep and _____11_____ depths of the serial killer's mind to try to determine what _____12_____ his _____13_____ attacks on his victims. After months of

_____14_____ studies, however, the doctor could find no _____15_____ for the crimes.

Jill told everyone in the school that Barbara was being unfaithful to her boyfriend Tom, since she was supposedly seen at the movies with Mark. Since Tom was well-liked by just about everyone in the school, this _____16_____ an angry response among the kids, and people began saying cruel things about her behind Barbara's back. The only problem was that the story Jill told was a complete lie, and I can't understand what would _____17_____ her to start such a _____18_____ rumor about Barbara.

I've read lots of detective stories, and if there's one thing I learned about solving a crime, it's this: No matter how _____19_____ the investigation is, the one thing the detectives need to determine is a _____20_____ for the crime. Once they can discover a reason for the deed, the guilty person is not hard to find.

Answers

1. extensively
2. triggers
3. triggered
4. vicious
5. murky
6. teetering
7. motivate
8. extensive
9. billfold
10. motivated

11. murky
12. triggered
13. vicious
14. extensive
15. motive
16. triggered
17. motivate
18. vicious
19. extensive
20. motive



The Importance and Use of Student Self-Selected Literature to Reading Engagement in an Elementary Reading Curriculum

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The purpose of this article is to discuss the importance of student self-selecting literature and reading engagement in an elementary reading curriculum. The article discusses the use of self-selected reading in the context of child development, book difficulty, independent reading time accountability, and a supportive environment. The successful use of self-selected reading by the Children's Choices Project is also discussed.

Real world readers do not wait for a teacher to tell them what to read. They read what interests them, what suits their purpose.... When kids define what they care about, they begin to define who they are. (Ollman, 1993, p. 648).

ON JANUARY 8, 2002, President Bush signed the *No Child Left Behind Act* into law. The Act attempts to provide every child in America with a high-quality education regardless of his or her income, ability, or background. As part of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, *Reading First* is a national initiative aimed at helping every child in every state become a successful reader by third grade. A booklet, entitled *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read* (2001), has been widely distributed across the country in an effort to promote the findings of the National Reading Panel Report commissioned by Congress in 2000, as "key skills and methods central to reading achievement" (p. ii). The booklet describes the five areas of reading instruction below as "a foundation for instructional practice" that "teachers can learn about and emphasize...that have worked well and caused reading improvement for large numbers of children" (p. iii). The reading instruction areas are:

- phonemic awareness
- phonics
- fluency
- vocabulary
- text comprehension

Upon reading the *Put Reading First* document, it is obvious that something is missing. Reading is more than the sum of the five areas described. Reading is more than a cognitive process of decoding the words, reading fluently, or comprehending the text. It is becoming deeply involved, captivated, absorbed and immersed in a text – in other words, engaged. Reading engagement integrates the cognitive, motivational, and social dimensions of reading and reading instruction (Baker, Dreher & Guthrie, 2000). This means that children must not only have the competence to read, but also the motivation to read. According to Baker, Dreher, and Guthrie (2000), "If motivation is treated as secondary to the acquisition of basic reading skills, we risk creating

classrooms filled with children who can read but choose not to" (p. 1). If the goal of the *Reading First Initiative* – for all children to be successful readers by third grade (and hopefully beyond) – is to *truly* be achieved, then reading engagement must be as much of a priority as all other areas of instruction.

Self-Selected Reading and Engagement

Educators must focus their attention not only on *how* students read, but also *why*. Guthrie and Anderson (1999) explain that "motivations and social interactions are equal to cognitions as foundations for reading" (p. 17). They believe that reading can be seen as engagement because "engaged readers not only have acquired reading skills, but use them for their own purposes in many contexts" (p. 17); in fact, "an interested reader identifies with the conceptual context of a text so fully that absorbing its meaning is an effortless activity" (p. 19). Engaged readers are involved, interested and constantly learning from their text at all times.

Motivation is a critical factor of engagement. Gambrel (as cited in Graves, Juel, & Graves, 1998) states "Motivation must be at the heart of the language arts curriculum because the quality of the content of the program matters little if it is not taught in a way that both enriches and engages students" (p. 239). As motivation increases, students desire to spend more time reading. Therefore, motivation plays a dual role; it becomes a part of both the process and the product of engagement.

Because the engagement of readers is key to the reading process, it is essential that educators find ways to increase engagement. Student self-selection of literature can be one means to this end. In addition to fostering intrinsic motivation, allowing students to make choices gives them control. When real world readers choose a text, they are reading to learn and to enjoy. They accomplish these tasks by selecting a text that fulfills their needs. Selecting what to read is a major part of becoming a reader (Ollman, 1993). According to Darigan, Tunnel and Jacobs (2002), self-selecting literature is so essential to the reading process that without its inclusion into a reading program, no reading development can be

accomplished. In order for students to engage with text, they must feel like they have control in selecting materials that are interesting to them.

Self-Selected Reading and Child Development

Being able to make choices positively affects the educational development of children. It helps children become both independent and responsible. They "learn to deal with differing difficulty levels of books; understand that there are different purposes for reading (and these purposes may change); and learn to assess their progress by gauging their choices against their own standards and the choices of others" (Ohlhausen & Jepson, 1992, p. 34).

