



# Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

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Volume 39  
Issue 1 *September/October 1998*

Article 7

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10-1-1998

## Reading Horizons vol. 39, no. 1

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(1998). Reading Horizons vol. 39, no. 1. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 39 (1). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol39/iss1/7](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol39/iss1/7)

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*Reading*



*Horizons*

ISSN 0034-0502

1998

Volume 39, No. 1

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A large, stylized sunburst logo composed of several curved lines radiating from a central point. Below the sunburst, the words "Reading" and "Horizons" are stacked in a serif font.

Reading  
Horizons

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Dear *Reading Horizons* Readers,

Welcome to our first issue of the new academic year 1998-1999. It seems every institution has attempted some change to welcome the new millennium, and our cover design represents our welcome to the new millennium. *Reading Horizons* is changing not only its format but its reviewers and editorial board to encompass a variety of geographical and literacy views. We hope you approve.

Senior Ryan Flathau, a graphic arts student in the College of Education, was the artist who designed our cover representing reading as the horizon to new worlds. We think it reflects well our authors' attempts at opening new vistas through either research, new thoughts, new practices, old practices revisited, and new children's literature. We welcome your comments and ideas.

*Reading Horizons* represents teachers' and teacher educators' voices addressing literacy issues and practices. Welcome!

Karen F. Thomas  
Paul T. Wilson  
Co-Editors  
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*READING HORIZONS:*  
A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Editors: Paul T. Wilson & Karen F. Thomas  
Executive Assistant: Susan Standish

Begun in 1960 as a local newsletter, *Reading Horizons* has developed into an international journal read across the United States and Canada, and world wide. Devoted to literacy instruction and research at all levels, the *Reading Horizons* tradition is to serve as a forum of ideas from many schools of thought. Through original articles and research reports, theoretical essays, opinion pieces, policy studies and syntheses of best practices, *Reading Horizons* seeks to bring together school professionals, literacy researchers, teacher educators, parents and community leaders as they work collaboratively in the ever widening horizons of reading and the language arts.

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

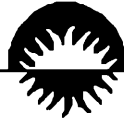
## READING HORIZONS

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## **The national reading summit: A commentary**

On September 18 and 19, the U.S. Department of Education hosted a national Reading Summit in Washington D.C. The charge for the summit participants, as stated by Secretary of Education Richard Riley, was “to lead a new crusade to dramatically improve child literacy in America.” Riley called for a collaboration of policy makers and educators. Each governor received an invitation to put together a team of seven people representing the states’ and territories’ stakeholders in young children’s early reading; I served as one of the seven from the Michigan delegation. The National Academy of Science’s report *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* served as the organizing focal point of the summit.

Secretary Riley set the tone for the conference in his opening remarks highlighting five challenges deserving reading educators and researchers attention. He challenged:

1. Parents and/or other family caretakers to read to and with their children at least 30 minutes a day;
2. Reading researchers to “once and for all end the reading wars;”
3. Each state to collaborate and link all the schools and agencies providing early childhood services;
4. Those who work with learning disabled, African American, and limited English proficient children to help them read well; and
5. Teacher educators to do a better job of preparing teachers of reading.

Then Catherine Snow, Chair of Report Committee, presented segments of The Academy’s reading study emphasizing that the reading community of researchers and educators do have a scientific basis through replicable research to know how to prevent reading difficulties in young children. Following Snow’s comments, the summit then had a series of workshops devoted, in one way or another, to improving young children’s reading. The summit culminated in each state and territory coming to a closure around a plan to implement findings in The Academy’s report.

Had the summit equitable represented teachers who task it is to teach young children and those who prepare teachers as well as responsible policy makers whose knowledge comes from being in schools where reading instruction occurs, the summit might have been

something more than a political maneuver. While the following comments are specific to the conference and its tone, they are not necessarily divorced from the report; the summit and the report on which it was based were so inextricably bound.

One had only to read *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* to stay abreast of the conference proceedings, I found the workshops lacking and self-serving. Some workshop presenters advocated specific school reforms in an attempt to reform literacy education — reform programs which cost big money to purchase and maintain. I found this offensive. In the middle of one workshop in which the presenter was pushing a rather costly school reform, a fellow participant slipped that day's Carl Rowan editorial under my wandering eyes. Rowan's article, titled "It's the Teachers, Stupid" reminded me that literacy reform is in the hands of teachers. It's always the teachers. They know what works and with whom. They were conspicuously absent from this conference.

Depending on the individual participant's background, the summit may have been helpful and encouraging, or even informational for preventing reading difficulties for our young children. Effective classroom teachers and teacher educators would have learned nothing new from this summit. They were conspicuously absent from this summit. For my part, I consider the following summit aspects as new:

1. The national endeavor to link up all state departments of education with each other and the federal government; and
2. The federal challenge asking for a commitment from each state and territory to submit a plan to assure successful reading in young children by the end of grade three.

The collaboration appeared to be the only new aspect.

My response to the *new* aspects of this reading summit is best characterized as mixed. I am heartened at the attention being focused on early reading by the federal and state government. With such attention focused on early reading instruction, legislative bodies may see the necessity for stricter requirements for pre-school education agencies and an appropriate place for resource allocation. I am also encouraged that the focus on those populations who traditionally have reading difficulties (i.e., from poor urban areas and limited English proficiency backgrounds) should receive "the amount of instructional support needed as gauged by the entry abilities of the school's population" (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 328). The study points out that this type of resource planning would fly in the face of the current and ill-conceived "practice of giving schools bonuses for high test scores" (p. 328). The summit did not emphasize the above point, but the study addressed this issue.

A troubling point emphasized at the summit revolved around the issue that scientific evidence does exist to prevent reading difficulties. This bothers me; I am not eager to see what *does exist* construed



as a “quick fix” to early reading difficulties. One could have left the summit with the notion that all that early education personnel have to do is implement all the pedagogical suggestions listed in The National Academy Press to prevent reading difficulties. Another quick fix I fear is the basal publishers’ response to this report as a mandate to assemble systematic, consistent, formal, and well-articulated phonics and word patterned basals. (*Here we go again!*)

What was *not new* at this reading summit can best be outlined as:

1. A reinforcement of the artificial establishment of two reading camps — “phonics” and “whole language;”
2. The attempt to end the “reading wars;”
3. An attempt to blame one or another institution/agency for reasons why our children have reading difficulties;
4. The mistake that poor teaching and impoverished teacher education, not power and politics, are at the base of reading difficulties in our nation’s children;
5. An oversimplification, if not miss-statement that our fourth graders are scoring poorly in reading; and
6. An obvious lack of teachers’ voices.

What was *not new* at the summit revisits some of the old problems plaguing the reading world. First, the “phonics” versus “whole language” terminology bandied about at the summit keeps an artificial war waging. I must add, as an aside, that no reading educator nor researcher in attendance spoke of “phonics” versus “whole language.” However, the fact that so many outside the reading research world used that phrase means it is a popular perception keeping alive a war — a war with, unfortunately, real armies. My real concern in this call to end the reading wars appears to be a call to end the debates and close down the voices of alternative research. The second, and unfortunate, point addresses the profession of choice to blame for many of the reading difficulties. Teacher educators were clearly the profession receiving blame. While the reading study’s *suggestions* regarding teacher preparation should serve as a mandate to state legislative bodies to support institutions of higher learning, at the summit those suggestions became *criticisms* of teacher educators. Third, there can be no mistaking what this summit clearly communicated, i.e., that teaching methodologies, not power and politics, are the causes for our reading difficulties. Power and politics must be factored in the blame through the following forces: moneys not appropriated for literacy support; basals purchased and mandated by states and school districts; and state mandated curricula devoid of teachers’ voices. These factors leave out classroom teachers as decision makers in reading instruction as well as teacher educators. Last, the presence of classroom teachers (elementary and high education) was sorely lacking; they were conspicuously absent. They were outnumbered greatly and gravely by state departments of education personnel and politicians of

one sort or another. Where was the collaboration? How can you call a summit calling for collaboration and have it attended mainly by state department of education personnel and attempt to blame teachers and teacher educators for reading difficulties?

The summit's intent "to dramatically improve child literacy in America," remains to be seen. I am afraid that the summit, like much of the curricula governing reading, will not involve the classroom teachers of literacy nor many of those who prepare classroom teachers. The responsibility shifts to teacher educators to make sure this happens. While the "landmark report of the National Research Council" as Secretary Riley labels it, offers cogent suggestions, imperative caveats, remedies, and timely concerns, they are issued to *all stakeholders* in young children's early reading initiatives — not just teachers and teacher educators. One did not leave the summit with that shared responsibility. Fortunately, much of the study may succeed where the summit failed. But the study will fail if it is accepted as a canon for teaching reading to young children. It is *a way* for some, not *the way* for all.

Karen F. Thomas  
Co-Editor, *Reading Horizons*

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**Volume 39, Number 1**

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# **Using narrative picture books to build awareness of expository text structure**

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## **ABSTRACT**

For many students, reading in the content areas presents quite a challenge. The transition from an emphasis on narrative texts in the lower grades to expository texts in the upper grades is not always easy. This article describes a system I use for introducing expository text structure through the use of narrative picture books. My goal is to develop an understanding of expository text structure with simple texts so that students will be able to transfer these understandings to more cognitively dense content area materials.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Once upon a time... Young children become aware of how stories are structured through home and school experiences. It is not uncommon for children as young as first grade to have an adequately developed sense of story structure as part of their mental repertoire (Dreher and Singer 1980). This knowledge of narrative story grammar (i.e. setting, character, problem, solution) helps readers comprehend and recall story information. While stories tend to function as the main genre for instruction in the early elementary years, expository texts serve as a major source for written social studies materials in the upper elementary and middle schools. In order to access the growing wealth of information that is available through books, magazines, reference sources, CD ROMs, and the Internet, students need to develop an understanding of expository structure. When readers are aware that writers structure relationships among concepts through text patterns and use cue words to connect their thoughts, comprehension improves (Taylor, 1992).

In a study with eighth grade readers, Seidenberg (1989) reported that lack of text structure knowledge inhibited the students from constructing accurate representations of informational texts, from identifying important ideas and from summarizing the text. Similarly, a deficit in text structure awareness in students with learning

disabilities had an adverse effect on their ability to predict forthcoming information, to identify important details, and to monitor their own comprehension (Englert and Thomas 1987).

Myer (1985) coined the term "structure strategy" to refer to the process that readers use to seek out and apply the author's organization while constructing representations of expository texts. Generally, expository texts are constructed around five text patterns: description/enumeration, sequence, compare/contrast, cause/effect, problem/solution (Myer and Freedle 1984). Figure 1 contains a definition for each of these text patterns and cue words that signal predominant patterns. Seidenberg (1989) noted that the ability to comprehend and to compose expository prose is essential for school success. It appears that many elementary and middle school students would benefit from a formal introduction to expository text structure.

### NARRATIVE PICTURE BOOKS

Realizing the importance of teaching students to recognize expository text patterns, I designed a system for teaching students this comprehension skill, using methods and materials that built upon their prior knowledge and experiences. My goal was to have students develop proficiency in this skill with simple texts so that they would be able to transfer it to more cognitively dense social studies materials.

Since most upper elementary and middle school students have a well developed sense of narrative story structure (Dreher and Singer 1980), it seemed logical to use narrative picture books to introduce expository text structure. Picture books, which no longer seem to be relegated to young readers, allow teachers to introduce the concept of text patterns in a unique, interesting, and straightforward way. Without the sophisticated content of grade-level texts, students are able to focus their attention directly on the patterns that authors use to organize ideas.

Despite the fact that simple picture books are generally written around a narrative story grammar, in which there are characters, a setting, a problem and a resolution, careful examination revealed that many picture books contain an underlying "expository" text pattern. For example, Nettie's Trip South (Turner 1987) represents a description/ enumeration pattern. Written in a letter format, this picture book describes Nettie's reaction to the harsh treatment of slaves during her pre-Civil War trip from the north to Richmond, VA. In *Island Boy*, Cooney (1988) sequenced the events of the major character's life on Tibbetts Island. The reader meets Matthais in his youth and follows him until he is laid to rest under a red astrakhan tree. Figure 2 contains a list of several picture books that may be used to introduce students to expository text structures. The brevity of these books makes them ideal to use in 45-minute instructional periods. The following



sample lesson illustrates how picture books can be used to build text structure awareness.

## GETTING STARTED

### *Expository Text Structure and Comprehension*

It is best to begin by introducing one text structure at a time, starting with the most easily recognized organizational pattern (sequence) and gradually introducing more complex patterns (compare/contrast and cause/effect). Before class, select one text structure on which to focus. The following lesson will illustrate the sequence expository pattern.

**Sample Introductory Lesson:**

**Purpose:** To introduce students to sequencing.

**Materials:** One (or more) narrative picture book(s) which represent sequencing (see Figure 2 for suggested picture books); overhead transparency of graphic organizer for sequencing (see Figure 3 for sample graphic organizers); a grade-appropriate social studies passage that follows the sequence pattern (on overhead or copies to distribute).

**Time:** One 45-minute period

**Procedure:**

- (1) Set purpose for listening.
  - Elicit from the students what they know about sequencing.
  - Have students listen to *Island Boy* (Cooney, 1988) for the purpose of recalling the sequence of events in the story.
- (2) Read picture book aloud.
- (3) Discuss the predominant text structure (sequencing), noting how this structure is used to connect ideas. In these books, the pictures, too, will extend the ideas of the author and support the text arrangement, so information from the pictures should be identified as well.
- (4) Use an overhead transparency to record the information on an appropriate graphic organizer (see Figure 3 for samples). The graphic organizer enables students to visually see the relationships between superordinate ideas (main) and subordinate ideas (details).
- (5) Call students' attention to the cue words that Cooney uses to signal sequence of time: "at first"; "Time passed. Now..."; "soon"; "As Matthais grew older..."; "After fifteen years"; "In May"; "For a long time..."; "In September." By drawing attention to these words and phrases, teachers can help students understand how the author connects one idea to the next and sequences events in a logical order of succession.
- (6) After introducing (modeling) sequencing with a picture book and graphic organizer, select a passage from social studies materials that follows this same pattern. Repeat steps

1-5, thinking aloud as you read, analyze, and record the information onto the graphic organizer (overhead transparency). Providing direct instruction with social studies materials enables students to realize how this comprehension strategy can be applied in an authentic way to their own construction of meaning with grade-appropriate expository materials. As noted above, pictures add to the available information in picture books. A parallel can be drawn to the use of graphic aids (charts, graphs, maps) that authors of social studies books include to connect and extend ideas. Information from the graphic aids should be included on the graphic organizer if appropriate.

Over the next several days, repeat these same procedures while introducing the remaining expository text structures.

More sophisticated instruction and practice in identifying the text structures of informational materials may be necessary for some students before they can apply this comprehension skill directly to social studies texts. Figure 4 contains an annotated bibliography of popular preteen magazine articles that may be used to provide guided practice during this stage of instruction. These articles furnish students with opportunities to apply their understanding of text structure to materials that are a bit more challenging than picture books, yet not as cognitively dense as most social studies materials. Once students begin to understand how each expository text structure is used to organize and connect ideas, it is necessary to introduce texts that contain multiple structures.

It would be nice if all informational writing followed one easily identified text structure; however, many times, the passages that students encounter while reading social studies texts contain a combination of patterns rather than one specific pattern. I use the book *Teammates* (Golenbock, 1990) to illustrate this point. Golenbock uses several text structures to tell the story of Jackie Robinson's first season as a Brooklyn Dodger. The book begins with a compare/contrast structure, as the professional lifestyles of Negro League players are contrasted with those of Major League players. Next, Golenbock presents a problem. Brooklyn Dodger General Manager, Branch Rickey, tries to find ways to desegregate his team. He resolves this problem when he hires Jackie Robinson. The reader then travels through a sequence of events as Jackie meets with Mr. Rickey and attends spring training. Cause and effect text structure is also used. Because Jackie Robinson is the first Black player in the Major Leagues (cause), he is humiliated; he must live by himself when the team is on the road; and his job is threatened when other players draft a petition to have him thrown off the team (effects). Finally, the hateful screams from the crowd caused Pee Wee Reese to walk across the field and put his arm around Jackie's shoulder, displaying support for his fellow teammate (effect).

At this point, I've found it worthwhile to have students analyze a variety of picture books in order to determine the ways in which authors embed multiple text structures within one piece of writing. Again, the picture books provide students with opportunities to use short, simple texts to grasp this complex concept. I recommend that teachers also analyze social studies materials with their students by modeling and using think alouds. Vacca and Vacca (1989) suggest the following guidelines for teachers to use when analyzing text patterns. First, identify the most important idea in the passage and note cue words that signal the text structure. Second, identify other important ideas and how these ideas are connected to the main idea. Third, outline or diagram the superordinate idea (main) and subordinate ideas (details) to sort out important from less important ideas. Vacca and Vacca (1989) state that in planning reading assignments, it is helpful for teachers to try to identify the overall text pattern "even though several types of thought relationships are probably embedded within the material" (p. 43).

#### TEXT STRUCTURE AND COMPOSITION

As students are introduced to expository text patterns, they can be provided with opportunities to use these patterns to construct meaning in their own writing. A wide variety of discourse forms are available for students to use in authentic informational writing. These forms include brochures, presentation proposals, and reflections on assignments (see Figure 5 for additional suggestions).

Teachers may help middle school students gradually learn how to combine several expository text structures. *Using Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell 1993) or other picture books as models, teachers may move students into more complex forms of expository writing. For example, a teacher may suggest that a research paper on the initial stages of the American Revolution begin with a description/enumeration of events that led to the Boston Tea Party. Next, the paper may focus on the cause and effects of this one event. The paper may conclude with a section in which the causes for the Boston Tea Party are compared/contrasted with present-day issues of taxation. Three different graphic organizers may be used to record the ideas: description/enumeration, cause/effect, and compare/contrast. The same graphic organizers that were used to record information in the comprehension lessons may be used throughout the writing process. Graphic organizers help students identify and organize the key concepts they wish to communicate. When ideas are well organized and cohesively expressed, they are often easier for readers to understand. It should be noted that a graphic organizer should be used as a preliminary step within a larger process rather than as an end product in and of itself. A timeline, for instance, could be used to detail events of an ancient civilization. After completing the timeline, students could

analyze the information recorded on this graphic organizer and use it to write a piece of discourse, or to engage in a discussion, or perhaps to create a project that connects social studies with the arts. Finally, the writer may indicate expository patterns through topic sentences. For example, the author might signal the description/enumeration pattern used in the first section of the American Revolution report by leading off with the following sentence: There were several events that led a group of Boston citizens to empty 342 chests of tea into the Boston Harbor on the evening of December 16, 1773. Conscious attention to text structure assists the writer by providing a framework in which to compose. Likewise, it helps the reader see relationships and construct an accurate representation of the writer's intended meaning.

