



# Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

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Volume 36  
Issue 4 *March/April 1996*

Article 6

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4-1-1996

## Reading Horizons vol. 36, no. 4

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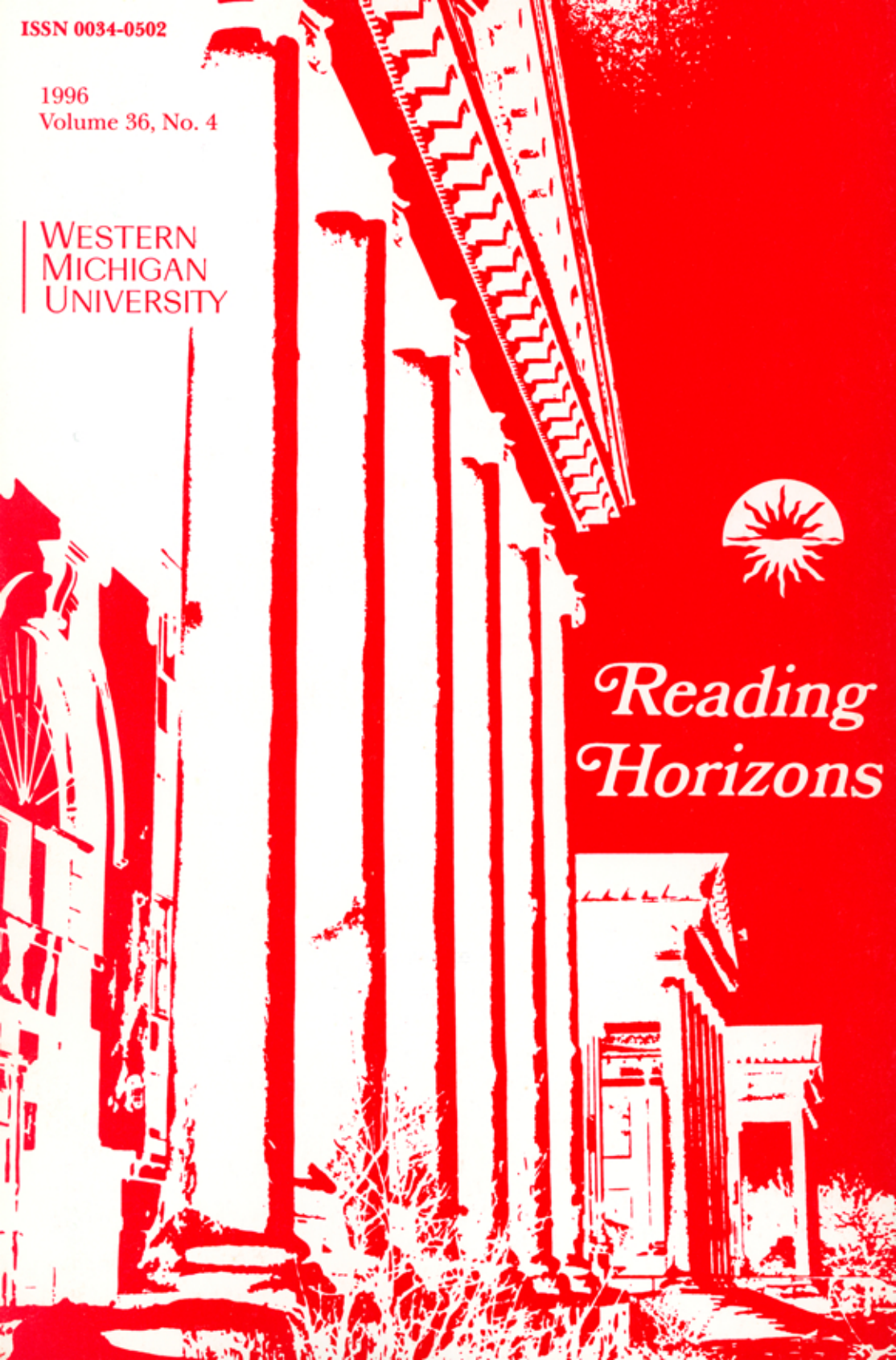
ISSN 0034-0502

1996  
Volume 36, No. 4

WESTERN  
MICHIGAN  
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# *Reading Horizons*







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# Documenting and Evaluating Oral Language Development in the Classroom

Ruth Crawford

*What I want to know, is how her teacher is measuring those things like oral language. Well like, what does it mean when she gets a check plus in 'sharing with others' and only a check in 'can use language to describe events and objects?'*

*With my son, I know that he speaks well and shares things in class, but I don't think he gets enough credit for this. He is very verbal — that is his strength. Where his writing might be a bit behind, he makes up for that in his ability to speak well. I'd like to know that was taken into consideration.*

These comments were made by parents discussing the necessity of creating a school-wide program of documenting and evaluating oral language. They articulate two very real concerns common to parents and educators alike: How is oral language valued and evaluated in the classroom? Concerns such as these confirm that it is not enough for teachers to simply expound the virtues of oral language or even to place check marks on report cards. In order to insure that oral language be given its rightful place in the curriculum, teachers

must implement validated programs that contain documentation and evaluation.