However, enjoyment of a book cannot be forced on a child; it must come about naturally. Johnson & Giorgis (2002) point out that "Even with a teacher's caring guidance and a parent's well-intended recommendation, children turn to books that reflect *their* interests and capture *their* emotions" (p. 780). Educators often feel that students are unable to make the important decision of selecting a book. Many believe that children cannot learn if they are not always reading from what we, as educators, might deem "quality literature." Yet, what teachers view as quality literature might differ considerably from what students feel is a "good" book (Worthy, Moorman & Turner, 1999). When given the chance, students will make positive selections based on both interest and ability (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002; Schlager, 1978; Worthy, 1996). Data suggest that students "can, and do, make choices that increase their awareness and extend their growing knowledge of literacy" (Fresch, 1995, p. 226).

Olsen's theory (as cited in Kragler, 2000) of child development claims that children are "self-seeking, self-selecting, and self-pacing organisms" (p. 2). As such, Olsen believes that children will seek and select experiences that are consistent with their developmental level. Consequently, many students' reading selections move back and forth between harder and easier materials depending on their developmental purpose, creating a "yo-yo" effect. While this variation in reading levels may seem inappropriate, teachers must acknowledge that respecting

children's choices allows them to grow and learn to value their own decision-making (Ohlhausen & Jepson, 1992).

Self-Selected Reading and Book Difficulty

Though many educators subscribe to the belief that students *must* read books that are on their grade level, children are often able to read texts that are otherwise too difficult for them if the texts are interesting (Worthy & Sailors, 2001). In fact, a study outlined in *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading* (1985) found that two factors help students recall information from reading: readability and reader interest. The study (as cited in Darigan, et. al., 2002) found that "the 'interestingness' of a text is thirty times more powerful than the readability of text when it comes to comprehension and recall" (p. 454). In fact, it is the "interestingness" of the books that leads to enjoyment and increases in positive attitudes toward reading by children.

It can be helpful when thinking about the role of interest to compare student literature choices with those of adults. As adults, we are sometimes forced to read books or articles that are difficult or uninteresting. However, we know that reading those texts is important to our job, our health and well-being, or our education. At some level, those books have value. Students too must read books that are not always the most fun for them in order to increase their knowledge of subjects like history, science, or math. As adults, we also read books that are on our level. We sit on the couch after a long day at work or lie in bed before falling asleep clutching the newest mystery, sci-fi thriller, or romantic comedy. We choose these books because they are interesting to us and because we are able to read them comfortably. Students should also be allowed to read books for pleasure, books that are "just right" for them as well. These kind of books continue to stimulate their understanding of literature and ideas but are also just fun and interesting to read. Finally, as adults, we read books that are too easy for us. We sometimes feel as though our brain cannot take any more thought. So we pick up a newspaper or a magazine (texts which are easy to read) in order to find an interesting topic. We might also read a children's book with our kids at bedtime or to our students in class. While reading these books may not increase our knowledge, the choice to read them is purposeful and

helpful to us at that point in our lives. It is the same for children. Reading books that are too easy for them can be motivating. They begin to feel comfortable and confident with their reading ability. This might lead them to try something more challenging the next time they choose a text. At all three levels, any reader is making progress. However, it is clear that students (and adults) are more motivated to read when allowed to choose their own materials (Kragler, 2000). Prohibiting them from doing so may hinder their desire to read.

Time to Read Self-Selected Books

Allowing students to self-select their own literature is an important first step in reading engagement; however, students must also have time to read what they have chosen. This may be accomplished by providing blocks of independent reading time (Fisher, 1994). The National Reading Panel Report (2000) and the ensuing *Put Reading First* (2001) document has put into question the value of independent reading with such statements as, "No research evidence is available currently to confirm that instructional time spent on silent, independent reading with minimal guidance and feedback improves reading fluency and overall reading achievement" (p. 25) and "Rather than allocating instructional time for independent reading in the classroom, encourage your students to read more outside of school" (p. 29). Many educational researchers have called into question the validity of the studies the panel considered "scientific" research (see Allington, 2002 for an in depth discussion). Teachers must put such statements into perspective by thinking of their own experiences with children. How many students do not have access to a diverse collection of children's books outside of school? How many students spend a majority of their time after school in a childcare program, sports, music or other activity? How many students are positively influenced by teacher and peer book recommendations as a result of in-class independent reading time? If your response to any of these questions includes even a few students, then independent reading time is well spent. Richard Allington (2001) states:

In learning to read it is true that reading practice - just reading - is a powerful contributor to the development of accurate, fluent, high comprehension

reading. In fact, if I were required to select a single aspect of the instructional environment to change, my first choice would be creating a schedule that supported dramatically increased quantities of reading during the school day. (p. 24)

Independent reading time should be provided at least once every day (Sanacore, 1999; Sebesta, 2001; Graves, Watts-Taffe, & Graves, 1999). Allington (2001) recommends a minimum of 90 minutes of in-school reading per day. At first, this may seem impossible - there's already not enough time to teach everything *and* prepare for mandated testing! But, according to Routman (2003) "When an independent reading component is added, test scores go up" (p.83). Take a careful look at how much of the school day is spent on non-instructional activity-opening and ending procedures, intercom announcements, and paperwork. With some improvements in organizational efficiency, it may be possible to find 30 to 50 minutes for reading every day.