### CONCLUSION

Finding ways to increase our students' comprehension of expository texts is a challenge for most social studies teachers (and teachers in general). Transitioning from narrative to expository reading and writing does not come naturally for all student. Moffett (1981) stated that "for many students, narrative is a kind of haven which they are reluctant to leave because chains of events have a ready-made organization, whereas exposition requires that the student create and assert a new order that is not a given of the material" (p. 122).

As students read and write informational texts in which text patterns are apparent, they build an awareness of the organizational arrangements and unique conventions that expository writers use to communicate information and to express ideas. This, in turn, prepares them for the task of independently comprehending and composing more complex exposition. Since sources of information continue to increase exponentially in today's world, the ability to use a "structure strategy" to enhance comprehension appears to be a required skill for successful lifelong learners. A systematic method for providing direct instruction and guided practice in expository text structure awareness can empower students by enhancing their reading and writing skills in all content areas.

Figure 1  
Narrative Picture Books - Expository Text Structures

### DESCRIPTION/ENUMERATION

- \*Kroll, V. 1993. *Africa brothers and sisters.*, NY: Four Winds Press. A father and his son discuss characteristics of approximately 20 different African tribes.
- \*Rylant, C. 1982. *When I was young in the mountains*, NY: E.P. Dutton. A young girl describes what it was like to grow up with her loving grandmother, grandfather, and brother in a mountain community.
- \*Turner, A. 1987. *Nettie's trip south.*, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company. Nettie writes a letter to her friend, Addie, describing her reactions to the treatment of slaves, which she witnesses in a pre-Civil War trip to Richmond, VA.
- \*Weller, F.W. 1992. *Matthew Wheelock's wall*. New York, NY: Macmillan. Matthew Wheelock builds a stone wall around his New England field. This wall and all it stands for is treasured for generations.

### SEQUENCE

- \*Caseley, J. 1991. *Dear Annie.*, NY: Greenwillow Books. Annie and her grandfather are pen pals. Over the years, Annie saved over 100 letters that her grandfather sent her.
- \*Cooney, B. 1988. *Island boy*. NY: Viking Kestrel. The reader follows Matthais' life on Tibbetts Island from his youth until he is laid to rest under his favorite red astrakhan tree.
- \*Silverstein, S. 1964. *The giving tree.*, NY: HarperCollins. A relationship that a boy establishes with a tree changes over time.
- \*West, C. 1986. *"Pardon?" said the giraffe*. NY: Harper & Row, Publishers. Frog hops on the backs of taller and taller animals as he asks the giraffe, "What's it like up there?"

### CAUSE/EFFECT

- \*Barton, B. 1973. *Buzz buzz buzz*. NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. The bee stings the bull, which causes the bull to run and jump all around, which causes the cow to get nervous, which causes...
- \*Brown, R. 1985. *The big sneeze*. NY: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books. The farmer's big sneeze causes a chaotic chain of events.
- \*Numeroff, L.J. 1991. *If you give a moose a muffin*. NY: HarperCollins. Chaos erupts when a boy gives a moose a muffin and triggers a series of humorous events.

- \*Viorst, J. 1972. *Alexander and the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day*. NY: Macmillan. Everything goes wrong for Alexander. One disaster leads to another throughout the entire day.

### COMPARE/CONTRAST

- \*Buckley, H. E., and J. Ormerod 1994. *Grandfather and I*. NY: Lorthrop, Lee & Shepard Books. The warm relationship of a grandfather and grandson is built around the relaxing, peaceful times shared. The slow pace of grandfather and grandson is contrasted with the hurried lives of mother, father, brothers, and sisters.
- \*Delaney, M. 1989. *My sister*. NY: Atheneum. A young girl shares the pros and cons of having an older sister.
- \*Gray, N. 1988. *A country far away*. NY: Orchard. The illustrations in this book reveal the similarities and differences of everyday experiences of two boys: one in a small African village and the other in a modern suburban community.
- \*Hutchins, P. 1971. *Titch*, NY: Macmillan. Titch is compared to his older siblings, Mary and Pete.

### PROBLEM/SOLUTION

- \*DePaola, T. 1983. *The legend of the Bluebonnet*. NY: Scholastic, Inc. A drought was killing The People called Comanche and their land. It was determined that in order to appease the Great Spirits, the People would sacrifice their most valued possession. She-Who-Is-Alone, a young girl who has lost her entire family in the famine, decides to offer the Great Spirits her warrior doll, her only possession.
- \*DePaola, T. 1984. *The mysterious giant of Barletta*. London: Anderson Press. Word reaches the quiet, Italian town of Barletta that it is going to be attacked by an arm of a thousand men. Zia Concetta, the oldest member of this community, and the mysterious giant come up with a very clever and humorous plan to frighten these soldiers away.
- \*Guback, G. 1994. *Luka's quilt*. NY: Greenwillow. Luka's grandmother, Tutu, sewed a traditional Hawaiian quilt for Luka. However, the quilt lacked the bright colors that Luka hoped it would have. Lei Day brings a solution to this problem.
- \*Young, E. 1992. *Seven blind mice*, NY: Philomel. Seven mice share their individual observations in order to determine what the object is that they have discovered. It turns out to be an elephant.



Figure 2  
Expository Text Structures and Cue Words

**DESCRIPTION/ENUMERATION**

The author provides description, characteristics, or attributes of a topic. Often it is the summation of these details that is the main idea.

Cue words: for example, first, second, most importantly.

**SEQUENCE**

The author places facts, events, items, or concepts in a logical order.

Cue words: first, second, next, finally, then, before, after, when.

**COMPARE/CONTRAST**

The author points out similarities and differences in facts, events, items or concepts.

Cue words: but, however, although, yet, similarly, on the other hand, while, for instance.

**CAUSE/EFFECT**

The author shows how the facts, events, items, or concepts (i.e. the effects) result due to the facts, events, items, or concepts (i.e. the causes).

Cue words: because, since, therefore, if...then, as a result, thus, hence

**PROBLEM/SOLUTION**

The author identifies a problem and provides solution(s).

Cue words: the question is, the problem is, therefore, if...then.

Figure 3  
Graphic Organizers for Expository Text Patterns

**DESCRIPTION/ENUMERATION**

Visual representation of ideas:

semantic web:

outline: I. \_\_\_\_\_

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

**SEQUENCE**

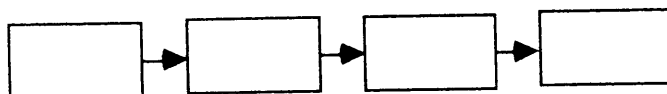
Visual representation of ideas:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

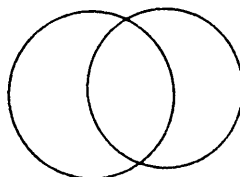
3. \_\_\_\_\_

flowchart:



**COMPARE/CONTRAST**

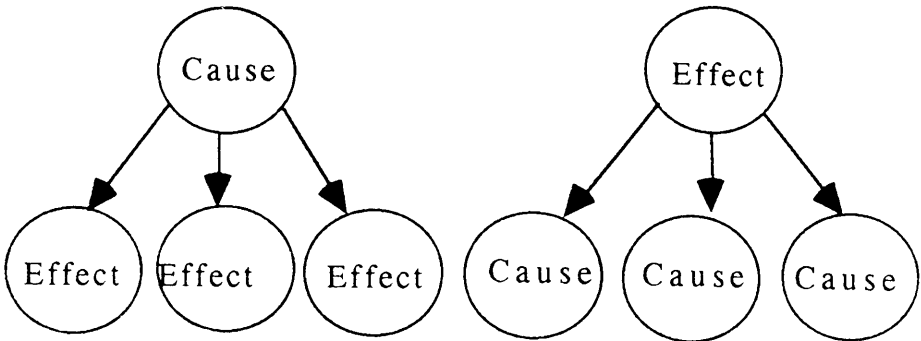
Visual representation of ideas:



Venn diagram

### CAUSE/EFFECT

Visual representation of ideas:



### PROBLEM/SOLUTION

Visual representation of ideas:

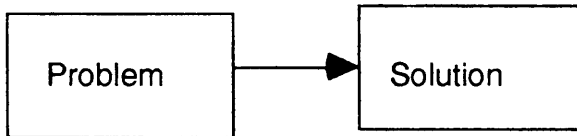


Figure 4  
Nonfiction Magazine Articles

**DESCRIPTION/ENUMERATION**

Sunquist, F. 1995, November. The lizard kings: Komodo dragons. *National Geographic World*, p. 243. Facts about the Komodo dragon, the world's largest lizard, are provided.

**CAUSE/EFFECT**

\_\_\_\_\_ 1995, June/July. Endangered species. *Kids Discover*, p. 2. More and more animals and plants are becoming extinct. This article highlights causes for this dilemma.

**SEQUENCE**

McMane, F. 1995, November. Legends. *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, p. 66. Reece "Goose" Tatum was the top clown of the Harlem Globetrotters from 1942-1955. This article highlights his youth and professional career.

**COMPARE/CONTRAST**

Coffey, P. March, 1996. Who's better? Jeremy Roenick vs. Joe Sakic. *Hockey Digest*, pp. 78-81. The personalities and professional accomplishments of these two hockey stars are compared and contrasted.

**PROBLEM/SOLUTION**

\_\_\_\_\_ March, 1996. It's all in the cards. *Beckett Baseball*, p. 11. Doug Melvin, General Manager for the Texas Rangers, was interested in luring two Cuban pitchers to his team. They had both defected from their home countries and information about them could not be found. Fortunately, by securing a set of Cuban baseball cards, Melvin was able to get the stats he needed to make his decision about these pitchers.

Figure 5  
Forms for Expository Discourse

advertisements  
announcements  
autobiographical sketches  
book jackets  
calendars  
directions  
commentaries  
editorials  
handbooks  
how-to's  
interviews  
invitations  
job descriptions  
journals  
letters  
memoirs  
newsletter articles  
observations  
pamphlets  
preparation for poster displays  
reports  
requests  
reviews of books, films, TV shows, documentaries  
songs  
speeches  
time capsules  
tributes

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# **One first grade teacher's experience with a literature-based reading series: A look at her first year**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to examine a first-grade, rural school teacher's use of a newly adopted literature-based reading series. The goal was not only to see how she used the materials but to also examine any struggles she experienced during her first year with a literature-based series. The participant/observer spent one day a week for an entire school year observing the teacher's reading class and interviewing the teacher at regular intervals. It was apparent in the interviews that this teacher had a positive attitude toward many aspects of the new series and believed that she had changed her methods and beliefs of teaching reading. However, classroom observations revealed that in fact she modified the materials to meet her epistemology. Although prior studies support that the literature-based basals are significantly different from previous editions, a change in reading instruction will only occur with greater teacher guidance.

## **A LOOK AT HER FIRST YEAR**

This study examines one first grade teacher's use of a newly adopted literature-based reading series. The teacher taught in a small, rural town in the Mid-South. The researcher served as a participant/observer and visited the classroom throughout the school year in order to observe the teacher's lessons with the newly adopted series and to interview the teacher and others involved in the educational context on a regular basis. The purpose of this study is to look at one teacher's implementation of a newly adopted basal reading series in light of her theoretical beliefs and pedagogical practices. The researcher also sought to examine any difficulties encountered by this teacher. This article will begin with a brief review of the research surrounding basal readers followed by a discussion of

the research methodology. The article ends with conclusions and implications.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since the popularization of basals in the 1840s (Smith, 1965), they have often been a source of criticism because of the quality of literature (Strickland, 1964), the controlled vocabulary (Chall, 1983) and the explicit instructions (Woodward, 1986). Reading researchers and educators have argued that the control of teaching reading lies with the basal publishers instead of with the teachers (Shannon, 1989) and that even pacing in the lessons is managed by administrators and not the classroom teachers (Shannon, 1990). Still many schools have relied on the basals during the last 40 years (Paris, Wixon, and Palincsar, 1986; Venezky, 1987).

As basals continues to be an important part of many classrooms, it is interesting that newer literature-based editions of basals use published literature, less controlled vocabulary and a slightly more suggestive tone in the teacher directions (Hoffman et al., 1994) than previous editions. The newer basal readers also recommend flexible small group reading, provide fewer questions, and contain very little pacing information for teachers (Hoffman et al., 1994). However, it is evident that the debate surrounding basals will continue even with the development of these newer editions (e.g., Goodman, Maras, and Birdseye, 1994). The question now is how will teachers implement a literature-based series with which they are unfamiliar.

Research shows that in contrast to urban and suburban teachers, teachers in rural areas are less confident about teaching with literature (Lehman, Allen and Freeman, 1990). If literature is used, the teachers feel more secure teaching from a published reading program, exploring literature with a structured sequential curriculum, and having grade level lists of books available for use. Since the literature-based basals contain literature, provide some structure, and contain lists of trade books which might be used with the basal stories, rural teachers might find them very appealing.

Most educational research takes place in suburban and urban areas, yet nearly two-thirds of the 15,600 public school districts in the United States are in rural areas (Trusock, 1994). Rural residents make up 42% of the functionally illiterate (Bailey, Daisey, Maes, and Spears, 1992). Since illiteracy is a prevalent problem in these areas, more research needs to be conducted in rural communities. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to take a closer look at one rural classroom in order to determine the complexities surrounding the implementation of a new literature-based reading series.

## METHOD

### *Context*

The context of this study is a school located in a small, rural community in the Mid-South with 181 students. It is the only elementary school in a town of 711. Approximately half of the parents are involved in agriculture (soybean, rice, cotton) while the other half work at factories in a nearby town. The socio-economic makeup of the school is lower-middle class. Approximately 50% of the students are White and 50% African-American.

### *Key Informant and Her Classroom*

The key informant for this study was a first-grade teacher, Mrs. Glasier, who was one of two first-grade teachers at the school. Mrs. Glasier had an undergraduate degree in education, had taught elementary school for 16 years, and was a lifetime resident of the community. In a previous study (Altieri, 1996), which analyzed the use of literature in the school, it was evident that the basal played an important role in this teacher's classroom. Mrs. Glasier expressed interest in the new basal series adopted by the school and suggested that the researcher spend the year in her classroom to see how she dealt with the new series.

Mrs. Glasier's class of 18 students had equal numbers of males and females. Approximately 50% of her students were African-Americans and 50% White. Six of her children received Chapter 1 services from special education. A typical day in this classroom began with reading and language arts and daily basal use. The rest of the day was broken up into other segmented periods of time for math, science/social studies, and spelling. A small number of trade books were kept in the back of the classroom, many of which were provided with the new reading series. The teacher had selected the texts from a list provided by the publishers. As a school-wide decision, all teachers used the same word list for vocabulary and spelling. Thus, the words suggested in the basal were the spelling words with no additional spelling book use.

### *Materials*

The teachers selected the 1993 literature-based basal series by Silver Burdette and Ginn. It was standard practice for the school to use a series for approximately eight years before adopting a new series. Previously the school had used the 1986 Houghton Mifflin Reading Series.

The teachers examined a variety of basal series during the basal selection process and voted on the one which they preferred. The 1993 Silver Burdette and Ginn was the series that the teachers chose. It was evident from interviewing numerous educators in the building

that the series was selected because it was a step towards “whole language” in their eyes. It appeared that the use of literature in the basals lead the teachers to feel that the texts were “whole language,” and they believed this selection would make them current in the delivery of reading instruction.

Prior to beginning the school year, the publishers provided a workshop in order to familiarize teachers with the materials. That was the only support provided by the publishers of the selected new series.

### *Design and Procedure*

This year long, qualitative study employed a naturalistic inquiry methodology (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Primary data sources were field notes and interviews. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1988) with the key informant at five different points in time. She was interviewed prior to the school year when the new series was originally selected. Then she was interviewed at four evenly spaced times throughout her first year of implementing the new series. The researcher also interviewed the children in the classroom and other people involved in the educational context. Notes were taken during the interviews by the researcher and later transcribed.

Field notes were gathered on a weekly basis by the researcher who served as a participant observer (Spradley, 1980) in the classroom for approximately three hours during the established reading time on a weekly basis. These visits began in August and lasted through May so that the entire year with the basal could be examined. Secondary data sources included artifacts and a field work journal (Spradley, 1979). Artifacts included copies of handouts, journal pages, and standardized test results.

During data analysis, the researcher looked for patterns through analysis of the primary data sources and then triangulated the findings whenever possible by examining across both primary and secondary sources of data. A constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) of fieldnotes and interviews was employed to determine underlying themes existing in the data. These themes enabled the researcher to develop and test hypotheses. This process focused data collection on subsequent visits. Member checks were used to verify or disconfirm information (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Finally, peer debriefing occurred on a regular basis throughout the study with a colleague experienced in literacy education and naturalistic research design. This allowed the researcher to discuss emerging hypotheses and to receive continuous feedback about the findings.

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Interviews with the teacher indicated she firmly believed that her philosophy of reading had changed during the course of the year. Initially, the teacher used the word "traditionalist" to refer to her views. She felt that because she "was a traditionalist," the new basal series might be difficult for her to use with the children. However, as the year progressed, it became evident through further discussions that she felt her teaching of reading was changing. By the end of the year Mrs. Glasier stated that she "should have done this stuff years ago." She felt she had been in a "rut," but now her teaching had changed a great deal. It was obvious from talking to her that she was comfortable with the materials at the end of the year, and that she felt she was current in her reading beliefs.

However, observations, and interviews revealed that her theoretical view of reading was not altered when she encountered new information which contradicted her way of viewing literacy development and literacy teaching early in the year. Instead, she assimilated the new information by changing the information to fit her epistemology of how reading should be done. Flexible grouping, text-based spelling words, student notebooks, and publisher provided trade books were all uncertainties confronting this teacher in the new basal series.

### *Flexible Grouping*

One suggestion in the text that caused concern for Mrs. Glasier was the flexible grouping suggested in the teacher's manual. She had used whole class reading instruction for several years, yet the new series often recommended using flexible small groups or partners for reading. In the fall, she tried flexible groups and appeared to not understand the philosophy behind this approach. She repeatedly expressed a dislike for small group or partner reading because she wanted to know what every student was doing during reading. Occasionally, at the end of the year she grouped students but usually only during free time. When groups were used during the preestablished reading time, she would still go around the room and individually make each child read the passage to her while groups were reading.