Oral language has long been overlooked as a critical component of language arts (Buckley, 1992). This neglect will continue until proper evaluation procedures are facilitated by teachers (Buckley, 1995). For that which is not evaluated is seldom valued (Loban, 1976). Researchers have determined that in order to facilitate oral language development, educators must provide a "curricula that is a thoughtfully organized, sequential set of experiences leading logically through the grades" (Stewig, 1988, p. 172) with practical and accessible means for documentation and evaluation (Loban, 1976). Stewig (1988) declared further that to appropriate oral language into the curriculum teachers must do these three things: "1) develop rationales, 2) plan curriculum sequences, and 3) implement evaluation programs" (p. 41).

In keeping with these guidelines the following program was implemented in a PDS (professional development school) encompassing grades pre-school through six. The author, in conjunction with teachers from this school, created and facilitated a program which consisted of identifying sequential oral language objectives for each grade, using video and audio recordings to document oral language events, and developing a system for easy retrieval and evaluation of these events. Using both audio and video recorders, students were taped at various times throughout the year during a variety of oral language events. The tapes were to become cumulative records with each grade level thereafter adding recordings. Parental involvement became a significant aspect of this program since parents were expected to examine taped recordings and provide related feedback.



The response of parents, students, and teachers in the school to this innovative program was overwhelmingly positive. Consequently, several unique discoveries were made as a result of the recordings. These discoveries provide insight into the emergent on-going nature of oral language development; the value of a cumulative video and audio record of oral language progression; and the need to establish consistent methods for documenting and recovering evidence from tapes.

### **Examining beliefs**

The following questions concerning oral language were presented by teacher education students to the various PDS teachers: 1) How significant is oral language development to the overall educational progression of your students?, 2) How are the oral language objectives met in your classroom?, 3) What is the significance of documenting and evaluating the progression of oral language development in students? Unanimously, teachers agreed that "students must talk and communicate to learn well" (Hart, 1983, p. 164). They agreed too, that oral language is a developmental process which should be reflected in progressive and developmentally appropriate objectives in the classroom. Furthermore, all teachers answered positively when asked if they had instituted oral language objectives in their classroom. However, there was an indicated lack of continuity between grade level objectives; and few teachers had means for documenting and evaluating oral language development in their classroom.

Although all teachers perceived a need for oral language in the classroom, various levels of importance had been placed upon this need. In the earlier grades, teachers presented extensive lists of oral language objectives for instruction. However, in the upper grades the oral language objectives of teachers ranged anywhere from simply those listed on

their report card, to lists consisting of both whole class and individually established oral language objectives.

Often, teachers stress oral language less and less as students get older. This is an erroneous decision since students must continually develop proficient oral language skills in order to prepare for adult life where oral language is often the predominant mode of transferring information (Smith and Smith, 1994). Moreover, the ability to speak well "should be the hallmark of students who have had the privilege of twelve years of education" (Buckley, 1995, p. 45). Oral language objectives must then be both consistently and progressively stressed by teachers throughout grade levels.

### **Formulating new objectives**

After establishing the existing oral language objectives of each level, a master list was comprised (see Figure 1). Each teacher was given this list to review before meeting again to discuss the creation of a continuum of oral language objectives. As a result, many teachers refined their previous objectives based on those adopted by other teachers.

After refining their objectives, teachers met to discuss the new continuum. There were, in all, three types of oral language objectives created. These objectives included: school-wide objectives, objectives specific to particular levels, and objectives individually created for specific students. Many objectives, such as "uses oral language to contribute information to the class" were determined appropriate for all levels. Thus, it was determined that these were to become school-wide objectives. Grade equivalent objectives were those established as developmentally appropriate for certain levels. Both school-wide and grade equivalent objectives were to be reevaluated annually through collaborative meetings in order to insure they remained developmentally

appropriate and appropriately progressive throughout levels. Individual oral language objectives would be those established each year by teachers, students and parents based on the abilities, needs, and desires of the individual student. The ability to create individual objectives would be particularly dependent upon the evidence derived from oral language records both past and present.