Independent reading time during the school day increases reading achievement and engagement because it helps students enjoy reading, expands their experiences, provides them with context to practice skills such as decoding, and increases their vocabulary (Anderson, Higgins & Wurster, 1985). Johnson and Giorgis (2002) state in their article, *Pleasure Reading*, that "Time to read books of their own choosing, for their own purposes, and without having to prove that comprehension has occurred remains significant in the ongoing development of readers" (p. 780).

Accountability for Reading Self-Selected Books

Choice and accountability build responsibility for students (Nations & Alonso, 2001). Students must not only be allowed to choose their own books and have the time to read them, but they must also be accountable for the decisions they have made. During self-selected reading time, teachers can educate students on how to choose quality literature that is just right for them through individual conferences and then continue to monitor and evaluate student choices over time. By meeting with each student as often as possible, teachers become aware of the needs of the

class and of the individuals within it. Many times, that knowledge results in the need for whole class mini-lessons on relevant topics and small group guided lessons about reading strategies for students needing more guidance, or to introduce new genres, literary elements or devices. While the teacher's role may appear less challenging in this type of reading instruction, it is instead much more demanding.

With the inclusion of self-selected independent reading time, and student-teacher conferences, each student is given the skills and knowledge they need to succeed. Taking ownership of the reading process encourages students to read more and often, allowing them to become master decision-makers; skills that are important in life. Rasinski (1988) believes that "Interest, purpose, and choice need to be at the heart of the literacy curriculum at all levels" (p. 400). Unfortunately, while educators may see the need and relevance of this statement, they may still feel wary and/or unprepared to create such an environment in their own classrooms.

Creating a Supportive Environment for Self-Selected Reading

One of the most significant needs in a classroom encouraging student self-selection of literature is an appropriate physical environment. Teachers can create a silent reading area away from the mainstream of class activities. Students should feel at ease in this area. Some teachers include pillows, beanbag chairs, or even a couch in this area. Others allow younger students to bring in a favorite pillow pal (stuffed animal) to read to during silent reading time. The most important aspect of this silent reading area is that it be both comfortable and inviting (Reutzel & Cooter, Jr., 1992).

Classrooms must have libraries! Regie Routman (2003) states, "I have seen excellent classroom libraries transform children as readers. Conversely, when there are no libraries, or poor ones, students often do not like to read and do not achieve their highest potential" (p. 81). Classroom libraries must be filled with literature that is both interesting and diverse. Neuman (1999), in her study of preschoolers, found that young children "need rich and diverse reading materials" in order to acquire "the complex set of attitudes, skills, and behaviors associated

with literacy development" (p. 306). Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) found that reading preferences, availability, and access to diverse texts such as magazines and comics for the middle school students in their study had a strong affect on the amount of time the students spent reading. Placement of texts is also extremely significant. Books must be in close proximity on shelves either at or below the eye level of students. This attention to shelving positively influences the likelihood that a book will be selected (Reutzel & Gali, 1998; Neuman, 1999).

In addition to creating a comfortable and stimulating physical environment, classroom teachers must attempt to promote a positive mental environment as well. The main way to accomplish this task is by demonstrating that the classroom is one that values reading and literacy. Read-alouds should occur frequently to help students become aware of the many possible book choices that are available to them (Rasinski, 1988; Sanacore, 1999; Stone & Twardosz, 2001). Read-alouds can include picture books or an ongoing novel. Mini-lessons can be introduced with a read aloud. Mini-lessons are brief, explicit teaching opportunities, usually at the beginning of a sustained period of silent reading in which the teacher demonstrates reading strategies and skills that efficient readers employ when reading. Mini-lessons can also include the value of literacy, the love of reading, and how to select literature (Heibert, Mervar, & Pearson, 1990; Fountas & Pinnell, 2000). Students can also buddy read: Children are able to help each other with words through conversation and become both learners and teachers simultaneously. Buddy reading is an activity that builds a community of readers and encourages supported risk-taking (Fresch, 1995). Furthermore, in order to create the ideal mental environment, teachers must be very familiar with two main things: literature and their students.

Becoming acquainted with all types of literature is not something that occurs overnight. However, knowing where to find the right types of books is a good beginning. One way educators can find out about quality literature is by looking for books that have received honors and awards. For instance, Newberry and Caldecott awards are given yearly to those distinguished pieces of writing and illustrations, respectively. The Coretta Scott King Award goes to quality literature dealing with African American themes. The Pura Belpre Award is given to those pieces of

good literature focusing on Latino issues and characters. There are also a variety of book lists that lend themselves to choosing the best literature of the year. Examples are the *Reading Recovery*® booklist, the National Book Award lists, and the Orbis Picture Award lists (Sebesta, 2001). Teachers can also consult websites relating to literature, such as the Children's Literature Web Guide, The Reading Zone of the Internet Public Library, or the Children's Book Awards website (Appendix A). Finally, educators can find a resource in annotated bibliographies. Examples like the Association for Library Service to Children, Notable Children's Books, and the Hornbook Guide to Children's and Young Adult Books can be very helpful (Leu & Kinzer, 1999). Other sources are *Choosing Books for Kids* (Oppenheim, Brenner & Boegehold, 1986), *The New York Times Guide to the Best Books for Children* (Lipson, 2000), and *Children's Literature in the Elementary School* (Huck, Kiefer, Hepler, & Hickman, 2003), three well-respected, comprehensive sources for studying high quality literature (Stone & Twardosz, 2001). By consulting these types of sources, teachers can become extremely familiar with all types of literature, thereby better preparing themselves for recommending and discussing good books with students.