### *Readers Writers Notebook*

Similar patterns were evident when she made use of the student notebook. This is a consumable book that is similar to publisher supplied workbooks that often accompanied prior series. However, the notebooks differed from workbooks because the notebooks required a great deal more writing and often encouraged student drawing. Although researchers support allowing young children to



integrate drawing and writing (Altieri, 1995; Olson, 1992), it was evident that this teacher did not feel the drawing was necessary.

Initially, this teacher saw the notebooks as “a waste of money” and nothing but “blank pages,” and she missed the workbooks provided with the previous series. She had difficulty seeing value in a book with an entire page allowed for one question. Although the publishers appeared to be encouraging the reader to write and draw in response to the question, Mrs. Glasier felt that the pages often covered questions that could be done in a “10 minute oral activity.”

Mrs. Glasier did state that if the publishers said to do something, it was done. She believed they were the experts. The students proceeded to complete each of the pages in the order they occurred in the notebook. The publisher-provided notebooks appeared to focus less on isolated skills than workbooks. Instead, they involved drawing and writing. Although every page in the notebook was sequentially completed, when directions required students to draw and write a story, this teacher would often have students only complete the writing part before moving on to the next page. Briefly into the year, she began giving the children sentence starters for their stories on the blank pages. As time progressed, she even referred to the notebook as a workbook during class.

### *Spelling Words*

The new series also recommended using words from the stories, selected by the publisher, for spelling words. Even though these words appear to be more difficult than the traditional isolated word list provided in spelling workbooks, basal authors assume that students will find them easier to learn because the words are seen in a meaningful context on repeated occasions.

Prior to this school year, the teachers used a separate spelling book which contained word lists. Often lists such as these contain phonemically similar words. Once again, the teacher attempted to follow the suggestions provided with the new basals based on a school-wide mandate that this policy be followed. Shortly after the year began, she, like many other teachers at the school, encountered difficulties because parents were concerned that the words were too difficult and students seemed to have trouble spelling the words, which were less phonetically regular than past traditional spelling lists.

A few months later, she decided to make her own spelling lists from words in the stories. The chosen words tended to be phonetically regular and very similar to each other. She also chose some of the smaller words in the story. Evidently, she felt that she could now satisfy many of the stakeholders and still follow the publisher's idea that the words should come from the story.

### *Children's Literature*

Although the basal publishers allowed the teacher to select a number of trade books with this series, it was evident in Mrs. Glasier's classroom that this did not necessarily ensure the infusion of more children's literature into the curriculum. A previous study regarding this teacher's use of literature revealed that Mrs. Glasier used children's books to read aloud to the class. However the use of multiethnic literature was almost nonexistent. In fact, during the prior school year, she could not name any stories portraying people of diverse cultures that were read to her children or used in the classroom (Altieri, 1994). Since this occurred in a number of interviews held with teachers at the school, it appeared to be linked to the isolated nature of the area and the fact that they were unaware of current children's literature.

Initially, with the newly adopted basal series, the teacher continued to read aloud to the children as time allowed. Usually the books shared were ones provided by the basal publisher. During this time, it was evident that the publisher-provided books were more current than those the teacher previously used and represented more and diverse ethnic groups. However, as the school year progressed the teacher no longer read to the children during story time. It appeared to the researcher to be due in part to the number of options included in the teacher's manual. The teacher often stated she was "unsure which suggestions to use in the book." Thus, she appeared to try to use so many suggestions in the teacher's manual that very little time was left to actually read aloud to the class.

During an interview, Mrs. Glasier, acknowledged that she did use fewer trade books with the students in her class this year. She stated that she felt the literature provided in the basals was so good that she no longer felt the need to read other books to them.

The stories in basals do represent a variety of cultures and have been shown to be more engaging (McCarthy, et al., 1994). Thus for some teachers, especially those in isolated areas, the texts may provide opportunities for children to be exposed to more quality literature. This literature represents a variety of genres as well as a variety of cultures. However, it is also evident that some teachers may feel the basal stories are a replacement for trade books in the classroom.

Research supports the importance of using literature with children (Huck & Hepler, 1996; Manley, 1988; Norton, 1995; Smith and Bowers, 1989). By doing so, teachers have an opportunity to exemplify excellent reading, show their own love of books, and allow children personal choice in the selection of books read. Also, the publishers are encouraging the use of trade books by supplying them with the series. However, it appears that these books may not be used in the classroom as the publishers anticipated.

## EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Although the literature-based basals are significantly different from previously published reading series, researchers question what changes in pedagogical practices take place in classrooms which adopt them (Hoffman, et al., 1994). Basal readers play a key role in many classrooms today, so it is important to look at how the greatest gains can be achieved with these series. The literature-based basals make many good suggestions (e.g., integrated spelling and vocabulary, small group reading, and encouragement of writing and drawing), yet to merely present teachers with new materials is rarely enough to change a teacher's theoretical views or pedagogical practices (Hoffman, et al., 1994).

Some of the literature-based basal series provide quality multicultural trade books for the teachers and students in the classroom. This is extremely important as prior studies have shown that a lack of knowledge about (Thompson and Meeks, 1990) and difficulty in obtaining multicultural literature (Reimer, 1992) may influence the extent to which multicultural literature is used in the classroom. The importance of using such texts with children has been well documented (Altieri, 1996; Bishop, 1991; Harris, 1993). Since rural schools are often isolated, these publisher-provided trade books can assure that teachers have access to quality multicultural stories to share with children. However, some teachers may not realize the value of such texts and thus still may not use them in the best possible manner.

Results of this study suggest that important constraints influenced the degree of change that took place. Most notable constraints included the teacher's philosophy, and the limited amount of support provided by the basal publishers. Although Mrs. Glasier followed the teacher edition closely, she did not appear to substantially change her pedagogical practices. She was initially enthusiastic about the new series, but she quickly encountered difficulties with it.

Research indicates that teachers need to know how to employ new methods in their classroom (Guskey, 1989). More important, teachers also need to understand the philosophy behind the practices. While Guskey's research suggests that lack of knowledge is a major obstacle in change, this experienced teacher knew how to use small groups, assign spelling words, and complete notebook pages. Rather, the problem appeared to be her theoretical beliefs of reading instruction. She did not understand the philosophy behind the methods suggested in the literature-based basals and the value of these practices. Preservice and inservice education should address these areas.

While research shows that support systems are an essential part of any program under change (Scharer, 1992), rural teachers often

are professionally isolated (Erickson, 1995). These teachers may not have convenient access to a university or workshops necessary to keep them up to date. Not only must teachers be aware of new strategies, but teachers must also understand the philosophy behind these methods.

It is difficult to develop this knowledge when teachers are provided with new materials but very little information on the background of the materials. This teacher only received assistance from the literature-based basal publishers at a meeting after the adoption of the basal series, even though most questions and concerns occur after implementation of new materials. Other research has also shown that, in general, the literature-based basal publishers are providing minimal support with the new materials (Hoffman, et al., 1998). This problem seems to be compounded when one thinks of isolated rural areas, where teachers may not have access to a great deal of other support.

While rural teachers are often left to themselves to find a solution to their problems (Killian and Byrd, 1988), research shows that teachers learn a great deal from each other (Altieri, 1994; Roberts, 1982). Allowing teachers to work in teams might be beneficial. Taking the time to help teachers grasp the theory behind any new reading series is essential, and small discussion groups facilitated by literary experts might help. Distance learning technology may also help teachers work through new materials. With one-third of our teachers teaching in rural schools today (Erickson, 1995), it is essential that efforts be made to meet their needs. Beliefs of individual teachers must be addressed to make lasting instructional changes (Pajares, 1992).

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## **Benefits of literacy field experiences: Three views**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Three professors of literacy education reflected upon their varied field experiences with preservice teachers enrolled in their reading/language arts methods courses. After describing each field experience and discussing its impact on classroom teachers, elementary students, college students, and college professors, authors offer some general conclusions regarding literacy field experience.

"That child would not even pick up a pencil. You cannot imagine what it means to him to have that consistent one-on-one caring from another adult. Now look at him. He seems so much more engaged, so animated, with a light in his eyes!"

This comment was made by a classroom teacher who had observed the changes in one of her elementary students after he had worked with a preservice teacher in a literacy field experience.

### **IMPORTANCE OF FIELD EXPERIENCES**

Few would argue about the importance of field experiences to enhance teacher education programs, particularly those that engage preservice teachers with students for sustained lengths of time. Linking these field experiences to actual methods courses is important. Too often field experiences that are not part of a specific course focus on passive observation of students, rather than connecting what is learned in methods courses to classroom practice with actual elementary students (Lanier and Little, 1986). Students whose field experiences are integrated into methods course content can see connections between what they are learning about teaching and how this is actually applied with students in the context of a real classroom (Lemlech and Kaplan, 1990). It is within the context of learning and practicing that preservice teachers actually construct their own knowledge about pedagogy.



Educators have begun to look at constructivist learning theories for guidance in preservice teacher programs. Research has brought into focus the discrepancies between what teacher educators “practice” and what they “preach.” Many methods courses are still predominated by lecture, some small group interactions, planning for a mythical class, and micro-teaching experiences with peers as students and/or a video camera to record the “perfect lesson,” or occasionally going to a school to try that lesson with a classroom of students the preservice teachers do not know and probably will not see again. But experiences that include sustained contact with children who depend on preservice teachers for some part of their learning provide those teachers with opportunities to construct their knowledge of teaching (Bufkin and Bryde, 1996; Kroll and LaBoskey, 1996; Marshall, 1996). Fosnot (1989) states that “The learner must have experiences with hypothesizing and predicting, manipulating objects, posing questions, researching answers, imagining, investigating, and inventing, in order for new constructions to be developed” (p. 20). It is only through active engagement with children that preservice teachers can hypothesize and predict (plan lessons); manipulate objects (launch those plans); pose questions and research answers (develop sustained inquiry-based relationships with children); and imagine, investigate, and invent (reflect on, discuss, consider, research resources, and create more plans). Thus, preservice teachers have the opportunity to construct their knowledge of a healthy teaching/learning culture.

#### PURPOSE OF INQUIRY

We, the three authors of this article, seek ways to facilitate our university students’ learning in literacy methods courses. We all teach elementary literacy methods courses at the same university. Kathy and Wilma teach a six-hour reading/language arts methods block. Jarene teaches a three hour introductory reading course. We have each set up field experiences in these courses in different ways and at three different elementary schools. We initiated our inquiry to consider the results of our varied field experiences. We each felt comfortable with the format of our field experiences, but we are always interested in improving the experiences for all involved, particularly the students and teachers in the public schools. We sought information from interviews of the inservice teachers at the three different elementary schools as well as our own observations of children and conversations with preservice teachers. We chose to examine our field experiences and outcomes so that we could be more responsive to our classes, our students, and ultimately, elementary school students.

Our discussions and observations covered two semesters and two groups of preservice teachers with each professor. The classroom teachers and elementary students were the same each semester, so

reflections by classroom teachers encompassed a year of experience. Because of the difference in course requirements, six credit hours versus three credit hours, Jarene's preservice teachers were with elementary students for less sustained time than Kathy's and Wilma's classes. However, all of our experiences provided all of us different ideas and processes to consider.

This article shares our reflections upon our own teaching/learning practices based on the various components of information. We reflect as we ask our students to do. We are hopeful that other professors might similarly share reflection on their practices, thus improving the process of educating future teachers.

For the duration of the article, the following terms will be used: Preservice teachers refers to our undergraduate university students. Students refers to the elementary students with whom we worked. Teachers refers to the certified teachers in the schools that participated in our practicum experiences. College professors will refer to Kathy, Wilma, and Jarene, the three professors who participated and authored this study.

#### KATHY'S VIEW

Half of my preservice teachers worked with second graders while the other half worked with fifth graders. Preservice teachers wrote a note describing who they were and then the second and fifth-grade teachers gave these notes to their students. The students wrote letters about themselves to the preservice teachers the week before field experiences began so that the preservice teachers knew their names and some of their interests, and had a sample of their writing. My preservice teachers then worked with the elementary students for one hour weekly for 10 weeks applying many of the reading and writing strategies that we had talked about in class. In preparation for the sessions, preservice teachers were asked to write goals/objectives (linked to the school's reading or language arts goals) and plans for the day. After teaching, they were to write a reflection about what happened, what went well, what didn't go well, what the child had learned, what the preservice teacher had learned, and what they might do next time. I also worked with two students in the fifth grade. I modeled the types of lessons I was preparing with my own preservice teachers and also reflected on how I might improve instruction based upon what I learned from the elementary students.

#### *Teachers*

During and after the experience, I interviewed the teachers about their views of this type of field experience.

The fifth grade teacher was initially reluctant to have the preservice teachers in her classroom. She said, "I was anxious and nervous because of my class. They are so low-functioning in reading and

writing. I was happy but worried. I didn't want to scare any of your preservice teachers away. I was also nervous about the liability — I have violent, angry kids that behave worse for others than for me. But I wanted them to have the chance to work one-to-one with others and now I and they are anxious for each time. We look forward to it."

The second grade teacher was excited about the one-to-one contact. "I was excited about my students' learning — reading fluently and proficiently with a partner in an interactive manner."

During the process of field experience, I asked the classroom teacher about the value of this experience. The second grade teacher said, "The best teaching is not teaching at all. I sit back and observe my students. They are doing wonderful things. For an hour they are doing their thing and I learn from that. I don't want to watch too much and give the message that I don't trust them (the preservice teachers and the students). I get glimpses, though."

The fifth grade teacher said, "I get new strategies and ideas for the classroom. I show my kids that I trust them with other adults. I have taught my kids responsibility. I have the confidence to have other adults come in and see the mess in my room. It lets me look at my kids through a slightly different lens. They need time to themselves without me around. They tell me later about their projects, that they are purposeful, and these projects give me ideas to use in class."

### *Preservice Teachers*

The preservice teachers learned about weekly planning and making instructional decisions based upon the individual students they were working with. Some of them asked me to help them find a way to motivate their students to read and write. My response was almost always, "What is this child interested in?" If the preservice teachers didn't know, I told them to find out. If they did, I asked them to find books on that topic and go from there.

One of my preservice teachers had a second-grade partner who was really interested in bacon. (apparently bacon was this child's favorite food and he talked about bacon non-stop to his preservice teacher.) I gave my preservice teacher a copy of the book *Don't Forget the Bacon* by Pat Hutchins to read to his student. He returned the book to me at the end of the semester and told me that they had read the book every time he worked with his student. It prompted them to work on reading fluency, as well as rhyming words (the story is about a boy who gets his grocery list mixed up because he forgets his original list and thinks of rhyming words for the listed words instead).

Another preservice teacher found out that her student was really interested in dogs. They spent much of the semester gathering information on dogs for a card game they made up using these cards.

Preservice teachers learned that they need to get to know their students and what topics interest them. They also learned to adapt their plans according to the needs of the children and their strengths

and weaknesses. Sometimes the preservice teachers worked in groups with their peers and other children so that they could have group discussions. But mostly they worked alone with their student, cultivating their own teaching styles and helping the children with their reading and writing.

I had asked my preservice teachers to do whatever reading and writing they were asking their students to do, too, because I believe in the power of modeling and demonstrating our own reading and writing strategies. Several of the preservice teachers didn't do this initially, but rather sat and watched the elementary student work. Each one of these preservice teachers wrote on their lesson reflections that they were going to do the work themselves the next time, too, because they felt the elementary students felt like they were being watched. They also said they got bored just sitting there and wanted to be more involved themselves.

At the end of the semester, several of the preservice teachers who worked with the fifth graders told me that they had originally wanted to work with young children, but that this experience had made them appreciate older children. They now wanted to student teach with older students.

### *Elementary Students*

The elementary students were sad on our last day. Many of them gave their addresses to the preservice teachers in thank-you notes and cards. Some of them really connected with their preservice teacher. The second grade teacher said, "Chris (second grade student) has put lots of his writing done with his partner in his portfolio. He writes better with his partner than with me. His partner gives him confidence."

The elementary students were also exposed to different teaching ideas and styles. The second grade teacher said, "They see different teaching styles of adults. They see the process of education and fresh ideas. The one-to-one projects are much more beneficial to them."

The fifth grade teacher said, "The kids look forward to this time and will be sad when it's over. The kids willingly work on projects. They really care about the projects and want others to be proud of them. They are more interested in reading and seem to have more self-esteem."

### *College Professor*

I worked with two students from the fifth grade throughout the semester. I think it is important that I model reading and writing strategies with elementary students for my own preservice teachers. I always learn from the experience and I enjoy working with the children. I often shared with my college class what I was doing with my students. For instance, both my fifth graders liked basketball so we read some informational books about basketball and then wrote our

own alphabet book of basketball. I showed my preservice teachers our finished product. Several of them then did alphabet books with their elementary students.

The fifth grade teacher had this to say about my working with two of her students: "I like that you work with kids in my classroom. Most of the time the two you work with struggle with reading and writing. Now they are held up, as if I trust them to work with the professor, as if they are one up on the other kids. They also get to know a college professor. They learn that you are real, that college is not a scary place, but rather a place made up of real people."

This fifth grade teacher has one year of experience and is currently pursuing her master's degree. I think she saw the value of my working with the children in another way too. She said, "You work with the kids and I like that. I've wanted to ask some of my professors, 'Have you been in a classroom lately?'" You cannot teach a teacher if you don't teach yourself. It gives you credibility. The idealism of college isn't applicable. You have to see what really works."

The limitation of my working with elementary students was that I had only limited time to observe my preservice teachers working with their elementary students. I was able to observe the preservice teachers working with fifth graders, since I was working with fifth graders also and we were all in the same classroom. However, I only observed the preservice teachers working with second graders when my fifth grade students were absent.

#### WILMA'S VIEW

Because I am concerned about preservice teachers learning to adapt lessons to diverse proficiencies and ethnic backgrounds, the field experience in my course had preservice teachers working with small groups of three to seven elementary students in literacy once a week for 12 weeks. Each session was about an hour long with a short time before for general questions and announcements and a time after for debriefing and discussion. Preservice teachers worked with intermediate students in the first six-week block and primary students in the second six-week block. All students in the elementary school were included in the field experience and students from self-contained resource and ESL rooms joined the groups for this hour each week. Thus, preservice teachers were required to plan for a small group of students with diverse strengths, needs and literacy proficiencies. Prior to the first session, preservice teachers and elementary students had exchanged letters once to get to know each other and to see each others' writing.

I required that preservice teachers use children's literature as the foundation for their lessons, choosing literature to fit the interests and proficiencies of their students. Sometimes that entailed having several different pieces of literature. Preservice teachers read aloud

and had students write each week —much of which was done in dialogue journals. Preservice teachers also developed their plans using at least one district language arts and/or reading goals/objective each week. The specific objective was up to preservice teachers' discretion and selected according to chosen literature and student needs. Two plans were handed in so that one could be left at the school for teachers to see as a type of accountability measure. A teacher-liaison collected, stored and made available those plans. Preservice teachers wrote anecdotal records about student progress and journal entries each week after the teaching session. Journal entries were informal reflections about the usefulness of their lessons and students' responses. I responded each week in these journals.