**Figure 1**  
*School-wide oral language objectives*

The students will use oral language:

- \* to communicate ideas to others
- \* to expand vocabulary
- \* to share experiences with others
- \* to adjust to social situations
- \* to resolve conflicts appropriately
- \* to contribute ideas to class
- \* to expand the awareness of others
- \* to express thoughts and feelings
- \* to examine and experience cultural diversity
- \* to communicate in an organized manner
- \* to participate in group discussions
- \* to read the ideas of others
- \* to read their own ideas when written
- \* to ask questions and demonstrate understanding of the answers received
- \* to analyze situations and respond to them
- \* to describe a sequence of events or multiple events
- \* to demonstrate an appropriate level of comprehension of concepts
- \* to rephrase or add details to clarify their messages to others
- \* to participate in social and instructional conversations
- \* to demonstrate their construction of knowledge
- \* to develop expression
- \* to participate in group planning

## Documentation

Once oral language objectives become a consistent aspect of the curriculum, teachers must document evidence of this. Buckley (1992) contends that to best evaluate oral language, teachers should use taped samples. Several teachers in the PDS were already using audio and video tapes to record oral language events in their classroom. Based on the determined availability and limited cost of these endeavors, this was established as an appropriate means for the documentation of oral language school-wide.

While many researchers mention the use of audio and video equipment for recording oral language (Loban, 1976; Wellhousen, 1993; Buckley, 1992; Stewig, 1988); little, or no, specific methods for documenting and evaluating these recordings have been offered. An array of difficulties arise when teachers use audio and video recordings without consistent methods for locating and documenting the specific events of children. "Searching through tapes for one piece of evidence was difficult without a record keeping system," remarked one PDS teacher. "It is especially difficult too, if a parent wants you to locate that specific sentence or event you might have mentioned as an illustration of their child's growth. You need to be able to put your hands on that place in the tape in order to show that you really are evaluating their child based on authentic incidence from the classroom" added another teacher.

Hence, teachers need a practical record keeping system that allows easy access for documentation and evaluation of the oral language objectives for which they are accountable. This system must also allow for additional input and observations to insure proper evaluation of language events (Goodman, Goodman and Hood, 1989). In order to satisfy these requirements, a consistent system for documenting,

recovering, and evaluating evidence from tapes was created. Based upon the principles of the recording system for kid watching, this DE (documentation/evaluation) process addresses specific behaviors (of oral language) to be observed; includes a limited number of specific items to be observed so that the checklists aren't too lengthy; and provides additional space for observations and comments (Goodman, Goodman and Hood, 1989). The DE process consists of two forms, 1) the target objective checklist, and 2) the anecdotal, or scripting, record.

## Evaluation

As evaluation begins the teacher documents the time, date, and method of recording onto the pre-prepared target objective checklist. While certainly more than one oral language objective might be observed during any given event, teachers are cautioned to focus upon only the objectives which necessitate documentation at the current time. The goal being to document and evaluate identified aspects of oral language.

This example of an excerpt from a child's oral language demonstrates the placement of the oral language objectives and the corresponding documentation and evaluations on the target checklist (Figure 2). The method for recording the event is indicated by a V — for video tape, A — for audio tape, or O — for simple observation. The date and time of assessment are included to provide easy access to the corresponding tape — which is also labeled with the date, time and event recorded. Following the time is the teacher's evaluation, which as recommended by Loban (1976), uses the single criterion of effectiveness, ranging from high, to moderate, to low. These ratings are represented by the letters H, M, or L respectively.

As soon as the event begins, teachers record their insights and observations on the scripting form (Figure 3). This anecdotal record is necessary since the illustrations provide much needed descriptions and interpretations concerning the event. As with kid watching, teachers are encouraged to record instructional ideas which occur during observation. This allows teachers to refine instructional practices based upon documented observations of children's needs and abilities.

**FIGURE 2**  
*Target Objective Checklist*

First Grade Oral Language Objectives: The Learning Uses Oral Language to:

Re-tell an event sequentially (V 9-13, 1:15 p.m. L) (A 10-12, 1:20 M) (O 11-6, 1:18 M);

Contribute information to the class (O 9-27, 10:05 a.m. M) (V 10-11, 12:16 a.m. H) (A 10-13, 2:05 p.m. M);

Represent views and opinions (S 9-18, 2:30 p.m. M).

These sheets may also be used as places to record vignettes. A vignette is a chronicle of an especially meaningful event from a child's classroom life (Pappas, Kiefer and Levstik, 1990). Since these are quite detailed accounts they are usually written some time after an event. It is advantageous for teachers to include at least one vignette per grading period since these may reveal events which were significant but not documented by either video or audio taping.

Both the target objective checklist and the scripting notes become part of the student's portfolio. Parents are asked to

take the tapes and these documents home to review and to provide feedback. On occasion parents may disagree with the teacher's evaluations of their child. If this is the case they are asked to provide further evidence from home to augment the child's portfolio. Often, parents undertaking this endeavor will discover that the teacher has in fact provided a clear indication of their child's growth. While other parents may produce evidence from home which substantiates their views and demonstrates the need to re-examine the teacher's assessment. Either way, parental feedback is a necessary component of the evaluation process.