It is also essential that teachers know the needs of their students. They must be "kid-watchers," always observing, assessing, and evaluating the capabilities of the children (Nations & Alonso, 2001). According to Nations and Alonso (2001), "When you know what they can do, then you can find ways to move them forward in their learning. When you know where they struggle, you can provide more support and in turn give them success with literacy tasks in the classroom" (p. 46). Observation and awareness are the keys to ensuring an understanding of students' strengths and needs, but teachers must also be conscious of student interests. They can find out about the interests of their students by administering an interest inventory. Interest inventories allow teachers to discover what each child enjoys in reading and in everyday life. By combining this knowledge with that of the needs of students, teachers are able to guide students in appropriate book selection. In addition, interest inventories also inform teachers on what to include in their classroom book corner.

Teachers must also serve as models for their students. Ollman (1993) "found that methods that were modeled by the teachers were more frequently used than methods that were just taught to the students" (p. 10). Students benefit from watching teachers demonstrate the joys and frustrations that come with choosing a piece of literature that is just right for them. Teachers can even "think aloud" as they choose a book, making the thought processes that take place when choosing a book visible. These efforts will serve students by allowing them to share in the wonder about the appropriateness of our choices (Routman, 2003; Stone & Twardosz, 2001). Modeling provides motivation for students. As children see teachers reading and making quality choices, they too will be encouraged to do the same. Teachers can also model and encourage students' book choices through persuasive book talks, correspondence with a favorite author, or a file of book critiques on index cards (Wilhelm, 2001).

One specific strategy geared toward the modeling process is what Ohlhausen and Jepson (1992) call the "Goldilocks Strategy." These educators have created an analogy that compares the experiences of Goldilocks to those of students attempting to find "just right" books. Goldilocks made choices, so we can assume that because she made them, "she learned from her mistakes and deepened her understanding of what it means to be responsible for her own actions" (pp. 31-32). By taking advantage of the opportunity to make choices and to learn from them, Goldilocks takes a step forward toward self-discovery. So, too, do students move toward an awareness of their needs by choosing their own literature.

Ohlhausen and Jepson (1992) offer specific models for mini-lessons to show students how to identify books that are "too hard," "just right," or "too easy." When introducing the Goldilocks Strategy, teachers must explain ways to identify these categories. These authors suggest that teachers say:

A "Too Hard" book is one you'd really like to read -perhaps one your big brother or sister has read or one I've read aloud to the class. But you know it's too difficult for you right now. That's okay. You can pull it

out every once in a while to see if it's getting easier. If it is getting easier what's happening to you? Right! You're getting to be a better reader! Sometimes it might be just a few months before you'll be able to read it better; but sometimes it might be years (p. 34).

After sharing this concept with students, a teacher can then show an example of a book that is too hard for him/her. For example, the teacher might pull out a book read in college and read a passage aloud to the students that was too difficult. The students will quickly notice how their teacher is having trouble with reading, and it will be an eye-opener for them. Next, the teacher should explain the just right books:

"Just Right" books are books you want to read. A "Just Right" book is one that isn't too difficult - one or two words per page that you don't know. You can use this book to help you learn to read by practicing the strategies you've been learning. After you've learned to read it really well, then maybe you'll be able to change it to a "Too Easy" book (p. 35).

After explaining, the teacher will share a passage from a book that he/she is currently reading for pleasure, preferably one that the students have seen him/her reading. Then the teacher can give a short summary to show the students the understanding he/she has of the book. Students will notice that the book the teacher has shared is "just right."

Finally, the teacher should tell the students about "Too Easy" books:

"Too Easy" books are old favorites. They're books you like to read for fun and for independent reading times like SSR. They're ones you might decide to pick up and read when you need a break from hard books, when you're feeling kind of low, or when you just need a "good read." Often it's a book you've read before, or one you've practiced reading lots of times. It doesn't always have to be a storybook; it can be a magazine, newspaper, joke book, comic book, or nonfiction book (p. 35).

After explaining what a "too easy" book is, the teacher can read a favorite picture book to students, explaining that while it is too easy, he/she still enjoys reading it to the students.

The Goldilocks Strategy is just one way of introducing and modeling the role of self-selection to students. It is a prime example of modeling how to choose a book that is "just right" for each student. As with any learner, students will feel more comfortable with choosing texts once they have been taught how to do so. However, there are other ways to help students feel comfortable when making literature decisions.