### *Teachers*

The following reflections were gleaned from interviews with one intermediate resource teacher, one intermediate classroom teacher, one primary ESL teacher, and one primary classroom teacher.

Each of the teachers interviewed expressed enthusiasm upon first hearing about the preservice teachers coming to work with children in the school. However, they each expressed belief that other teachers in the school were not so eager. Prior experiences with field-experience students that usually involved very short contact time and a teaching agenda that fit the university curriculum rather than the elementary curriculum had left them concerned. After the first couple of weeks, all teachers were pleasantly surprised and were really excited about the program. Linda noted, "I can say that I think that having the UNO students here creates a little bit of excitement for us as a staff. It creates a real positive feeling on those days that we know that you are coming. Just in the morning, you know, people say, 'Oh yea, that's right, we have GROUP today,' and its not like, 'Oh, brother, we have GROUP today.'"

Whether or not classroom teachers gained directly from the experience depended on the individual teacher. One teacher suggested that the main benefit for teachers was an extra hour of planning time. The ESL teacher noted, "I imagine that most of us are filling a facilitator role or using it as a time for doing something that we want to do." However, each teacher mentioned ideas they'd picked up for literature to use and ways to use that literature. Dawn, behavior disorder resource teacher commented, "It adds variety to our reading program. It is also fun for the kids and something different. It breaks away from the monotonous. Gives us opportunities to see new things maybe that the teachers come up with. At one point, I noticed one sixth-grade teacher pulling several trade books from the shelf. She commented that, 'Seeing all the good books your students use reminded me that I have so many that I don't get around to using. I want to at least have them out for kids to read along with their basal lessons.'"

Teachers did come to the facilitator and ask to see the preservice teachers' lesson plans because, "One of the preservice teachers in my room used a great book and had a great lesson with it. I think that will fit in really well with ..." The facilitator planned to collate all plans into a notebook over the summer to have available for teachers as a resource the following year. She commented that teachers feel really swamped for time and, even though they'd like to use more literature, they can't find the time to locate good books to accompany objectives and/or interests. Thus, the lesson plans delivered each week are an aid to teachers.

Teachers also commented about the value of watching their students interact with other adults. They were able to take time to really observe individual students without worrying about the rest of the class. Linda, second-grade teacher, especially appreciated that opportunity. "I know I have stood and watched and, you know the boy I am worried about, and wonder about if he has ADHD, and I saw him doing things over and over again. It gave me a chance to see him interact with another adult to see if he behaves the same with her."

### *Preservice Teachers*

Preservice teachers talked most about planning and using those plans with real children and then getting to know a group of students and planning according to their needs. The diversity of needs and strengths, even in small groups, provided some real-class planning. Finding appropriate learning activities and literature was a challenge. Preservice teachers learned that some of the best plans bomb, and teachers have to be flexible and change on the spot. I heard several preservice teachers say, "My lesson just wasn't working today, and I learned I could change it in my head and to on to do something better."

Preservice teachers learned to over-plan and be ready to use all or none of those plans while learning about timing — some activities took too long and they had to stop before they were done. Other times they ran out of things to do (especially with primary children) and needed to have useful time fillers. Linda, second grade teacher, noted "The preservice teachers, I think, see the value of planning your lesson and carrying it out. Hopefully, they are self-evaluating what they have done. That's valuable. I think that doing that in a small group is different from a one-to-one situation."

Preservice teachers often talked with each other and me about their students and their lessons. If something did or didn't help children learn, they shared and others learned. Although collaboration was informal, I encouraged students to share as much as possible. Dawn, resource teacher, suggested that peer support was one vital piece of the field experience in this format. She had experienced both the whole-class experience and going to schools on her own when she was in college. She supported our plan, "...the whole

attitudes of the (preservice) teachers. There is just, you have more confidence when the whole class is with you, I think. It just kind of helps. Even the kids, the kids have more confidence, and it is not just so structured. It is a lot more fun, I think for both sides. I remember just being petrified. Well, you just don't have that confidence, you know. Peer support is important for college students, too."

Sessions with intermediate students were planned around a theme, jointly chosen by elementary students and their preservice teacher. Preservice teachers learned that students who have some investment in the topic and their reading and writing activities are often motivated to participate. Preservice teachers also learned the value of writing with and responding in writing to their students. Many very reluctant writers wrote more and more as the sessions progressed — at least in part because their preservice teacher always wrote back. That was frequently the first thing students wanted to do — read what their preservice teacher had written to them. Preservice teachers also learned first-hand about diversity of proficiencies and emerging literacy stages. Experiences with two different grade levels also gave them some understanding of how needs vary with age, and many found they really enjoyed intermediate students, even though they once thought they would be "afraid" of older kids.

Preservice teachers had to learn to orchestrate learning in a group. Since the elementary students usually wanted to talk and share all their news from the week, their preservice teachers had to find ways to respectfully draw that to a close and get on with the lesson. Furthermore, some children did not cooperate all the time, so we had the chance to discuss methods for facilitating a positive learning environment — even on a small scale. Behaviors were occasionally a concern, too, and preservice teachers had the chance to learn first-hand about strategies for avoiding power struggles, discouraging "bossy" students, being firm with uncooperative students, continually inviting reluctant students to participate, helping students not play with supplies, and many, many other real-life decision-making opportunities. Linda, ESL teacher, saw changes in preservice teachers "management" of groups of students. "Towards the end, it [management] did get better. Because at first they would have way too much to do. Another person did not have quite enough to do. Some of the kids that have problems are just some of the kids that just plain old have problems so it wasn't the teacher's fault."

### *Elementary Students*

Everyone mentioned that children were very enthused about seeing their preservice teachers. They got to read and hear good literature each week and be involved in small-group literacy activities. In a few instances, preservice teachers were able to connect with students that their regular teachers had not. A particularly moving incident involved a second grader whose teacher and ESL teacher thought



might be unable to read or write. He connected with his preservice teachers, chose to try a long part to read and succeeded. His teacher came along at the right time to observe this and wept for joy. She told me later that this student kept going from there. Some intermediate students had resisted writing for their classroom teachers and wrote quite a lot for their preservice teachers. In another instance, a fifth grader seemed to want to impress his preservice teacher with his reading and proceeded to read a couple of books during that six weeks to share. Though he didn't continue at quite that same rate, his teacher tells us he did continue to read and consider himself a reader — a change in attitude.

Because of the small group setting, some students, particularly those from a Behavior Disorder resource room, were successful working with peers in ways they had not been for some time. Very diverse groups of students worked together, came to really like another adult, and grew in literacy skills at the same time. Leslie, primary ESL teacher, noticed that her students "are more attentive when they listen to stories. They are more open towards new people; they don't hang on to me as much." Even the social was important. Dawn said, "I think the number one thing for my students would have to be the social. They just really enjoy meeting their teachers and seeing them every week, getting together with other classmates in the school that they aren't normally interacting with."

### *College Professor*

Since the preservice teachers and their groups were spread over at least half of the school building, I chose not to teach a small group, but went from room to room to observe. Some of the time I had a graduate assistant come with me and observe as well. She then gave her comments, suggestions, and ideas, as well as I did. Often when I was roaming into the different rooms, I stopped to talk with teachers. I made sure they saw me as a team player and one who valued their expertise and worked to help them realize I am also a teacher who cares a great deal about children. I'm fully aware that many public school teachers are skeptical of professors' understanding their jobs, so one important gain for me was trust from teachers. By being highly visible, I was able to move into discussions and hear some of their concerns and suggestions. I also had the opportunity to notice a variety of activities that children responded to with positive attitudes and those that seemed to go nowhere. Nancy (primary teacher) weighed the possibility of my working directly with students against the way I did it and said she preferred this because she didn't believe preservice teachers would get to see me model anyway ...they were busy with their own groups. She further commented that "I appreciate when you come in and I can say to you, 'Now I am wondering about that group over there,' or 'this is what I am noticing here or

there.” Since there was not time to talk with the preservice teachers, I became the messenger between the two groups.

Terry, intermediate teacher and liaison, seemed to believe the most important piece for professors was to see that teachers have concerns beyond theories and lesson plans. “Professors need to be in the classroom and know what is important to teachers — what they are worried about. Professors need to be aware of the types of requirements and restrictions that teachers need to work around.” She and others expressed frustration about the unreal demands in college for writing the perfect plan or making a huge project that is very unrealistic for “the real world.” “Teaching is the smallest part of what I do every day,” Terry said. And she felt she was made to believe that she had to do what she planned in college. Leslie felt she had been humiliated in college and not respected. She felt this program, with the professor right there with preservice teachers, indicated a greater level of respect than she had experienced and she was glad.

Being spread over half the building was also a part of the difficulty. Not every preservice teacher was having a marvelous time each session, and the logistics made it hard for me to spend enough time observing to be able to advise as much as I would like. I also found that when teachers wanted to talk, it took time away from my observations. I’m also trying to find ways to give more effective feedback to preservice teachers about their teaching. I felt that was a gap in this experience that I hope to fill in the future.

#### JARENE’S VIEW

Each of 26 preservice teachers taking an introduction to reading course was assigned to work with one second grade student from one classroom in a public elementary school. Since there were only 23 second graders and 26 preservice teachers, ESL students came to the second grade classroom during each of the preservice teacher’s visits to receive one-on-one reading instruction from the three extra preservice teachers. Reading instruction occurred during six one-hour, once-a-week visits. Preservice teachers prepared reading and writing lessons which focused primarily on individual needs of each second grade student. The lessons also incorporated the school’s curriculum as outlined by the classroom teacher. Before the visits began, letters were exchanged between second grade students and preservice teachers as each participant wrote an introduction accompanied by a computer-generated photograph. Preservice teachers used the second grade writing samples to make initial assessment about reading and writing needs for the first instructional visits. In addition, the classroom teacher provided information on the story and reading skills she was presenting that week. These classroom skills were reinforced during the instructional visits when they coincided with the needs of individual second graders.

There were four types of written feedback. First, the preservice teachers' lesson plans were checked and approved with written feedback from the university professor before each classroom visit. Second, each preservice teacher wrote an assessment of student performance and learning after each lesson directed for the classroom teacher in an assessment notebook. The classroom teacher read and responded in writing to each assessment and the assessment notebooks were returned to the preservice teachers in time to use the feedback to prepare the next lesson. Third, the second graders wrote and drew in a writing notebook the last 10-15 minutes of each visit. Preservice teachers collected these writing notebooks, used the product for assessment to guide the next lesson plan, and responded in writing to each second grader's entry. Preservice teachers and elementary studies discussed the writing notebooks along with the feedback during each visit. Fourth, the preservice teachers wrote reflections about their own teaching: about what happened; what went well; what didn't go well; what they had learned; and what they might do next time.

### *Teachers*

The following information was gleaned from my participation in the experience, observations of preservice teachers and second graders, and an interview with the second grade classroom teacher.

The second grade classroom teacher had never collaborated with a university professor before in this manner and although hesitant at first, was pleased with the results. "I was hesitant because I didn't want to waste any time with poorly prepared lessons and I was worried about the noise. However, I could sense when you asked for my reading objectives and sent me an agenda of the proposed visits that things were organized. After that first visit, I saw that every student was engaged in learning and the noise was not a problem. I tell everybody how wonderful it worked." She also said she felt like she had a real part in preparing preservice teachers. After the six visits, she even came to the university campus and presented for the first time to preservice teachers on ways she taught reading. She asked for more university collaborative visits. She said she told other elementary teachers how well the project worked. She asked for articles and new children's books that she could use in her classroom. She said she got ideas and new strategies and games to use with her second graders by watching the preservice teachers teach as she walked around the room during their visits.

### *Elementary Students*

The classroom teacher mentioned unexpected benefits she saw her second graders receiving. "That child wouldn't even pick up a pencil. You can't imagine what it means to him to have that consistent one-on-one caring from another adult... I mean if you knew what his experience has been, there is no father at home and his

mother is in jail for drugs... Now look at him. He seems so much more engaged, so animated with a light in his eyes.”

She also said that her second graders were sad to see the visits come to an end. “At the beginning, they thought the six weeks sounded like such a long time, and now it’s suddenly over. My students don’t want to miss school because they know their college student is coming... They talk all through the week about ‘That’s the day the college students come.’”

The second graders were engaged in one-on-one reading and writing and remembered what was discussed during the lessons. “During the week, one of my students will say, ‘That’s what we did with my preservice teacher,’ or ‘My preservice teacher told me that,’” The second graders were eager and excited about the reading and read books during the week that they had read with the preservice teachers.

### *Preservice Teachers*

Preservice teachers said that the preparation and delivery of the six instructional visits about reading and writing was the best part of the course. They also said they learned a great deal from the guest presentation from the classroom teacher after the six visits. It was relevant having just spent so much time teaching in that teacher’s room, as well as having observed the teacher’s teaching for 10 minutes before the start of each instructional session. Preservice teachers were disappointed when the visits came to an end after establishing a bond with each of their elementary students. Preservice teachers’ lesson plans became more specialized in designing instruction to meet individual students’ needs. They said they were much more aware of the wide variety of abilities and reading and writing development all in one classroom, even in second grade, and that there really was no such thing as a “second grade level.” Preservice teachers began to think of ways to design and manage differentiated instruction for an entire classroom of individual students. They said they really enjoyed and benefited from the classroom teacher’s regular written feedback and that they realized the importance of their regular, authentic feedback to the second graders in the writing notebooks. Preservice teachers began to consult directly with the classroom teacher in informal conferences after each instructional visit and said they began to gain confidence in their own instructional decisions. In addition, preservice teachers’ confidence in their own abilities to make professional decisions increased as they were required to include connections or ideas they’d gained from professional readings and in reflecting about their own teaching.

### *College Professor*

I gained confidence that collaborative teaching with classroom teachers is a very effective way to engage in the preparation of

preservice teachers. I learned more about the value of written ongoing assessment and feedback loops, about the learning process between all of the participants, namely elementary students, preservice teachers, classroom teachers and university professors. I learned how to be more sensitive to and how to address others' concerns, such as incorporating the needs of the classroom teacher and the school culture (using name tags and being on time, prepared and quiet in the halls, asking permission, writing notes to parents, letting the school secretary know) into the project and specific lesson plans.

### SOME GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Although each one of us set up the field experiences in different ways, there was overlap in many of the benefits. All three of us mentioned the importance of the elementary students and the college students writing to one another before the face-to-face interaction actually began. By reading a letter, preservice teachers learned about their prospective students and had some basis from which to do initial planning. They also benefited from planning with specific students' strengths and weaknesses in mind.

In all instances, we mentioned that the teachers learned some strategies and ideas from our preservice teachers. They saw it as an opportunity to gain information and try different books with children as well.

Each of us noted that at least one elementary student made a connection with the preservice teachers that enhanced his/her attitudes about reading and writing. Elementary students felt special because they were working with an adult who cared about them and wanted them to become better writers and readers.

The preservice teachers seemed to benefit from the added reflection and the input from their peers as they planned and carried out their lessons. They had a sounding board to go to if things weren't going well. They had other people to turn to for help beyond just the professor. This community spirit really enhanced the field experience for all of us. Telling preservice teachers to be reflective is one thing; encouraging and enabling them to be reflective is preferable.

Finally, we all noted that the teachers trusted us and respected us for bringing our preservice teachers to their schools. The relationship between teachers and professors can be an uncomfortable one, but in all three cases we felt as if we were all partners in enhancing learning, for our preservice teachers as well as the elementary students. We have all been asked to continue the field experiences at these three different schools, which is a tribute to the partnership that has been established between a university and a local school district.

There were some problems associated with the field experiences by each one of us. Kathy struggled with juggling her own tutoring of elementary students and observing her preservice teachers as they

worked with children. Wilma found it difficult to get the whole school involved in the inclusion of her preservice teachers in each classroom. Jarene found it challenging to gain entry into her school, as this school had not provided prior field experiences for preservice teachers. All three of us gave up class time so that we could be at the elementary schools during the time that our college class was scheduled to meet. Some would argue that we lost valuable "content" time through this practice. That may be true, but we think that the benefits of real life experiences for our preservice teachers built a context for what we were each teaching in our literacy classes.

We continue to alter our field experiences as we seek to improve our teacher education program. Even though we each set up our field experiences differently, we agree on some important tenets of field experience. First, we think that being reflective about this process is an important part of improving the product. Secondly, we think the notion of practicing what we preach is particularly important for not only preservice teachers to see, but also classroom teachers. And finally, we think that preservice teachers are more apt to remember their field experiences and learn from them when they are allowed to construct their own learning in a realistic classroom setting.

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# **The social contexts of tutoring: Mentoring the older at-risk student**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative research study targeted fourth grade at-risk children in a culturally diverse elementary school in a mid-sized city in the southwestern United States. The purpose of the study was to describe the nature of social interactions within the context of tutorial sessions and to identify common characteristics of highly-effective tutors in their interactions with older, at-risk readers.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Much attention has focused on the needs of at-risk students and the necessity of early intervention programs to circumvent the cycle of failure before a child reaches the intermediate grades. (Clay, 1979, 1985; Johnston & Allington, 1990). Chapter One research (Carter, 1984; Kennedy, Birman, & Demaline, 1986) confirms that premise and suggests that remediation of learning problems after the primary grades is generally ineffective. This research contributes to new understandings about the importance of the early childhood years and gives impetus to President Clinton's America Reads Challenge. This nonpartisan effort involves community volunteers in one-on-one tutoring to assure that all children have every opportunity to become literate before the end of grade three.

Although the ideal is to assure early intervention for all at-risk readers before they reach the fourth grade, there are many upper elementary and middle school students who are denied successful early intervention and are failing to develop essential literacy skills. Barriers such as negative attitudes toward reading, lack of motivation, internalization of poor habits, and lack of solid word recognition strategies make it unlikely that research studies will be able to post significant gains with students beyond grade three (Cloer & Pearman, 1993). Perhaps these difficulties older with children account for the scarcity of effective research-based models of delivery for successful tutorial



programs with older, at-risk readers. Wasik & Slavin (1993) conducted an extensive analysis of one-on-one adult-delivered instruction for at-risk children, discussing precise models of delivery. Their review found a preponderance of studies focusing on early intervention while only three studies targeted students in grade three or above (Bausell, Moody, & Walzl, 1972; Fresko & Eisenberg, 1983; Shaver & Nuhn, 1971).