**FIGURE 3**  
*The Scripting Record*

Name XXXXXX Date and Time: 9/13/95 1:15  
*XXXXXX begins to tell the class how we made bread. Although he has use of the recipe chart the directions are not given sequentially. XXXXX stops several times to ask what comes next. I prompt him by telling the first step, and by asking him to provide the next. Yet he still does not give the steps in order. XXXXX has developed a willingness to speak in large group settings and even volunteered to give this information. He smiles as he speaks and even laughs at his own mistakes. He seems comfortable speaking in front of the class. All of this demonstrates his development. I plan to implement more opportunities for XXXXX to practice presenting information sequentially.*

## Oral language lessons

As a result of this program, teachers, parents and students reconsidered the importance of oral language in the curriculum. Teachers discovered that by creating consistent objectives, a clearer focus upon instruction and evaluation

was provided. These objectives also allowed neglected aspects of oral language to be uncovered as teachers came to appreciate their worth in a greater way.

The recording methods also proved advantageous. One teacher stated that these had allowed her "to know students better and be able to share evidence of growth." While another concluded that the "best thing about using recordings was the possibility to authenticate assessment." Teachers used words like validation, verification, and authentication to describe the advantages of using video and audio recordings to document oral language development.

Appreciation for this consistent method of documenting and recovering evidence from audio and video tapes was also strengthened. Gone were the days of hunting through tapes or trying desperately to recall examples from specific events to share with parents or other teachers. Through the use of effective documentation systems, teachers could now pass on information knowing that others would receive a clearer picture of where students were and where they were going. There was much to be said about using the tapes as cumulative records of oral language progression.

The response of parents to this program was overwhelmingly positive. Parents are a vital component in the success of any literacy program. Previous intervention endeavors (Crawford, 1995) reinforced the necessity of involving parents in both evaluative and operative modes. Parents played a key role in the development and facilitation of this program by sharing insights and opinions and by monitoring the assessment of their children. This interaction opened up channels of dialogue between parents and teachers concerning the significance of oral language development and the effectiveness of this new program.



Through this program parents came to better appreciate the oral language development of their children. They learned to view oral language less as mere "chit chat," and more as a means for communicating, investigating, and articulating the learning process (Smith and Smith, 1994). Furthermore, parents realized that they could assist their children's oral language development by planning home activities which reinforced objectives from the classroom (Crawford, 1995).

Students generally enjoyed being video or audio taped. Since the tapes were sent home they also enjoyed sharing their endeavors with family members. Through these recordings students were allowed to assess their own competency, and to realize things like, the more they practiced speaking, the more proficient they would become.

Eventually the program will be used to facilitate students in the art of self-assessment; in that students will be asked to assess the fulfillment of an objective based upon evidence taken from their recordings. By practicing self-assessment, students will become more responsible learners. By watching themselves develop over time they will gain a direction for learning with a vision toward the future.

## **Reflections**

This program was founded upon the contention that educators must do more with oral language than pay lip service or plan activities. If teachers are to understand and facilitate the oral language development of children, they must implement programs geared toward documentation and evaluation (Bouffler, 1993). Our program provided the means to accomplish this through cumulative records of progression. Although this program is still in its infancy, results thus

far are promising. Forthcoming longitudinal studies should reveal the distinct advantages of such a program. We await that day, when our cumulative records allow for the examination of progression — grades preschool through six. Hopefully then even more will be learned about oral language development and the value of having documented this progression.

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# **External Review of Portfolios in Preservice Teacher Education: Studying Our Own Practice**

**Patricia A. Scanlan  
Delores E. Heiden**

In this article we present the results of a study in which we examine our use of literacy portfolios in our elementary education methods courses through the inclusion of an external reviewer in the portfolio evaluation process. Preservice teachers at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse are concurrently enrolled in a field-based block of three professional elementary education courses. They are required to create a literacy portfolio as a combined requirement in our two methods courses (Elementary Level Reading and Curriculum and Methods in Language Arts) in which they demonstrate and reflect upon the development of their knowledge and skills as literacy educators. Our one-semester study provided an external professional audience for the review of these literacy portfolios, and provided us new insights to improve the ways in which we evaluated these assessments.

The use of portfolios is currently being explored in a variety of contexts in teacher education (Ohlhausen and Ford, 1990; Ohlhausen, Perkins, and Jones, 1995; Ryan and Kuhs, 1993; Wolf, 1991) as teacher educators seek to align their

practices with their beliefs about teacher development (Stahle and Mitchell, 1993). Increasingly, portfolios are being viewed as an alternative approach to assessment in preservice teacher education which is more valid than traditional, quantitative measurements (Gellman, 1992/1993; Ryan and Kuhs, 1993). The value of portfolios as a vehicle for reflection and self-assessment has also been established in the professional literature (Rousculp and Maring, 1992; Wolf, 1991). In their review of current research on portfolios, Herman and Winters (1994) point out that "well-designed portfolios represent important, contextualized learning that requires complex thinking and expressive skills" (p. 48).