One common method associated with book choice is the five-finger method. This method is also called the rule of thumb, sticky palm, and greasy fingers (Reutzel & Cooter, Jr., 1992; Baker, 2002). Students are instructed to open the book to any page and begin reading. As they read, the student will put up one finger for each word with which he/she is not familiar. If the student finishes the page and is holding all five fingers up, he/she will know that that particular selection is too difficult. If they are holding no fingers up, the book choice is too easy. If there are two or three fingers held up, the selection is probably a "just right" book. The five-finger method is a fairly simple method to help students find a way to choose appropriate books.

There are a variety of other possible self-selection strategies (Routman, 2003; Wendelin & Zinck, 1983). It is clear that those strategies that are considered the most useful vary from grade to grade; therefore, it is the teacher's job to recognize this fact and find new and positive strategies to lead the students toward those that will be most beneficial to the students' particular reading level and understanding of literature.

Alternative Approaches to Total Student Self-Selection

It is also important to note that those who are hesitant to allow full student self-selection in their classroom have other possibilities to which they can turn. The middle road of book selection is often found in the form of text sets (Darigan, et. al., 2002). For instance, teachers can offer students a choice from among several "suitable" pre-selected books.

Younger children might have their own book boxes with several predetermined books to choose from during self-selected reading. Intermediate and older students might have a list of books from which they may choose for studying topics in social studies or other content areas (see sample text set on the Revolutionary War in Appendix B). This idea aligns well with the use of literature circles. In literature circles, students are allowed to choose books, but this choice can be guided by particular parameters.

Monitoring Student Progress

No matter what parameters or guidelines are set, teachers must be aware that the student self-selection of reading materials is often difficult. It takes a large amount of teacher support and student reflection to get to a point where teachers feel confident that students know how to choose an appropriate book (Baker, 2002). While it is necessary for teachers to know the needs of each student and use that knowledge to guide the literature selections of those children, additional accountability measures must be in place as well to monitor student progress.

One popular way to monitor the knowledge and understanding gained by students is through responses to the text. Students may respond orally by communicating with the teacher during individual conferences, sharing during a group discussion time, or with a peer. Students can also respond through writing in reading response journals or creative writing projects such as developing book jackets, or even ads for a particular story. Additionally, students can respond through drama by creating mini-plays and reenacting the events of a story (Zarillo, 1989). All of these suggestions provide ways for teachers to monitor student progress.

Students are also capable of evaluating their own choices. Teachers can set up a series of questions by which students can monitor their own selection process. McLaughlin & Allen (2002) created a set of questions for students to ask themselves after reading in order to determine the appropriateness of a text. Some of those questions include:

- Were you able to concentrate as you read independently?
- Did the ideas in the book hold your attention?

- Did you get mixed up in any place? Were you able to fix it?
- Were there words you didn't know? How did you figure them out?
- Were you hoping the book would end, or were you hoping it would go on? (p. 68)

By answering questions like these, students are able to monitor their reading progress. With guidance from the teacher, students will know that they want to read a book that captures and holds their attention; one they hope will go on forever. Therefore, by answering no to those particular questions, a student might realize he/she should abandon the book he/she is reading and choose another.

Ohlhausen and Jepson (1992) also created some questions to accompany their Goldilocks Strategy. Students who answer yes to these questions know that the book they are reading is either "Too Easy," "Just Right," or "Too Hard." Some of the questions these educators provide are:

Too Easy:

- Have you read it lots of times before?
- Do you understand the story very well?
- Can you read it smoothly?

Just Right:

- Is this book new to you?
- Are there just a few words per page you don't know?
- When you read, are some places smooth and some choppy?

Too Hard:

- Are there more than a few words on a page you don't know?
- When you read, does it sound pretty choppy?
- Are you confused about what's happening in most of this book? (p. 36)

Again, these questions are helpful to readers who need to determine their success with a particular book. By being taught how to use them,

students are able to monitor their own progress without the help of a teacher.

Choosing appropriate strategies to use when teaching children to self-select their own literature is essential to creating a positive reading environment. Teachers must recognize that each class of students will have differing literary needs. A combination of self-selection strategies will be necessary when attempting to create a self-selected reading environment.

Conclusion

Time spent reading, like time spent loving, increases our lifetime.
(Daniel Pennac, 1999, *Better Than Life*)

Most of us do not need scientific evidence to know that our lives would not be as fulfilling without love. Love brings meaning to our lives. Reading should also be a meaning making process. But, far too many times, reading is only presented to children as the sum of its parts - phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension - especially in light of the National Reading Panel report, the *Put Reading First* document, and national and state mandated testing that are currently driving reading instruction in the United States. Pavonetti, Brimmer, & Cipielewski (2002) remind us:

We must not be driven by promises of short-term gains. Forced by public opinion, principals, administrators, and teachers strive to achieve immediate results regardless of long-term consequences. All eyes are focused on year-by-year comparisons of nationally standardized or state-administered tests. Few stop to consider the effects of such testing on students' abilities....What will these students be like in 10 years? Will they be responsible employees who exhibit initiative? Will they be involved parents who read to their children at bedtime? Or will they be so "tested" that they will remove themselves from all contact with school, teachers, and even books? (p. 310)

An overemphasis on reading skills can lead to unengaged reading. "No immediate benefits and few lasting by-products can come from unengaged reading. If the reader is not involved with the text—not engaged in the information or the experience—the reading is empty and unproductive" (Darigan, Tunnel, & Jacobs, 2002, p. 6). Without reading engagement, children become unmotivated and uninterested in reading, resulting in children who can read, but choose not to.