Reading researchers identified several key components as essential for effective tutoring or one-on-one compensatory supplemental programs; however, most research focuses on early intervention. Wasik (1998) discussed the important factors of consistency and intensity in tutoring younger children. It is important that a child form a trusting relationship with the tutor, so most programs assign the same tutor to meet with a child each week. In fact, some researchers identified this positive, caring relationship between child and tutor/caregiver as the single most important factor in the success of supplementary programs (Vendell, Humow, Posner, 1997). Successful tutors, it seems, are aware of the critical importance of building positive relationships based on trust and respect. These tutors understand that affirming interactions result in a desire to please the tutor, increased motivation to learn, and more cooperative attitudes.

The importance of social interactions for reading development is well established (Guthrie et al., 1993; Slavin, 1990; Wood, 1990; Mullis et al., 1993). Gambrell (1996) connected social interactions and motivation for reading. When students in her research study were asked what they liked best about a challenging, new reading program designed to increase young children's motivation to read, frequent responses focused on social interactions related to books and reading. Very little research has identified the essence, content, and characteristics of social interactions, particularly as they relate to the tutoring relationship, mentoring style of the tutor, and their effects on the child's literacy success. In one of the few research studies published to date, Juel (1996), addressed the aspect of social interactions and tutoring. She studied factors which contributed to effective literacy instruction in a tutorial program for thirty first-grade, at-risk children. Juel pointed out that children in the more successful dyads experienced significantly more scaffolded reading and writing experiences than the children in the less successful dyads. Juel (1996) also pointed out that this scaffolding, an essential element for effective literacy tutoring, occurred through social contexts and interactions.

Given the strong research base with respect to the importance of social interaction in reading acquisition for younger children, there is a need for more research which focuses on the role of that factor in successful tutorial programs for older reluctant readers. Closer analysis of the social interactions between tutor and child may determine what, if any, relationship exists between the mentoring style of the tutor and the child's willingness to cooperate with his/her tutor,

and the child's motivation to read and/or write during tutorial sessions.

In an effort to provide a closer analysis of the social context of tutoring with older readers, this research reports on targeted fourth-grade, at-risk children in a culturally diverse elementary school in a mid-sized city in southwestern United States. The study sought to answer the following questions: 1) what is the nature of social interactions within the context of tutorial sessions with older, at-risk readers; 2) how can naturally occurring social interactions between highly effective tutors and tutees be described? and 3) do highly effective tutors share common characteristics as they interact with at-risk children?

This article will describe four literacy success stories, four case study pairings of Caucasian college student volunteer tutors and at-risk children: two African American boys, one Hispanic American boy and one Caucasian girl. The efforts of these tutors and their students all resulted in significant literacy gains. This article will describe, in detail, the social interaction of these dyads and then identify common themes, characteristics, and categories, which emerged from data analysis.

## THE SCHOOL SETTING AND THE TUTORS

Scott Elementary School (pseudonym used) was the setting for the volunteer literacy tutorial program involving a group of seventeen college students, nine athletes, who were non-education majors, and eight preservice teachers. The athletes came straight from class and had heavy practice schedules for their respective sports. Many of the preservice teachers also came from class and had to return to campus for class or go immediately to after-school jobs. Their hectic schedules and the fact that all were volunteers who received no pay or course credit for their services, limited the time available for ongoing training seminars. These seminars were held on a monthly basis and were about an hour in length. The athletes who participated were recruited by their academic advisor with the expectation that involvement in literacy tutoring would improve the athletes' literacy levels. The preservice teachers were all volunteers who wanted the extra experiences in teaching a diverse population of children.

Recent publicized standardized test scores found Scott Elementary ranking at the bottom of the district. Faculty and the principal were eager to participate and welcomed the tutoring from the college students on a biweekly basis, for thirty minutes each session, during ten weeks of the fall semester. Fifty percent of the fourth-graders were reading below grade level at the beginning of that school year. Fourth-grade teachers identified literacy as a weakness for their team. They used an eclectic approach to teaching reading with a state adopted basal reading series as the primary materials, supplemented

by classroom libraries, folder games, and skill sheets connected with the state-standardized test. All teachers used whole class instruction, and two of four teachers used centers when seatwork was completed.

### TUTORING COMPONENTS

The principal identified the following two major reading objectives as weaknesses of the fourth grade students for the tutors' attention in the research project: (1) the student will summarize a variety of written texts; and (2) the student will determine the meaning of words in a variety of written texts. At his request, these objectives were included in the agenda for all tutoring sessions. Although the teachers and principal acknowledged the need for the one-on-one intervention, they felt thirty minutes twice weekly was all the time that could be spared from their instructional program. This proved to be a major obstacle for many of the tutors. Thirty minutes provided only a brief period of time for settling the child into the tutoring routine and allowing for in-depth study or activities.

Each tutoring session consisted of four or five basic activities explained to the athletes in initial training sessions. These strategies were quite familiar to the education majors, who had learned these strategies in their undergraduate methods classes. The instructional component of the tutorial session was essentially the same for all dyads involved in the research project. The five tutoring activities were presented to the children in the same order each time by all the tutors. The session began with the child choosing an independent level book to read aloud to the tutor. About two hundred children's trade books were color coded and sorted by levels in boxes along the counter in the large multipurpose room that served as our tutoring location. Each child's level had been determined from pre-testing and was indicated with a colored dot on his/her journal. Many of the books were quality, multicultural titles, carefully chosen to be of interest to the African American and Hispanic American children who were the primary participants in the program. Following the reading of the book, the child would give a retelling of the story just read.

The next component of the tutoring session was an activity provided for the tutors in the form of practice pages made available from the principal. These activities presented the children with opportunities to practice skills using the standardized test format they would encounter in the spring and focused on the two objectives identified by the school as target goals for improvement.

Journal writing was another component of the tutorial agenda. Each child had a journal with three major sections. The child and tutor could decide if entries would be made in one, two, or all three of the sections at any session. Section one, was entitled "WOW" (Wonderful, Outrageous Words), and was a mini-personal dictionary. There was a page for each letter of the alphabet and students were

encouraged to write any unfamiliar words they encountered in their reading on the appropriate page (see figure 1; note invented spellings accepted due to developmental levels of children). Sometimes a sentence or a definition was written. At other times definitions and sentences were discussed orally, but not entered on the page with the word.

Figure 1  
"WOW" Wonderful, Outrageous Words  
Sample journal entry of student

wow words  
(Wonderful, Outrageous)  
A

avoid  
attendance  
attendance - how many  
people go <sup>somewhere</sup> <sub>"book way"</sub>  
admittedly  
admittedly -  
appliance - tool

Section two of the journal was entitled "ME AND THE BOOK." Each child was instructed to write one or two sentences about the book just read aloud: what they liked, disliked, favorite part, a similar experience that had happened to them as they identified with the main character, or any general reactions to the book. The final section was for interactive writing, "WE WRITING" (Pinnell & McCarrier, 1994). Tutor and tutee composed a story together. At the beginning of the sessions, children dictated their ideas to the tutor since many of them were very reluctant writers. As the sessions progressed, the children began to take over the responsibilities of the writing. Tutors and children used the resource book, *World of words: A writing companion for all kinds of kids!*, (Thomas-Cochran, 1994) to provide fun ideas and topics for tutors and children.

Whenever there was time or if the child chose to write only in one section, he/she would read aloud from a chapter book at instructional level until the end of the session. Children also used an alternative to the instructional level chapter book, *Time Magazine for Kids* published weekly and available at different instructional levels

(Wallis, 1995). Many of the students preferred the non-fiction reading material because it was colorful, timely, and appealing with articles about news events, sports and music stars, and science features.

Additional strategies involved story mapping and modeling basic comprehension strategies using the COMP 8 System (Wilson & Russavage, 1989). See figure 2. Some of the tutors selected a theme for the sessions, and all books and activities centered on a topic of interest to the child as determined by interest inventories administered at the beginning of the project. The theme, chosen by the child as a basis for the tutorial sessions, proved to be one of the most successful tools used by the tutors for establishing rapport and formed the basis for affirming social interactions based on a sincere desire to appeal to the child's interest.

Figure 2  
COMP 8 System Comprehension strategies  
taught by tutors to children at each session

**BEFORE YOU READ:**



**Look**  
at title, picture clues



**Think**  
about what you already  
know

**AS YOU READ:**



**Predict**  
what you think will  
happen



**Picture Things**  
in your mind



**Question Yourself**  
Does it make sense?



**Read On**  
use context clues



**Reread**  
silently or out loud



**Ask Someone**  
who knows

Note. From "School wide application of comprehension strategies," by R.M. Wilson & P.M. Russavage, 1989, *Reading Issues & Practice*, 6, p. 48

## METHODOLOGY

The researcher and research associate used qualitative multiple data sources including preliminary and post-interviews with the tutors, teachers, and children as well as journal entries of tutors and children. Pseudonyms were used for all participants. Additionally, we wrote field notes and recorded comments of children and tutors throughout the project. As non-participant observers, we adhered to the constant comparative method (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982) throughout the analysis.

Standardized test scores, administered by the school district each spring, were used to identify the population of students for the study, those fourth graders most at-risk of being successful in literacy endeavors during that school year. Although these measures were of limited value in improving the literacy instruction for individual, at-risk children, we provided additional quantitative data in the form of pre-test and posttest scores on measures of reading achievement, writing achievement, and attitudes toward reading. These measures provided additional diagnostic information for the teachers' use at the conclusion of the tutorial project and enabled the researcher to identify the most effective dyads. Although qualitative data were gathered on all dyads, these pre and posttest scores helped the researchers to refine and narrow the focus in this article to describe only the social interactions between effective tutors and highest achieving children they tutored. The quantitative data presented in the descriptions in this article serve the purpose of providing information for the reader to substantiate the researchers' claim that these dyads were successful.

*Dyad 1: Sarah and Mary*

Sarah's blonde hair and blue eyes were her most noticeable features. One would think that she was a descendent of the Scandinavian or German homesteaders who settled on the American frontier in the mid-1800's. Perhaps that is why the American Girls Collection of storybooks, in particular, Meet Kirsten, so captured Sarah's attention from the first day of the tutoring sessions. Her tutor Mary was an elementary education preservice teacher and a positive role model for Sarah. It was a successful match from the beginning. The two young ladies developed a caring and loving relationship "at first sight," an important factor in Sarah's literacy success. In the words of her tutor,

*I love to read and she [Sarah] does too [now], but maybe beforehand she had never found any books she liked. I introduced something new to her .... That "new thing" was the concept that reading can be fun!! We did hit it off the first day. We are both very talkative... and very enthusiastic. She was willing to share about her family which some kids at*

*that age are not, especially what she had or didn't have. I think we were a good pair. If I had had a boy, it might have been entirely different. I may relate better to girls than boys.... I don't think I have gender favorites ...I have favorites more in children like Sarah, children who are willing to learn and don't cause trouble.*

Figure 3

Illustration of two good friends meeting, expressing happiness in sharing, as Sarah and Mary did at each tutorial session. This was one of the passages from Sarah's favorite book.



*"You're here! You're here!"  
Kirsten repeated over and over.*

Note. From *Meet Kirsten* (p. 31) by J. Shaw, 1986. NY: Scholastic

While some might find the tutor's confession alarming from the standpoint that teachers should not have "favorites" or be particularly drawn to a "type" of student, Mary's honesty challenged the researcher to pursue this remark. To investigate the close bond between Sarah and Mary, I interviewed Sarah. When asked what made her tutor so special, she related that she thought Mary's appearance was "... neat, co-ol, ... she's tall, has blonde hair and blue eyes, just like me. We could be sisters, you know." This interchange provided a clue to one essential component of the affirming social context of this particular dyad. Feeling a "kinship" to one's tutor/tutee is an essential part of establishing rapport and building a reciprocal relationship of trust and respect. (e.g., Mary saw something of herself in Sarah, a bright child who was eager to please and do well.)

Mary's decision to choose a highly motivating series of books for her young tutee proved to be just what Sarah needed. Because the book was about a young nine-year-old girl, just like herself, Sarah avidly began reading the book with her tutor's help, sometimes listening only, sometimes echo reading, sometimes reading aloud to her tutor. The book was interesting to Sarah in a way that previous books were not. It captivated her attention and drew her into the story. Her tutor indicated that the tutoring sessions consisted primarily of reading and discussing books from the America Girl series. Since Sarah was enchanted with the book, she was motivated to read for pleasure for the first time in four years of school experience. She kept a personal reading log of her books read outside of tutoring time and surprisingly was excited about the prospect of adding books to her log.

Sarah had begun her fourth grade year of school reading approximately a year below grade level. Her total reading pre-test score (grade equivalent) on the *Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test* (MacGinitie & MacGinitie, 1989) was a 3.2. She had been selected for the program on the basis of her third grade achievement standardized test score, which placed her at the 43<sup>rd</sup> percentile. Her attitude toward reading pre-test score placed her at the 56<sup>th</sup> percentile on the *McKenna-Kear Reading Attitude Survey* (McKenna & Kear, 1990). Sarah's teacher, in an interview, described her in this way:

*Sarah, it took a good six weeks to follow her around and see what she could do. She has been allowed to be lax and not be accountable. She's learned that 'snail's pace thing' where you just sit around .... You get frustrated with her [as teacher] and you just have to sit her out. She's very bright ... and finally she started coming around with that accountability factor and she loves working one on one, that's her favorite thing to do. She wanted to stay after school and work [one on one]. But she also started feeling better about herself and her ability to do this. Then, she liked being*



*up with those kids who finish their work and get the extra privileges... not the smart kids, but the faction [of the class] that the kids know they can ask them for help.*

The tutor came to Sarah's Christmas program, ate lunch with Sarah whenever her class schedule would allow it and took a personal interest in her life at school. As a Christmas present at the end of the tutoring project, Mary presented Sarah with a most appropriate gift, the American Girl book collection. Mary wanted Sarah to know what she had been showing her in their tutoring sessions, that books can be fun and that books are a special gift.

Sarah obviously learned the lesson well for her post-test scores were remarkable. The total reading score on the Gates-MacGinitie, administered after ten weeks of tutoring revealed a 4.2 grade equivalent, approximately what we would have expected of a student at that point in the fourth grade. Her attitude toward reading had skyrocketed from the 56<sup>th</sup> percentile to the 89<sup>th</sup> percentile, clearly an indication that Sarah had concluded that books can be fun! Also, it was exciting for the teacher and tutor to note that the longitudinal effects of the individual tutoring paid off in the spring, as Sarah was one of the highest achieving fourth graders on the standardized achievement testing, with an 86<sup>th</sup> percentile score on the reading subtest. Her writing score of 3 on a 4 point holistic scale was also commendable. When comparing her scores to the previous spring [third grade achievement], Sarah posted an impressive 43-percentile point gain in reading achievement. She was so highly motivated to do her best that her teacher related that she stayed with the test until time was called, desperately wanting to do her best. The teacher related, "The one-on-one started the ball rolling, made them feel special, helped these children blossom. It would be interesting to know what they would have scored without that."

Sarah's success story is ongoing and the effects still being noted. Just recently she was selected for the gifted and talented program at her school. This is truly a remarkable case study of a child who decided that the time was right for improving her literacy. With the encouragement of a special tutor, she was motivated to live up to her potential, finally in the fourth grade.

#### *Dyad 2: Anthony and Lisa*

Anthony, an energetic African-American boy with an identical twin brother, was:

*kind of like a dormant seed in that for the first six weeks after school started, it was always...'I can't, I don't know how, I can't do this; this is too hard.'*

*One time we played a math contest with flash cards, "Around the World" and he just stomped the whole class. I was just stunned because his ability finally just reared its head. I think he was used to getting by with not giving his best. He likes working one-on-one and I guess maybe a combination of me holding him accountable and the tutor working with him made him focus better on doing his best.*

Anthony's teacher gave this account just weeks after the tutoring began and noted the profound effects on his self-esteem and classroom performance, effects she attributed to the special relationship with and attachment for his tutor, Lisa. Anthony's twin brother was also in the program and on the first day when the children met their tutors, Anthony was furious because his brother had a male track star for his tutor. Not only did Anthony resent not having one of the athletes, he also resented having a female tutor. He had decided at first glance that he would not cooperate and certainly would not learn anything. "I won't read and you can't make me!" was his first comment during the initial tutoring sessions.

Anthony was one of the lowest-performing children in the fourth grade. Both he and his brother were among the slightest and shortest of all fourth grade boys. His standardized reading achievement test score from the third grade placed Anthony at the 31<sup>st</sup> percentile. On pre-test measures of attitude toward reading, his total overall score was at the fourth percentile while his reading achievement score on the *Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test* indicated that he was performing at the level of a second grader. In general, he had low self-esteem and a poor attitude toward all subjects and school. His reaction on the first day of tutoring was typical of his response if asked to perform an academic task.

His attitude changed dramatically when his tutor Lisa proved to be a "with-it" young lady, in his words, "cool and awesome!" She asked him to share his interests and soon learned he loved all kinds of sports, especially the Dallas Cowboys. Being a fan herself, she brought in tidbits of her knowledge, sought books about football at his instructional level, and planned her lessons around this motivating theme. Another factor in the rapport Lisa established easily was her understanding of African American culture and family life. Anthony was one of nine children being raised by a single mother, father absent and living in Europe. Lisa shared with Anthony that she knew what it was like to miss your father since she too grew up in a single family home. Later, in her elementary school years, her mother married an African American man and although Caucasian, Lisa had African American step-brothers and step-sisters. These cultural connections coupled with her attention to Anthony's special interests, allowed her to form a unique bond with Anthony. Lisa's life experiences

formed the basis of her social interactions with him, experiences, sometimes painful, but shared freely with Anthony.

Lisa followed the same tutoring agenda as the other tutors but with her own unique teaching style. She used lots of humor and encouragement. She always spent the first two or three minutes of each session, just chatting about Anthony's life. She called this their "up close and personal, friendly time." She shared with him the fact that she would be graduating soon from college, the first one in her family to graduate from high school. She told Anthony that he could do that also. She "invited" him to write with her: "You've got the great ideas; I'll write them down." They were a team in every respect. "Let's do this together," she would suggest. "You help me." By the end of the sessions, Anthony had blossomed and was doing all the writing. She had been so adept at motivating him, that the boy who at first refused even to talk with her, was at the end of the sessions reading and writing with enthusiasm (see Figure 4).

Figure 4  
Anthony's writing sample  
from his journal during one tutoring session.

10-23-96

A burglar breaks into  
your house...

The burglar who broke into  
our house was... right with  
brown hair, green eyes,  
and big hands. He was  
wearing a white shirt  
and blue jeans. He  
also had a black  
watch on. And a black  
belt on.