Investigations in the use of portfolios include examination of both their product and process functions (Cole, Lasley, Ryan, Swonigan, Tillman, and Uphoff, 1991) and the tensions that result from the relations between these functions (Mosenthal, Daniels, and Mekkelsen, 1993; Wixson, Valencia, and Lipson, 1994). The formative function of portfolio assessment is most often advocated (Gellman, 1992/1993). Portfolios have also been used in teacher education programs to evaluate preservice teachers (Barton and Collins, 1993; Cole, Messner, Swonigan, and Tillman, 1991). The portfolio system at the State University at New York at Stony Brook is an official procedure wherein student portfolios are evaluated — and graded — by instructors (Elbow and Belanoff, 1991).

The question of who does the evaluating of portfolios poses a critical issue. Certainly, portfolios are a vehicle to support self-assessment of students' own learning. When portfolios are part of course or program requirements in teacher education, they may also be subject to review and evaluation by instructors. Reports of portfolios in preservice teacher education describe evaluation of the portfolios by course instructors themselves (Stahle and Mitchell, 1993;

Valeri-Gold, Olson, and Deming, 1991/1992) or by teams of reviewers drawn from the faculty involved in professional education course work (Cole, Messner, Swonigan, and Tillman, 1991; Mathies and Uphoff, 1992).

All of the aforementioned studies employed internal reviewers who were well-acquainted with course content, portfolio assessment, and preservice teacher education. Except for the inclusion of inter-departmental reviewers in a study by Ohlhausen, Perkins, and Jones (1995), little has been written about the use of external reviewers of preservice teachers' portfolios.

## The problem

The portfolio assignment. Elementary education majors at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse enroll concurrently in our two required methods courses. As a combined requirement for both methods courses, students are required to construct a literacy portfolio as a culminating project which reflects the learning they acquire in both their on-campus course work and their field-site experiences. The description of the portfolio assignment found in each of our syllabi includes the following: "This portfolio is a systematic collection of your work as a developing teacher; it is also a vehicle for you to reflect on and self-evaluate your development as a teacher and a learner." We also established the guideline that the portfolios should document growth and development in three areas: 1) professional knowledge about the teaching of reading/language arts, 2) professional skills and abilities related to the teaching of reading/language arts, and 3) personal reading and writing habits.

For the three semesters prior to this study, our assessment of the portfolios was based on a broad set of criteria — organization and professional appearance, reflections, and

quality of writing. These criteria were included in the portfolio assignment in our course syllabi. We wanted the portfolios to be organized in such a way that they would be easily accessible to a professional audience; we wanted the students' reflection in their portfolios to clearly and articulately explain why they had chosen to include particular pieces of evidence which reflected their learning and growth; and, last, we expected that students' reflections would be well-organized, coherent, clearly elaborated, use appropriate conventions and portray a sense of honesty and personal investment. We developed an evaluation matrix of these criteria to guide our review of the portfolios; these criteria were also shared with the students during the portfolio development process (see Appendix A). While these criteria were fairly broad, we wanted to ensure a flexibility in our reviews that would acknowledge individual differences as well as recognize the quality of the students' final product.

### **Our questions about portfolios evaluation**

At the end of each semester, we both read all portfolios and discussed the quality of the work; each of us met in final conferences with half the students. Input from students helped to determine the final portfolio grades.

Because of our experience with portfolios, we believed that their use was more aligned with the goals of our courses and with our views on teacher development than were the more traditional assessment measures. Although we generally saw students' portfolios as providing strong evidence of their learning and growth, we questioned how others might view them. Would another educational professional outside of the university also see the strengths in these portfolios?

For several semesters, we had struggled with the task of assigning grades to these unique and individual

representations of students' learning and growth. Like Mosenthal, Daniels, and Mekkelsen (1993), we felt a tension between the use of portfolios to facilitate the development of preservice teachers as reflective practitioners and our practice of grading them. How often, if ever, did students use the portfolio as a way of telling us what they thought we wanted to hear? How could we better explain to students whose portfolios we viewed as less successful the reasons for our evaluation of their work? How could we better articulate the criteria used to evaluate the portfolios? We believed that expanding the professional audience who read and reviewed our students' portfolios might help us to address these questions. We also believed the inclusion of an outside reviewer would inform and enhance the portfolio review process.

## Method

In order to ensure that the involvement of an external reviewer did not decontextualize the assessment process, we sought to involve a reviewer who was knowledgeable about both teacher education and about the work of elementary classroom teachers. Kate Pilmonas, whose expertise we enlisted, is a professional who understands the changing face of assessment, has a practical understanding of learning to teach as a life-long developmental process, and is well-versed in current theory and practice about literacy education in elementary schools. As a reading specialist, Kate had also served as a cooperating teacher for two of our students the previous semester and was involved in the study of portfolio development in her own school district.

Of the forty-nine students enrolled in our two courses, forty-one gave their permission to be involved in the study. While we instructors read and evaluated all students' portfolios at the end of the semester, for the purposes of this inquiry

Kate reviewed fifteen randomly selected portfolios. She also participated in these fifteen students' final portfolio conferences. The three of us met three times before and after these reviews to discuss our observations about the preservice teachers' portfolio development. Our meetings were audiotaped; twelve of the fifteen students' final conferences were also audiotaped. All audiotapes were transcribed for later review and analysis.