The importance of student self-selected reading in reading engagement, motivation, and interest has been made clear through research. This research demonstrates that respecting students' literature choices:

- allows them to value their decision-making ability;
- fosters their capacity to choose appropriate literature;
- gives them confidence and a feeling of ownership;
- improves reading achievement, and most importantly;
- encourages them in becoming engaged readers.

In order for students to become life-long lovers of reading they must be fully engaged in it. Self-selection makes this possible by creating both a positive attitude toward reading and a greater proficiency when reading. This must be the goal for all readers.

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Appendix A

Internet Resources for Quality Children's Literature

Online Children's Literature Journals

- *The ALAN Review*
(<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/alan-review.html>)
- *Amazon.com* (<http://www.amazon.com>)
- *Booklist* (<http://www.ala.org/booklist/index.html>)
- *Horn Book* (<http://www.hbook.com>)
- *The Lion and the Unicorn*
(http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/lion_and_the_unicorn/index.html)
- *The New York Times Book Review* (requires registration)
(<http://www.nytimes.com/books/specials/children>)

Web Sites with Resources on Children's Book Awards

- *Children's Book Awards*
(<http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/awards.html>)
- *The American Library Association's web site* hosts home pages for the Coretta Scott King Award, Pura Belpre Award, John Newbery Medal, and the Randolph Caldecott Medal
(<http://www.ala.org>)
- *National Book Award* (<http://www.nationalbook.org/>)

Internet websites devoted to children's literature

- *Children's Literature Web Guide*
(<http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/>)
- *The Reading Zone of the Internet Public Library*
(<http://www.ipl.org/div/kidspace/browse/rzn0000/>)
- *Carol Hurst's Children's Literature Site*
(<http://www.carolhurst.com/>)
- *Child Lit. Site*
(<http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~mjoseph/childlit/about.html>)
- *Kay E. Vandergrift's Special Interest Page*
(<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/>)

Appendix B

Sample Text Set: The Revolutionary War

Title	Author	Grade Level
<i>Sam the Minute Man</i>	Nathaniel Benchley	2 nd / 3 rd
<i>George, the Drummer Boy</i>	Nathaniel Benchley	2 nd / 3 rd
<i>The Hatmaker's Sign: A Story by Benjamin Franklin</i>	Benjamin Franklin and Candace Fleming	2 nd / 3 rd
<i>The 18 Penny Goose</i>	Sally M. Walker	2 nd / 3 rd
<i>Good Children Get Rewards: A Story of Williamsburg in Colonial Times</i>	Eva Moore	2 nd / 3 rd
<i>Revolutionary War on Wednesday</i>	Mary Pope Osborne	3 rd
<i>Hannah's Helping Hands</i>	Jean Van Leeuwen	3 rd
<i>Hannah of Fairfield</i>	Jean Van Leeuwen	3 rd / 4 th
<i>Hannah's Winter of Hope</i>	Jean Van Leeuwen	4 th
<i>Phoebe the Spy</i>	Judith Berry Griffin	4 th
<i>George Washington's Socks</i>	Elvira Woodruff	4 th
<i>Toliver's Secret</i>	Esther Wood-Brady	4 th
<i>The Secret Soldier: The Story of Deborah Sampson</i>	Ann McGovern	4 th
<i>Little Maid of Virginia</i>	Alice Turner Curtis	4 th
<i>The Fighting Ground</i>	Avi	5 th
<i>Molly Pitcher Young Patriot</i>	Augusta Stevenson	5 th
<i>The Arrow over the Door</i>	Joseph Bruchac	5 th / 6 th
<i>Sarah Bishop</i>	Scott O'Dell	6 th
<i>Early Thunder</i>	Jean Fritz	6 th
<i>My Brother Sam Is Dead</i>	James Lincoln Collier	6 th
<i>Cast Two Shadows: The American Revolution in the South</i>	Ann Rinaldi	6 th / 7 th



Birthday Booktalks: Fostering Emergent Literacy and Self-esteem in Young Children

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The celebration of birthdays provides teachers the opportunity to recognize and honor each child, thereby nurturing feelings of self-esteem. When combined with birthday celebrations, booktalks on literature selections related to birthdays are recommended to promote emergent literacy as well as self-esteem. Examples that demonstrate different booktalk formats are given in this article. At the end of the article are additional suggested titles on which teachers may do birthday booktalks.

SELF-ESTEEM REFERS to how we feel about ourselves as human beings and includes our perceptions about our competence and capabilities. Summarizing research on this topic, Taylor, Harris, Pearson, and Garcia (1995) note that people who possess greater "self-efficacy," or feelings of competence and capability for particular tasks, take on more activities, try harder, persist longer, and ultimately perform better than those who see themselves in a less positive light (p. 76).

The role of teachers in promoting self-esteem cannot be underestimated. Spodek and Saracho (1994) affirm that teachers are the crucial factor in the way children "feel about school, themselves, and each other, and how much progress they make" (p. 178). Consequently, because feelings of positive self-worth are critical to success in school and in life, teachers should find ways to create classroom environments that promote self-esteem in learners. For children in preschool and primary grades, classroom activities that value personal experiences may promote the development of self-esteem (Beaty, 1996).