Lisa worked at a local department store in the evenings and on weekends (she paid for her entire college education without any family support). Anthony, his brothers, sisters, and Mother often shopped there. Lisa always gave Anthony a special warm welcome when the family stopped by her department to say hello. As she did during their tutoring sessions, Lisa made Anthony feel as if he were the most important child in her life.

The special bond they shared and the hard work in the tutoring sessions paid off for Anthony. At the time of the post-testing in December, Anthony had made remarkable progress in ten short weeks.

His total attitude toward reading score on the *McKenna-Kear Attitude Survey* had improved from the fourth percentile to the 88<sup>th</sup> percentile, a gain of 84 percentile points. His total reading achievement post-test score placed him at a mid-third grade level, with a gain of 36 NCE's in comprehension. Even more impressive was Anthony's performance on the standardized test (longitudinal reading measure) administered in the spring, four months after the conclusion of the tutorial project. Anthony posted a gain of 32-percentile points, one of the highest gains in the entire fourth grade class.

Here was a student who was motivated to succeed by a unique relationship and friendship with a tutor. Anthony received no other special services or tutorial help during that school year. His teacher believed that her own acknowledgement of his abilities, holding him accountable, and the special attention from Lisa enabled him to reach new heights of academic success. Lisa knew first-hand the impact that one teacher can make on a child's life. She explained in a post-instructional interview that she had been inspired by one high school teacher in her majority African American high school to stay in school and go on to college. No other teachers had ever believed she had the ability to succeed. Lisa convinced Anthony that he too could succeed, just as she had. This relationship crossed gender and ethnic lines as two at-risk learners came together at a "magic moment" in Anthony's life.

### *Dyad 3: Victor and John*

Victor was a courteous Hispanic American boy, quite shy and reserved. When he met his tutor, John, his dark eyes sparkled and the smile on his face revealed genuine excitement. John was an athlete on tennis scholarship who grew up in South Africa. He came to America to play tennis and obtain an undergraduate degree in finance with definite career goals to seek a master's degree in international business at a university in Germany upon graduation. English was John's third language, which he spoke quite fluently. German, the language of his father, was his first language and Afrikaans, his second language.

When the tutoring sessions began, Victor seemed intimidated by John's strange accent. In John's words, "Once I got to know him ... he was a shy little guy... I realized he was really smart and could do some literacy things." We had determined from previous testing that Victor's weak area was comprehension. His pre-test score placed him at a mid-first grade level in comprehension and an overall reading score of beginning second grade. His attitude toward reading score on the *McKenna-Kear* placed him at the 12<sup>th</sup> percentile.

John was quite businesslike and logical in his approach. John analyzed Victor's test profile and set a goal to improve comprehension. We discussed different strategies for John to try with Victor in addition to the common tutorial plan used with all students. John used ideas of his own that had worked for him in his struggles with

comprehension of text in a language other than one's native language. John strongly emphasized retellings because summarizing was a study skill he had found particularly useful in his own college courses. He required a retelling of Victor after each story read. When comprehension breakdowns were apparent, John would stop at the end of each page and ask for a retelling.

John began the sessions with a positive attitude and a sincere desire to help Victor. John talked with him about his interests and soon discovered that he and Victor shared a love of animals. John brought pictures he had taken on vacations to the Kruger National Park and Game Reserve in South Africa, which he and Victor discussed. He invited Victor to write stories about some of the animals and gave Victor copies of the pictures to keep. Victor was fascinated by John's stories of his homeland, South Africa. The pictures and John's descriptions conjured up images of an exotic foreign wilderness where zebras, elephants, and wildebeests roamed undisturbed. "On Safari" became the theme for the sessions, and Victor was transported for that short time, twice each week, to a country far removed from his own fourth grade classroom in southwestern U.S.A. via the web sites: **Error! Bookmark not defined.** and **Error! Bookmark not defined.** for further information about the integration of geography and reading for tutorial lesson plans. Both of these sites offer a variety of intriguing activities such as a chat room, maps, camera views, and listening booth for hearing authentic African music which can prove to be a highly motivating literacy activity as tutor and child together take a virtual field trip.

When observing John with Victor, it was evident that John had a strong commitment. While some of the other athletes would joke around and talk with each other and the other children during the tutoring sessions, John focused completely on Victor and the task he had set for the two of them, improving Victor's comprehension. He always sat beside Victor, looked him directly in the eyes, and gave him quality one-on-one attention. He never missed a tutoring session unless the tennis team was on the road. His demeanor conveyed the message to Victor that he was a special friend and that he believed in the importance of their time together.

Victor's improved literacy achievement was quite significant. Victor's total attitude toward reading score on the *McKenna-Kear Reading Attitude Survey* improved 56 percentile points (12% at pre-test to 72% at post-test in December). The deliberate way in which John focused on comprehension in each tutoring session resulted in Victor's elevated comprehension score on the *Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test* revealing an increase of 31 NCE's. At the beginning of the tutorial intervention program, Victor had been reading at a mid-first grade level based on comprehension scores and was now reading at a mid-second grade level.

In post-instructional interviews, John shared with me that he used a mentoring style centering on encouragement and realistic expectations. He related that as a thirteen-year-old boy in South Africa, he was sent to an English-speaking school for the first time. His mother had wanted him to learn English. He recalled that he could speak just a little English, but knew nothing of the grammar or syntax. John stated, "It was so tough for me. I can still remember how I struggled." His advice to teachers of second and third language learners, like himself and Victor, is "Don't assume too much of these kids ... just because they speak a little English." John used his past painful experiences and what he learned in that school in a faraway country to make a valuable connection to Victor and his needs. He began with easier tasks and books, and advancing to the more difficult ones, praised every little effort along the way. John used true sincerity, praise only when merited. He was often overheard to say, "This is going to be tough, but you can do it. I believe in you."

#### *Dyad 4: Corey and Russell*

Corey was a young African American boy who had been performing poorly his entire school career. His body language exhibited the despair he felt at his repeated failures in school. He rarely smiled and often entered the tutoring room pushing and shoving his classmates. His standardized test scores from the previous third grade spring placed him at the one percentile of all entering fourth graders. No other boy in the entire class had scored so low.

The teachers were desperate for help for Corey. Unfortunately, their assessment of him was that he would probably be retained in fourth grade; their expectations were low. He had received Chapter One services since his school entry and had been referred for special education in the past but had never been eligible. His teacher noted, "Most of the teachers who have had him wondered about his intellectual ability." Our pre-test assessment confirmed the school's testing data: an extremely negative attitude toward reading as evidenced by his score at the ninth percentile on the *McKenna-Kear* and a total reading achievement score of 1.8 (grade equivalent). Figure 5 is Corey's writing sample at the beginning of the school year when he was asked to write about something that was important to him. His limited literacy skills were quite apparent; yet, a touching sensitivity was revealed in his love for his family and his dog.

With these facts in mind, we began the tutoring program with optimism although it was unlikely that we would see any significant improvement. Corey was assigned to Russell, a male track athlete on full scholarship who also excelled in academics. Russell was loving and generous, a tutor who said in his preliminary interview, "I really want to volunteer for this program because I have two wonderful parents who have given me tremendous support and encouragement. I want to give back some of that to a child who is less fortunate."

Russell shared with me that his parents had been the role model for that attitude of community service and responsibility and had offered their home, free of charge, to a fellow track teammate who needed a place to live that semester.

Figure 5  
Corey's writing sample from  
the beginning of the fourth grade year.

What is importit  
What is importit to  
me is my dog and  
my family and my  
aunt and uncle and  
my money that my family  
give me and my room  
my house and my  
family to my me  
and my sisters and  
them and to go to  
my gas house and  
have gas and have  
a football to play  
football at my  
friends house and  
have a basketball  
ball and a basketball  
ring to play  
basketball and the  
strong and have  
a dog to play  
with and have  
glad to have a  
dog.

Russell was a hard worker with a strong commitment to the project. He rarely missed a session, arriving early, usually with a "Happy Meal" from McDonald's for Corey. His generosity amazed the other tutors. He sincerely wanted to give something to this young boy in an effort to improve his self-esteem and attitude toward school. Russell, like the other tutors, tried to find out something about Corey's interests and to plan lessons centering on a theme. Corey shared that he loved sports, but unlike Anthony, Corey seemed uninterested in all books, even those about football and basketball. Russell was very patient, but every tutoring session was a "tug of war" with Corey refusing to do anything constructive. His behavior was

avoidance and refusal, as we would expect of a young boy who had experienced so many unpleasant times with literacy. All the tutor's efforts to motivate and interest Corey appeared to fail.

On the days when Russell did not bring the kid's meal, Corey would become particularly uncooperative. On one particularly difficult day, Russell shared with me the following interchange that took place with Corey. Corey had refused to speak with Russell for the entire session. Russell expressed his disappointment to Corey that they were unable to read or write together. He told Corey that if he didn't want to talk that was fine, but maybe he would like to write his feelings on paper. IT WORKED! Russell had tricked Corey into writing about his anger. Although he only responded with "NO! NO! NO!" to every question Russell posed, he did respond. Since Corey was so angry, Russell decided to seize the "golden moment" and talk with him about his track scholarship and how he received it. He shared with him that he too could go to college (yes, he might even become a sports star and make tons of money someday). Russell explained that Corey would be unable to reach those goals if he did not care about himself and start trying to take advantage of the help being offered to him from his teachers and his tutor. He reminded Corey that he cared about what happened to him, but that no one could reach a goal for someone else. The only person who could reach that goal was Corey himself. Russell left the session quite discouraged, as Corey never spoke a word in response. In fact, it appeared that he had totally ignored Russell's words, except for emphatic "NO'S" written on the page.

That incident and the very personal interaction that occurred that day may have planted a seed in Corey's mind; however, it did not appear to make a difference in his attitude, at that point. The tutoring sessions ended a few weeks later. On the day that I was administering the posttests, Corey sat and pouted, refusing to pick up his pencil. (The tutors were not present for the posttesting.) I reminded him of Russell's words and explained how disappointed his friend would be if he did not answer any questions. He looked me in the eyes as if to challenge me to make him "pick up that pencil and try." He sat and waited until only five minutes were left on the reading achievement test and finally began to read and answer the questions. Obviously, since he answered so few questions, the test was invalid. His total reading achievement score placed him at a 2.2 grade level, a slight improvement over his pre-test score of 1.8.

His classroom teacher refused to give up on Corey, holding him accountable for all work. There was good parental support and a phone call to Corey's mother would produce positive results, but only for a short period. Throughout the weeks of school into the spring semester, the same pattern followed: accountability, phone calls to mother, and slight improvement for a short period. No other tutoring services were available for Corey when our project ended in



December. His teacher's goal became one of helping Corey to make it to the fifth grade; she truly cared for this young man who had given up on reading and school.

Corey's story is not one of glowing success as in the other three cases previously discussed, but it is very typical of many older at-risk readers. Every reading teacher has a Corey in her classroom. The influence of Russell's mentoring, his patient presence, "I'm here for you even if you don't like me at all!" and the teacher's concern eventually paid off. The positive gains did not surface until the very end of that fourth grade year when Corey began to prove himself by doing grade level work in all subjects, passing every one. His standardized test scores in reading that spring posted a significant increase of 24.3 NCE's. His writing score was a 2 on a 4 point holistic scale, indicating below average performance, but significant improvement from his third grade year. Corey's teacher, in the post-instructional interview, stressed her appreciation for Russell's patience and dedication. She believed that the tutor's attitude of "I believe in you; I will not accept your refusal to try" made an impression on Corey and helped him to believe in himself, helping him to take one small "baby step" toward improved attitude and acceptance of responsibility for his own future.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL INTERACTIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL PAIRING: LESSONS LEARNED

The purpose of this research study was to look beyond the instructional component. All tutors implemented the same basic tutoring agenda with a child-centered curriculum. Yet, there were glowing success stories within the athletes-as-tutors group and within the pre-service teachers as tutors group, and there were children from both groups who made negligible gains. Within the successful pairings, it was noted that the children exhibited increased motivation and a desire to cooperate. The children in these dyads exhibited more excitement and enthusiasm, performed well on the reading achievement posttest measure and on the attitudes toward reading scale and eagerly interacted with their tutors. In this study, it appeared that the social interactions played a contributing role to the success of the children in these pairings.

Close analysis of the successful dyads revealed that there were similar categories identifiable from the data in the naturally occurring social interactions. Certain similar characteristics of the tutors' interactions with children emerged. The effective tutors were skillful communicators who had past experiences with children, knew how to converse with them, knew the "with-it" slang, and understood the culture of growing up in poverty in America. In addition, the successful tutors had knowledge of and/or experiences with the African American or Hispanic culture. Only one pairing was of same gender,

same ethnicity; the Caucasian tutors were knowledgeable with respect to their tutee's culture and used that knowledge to be skillful conversationalists. The first three minutes were used to reestablish the communication link, to catch up on the latest news in the child's life, to share tidbits from the tutor's life, in short, to "socialize." The tutors followed directions well, one of the essential elements we discussed in our training sessions. However, not all the tutors in the project were adept at this socializing. Many felt awkward about talking with children informally and bypassed this step to immediately begin the lesson. Those dyads were not as effective. This social time paved the way for cooperation when the lessons began. Those tutors who paved the way with a "spoonful of sugar" were able to convince the children to "take the medicine" later.

One example from an early tutoring session with Sarah and Mary illustrates how skillfully she uses social interaction to set the stage for the instructional component of the session:

*Tutor: Guess what my girlfriend and I saw this weekend when we were at the mall?*

*Student: I don't know. What?*

*Tutor: A really bad beanie baby... a pink pig. What is that one called?*

*Student: Oooh! That's Squealer. I've been wanting him.*

*Tutor: I wish I could have bought him for you but I've got limited funds right now. My pay check doesn't come in for another week. Does your Mom ever buy you a beanie baby?*

*Student: Sometimes, but not often. She says we need other things more. One time I got a fish at McDonald's though. I've still got it.*

*Tutor: That's Goldie, right? Well, hey let's get our book out now. It's time to put our heads together and get some reading done. What about it?*

Another example of this skillful use of conversational social language occurred in a session with Corey and Russell. Russell had brought along the McDonald's Happy Meal and chatted with Corey for the initial three minutes while he began eating:

*Tutor: We had a track meet last week and our team did so poorly. I don't know what happened, man. I was bummed out...*

*Student: How'd you do?*

*Tutor: I usually place in the top five, but I came in at the bottom of the pack.*

*Student: That's bad.*

*Tutor: Do you ever feel like that in reading class? I always like to be first at the meets but I rarely ever make it. I always get disappointed in myself when I miss the mark.*

*Student: Me too sometimes, but ya' know. I don't really care most times. My Mom gets mad at me all the time 'cause I won't try. But I'm just dumb...why try?*

*Tutor: You can't give up... It's hard when you keep on failing, I know. I've been there too, but next track meet I'm goin' run harder, try harder. I may not make it every time, but I'm not goin' give up. Hey! We'll have to bust it to finish our work today. Let's get started. We'll talk some more about this next time.*

Another unique characteristic of the social interactions in the successful dyads was the masterful use of body language and gestures by the tutors. Close physical proximity, sitting side by side, as opposed to sitting directly across from the tutor seemed to send a message of care and a "team" approach. All the successful tutors used this position, while some of those less successful tutors sat across from the child, as if to keep distance between them and to communicate a message of "I'm the teacher, you're the student; I have the power; you do not." Direct eye contact, a "high five" or pat on the shoulder was a common occurrence in the successful dyads. These tutors used non-verbal communication to convey the message to the child that, "You are the most important person in the world to me, right now, and for the next thirty minutes, you have my undivided attention." One example of the use of gestures was Lisa's response to a successful reading performance by Anthony with a thumbs up sign and the words, "Wow, you're awesome, just like Emmitt Smith when he scores a touchdown!" John frequently used a pat on the back when Victor tried hard to complete his assigned tasks. He would keep his hand resting on Victor's back as if to communicate support when the task was particularly challenging. In one tutoring session Russell commended Corey accompanied by a high five, "Man, you're bad, you're awesome. You're batting two for two today!"

Another common characteristic of the interactions within the successful dyads involved the child's interest. This provided the "spark" to engage the child in conversation related to the books being read, to present an instructional strategy, as an attention getter, and to form the theme for the sessions. Although in training sessions, all tutors were advised to use this simple principle, some chose to ignore the advice. All of the highly effective tutors used information from the interest inventories to select materials and books centering on the child-centered theme. Because the child was vitally interested in this topic, he/she brought more prior knowledge to the books and

the “grand conversations” about the books were livelier. One of the tutor’s wrote:

*“I can see that I have to plan very concise, specific activities this semester, and I found out that she likes science and math. I don’t know why but that actually surprised me. I guess I assumed that because a student scores below grade level that she wouldn’t like school at all. Wrong! The science connection will give a base from which to plan our lessons ...”*

Another example of this use of interest is demonstrated in Lisa’s tutoring session with Anthony. He was passionately interested in football so Lisa illustrated the rereading comprehension strategy by relating it to a touchdown pass thrown by Troy Aikman:

*Lisa: Now, Anthony, what do you think Troy does if he drops the ball on first down to keep the San Francisco players from grabbing the ball?*

*Anthony: Well, he probably fall on the ball and cover it with his body.*

*Lisa: Right on! Well, does he quit there? Does he get so frustrated that he asks coach Switzer to pull him out of the game and put in the backup quarterback?*

*Anthony: Of course not! That be ridiculous. Troy no quitter. He awesome!*

*Lisa: Right and neither are you. So what should you do now that you just read that paragraph and you couldn’t answer my question correctly?*

*Anthony: (Shrugs his shoulders) no response.*

*Lisa: When we read and don’t understand, we do what Troy does. He throws the ball again on second down. So we reread the paragraph and try again to understand it. Sometimes that helps me. Let’s do it again.*

*Anthony: Okay.*

All research points to the importance of consistency in a mentoring relationship, and this study confirms previous findings. The successful tutors were highly committed and well-organized, faithful in attendance, missing no more than one session. Two of the four had perfect attendance. They took their volunteer jobs very seriously, as if they were being paid for their work. Positive social interactions with children demand repeated contacts over time. Infrequent attendance or inconsistent communication by the tutor resulted in poor progress for the child.