During the summer after this project, we instructors reviewed these transcripts both independently and together, and identified several patterns which emerged in our discussions about the literacy portfolios. Our criteria for evaluation of the portfolios expanded and became clearer as we analyzed the transcripts. We constructed an evaluation rubric which went through several revisions as we discussed the criteria, practiced applying it to the portfolios used in the study, and formulated language that would be understandable to our students. These multiple reviews and rereadings led to the development of an evaluation rubric which reflected a substantial revision and refinement of our criteria for portfolio evaluation. They also led to a number of descriptive findings about portfolio evaluation.

## Findings

With the help of Kate Pilmonas, this study has provided us with a closer look at both the strengths and problems of portfolio assessment in our courses. Through an "outsider's" eyes, we have come to value portfolios more; we have also once again had to face some continuing dilemmas related to their use. Through our analysis and synthesis of the study data, several patterns of findings emerged. These findings are outlined in four sections: confirmations, continued struggles, new insights, and rubric development.



## Confirmations — the joy of discovery

Since we began using portfolios several years ago, we have believed them to be valuable as vehicles for student reflection on learning and as assessment tools. From this study, however, we became more aware that one of the values of the portfolios lies in what Kate called the "joy of discovery":

*One of the neatest parts, I think was overall from your point of view, and mine, and theirs [the students'], was this joy of discovery that came out in so many ways. They discovered things about themselves. They discovered knowledge, they discovered methodology ... they discovered what it takes to organize. We discovered who they were as we listened to them and read [the portfolios] ... the fact that assessment gave us something we didn't know makes me think it's pretty darn good assessment. We didn't know the answers before we went in (transcript of reviewers' discussion, May 17, 1994).*

We discovered much about what our students had learned and about how well they could articulate that learning. For example, we were surprised and pleased to discover that Monica had developed an understanding of so many important course concepts; this had not been evident from the results of her course examinations. We also discovered that our emphasis on the need for teachers to be readers and writers themselves had an impact on our students. We learned that Jolene, a busy mother of two and a highly committed full-time student, had been successful in making time to read *The Client*. At age thirty-six, Jolene had finally discovered what it means to describe a book as one she "just can't put down." And we learned from his portfolio that Ben had begun to collect poetry, to read *Educational Horizons*, and to

write regular letters to a good friend who was having a difficult semester at a nearby university.

In both their portfolios and in their portfolio conferences, students also repeatedly described their discoveries. As they explained the process of developing their portfolios, they often expressed their surprise over how much they had learned during the semester. They simply hadn't realized what they knew until they had to pull it together in their portfolios.

Similarity in evaluations. Before meeting with each student in the final portfolio conference, we conferred about the grades we might assign each portfolio; we regularly suggested similar grades. Generally we have found students' portfolios to be of high quality. Before this project began, however, we did not know how another reviewer might see our students' portfolios. Were these literacy portfolios really as strong as we often saw them? This study clearly confirmed that our assessment of the students' portfolios was similar to that of at least one knowledgeable external reviewer. For 13 of the 15 portfolios reviewed, the grades Kate assigned were identical or a half-grade apart from the ones we assigned. Interestingly, the differences in grades for the other two portfolios were extreme, Kate's assigned grades being lower. Through the conference, however, important new insights were acquired about both these students. As instructors, we learned we had misjudged Alyssa's interest in working with children. Relatedly, Kate learned about Dennis' passion for teaching which had not been evident to her in his written work.

Importance of alternative assessment. Kate's strongest affirmation was of the importance in looking for alternatives to old systems that do not work. Even after being involved in

the time-consuming process of reading and reviewing portfolios and participating in portfolio conferences, Kate's enthusiasm for our use of portfolios never waned. She reflected on the value of portfolios as a messier, but better form of assessment:

*[I]t's messy, but that almost implies that it never was before. Before, the messiness looked like — a kid who wasn't a good teacher, who didn't have the heart or didn't have the soul to be a good teacher, could come off and get an 'A' on all of the multiple choice tests — and that's messy too. I don't think messy is anything new... The grading stuff has always been messy. What's different now is I think this is a more honest messy... the grade that goes down is much more honest than grades have ever been in terms of does it reflect authentic teaching ability... I mean, in that sense it's cleaner. The struggle is there, but you know these kids like you never knew them before (transcript of reviewers' discussion, May 17, 1994).*

## Continued struggles

Grading portfolios. Kate's confirmations about the value of using portfolios to assess student learning were important for us to hear, especially since the grading of portfolios was an ongoing dilemma and struggle for us as course instructors. The portfolio grade was 40% of the students' final grade in each of our courses; it was determined by both of us with input from the students during the final conference. Assigning a grade to the portfolio, and thereby making it a high stakes assignment for our students, clearly has both advantages and disadvantages.