Because birthdays are special in the lives of young children, these events provide teachers with opportunities to celebrate and honor the uniqueness of each child, thus fostering feelings of self-worth. When combined with recommended techniques for booktalks, birthday celebrations also may encourage, through pleasurable experiences, the lifelong habit in emergent readers of voluntary reading.

Many concomitant benefits to growth in literacy result from such reading experiences. Children's language structure becomes more mature, prior knowledge deepens, allowing greater integration of new learning into existing learning, interest in books increases, and knowledge of narrative forms and story grammar grows. Nonreaders have an opportunity to begin developing reading ability earlier than would occur otherwise. And overall reading achievement improves as children are exposed to more and more literature to which they can apply reading competencies already explicitly taught in the classroom (Morrow, 1986).

What Are Booktalks?

Professional literature is rife with suggestions for encouraging readers to connect with good books. Among these recommendations are booktalks, what Bodart (1986) calls "a sales pitch for books" (p. 20). Although they tend to be suggested more for use with upper elementary through secondary levels of instruction, booktalks may be effective in promoting the reading interests of preschool and primary age pupils as well (Norton & Anfin, 1997).

Formats for booktalks may vary and may include such traditional types as the plot summary, anecdote, character, and mood (Bodart, 1985). Others might include author, theme, and genre; which may encompass any of the other four traditional formats (Norton & Anfin, 1997). For instance, showcased books that focus on the theme of birthdays to foster self-worth may also be in the form of plot summary, anecdote, character, or mood.

What follows are examples that demonstrate different booktalk formats to get teachers started on literature selections related to birthdays. At the end of the article are additional suggested titles for birthday booktalks. Teachers may elect to do one for each child's birthday, or if they have large classes they may do one or several booktalks once per month or week to honor groups of children whose birthdays occur during those times. Whichever way teachers choose, they should adhere to what Bodart (1985, p. 5) calls the two "unbreakable" rules of booktalking: never talk about a book not read and never give away the book's ending. The key idea is to present enough interesting detail about the book so that the child will be enticed to get it and read it (Norton & Anfin, 1997).

Plot Summary Booktalks

In the plot summary booktalk, suspense is created by telling just enough of the story to make children want to get the book and read it to find out what will happen next. This idea is illustrated by the presentation below:

A Letter to Amy

Written By Ezra Jack Keats

Published: New York: Harper & Row, 1968

Friends can make a birthday party special. In *A Letter to Amy*, Ezra Jack Keats tells the story of Peter's birthday party. The story begins with Peter writing a special birthday invitation to his friend, Amy. When he and his dog, Willie, walk to the mailbox to mail the invitation to Amy, a strong wind blows the letter out of Peter's hand. As he catches the letter, he bumps into Amy and knocks her down. Before she can see that the letter is for her, Peter stuffs it into the mailbox. Amy runs away crying. Will Amy come to Peter's party? Is she still his special friend? Peter is very sad. If you want to find out whether Peter has a "happy" birthday party, you'll have to read *A Letter To Amy*.

Anecdote

As with the plot summary type, in the anecdotal booktalk the presenter selects interesting details not about a whole book, but about a single incident from a story or about one entire story in an anthology. With this format, the conclusion may be given, thus violating Bodart's fundamental injunction about never revealing the ending (Bodart, 1986). Children should then be exhorted to read the entire book for other exciting incidents or stories like the one focused upon in the presentation. Storybooks with an episodic structure or collections of short stories, folktales, fables, and poetry work well with the anecdotal format. The following three presentations illustrate an anecdote from two picture storybooks and from a poetry anthology.

Mary Wore her Red Dress and Henry Wore his Green Sneakers

Written By Merle Peek

Published: New York: Clarion, 1985

Do you like to sing? Do you like to play guessing games? If you do, you might enjoy *Mary Wore Her Red Dress and Henry Wore His Green Sneakers*, a book adapted and illustrated by Merle Peek. Mary is a squirrel, and Henry is a raccoon. They are only two of the guests at Katy Bear's birthday party. As you can see, the pictures at the beginning

of the book are in black and white. Each animal that comes to the birthday party introduces a new color. These are shown here on the title page. An example of one of the colors is in this next picture. Here, Mary a little squirrel, is going to the birthday party, and she is dressed up in a *red* party dress. As she walks along, Henry, a raccoon, races to catch up with her on this next page. In this particular illustration, Henry is wearing *green* sneakers. At the end of the book, which I'm not going to show you, there are nine different colors in the pictures! The book also has a guessing game, and you may have to think hard and look at the pictures carefully to make a good guess. Take my word for it: *Mary Wore Her Red Dress and Henry Wore His Green Sneakers* is fun to read, and it's available in our classroom reading center.

Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present

Written By Charlotte Zolotow

Illustrated by Maurice Sendak

Published: New York: Harper & Row, 1962

Trying to pick out the right birthday present for someone special can be very difficult. *Mr. Rabbit And The Lovely Present*, written by Charlotte Zolotow and illustrated by Maurice Sendak, tells the story of a little girl who asks a rabbit to help her find a present for her mother's birthday. Because her mother likes red, the little girl decides that she wants to give her mother something that color. The rabbit suggests red underwear, a red roof, red birds or cardinals, red fire engines, and finally red apples. The little girl thinks that red apples are the best suggestion, and so the rabbit and the little girl pick some red apples from an apple tree. But the story doesn't stop there. The rabbit has lots of other ideas to make a very special gift for the little girl's mother. If you would like to find out what birthday surprise the little girl finally gives to her mother, you'll have to read the book!

Happy Birthday

Poems Selected by Lee Bennett Hopkins

Illustrated by Hilary Knight

Published: New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991

Happy Birthday is a collection of poems about birthdays selected by Lee Bennett Hopkins and illustrated by Hilary Knight. Do you remember the first birthday present you were given? Probably not! That was a long time ago! In the poem "My First Birthday Gift," by Sandra Liatsos, a little girl remembers her first birthday gift. Can you guess what it was?

In another poem, "Birthday Surprise," by Margaret Hillert, a little boy describes a birthday present given to him by his brother. The present comes in a big box. When he opens the box and looks inside, he finds another smaller box. When he opens the small box, he finds another box. In the last four lines of the poem, the little boy says:

And there inside the smallest one
Oh, hurry, hurry, HURRY
I found a little baby mouse,
All soft and warm and furry.

In a third poem "Birthday Cake," the author Aileen Fisher wonders how little mice celebrate their birthdays. If you were a mouse, what kind of birthday cake would you like?

If you choose to read *Happy Birthday*, you will have a hard time picking out your favorite poem. I know I did.

Character

This format is appropriate for titles that focus on describing a main character, whether a person, animal, or thing: The teacher speaks in first person, pretending to be the character and thereby infusing drama into the booktalk. Booktalkers will enjoy the acting that these presentations require and so will young listeners.

Leo the Late Bloomer

Written By Robert Kraus

Illustrated by Jose Aruego

Published: New York: Windmill, 1971

Hi! My name is Leo. I'm a tiger. Every year when I celebrate my birthday, I think about how much I've grown up. I'm big now, but when I was little, I was a "late bloomer." Do you know what that means? It means I couldn't do anything! I couldn't draw; I couldn't write; and I couldn't read. I was also a sloppy eater, and I never said a word. My father worried about me, but my mom knew I was just a "late bloomer" and would be able to do things in my own good time. She knew I would bloom eventually, after I was older and had other birthdays. It might take a long time for me to grow and be able to write, to draw, and to eat neatly and to speak, but she had confidence and believed in me. If you would like to find out whether a little tiger like me, who couldn't do much, would grow and bloom, then read *Leo, the Late Bloomer*. It was written by Robert Kraus and illustrated by Jose Aruego.

Mood

This type of presentation lends itself to stories evoking a strong sense of atmosphere, usually created by the writing style, especially specific words, images, and figures of speech. These elements of style may create an overall eerie, joyful, sad, or triumphant feeling. Just as there are an infinite variety of emotions, so may there be an infinite variety of moods. The speaker will work carefully to select words and images, sometimes directly from the text, to evoke the general atmosphere of the work. Frequently, mood booktalks are combined with the three previously discussed. The example below is both mood and plot summary.

Alphie Gives a Hand

Written By Shirley Hughes

Published: New York: Lothrop, 1984

Do you feel uncomfortable in unfamiliar situations? Have you ever been afraid of going somewhere new? How do you feel when your parents leave you with a baby sitter? You don't know? How did you feel on the first day of school? Sometimes it helps to have an old toy or a special blanket to hold onto when you are in a new place and feel frightened or insecure. In this book, *Alphie Gives a Hand*, Shirley Hughes tells the story of a little boy named Alphie. Alphie is very

excited until he learns that his mother will not be able to go to the birthday party with him. While his mother wraps a birthday present for Bernard, Alphie grabs his old bit of a blanket that he sleeps with at night. When his mother drops him off at the party, she tries to persuade him to put down his blanket, but Alphie holds his blanket tightly. At the party, Alphie discovers that he is not the only one who is afraid. His friend Min begins to cry. And then Alphie does something that is very brave and very kind. Can you guess what he does to help Min stop crying? I won't tell you how the story ends, but I can tell you that Min and Alphie have a wonderful time at the birthday party. If you would like to read about the party, check out *Alphie Gives A Hand*. It's available in our classroom library.

Conclusion

Research indicates booktalks are a useful means of fostering literacy development. Books circulate more among students who have heard booktalks (Overmeyer, 1987; Spencer, 1984). Moreover, teachers who present booktalks have an added opportunity to shepherd children toward high quality literature available in the classroom-reading center (Witucke, 1979). Worthwhile reading selections will expand children's background knowledge and spur their growth in literacy and learning (Vacca & Vacca, 2002). When used in conjunction with events that honor each child's uniqueness as an individual, booktalks with connections to birthday celebrations offer an opportunity to promote not only literacy but feelings of positive self-worth.

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Additional Children's Books on Birthdays

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- Bunting, E. (1988). *Happy birthday, dear duck*. New York: Clarion.
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