All of the successful tutors expressed in pre- or post-instructional interviews that they possessed a social conscience, a keen awareness of their responsibilities to help those in society who are at-risk and who need the helping hand of a positive adult role model. (Refer to Russell's comments.) Repeatedly in the tutors' journals were comments such as:

*"I want to make a difference in this child's life."*

*"She explained to me that she will never read or write when she becomes an adult except to read and sign her children's field trip permission notes. I find that to be truly depressing... I only wish that I could make a difference in her life, but I can't help her unless she wants to be helped."*

*"I have a responsibility to help those who are less fortunate than I was. I had supportive parents and teachers. I was so lucky."*

All tutors were volunteers who participated for no pay, no course credit. These college students came from households where social justice and equity issues were modeled for them by their parents or stressed in their high schools and communities. In an interview with Russell's mother, one of the tutors, shared with me:

*"His Dad and I believe in helping out those who are needy. If we see one of the track guys, one of Russell's friends headed down the wrong path, we invite him over for dinner. Right now, we have a young man living with us who really needs a supportive family."*

The children easily perceived this personality trait as desirable and appealing, believing that their tutors cared about them specifically as valuable human beings. While some educators point to the present emphasis on squads of "volunteer do-gooders" as undesirable for solving the illiteracy problems of inner city children of color, certainly this desire to "help a child" is a motivating factor for tutors which impacts upon their decision to volunteer. In the present research study, when a social conscience was coupled with knowledge of the child's culture, it was a winning combination that resulted in positive significant changes in behavior, attitude toward school, and literacy achievement. No one would disagree that social conscience alone, without knowledge of child's culture is insufficient and ineffective; "do-gooders" must be culturally knowledgeable.

Another characteristic in the data that appeared to affect the quality of the scaffolding, resulting in more positive social interactions was a match in life and/or literacy experiences for tutor and child. In a study of this nature, it is impossible to ascertain the direct relationship between this characteristic and the child's achievement. Yet, it appeared that when the tutor felt a connected to the child due to similar life experiences or similar personality type, there was a closer bond and easier communication. As expressed in journal entries, when the tutor could relate to the child's socioeconomic status, the child's being raised by a single mother, the child's being a second language learner, the child being a "rebel like me", or a child who was "eager to please the teacher", the pairing seemed to be a true bonding of kindred hearts.

Mary alluded to this when she described the special kinship she felt for her child Sarah. (Refer to previous quote in descriptive section, Sarah and Mary). As a preservice teacher with many experiences in a professional development school setting, she already recognized in herself a special feeling for children, of any ethnicity, with open, positive attitudes, especially girls like herself who are exuberant and optimistic. This comment, though at first analysis appears offensive, gets at a basic reality that in many inner city schools, teachers are "drawn to" those children who are teachable. Whether reading teachers want to acknowledge it or not, it is a reality and that reality may impact the quality of the social context in which literacy instruction is delivered since many at-risk older children do not possess "teachable, pleasant" attitudes. Many have "given up" on their teachers and school, believing that those adults do not care if they succeed.

Further research is needed into the characteristics of highly successful tutors/teachers in inner-city, diverse settings and the social and cultural contexts in which those tutors acquired literacy, in effect, their own "literacy stories." Perhaps these "literacy stories" impact the perceptions of the teachers and/or tutors who attempt the difficult task of challenging the older, reluctant reader. Would teachers/tutors be able to recognize their commitment to certain children they perceive as "teachable" or understand their lack of patience with children whom they perceive otherwise if they understood their own literacy acquisition and life experiences?

An excellent example of this is in the dyad of Victor and John. As John related in his postinstructional interview:

*I think I was able to help that little guy because I was just like him. Wow, did I struggle! When I was thirteen, my parents divorced and my Mom placed me in*

*an English speaking school. Of course, I spoke German and Afrikaans fluently, but English... I was so embarrassed.*

This bonding is similar to the process of finding a "true friend" in life; often that experience happens only once or twice in a lifetime for some adults. This kindred bonding was not observed in the less effective dyads. In the present study, this characteristic relates directly to previous research in the area of the social-contextual perspective of literacy (Auerbach, 1989; Hiebert, 1991; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

The placement of children with tutors who have similar life and/or literacy experiences merits closer examination for this may be more likely to result in positive and immediate rapport building. This concept has received little attention in the research literature. However, this idea of "best fit" match of tutor and child is similar to the "goodness of fit" research in child rearing practices (Thomas & Chess, 1977). In the present study, the successful dyads of tutors and children were not necessarily of same gender and ethnicity pairings. None of the four case studies presented involved same ethnicity matches. However, in the tutors' opinions, ethnicity was not an essential, but it proved to be highly beneficial for enhanced communication if the tutors and tutees had similar life and literacy experiences.

#### CONCLUSIONS: DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research project supports the premise that effective literacy tutoring for the older at-risk student can not be defined by looking at the instructional component alone; effective literacy tutoring for the reluctant older reader is multidimensional as is motivation. Several characteristics were observed within the unique social context of each successful dyad: tutors were skillful communicators; tutors possessed a social conscience; tutors felt a kindred bonding to their child; tutors effectively used body language; tutors were knowledgeable of student's culture; and, tutees were motivated and cooperative as a consequence. In this study with fourth graders, as in Juel's (1996) research with emergent readers, the most successful dyads experienced significantly more scaffolded reading and writing experiences. Vygotsky (1978) confirmed that scaffolding occurs through social contexts and interactions. In the present study, this scaffolding was often observed to be embedded within a conversational framework which tapped into the child's special interests, culture, personality,

and life experiences. Essential scaffolding responses occurred quite naturally in the successful dyads. The highest achievers thrived within a tutoring context rich with enhanced social interactions. The effective tutors became quite adept at providing the necessary support structures for the literacy instructional activities.

This research of a volunteer literacy tutorial project with college student athletes and preservice teachers as tutors of at-risk fourth graders in a culturally diverse elementary school, indicated how difficult it was to circumvent the cycle of failure after grade three. Although there were model dyads, highlighted in this article, with praiseworthy accomplishments and successes, certainly, this researcher does not advocate volunteer tutoring as a panacea to America's problems of illiteracy and children at-risk. Reading educators would agree that the key to improving the literacy achievement for children at-risk is the regular classroom teacher and her/his instructional program. Community volunteers may play a crucial role, and further research is needed to refine the roles of these tutors/mentors and to propose models that capitalize on tutors' strengths as complementary to the classroom teacher. A close examination of specific factors related to the social context of the tutoring relationship and specific interpersonal skills of effective mentors may provide insights as we continue to search for effective models to enable the older, reluctant reader to succeed.

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# **Daddy, I know what the story means — now, I just need help with the words**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article describes a single instance of literacy learning involving the author and his two daughters, and provides a demonstration of how this literacy event can be unpacked both theoretically and practically in a way that a reflective practitioner could do. The aim of this article is to stimulate some reflective thinking and start some new conversations about what theoretical assumptions should drive reading instruction in the 21st century.

*Children are born learning, if there is nothing to learn they are bored and their attention is distracted. We do not have to train children to learn, or even account for their learning; we have to avoid interfering with it. (Smith, 1985, p. 8).*

The purpose of this article is three-fold: 1) describe a single instance of literacy learning; 2) provide a demonstration of how this literacy event can be unpacked both theoretically and practically in a way that a reflective practitioner could do, and, 3) stimulate some reflective thinking and start some new conversations about what theoretical assumptions should drive reading instruction in the 21st century.

I begin by describing a single instance of literacy that occurred at a local bookstore and involved myself and my two young daughters. Then, I take a reflective stance and discuss how this literacy event challenged me to interrogate some old beliefs and consider some alternative assumptions about reading, learning to read, and the relationship between reading and literacy. Based on these reflections, I end with a few lingering questions that I feel are worth thinking about more.

## BACKGROUND

Last winter, while visiting my mother over the Christmas holidays, I took a break from some frantic, last-minute Christmas shopping, and spent time visiting the old neighborhood in which I grew up. At first, I drove slowly around the block looking at all the familiar houses, trying to remember some of the names and faces of children who had lived in these houses at one time, and perhaps still do. I also drove up and down the “back alley”. This alley was a narrow concrete road that separated all the houses on the block into two rows. Adults, not from the neighborhood, used the alley as a short cut to avoid traffic on their way home from work. Parents from the neighborhood used it as a convenient place to load and unload furniture, appliances, groceries, relatives, kids, and pets from the family truck. But kids used the alley as a playground, a special place where we all met after school to play games such as Hopscotch, Kick-the-Can, Red Rover-Red Rover, Strike Out, Wiffle Ball, Pee Wee Football, and even Spin the Bottle when our parents weren’t watching.

As I drove out of the alley that afternoon and started back to my mother’s home, I noticed a house that was familiar and yet unfamiliar to me. It was a house with a large blue awning hanging over the front door. The words *THE BLUE MARBLE*, written in large white letters, were emblazoned on the front of the awning.

Growing up, I remembered this house as just an old, two story brick home, one of many that were built in the neighborhood around the turn of the 20th century. Today, I noticed that it had been refurbished into a children’s bookstore. I stopped at the bookstore for several reasons. I was still feeling nostalgic about the old neighborhood and was curious to see if one of my childhood friends might be the owner, and it was an opportunity to buy some books for my daughters and finally finish my Christmas shopping for this year.

## AT THE BOOKSTORE (FIRST VISIT)

Once inside, I met the owner, talked with several salespersons, and chatted with other customers who also had come into the store to buy books. None of these individuals was familiar to me. So, I spent time quietly browsing through shelves of children’s picture books looking for a few that might be particularly suited for Christmas gifts. After awhile, the owner reappeared and reminded me that before leaving I should go upstairs and see The Goodnight Moon Room.

Soon after, I went upstairs and quickly learned that The Goodnight Moon Room is actually a large bedroom that has been refurbished to replicate the setting of the classic children’s picture book *Goodnight Moon* (Brown, 1947). Like the original, the room has been painted in hunter green, outlined in bright orange hues, and equipped with accouterments such as a mother rabbit sitting in an old

rocker, a pair of mittens hanging from a clothes line near the fireplace, some toy kittens, and a picture of a cow jumping over the moon. I was captivated by the entire room, so much so that for the next 30 minutes I sat on the edge of the rabbit's bed and silently read *Goodnight Moon* several times. Afterwards, I spent time reflecting on the many times I had read this same story to my children when they were very young. Near closing time, I returned downstairs, complimented the owner on adding such a unique feature to the bookstore, and said goodbye.

#### AT THE BOOKSTORE (SECOND VISIT)

Since then, I have had the opportunity to revisit The Goodnight Moon Room on several different occasions. One time I was accompanied by my two daughters, Ferris, who was eleven years old at the time, and Madrean who was five. On the way to the bookstore I gave The Goodnight Moon Room quite a build-up. Thus, I wasn't surprised when, as soon as we entered the bookstore, Madrean went directly up to the salesperson behind the checkout counter and asked, "Where's the moon room? My daddy said you have one, and Ferris and me want to see it." The salesperson smiled, pointed towards the oak staircase in the adjacent room and said, "Sure, we have one. But you mean The Goodnight Moon Room. It's upstairs. Go right on up. Both children immediately darted upstairs with Madrean leading the charge saying, "C'mon, Ferris, let's check it out." Since neither of the children invited me to join them, I remained downstairs.

After awhile, I decided to see what the children were doing upstairs. So, I started to slowly walk up the staircase, but suddenly stopped at the top of the landing. By the sound of things, it appeared that Ferris and Madrean were collaborating in a dramatic interpretation of *Goodnight Moon*. Not wanting to interrupt the performance, I secretly watched Ferris playing the role of the mother rabbit and narrating the story to Madrean who was playing the role of the baby rabbit. Without them knowing, I observed the play for almost 15 minutes as Ferris sat in the rocker and narrated and choreographed the production as Madrean, following her big sister's instructions as well as improvising her own, spent time hopping, dancing, and singing around the room.

Eventually, Ferris finished the story, and Madrean concluded the performance. I couldn't help but applaud at the end. Apparently, my hand-clapping caused some concern and embarrassment, prompting the following conversation:

*"How long have you been standing there, Daddy?"*  
asked Madrean.  
*Not long", I responded.*

*"Well, you shouldn't sneak up on us like that, and you shouldn't be spying on us either," she stated.*

*"I wasn't sneaking or spying, Madrean, I was just watching", I said.*

*"How did you like it Daddy?", asked Ferris.*

*"I loved it, Ferris", I responded.*

*"Can we do it again, Daddy", asked Madrean.*

*"C'mon, you can join us this time. You can be the mother rabbit."*

I said that I would love to play the mother rabbit, but it was supper time, and unfortunately we had to leave. Unlike Ferris, who by now was famished, Madrean agreed to leave, but only on the condition that I purchase a copy of *Goodnight Moon*. "I want to read it to you and Ferris in the car on the way home, Daddy," she explained. I mentioned that we already owned several copies of the book, but that explanation had no impact. Madrean wanted her own copy. So, knowing the futility of trying to reason with a five year old, I acquiesced and bought the book. Afterwards, we got in the car and headed to Grandma's house.

On the way home, Ferris sat in the back seat listening to music on her portable cassette player, while Madrean sat in the front with the copy of *Goodnight Moon* opened on her lap. Shortly after starting for home, the following conversation occurred between Madrean and me:

*"Thanks for buying me this book, Daddy," Madrean said.*

*"You're welcome, Madrean," I responded.*

*"Can I read it to you right now," she replied.*

*"Sure, go ahead," I said.*

*"I want to read this book because I want to practice my reading," she stated.*

*I had never heard Madrean say "practice my reading" before, and was curious as to what meant by the phrase. So, I asked, "What do you mean you want to practice your reading?"*

*"Well, I can read books, Daddy. And, I can read this book. That's no problem. But now I need your help," she continued.*

*"How can I help, Madrean?", I inquired.*

*"Well, I know what this story is all about. But, there are some hard words in this book, and now I want you to help me with some of those words," she explained.*

*"Okay." I said.*

At that point Madrean started to orally read the story. While she read, two conversations, one public and one private, were taking place in my mind: one conversation was between a father and daughter, and the other was between a reading educator and himself. As a father I was listening to Madrean read, and helping her with the “hard words” whenever she asked. I soon learned that “hard words,” to her, meant words that she couldn’t easily pronounce or simply didn’t recognize or both. And as a reading educator I was listening to myself thinking about connections between what happened before at the bookstore and what was now happening in the car. Specifically, I was thinking about reading and learning to read, and how this whole experience had much to teach me. Both conversations continued until Madrean finished the story and we finally arrived at Grandma’s house.

#### SHIFTING BELIEFS AND ALTERNATIVE ASSUMPTIONS

*The only practical educational conclusions that can be drawn from an analysis of the relatively few fundamental ideas that have come, gone, and continually returned throughout over twenty centuries of reading instruction — always with the same result that some children have learned to read but others have failed — is that the universal concern should change from what teachers should do to what teachers should know. (Smith, 1985, p. xii).*

Later that evening, after putting the children to bed, I spent time reflecting on this whole course of events. From this experience, I have come to learn several important lessons about reading, learning to read, and the relationship between reading and literacy. I see these lessons as personal shifts away from old beliefs and movements towards new assumptions for three reasons. First, I have learned from this experience, and others like it over the years, that what we currently believe really matters. The beliefs we currently hold shape what we can know in the future in that they influence what questions we ask, what problems we solve, and what solutions we consider (Eisner, 1993).

Second, I highlight beliefs because I have come to think of intellectual development as a matter of continually outgrowing what we currently believe. Beliefs are not indisputable facts or immutable propositions; rather, they are theoretical assumptions, tentative hypotheses, or current best guesses about what the social world is and how it operates. In many ways, belief is knowledge at rest. We put ourselves in a position to grow when we recognize that knowledge is fragile and tentative, and beliefs are (or should be) as easy to reject as they are to embrace (Schwandt, 1990). From this perspective,



learning is a natural process that continually affords us opportunities not to believe tomorrow that we currently believe today.

And third, I highlight beliefs because reading education, like all professional fields of study, is a belief-driven profession. It is a field grounded in and driven by a constellation of theoretical assumptions about reading, readers, and text, and the symbiotic relationship between them. Continually interrogating beliefs and assumptions about reading is important because as Frank Smith (1985) states: "Old assumptions about reading haven't served us very well; children aren't reading any better and with any greater enthusiasm than they were 25 years ago." What is problematic is that much of reading education today is still based on old beliefs. What is needed is a conception of reading that is based on a different set of assumptions that reflect the best we currently know about reading, learning to read, and the relationship between reading and literacy. Based on this incident at the bookstore, and others like it, I have begun to interrogate some old beliefs and consider some alternative assumptions about reading and learning to read.

*Shifting Belief: Children must master the alphabet and be able to accurately name and correctly sound out the letters (and combination of letters) before they can learn to read.*

*To me, it's just common sense. Children have to first know and be able to pronounce all the letters of the alphabet before they can learn to read. How can kids read if they don't know the letters of the alphabet? We have to start by teaching them the sounds and letters of the alphabet (preservice teacher, 1996).*

Over the years I have heard statements like the following from countless preservice teachers, as well as from highly experienced inservice teachers. Quite honestly, I found myself making similar statements not long after my own children were born. At the time, I, like these preservice teachers, believed it was just "common sense." Since then, I've come to believe that therein, perhaps, lies much of the problem.

What is problematic about reading education today is that the field is grounded in and driven by a common sense view of reading. In addition, current conceptions of reading and learning to read are based on an adult, not a child's perspective. Ironically, what is needed is not a common sense, but an "uncommon sense" view of reading (Mayher, 1990). A good starting point is to shift perspective and consider some alternative assumptions about reading based on what we currently know about how children themselves learn how to read

*Alternative Assumption: The starting point for teaching children how to read should be viewed from a child's perspective, and based on the best we currently know about how children themselves learn how to read.*

When students and teachers ask me the question What is the starting point for teaching children how to read?, I often answer by saying, "It all depends." It all depends because there are many potential starting points for teaching reading. Many parents, teachers, and college students, for example, believe that the most logical starting point is to teach children grapho-phonemics. These individuals assume that knowledge of the alphabet is an essential precursor for learning how to read. Commercial products such as *Hooked on Phonics* and professional materials like basal readers are just two powerful examples of reading programs that promote accurate recognition and correct pronunciation of letters as the most appropriate starting point for learning to read.

Others, however, believe that the starting point is not letters, but combinations of letters taught as sight words. These individuals believe that reading is a matter of accurately recognizing words and building up large sight word vocabularies. Reading instruction that highlights word attack skills and commercial products that promote the use of Dolch word lists to increase vocabulary are just two common examples of this view of reading.