The major advantage of grading the students' portfolios is that it motivates them to take the assignment seriously; this is an assignment we really want the students to take seriously.

We recognize that many students would do their best work on their portfolios whether it was graded or not; we also know that as juniors in college, our students are exceptionally busy human beings and many of them use instructor expectations/standards as the way to determine where they put their time and effort. Our students are well-socialized into a culture where grades count, and where grades are worth working for. If the stakes in this assessment process were lower, many students might choose to give less time, thought, and reflection to this assignment. They also might miss the opportunity to synthesize and evaluate their learning, and to articulate that learning for themselves and others.

On the other hand, grading portfolios is never easy. After several semesters of reading and reviewing students' literacy portfolios, we found that we had an internalized sense of what an "A," "B," or "C" level portfolio might look like as a performance assessment. Assigning grades was more difficult, however, when we considered individual differences and growth of students throughout the semester. We relied on each other to confirm or to challenge our evaluations of the portfolios, and we always considered carefully how the students saw their work. What was most difficult, however, was how to provide feedback to people whose portfolios were not as strong as they believed them to be.

Every semester, about 10% of our students found our assessments of their portfolios to be significantly lower than they expected. For both of us, sitting face-to-face across from these people and trying to help them understand what we saw as problems in their portfolios in a 20-minute conference was hard; it seemed that a small minority of the students had minimal understanding of the criteria for this assignment.

The issue of grading was no less complicated when we invited students' input into the grading process. What was disconcerting about the practice of student self-grading was the reasons students provided for the grades they suggested. Often students said they deserved an "A" because they had put so much work into their portfolios; rather simplistically they equated time and effort with performance. Another common rationale was that the portfolio represented "B" work, because "I'm pretty much a 'B' student." Although we valued what the students thought about the quality of their portfolios, it was evident to us that often they did not understand the criteria on the evaluation matrix which we were using to evaluate their work. Clearly, Kate's observation that this kind of evaluation is a more "honest messy" is one we struggle to live with.

Quality of reflections. A second struggle, which is related to the issue of grading, is whether or not the portfolio sometimes becomes a place for students to tell us what they think we want to hear. At times it seemed that students' attempts to please took the shape of superficiality; students' reflections were bland, depersonalized, and "right out of the book." Too often we felt that students' portfolios lacked both honesty and voice. Kate helped us to think about the superficiality of their portfolios in another way:

*There was no passion. It was spitting back stuff, even the reflections sounded like book reports more than feelings ... and growth and what I've learned ... They really were academia-ese kind of stuff. It wasn't personal ... Maybe they [the students] don't feel that [their personal world] is important. That what you're giving them is the most important thing and "that's what I'll put back in here. If we got it from our teachers that must be the really important stuff" (transcript of reviewers discussion, April 26, 1994).*

Students as writers. The last struggle which emerged more clearly during this project was how the students' abilities as writers affected the quality of their portfolios. Kate was surprised to learn how much this mattered to her as a reader:

*I'm so process-oriented I was surprised at how important the product was to me. The handwritten ones [pieces of evidence] that were difficult to read, I could barely tolerate ... And while I was not tolerating them I was being real angry at myself because I was thinking there might be a really wonderful thing here, but the product itself is pushing it away from me. And that was a real eye-opener for me (transcript of reviewers' discussion, April 26, 1994).*

As we reviewed the 15 portfolios in this study, it became clear that in order for a portfolio to be viewed as strong by all three reviewers, the students had to successfully communicate with us about the learning they had done. Students who struggled to make written words communicate their ideas and experiences often produced portfolios that all of us evaluated less favorably. The dilemma for us here, however, was a new question for us about how important it is for a good teacher to be a good writer. What are the limitations of portfolios given the fact that teachers may be able to reflect on their practices in an oral mode but struggle to put these reflections in writing for others to read? On the other hand, if teachers are to be taken seriously as professionals, shouldn't they be able to express themselves in writing?

### **New insights**

As we discussed our review of the students' portfolios and debated our struggles with the evaluation process, new insights emerged about how we might improve our approach

to portfolio assessment. The criteria we used for evaluating portfolios had to be better articulated; it needed to do a better job of reflecting what we believe is important for developing teachers to know and be able to do. We also felt students needed to better understand this criteria so they could more willingly trust themselves and us in the evaluation process. Finally, we realized a clear need to construct criteria that were both specific and flexible; our criteria needed to reflect the growth of students at various developmental levels.

Students' gifts and struggles. Kate taught us about how important it is to help preservice teachers talk about both their gifts/strengths and their struggles. As a cooperating teacher in our program for two consecutive semesters, she had always asked her university students two questions in a short conference at the end of their time in her classroom: "What is your gift?" and "What are you still working on?" It seemed that if students were to be encouraged to take risks and to learn from things that did not go well, they also needed to be able to be positive with themselves and to identify their strengths as teachers.