Still others believe that the starting point is neither to teach letters nor words, but to highlight meaning. These individuals do not reject teaching the alphabet or word recognition skills, but believe that reading, first and foremost, is a natural meaning-making process. For them, children learn to read by strategically using all three cueing systems (grapho-phonemics, syntax, semantics) in any instance of reading where the focus is on meaning. In this sense, these individuals believe that if you "take care of the sense, the sounds (and words) will take care of themselves" (Lewis Carroll, from *Alice in Wonderland*). Stated differently, they believe that reading is synonymous with making meaning, and that accurate recognition and correct pronunciation of letters and words do not precede the act of reading, but are learned as a result of reading.

What we have here, then, are three very different perspectives on how to teach reading. Each of these perspectives represents a very different, and irreconcilable, system of values about reading and learning to read. Continually examining and interrogating our system of values should run concurrently with putting these values into practice. The incident at the bookstore and the conversation in the car has afforded me an opportunity to reflect on and reexamine what I currently believe about reading and learning to read. Based on this experience, I have come to believe that the starting point for teaching children how to read should be based on the best we currently know about reading from the child's point of view. When we see reading

from this perspective, we quickly learn that children learn to read effectively, efficiently, and effortlessly provided they are offered lots of reading experiences where the focus is always on meaning.

For example, throughout the entire performance Ferris and Madrean were clearly not focusing on letters and words, but on ideas and meaning. More specifically, they were not interested in comprehending words, but in creating and performing a dramatic interpretation of a story. In fact, I suspect that if at any time during the performance, Madrean were to stop and correct her sister whenever she mispronounced or misread a word during oral reading, Ferris would no doubt complain at first, and then protest. If Madrean continued, Ferris would quit reading all together. Conversely, I also suspect that if any time during the performance Ferris were to stop and correct Madrean whenever she sang out of tune, danced out of sync, or improvised beyond the story line, Madrean, likewise, would protest at first, then perhaps sulk. And, if Ferris continued, finally quit as well.

Fortunately, neither of these possibilities happened because both children naturally focused on the meaning of a familiar story, using imagination to see if from a different perspective and recast it in a different light. What did happen was that Ferris and Madrean collaboratively used reading, singing, dancing, and improvisation to create meaning from this text and context. They challenged themselves to make the familiar, unfamiliar, in new and creative ways, and in their interpretation also challenged me to rethink what I currently believe about the relationship between reading and language.

*Shifting Belief: Reading is the ability to accurately comprehend written language.*

Typically, reading is conceptualized as the ability to accurately comprehend written language. This notion seems entirely reasonable, and, as my students often remind me, "just makes common sense." What is problematic about this view of reading is that it is based on the assumption that a one-to-one correspondence exists between reading and language. According to this view, language consists of words, each of which has a specific meaning, given a specific context in which the word is used. Successful reading depends on the extent to which readers accurately recognize and correctly understand word meanings, and then use these meanings to faithfully reconstruct an author intended meaning of text.

*Alternative Assumption: Reading is a process of using alternate communication systems or multiple sign systems to construct personal meaning from text.*

Reading, of course, is an instance of language uses. However, I don't believe that the relationship between reading and language is one-dimensional, or that reading and learning to read solely involves decoding written language. Learning to read is less about decoding

words, and more about generating hypotheses, tinkering with ideas, and socially constructing personal meaning. Of course, learning to read involves the use of written language. But I've come to believe that it involves much more than written language. Language (oral and written) is only one tool, albeit a powerful and privileged one in our culture, that children use in learning to read. But it is not the only tool, and it is not a tool that children use in isolation, as Ferris and Madrean have demonstrated at the bookstore.

Rather, reading is a multi-modal experience, one that involves a variety of ways to create meaning. Metaphorically speaking, children have a whole tool box filled with lots of meaning making tools in addition to language that they use collectively and strategically to create personal meaning. Conceptually, I see those tools as alternate communication or sign systems (music, dance, art, improvisation, math), each of which is powerful potential for readers to create personal meaning through and beyond text.

*Shifting Belief: Learning to read precedes reading to learn.*

Historically, learning to read has been grounded in a chronological age or what Harste (1993a; 1993b) critiques as a developmental stage model of learning. This model has viewed learning more or less as a movement along a "pathway" (Bruner, 1990), and learning to read as a matter of mastering a set of hierarchically arranged and sequentially ordered skills deemed necessary to make headway along this path. Different paths are planned for different groups of students depending on chronological age and developmental stage. The idea is to match up as closely as possible an appropriate pathway with a set of specific skills that will enable learners to travel this path efficiently and effectively.

Several assumptions underpin this view of reading: 1) learning to read requires accurate word recognition which depends on accurate letter recognition; 2) reading requires rapid, accurate, automatic word recognition; 3) written language is a tool for writing down oral language; 4) phonemic awareness is essential to reading and reading development; 5) reading is a process of Look/Say, and 6) meaning is imposed on readers by the text (Goodman, 1993). From this perspective learning to read is seen as a developmental process in the sense that children cannot read to learn until they have first mastered letters, sounds, and letter/sound relationships, and then words, combinations of words, and syntactical structures in the order. Once these skills have been developed, then children will be able to accurately and fluently comprehend text, and thus read to learn. Simply stated, from this perspective learning to read is a developmental process based on a letters-to-words-to-meaning mentality.

*Alternative Assumption: Learning to read and reading to learn is a false dichotomy. They are really the same thing, and occur simultaneously in each instance of reading.*

A few months after this incident occurred at the bookstore, I started to read *Chicken Soup for the Soul: 101 Stories to Open the Heart and Rekindle the Spirit* (Canfield and Hansen, 1993). One of the stories in the book captured my eye. It was written by John Holt and entitled "We Learn By Doing."

*Not many years ago I began to play the cello. Most people would say that what I am doing is "learning to play" the cello. But these words carry into our minds the strange idea that there exists two very different processes: 1) learning to play the cello; and 2) playing the cello. They imply that I will do the first until I have completed it, at which point I will stop the first process and begin the second. In short, I will go on "learning to play" until I have "learned to play" and then I will begin to play. Of course, this is nonsense. There are not two processes, but one. We learn to do something by doing it. There is no other way.*

Although this story is clearly about learning to play the cello. Holt could just as easily have been talking about learning to read. For example, the same paragraph could read:

*Not many years ago I began to read. Most people would say that what I am doing is "learning to read." But these words carry into our minds the strange idea that there exists two very different processes: 1) learning to read; and 2) reading. They imply that I will do the first until I have completed it, at which point I will stop the first process and begin the second. In short, I will go on "learning to read" until I have "learned to read" and then I will begin to read. Of course, this is nonsense. There are not two processes, but one. We learn to do something by doing it. There is no other way.*

Learning to read and reading to learn occur simultaneously in any instance of reading. Children do not postpone reading to learn until they learn to read letters and words accurately any more than they put off writing to learn until they have learned to write words conventionally, or delay singing until they have learned to interpret musical scores correctly, or defer dancing until they have learned to perform dance routines precisely, or even postpone talking until they can pronounce words and sentences properly. Rather, children learn to read and read to learn by using all three cueing systems of

language (graphophonemic, syntax, semantic) simultaneously and strategically to make constructive sense of written language. These systems are inextricably interrelated and function as potentials for children to learn to read, learn about reading, and learn from reading in every instance of reading where meaning is the central focus. Simply stated, from this perspective learning to read and reading to learn reflect a semantic-to-syntax-to-graphophonemic rationality.

In this instance Ferris and Madrean were clearly engaged in reading as a meaning-making and meaning-representing process. Both children used reading as a tool to collaboratively create and spontaneously represent a socially constructed and highly personalized version of *Goodnight Moon*. The focus of this experience was clearly on collaborating, reading, singing, dancing, dramatizing, and improvising, all of which were used synergistically by the children, but especially by Madrean, to make sense of written language. Later, of course, the focus changed. Madrean wanted me to buy the book because she wanted to read it herself, just like Ferris had earlier. Apparently, it was at this point that Madrean wanted to attend to words, letters, and sounds by announcing: "Daddy, I know what the story means. Now, I just need help with the words."

*Shifting Belief: The relationship between reading and literacy is hierarchical in nature such that reading is viewed as a precursor to literacy.*

Historically, reading (like writing, speaking, and listening) has been viewed as an isolated skill that is learned (and therefore should be taught) from a chronological age and developmental stage perspective. For example, this perspective believes that children learn to listen before they learn to speak, learn to speak before they learn to read, and learn to read before they learn to write. Over time, and with developmentally appropriate instruction, children become literate. That is, they acquire "The Basics" or the three R's: Reading, (W)Riting, and (A)Rithmetic.

*Alternative Assumption: The relationship between reading and learning is symbiotic in nature such that how we learn to read reflects how we learn to learn.*

Recently, however, reading educators have widened the lens through which we view reading. Today, reading, as well as writing, speaking, and listening, is viewed, not as an isolated skill, but as an instance of language use. From this perspective, understanding how children learn to read means understanding how children learn language. Like reading, language isn't an isolated skill as much as it is a communication system, one of many that our culture has created over the centuries as ways to make, represent, and share meaning about the social world. In addition to language, these communication systems include art, dance, music, sign language, mathematics, and

improvisation, and represent different ways of seeing and understanding the social world.

Traditionally, however, education has not treated all communication systems equally. In particular, it has privileged language and math over all other ways of knowing. One powerful example is in the area of evaluation in that formal standardized testing privileges linguistic and logical-mathematical proficiencies over all other ways of knowing (Gardner, 1988). Other communication systems are recognized as beneficial and desirable in a fully literate individual, but these systems compliment and support the "Three R's." They are not regarded as or included in "The Basics" of literacy, and therefore do not enjoy anywhere near the same prestige as does language and math in schooling.

This incident has caused me to reexamine what the term literacy might actually mean, and how individuals actually become literate. Based on this incident, I've come to view reading not as a collection of discreet and hierarchically arranged skills, but as a tool to learn. Similarly, I've come to see literacy not in terms of "The Basics" or "Three R's", but as a set of interrelated ways of knowing. Learners become literate as they continually intentionally and strategically use a wide variety of different communication systems to generate and represent meaning of the social world.

In this incident Ferris and Madrean clearly were not treating reading as an isolated skill. Rather, they were using reading in tandem with other ways of knowing (singing, dancing, dramatizing, improvising) to create a multi-modal interpretation of *Goodnight Moon*. In other words, like most highly sophisticated learners, Ferris and Madrean naturally used an assortment of meaning-making potentials not to accurately reproduce, but to creatively produce a personalized variation of the original. Stated differently, these children, like all individuals (children and adults) become literate by actively and strategically using different communication systems to go beyond the known (what they already knew about the story) in order to enter the unknown (what they can come to know about, from, and through the story). In Madrean's case the unknown or, the yet to be learned, was driven by her interest and curiosity in now wanting me to help her learn "some of the hard words in this book."

#### SOME QUESTIONS TO PONDER

In this article I have tried to describe an incident that has challenged me to reexamine and rethink my beliefs about reading, learning to read, and the relationship between reading and literacy. This incident has enabled me to glean some new insights into the nature and function of reading. Fortunately, it has also allowed me to generate some new questions that hopefully will propel my learning

forward. Here are a few lingering questions that I am currently thinking about, and feel are worth thinking about more.

— How do we build a model of reading based on the inquiry questions of learners rather than on our assumptions about what their inquiry questions ought to be?

— How can we build on the best we currently know about language and language learning in order to move from a whole language view of learning to a holistic model of literacy to recognize language as but one way of knowing?

— Given that semiotics is the study of signs, e.g., art, dance, music, improvisation, to what extent should we use this field of study to develop new theories of reading?

— What curricular implications are involved when curriculum is grounded in and driven by theories of reading and learning which highlight multiple ways of knowing?

— What implications for assessment are involved when students are given opportunities to represent what they know or what they have learned over time by using a variety of alternate communication systems?

— What implications are involved for using a multiple ways of knowing perspective across the curriculum, K-12?

— What is the relationship between imagination and reading? To what extent do children and teachers perceive reading differently? To what extent do we as teacher educators enable preservice teachers to personally experience an imaginative, rather than a utilitarian, view of reading in the university classroom so that they, in turn, will be better able to create classroom contexts that will enable children to continue using reading in creative and imaginative ways?

I do not know the answers to these questions at this time. What I do know is that constructing answers to these questions will require me to take four stances: keep watching closely, keep testing rigorously, keep seeing differently, and keep taking risks. By watching closely, I mean keep “kidwatching” (Goodman, 1978), keep watching closely how my own children and the children of others go about learning how to read as well as use reading in conjunction with other sign systems to become literate individuals. By testing rigorously, I mean keep testing what I believe against what I see, hear, and feel about how children are learning to read and becoming literate in the process. By seeing differently, I mean shifting perspective so that what constitutes conventional wisdom and common sense today has the potential to be viewed in unconventional and uncommon ways tomorrow. And by taking risks, I mean keep putting my beliefs and theories to the test so that I can know tomorrow what I don’t know today about the nature of reading. To this end, I conclude with a quote by Ruth Simmons, President of Smith College, who once stated



"You have to take risks and also go against conventional wisdom — conventional wisdom doesn't make for startling advances."

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## **Children's literature: What's on the horizons**

**Lauren Freedman**  
*Western Michigan University*

Adler, David A. 1997. *Lou Gehrig: The luckiest man*. Illustrated by Terry Widener. San Diego: Gulliver Books/Harcourt Brace. ISBN: 0-15-200523-4. 32 pp.

This is an extraordinary biography of one of baseball's greatest heroes. The story is heartwarming and inspiring. The acrylic paintings which illustrate the story enhance the text.

Cardo, Horacio. 1998. *The story of chess*. NY: Abbeville. ISBN: 0-7892-0250-6. 45 pp.

This illustrated book offers a mythical look at the derivation of the game of chess. In so doing, it explains the pieces, the board and some of the moves. It is a compelling introduction to chess involving the complex strategies in playing the game.

Christopher, Matt. 1998. *The dog that called the pitch*. Illustrated by Daniel Vasconcellos. ISBN: 0-316-14207-7. 38 pp.

Mike and his dog, Harry can read each other's minds. Mike is going to pitch at the little league game that day and wants his dad to help him practice. As they start to warm up, along comes Mr. Grimley who is going to be the home plate umpire for the game. Mr. Grimley, it turns out, can also read Mike's and Harry's minds. In the bottom of the 8th inning, Mike accidentally bumps into Mr. Grimley whose glasses fall off and get stepped on. Harry saves the day by calling the pitches for Mr. Grimley. Much of the book reads like a play-by-play of the game complemented by the pen and ink cartoon drawings.

This early reader story is another one of Matt Christopher's well told sports stories and will be of great interest to baseball fans especially. The team is made up of both boys and girls.

Levine, Abby. 1998. *Gretchen, groundhog. It's your day!* Illustrated by Nancy Cote. Morton Grove IL: Albert Whitman & Co. ISBN: 0-8075-3058-1. 32 pp.

The book begins with a brief one page history of groundhog day. Gretchen is the next in a long line of groundhogs in her family to be The Groundhog who must come out on February 2 and either see her shadow or not. It is an awesome responsibility and Gretchen isn't sure she is up to it. The town is in an uproar until Gretchen's friend brings over a box containing written records of the town's history. Among these are the recorded experiences of Gretchen's ancestors and their experiences being The Groundhog.

This is a delightful little story and Nancy Cote's watercolor, pencil and gouache illustrations offer further detail and information.

McCain, Becky Ray. 1998. *Grandmother's dreamcatcher*. Illustrated by Stacey Schuett. Morton Grove IL: Albert Whitman & Co. ISBN: 0-8075-3031-X. 32 pp.

Kimmy goes to stay for a week with her Grandmother who is Chippewa like the rest of her family while her parents go to Chicago to house hunt as her father has a new job there. Kimmy remembers her grandmother as "... tiny and brown, with dark, shiny eyes that wrinkle in the corners when she smiles." Kimmy's grandmother, realizing Kimmy's sadness and fear at being away from her parents, takes her on a trip to the woods by the lake to make a dreamcatcher. After that, the rest of the week is spent on making surprises for her parents and their new home. The last page of the story contains directions for making a dreamcatcher. The acrylic and gouache paintings highlight the relationships between Kimmy and her grandmother.

Rodriquez, Alex with Greg Brown. 1998. *Alex Rodriquez: Hit a grand slam!* Illustrated by Doug Keith. Dallas: Taylor. 40 pp.

This is one of the best sports autobiographies or biographies available. It contains the life story of Alex Rodriquez as told from his perspective along with anecdotes about him from his family members as well as teammates and friends. The story is enhanced with both illustrations and photographs. Alex's story is inspirational as well as informative. There are other athletes available in this series such as Troy Aikman, Bonnie Blair, John Elway, Dan Marino, Scottie Pippen, Kerri Strug, Sheryl Swoopes, Kristi Yamaguchi.

Sensisi, Ellen. B. 1998. *For my family, love, Allie*. Morton Grove IL: Albert Whitman & Co. ISBN: 0-8075-2539-1. 30 pp.

Allie's family is having a big party and Allie wants to give them all something special. Allie's mother is white and her father is black. In the photographs, which accompany her story, the reader sees clearly the harmony and caring that exists not only between and among Allie and her parents, but both sides of her extended family as well. Allie decided with the help of her parents that she can make a special dessert for everyone. She makes Peanut-Butter Treats. The recipe for these and other ideas for things to give to your family are included on the last page of the story.

Spelman, Cornelia Maude. 1998. *Mama and Daddy Bear's Divorce*. Illustrated by Kathy Parkinson. Morton Grove IL: Albert Whitman & Co. ISBN: 0-8075-5221-6. 24 pp.

This is a simply told story about divorce written especially for very young children. There is a "Note to Grownups" at the beginning which explains the need for such a story. The colored pencil and watercolor illustrations set the tone and convey the range of emotions which might be felt by young children whose parents are going through a divorce. The major thrust of the story is the security and support that Dinah needs and the knowledge that "...they all loved her very much," even though the routines would now be different.

Tucker, Kathy. 1999. *The leprechaun in the basement*. Illustrated by John Sandford. Morton Grove IL: Albert Whitman & Co. ISBN: 0-8075-4450-7. 32 pp.

Times are hard for Michael McKeever's parents, and baseball season is about to begin. Michael needs new baseball shoes. One day when he is down in the basement getting something for his mother, he discovers Mr. O'Leary who has been hiding down there for some time. He also discovers Mr. O'Leary's pot of gold. Michael and Mr. O'Leary get into a shouting match. Michael calls Mr. O'Leary a "selfish leprechaun" while O'Leary calls Michael a "greedy human being." Discouraged, Michael goes to his dad who assures him that their luck will change, and he decides he will tape his old shoes for the game and make the best of it. Mr. O'Leary, in the meantime, remembers he was the best cobbler in County Cork. This is a simple story about hope. The watercolor and pencil illustrations bring the story to life and reinforce the emotional undertones of the story.

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