Students' goals. Related to students' abilities to discuss their gifts and their struggles, we realized that setting and self-assessing goals both during the semester and beyond also needed to be valued in the portfolio. While we had always had students set goals at the start of each semester, we found that their goals were often global in nature. We knew that we would have to make "ability to set and assess goals" more explicit if we expected this to count in the portfolios our students would develop. We also knew that goal setting would have to become a more regular part of what we did in both of our courses.

Selection and unity. Our last insight was related to selection and a sense of focus in the portfolio as a whole. As students approached the process of deciding what they had learned throughout the semester, we realized they needed encouragement to make intentional selections about what to include in their portfolios. Making decisions about what learning has been the most critical and important can be difficult, especially since the only decisions most students are usually expected to make include which bits and pieces of information to study for a test. We knew, however, that the strongest portfolios we had read had a clear sense of intentionality. Students knew exactly why they had included the things they had. Also, our strongest portfolios were ones in which the student had been able to develop a sense of unity or focus. Sometimes this occurred when a student used writer's voice to develop a sense of personalism throughout the portfolio; other times students had chosen a theme, like journey or time, and used that theme as a way to focus and explain their work. In the best portfolios we read during the study, the whole became more than a sum of its parts; the portfolio as a whole was a well-developed reflection on who an individual student was as a developing teacher. We knew we would have to make these criteria explicit in any assessment tool we might develop.

### **Development of portfolio rubric**

Reading and rereading the transcripts enabled us to identify and group the criteria which had emerged in our conversations. The insights and struggles described above helped us to expand and articulate our criteria in ways we had not done previously. We made our first draft of a continua of descriptors and then used this rubric to reread portfolios from the study. As a result of multiple readings and revisions, we constructed a rubric including a continua of descriptors which we hoped would make our evaluation criteria clearer both for



ourselves and for our students (see Appendix B). Because we recognize the ongoing nature of learning about evaluation, we expect that further revisions of this rubric will be needed.

## Conclusions

At the start of this study we wondered how the involvement of an external reviewer would inform and enhance our use of portfolios as an assessment tool. Including an "outside reader" confirmed the value of what we were doing; it also provided us with new insights about portfolio criteria and how those criteria might influence our classroom practice.

This study has resulted in a number of changes in our approach to using literacy portfolios. First, perhaps the major outcome of this project was the development of the rubric in which we more clearly articulated the criteria for evaluation of the literacy portfolios. We believe this rubric makes our evaluation criteria more explicit for students as they develop their portfolios; it remains to be seen how this new rubric will influence the development of students' portfolios and/or the grading process. Second, we have revised the description of the portfolio assignment in the course syllabi to be more nearly aligned with the new evaluation rubric. Third, we have begun to share this evaluation criteria with students much earlier than we have in previous semesters. Also, some class time is being spent giving students the opportunity to write reflections about what they've learned, using the guidelines under the quality of reflections section in the rubric. Finally, more opportunities are also being provided for students to revisit goals they set at the start of the semester, and to consider their progress toward those goals.

While we are encouraged by the discoveries we have made and the changes we are beginning to implement related

to literacy portfolios, there are still a number of dilemmas with which we continue to struggle. Notwithstanding the development of a new evaluation rubric, grading portfolios is a difficult task. It is indeed messy. We continue to wonder about the wisdom of this practice; we also wonder about the consequences of not grading portfolios.

A second dilemma we continue to face is related to the issue of quality of writing. We wonder to what extent the student's abilities as a writer should count in the evaluation of a portfolio. Experience suggests that some students are able to speak articulately about their professional growth and learning, but are unable to explain their development through writing. How can we recognize the reflection, the learning, and the personal investment of a student in the absence of effective writing?

### **Final reflections**

The involvement of an external reviewer helped us to expand our portfolio criteria and to make them more explicit. Kate's positive, thoughtful presence challenged our thinking, confirmed the value of what we were already doing, and facilitated our efforts to improve. Although there are parts of this rubric that could have been developed without the help of an external reviewer, Kate's views about what counts for developing teachers are clearly evident in the rubric we have developed.

We employ portfolios in our courses as a vehicle to encourage reflection and self-evaluation on the part of the student. But reflection is vitally important to our own practice, as well. Perhaps Kate's greatest contribution was her ability to support our reflective thought and study of our work with preservice teachers. Because of our conversations with Kate, we learned the importance of expecting our students to be able

to articulate their gifts and to describe their struggles in their portfolios. As she supported us in our own learning and development as teachers, Kate mirrored for us our own gifts; she also encouraged us to continue to appreciate the beauty of our struggles.

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This study was supported by a grant from the McGlynn Fund for the Enhancement of Teaching, University of Wisconsin - La Cross Foundation.

**Appendix A**  
*Literacy Portfolio Evaluation Matrix*  
*Spring 1994*

Student \_\_\_\_\_  
Evaluator \_\_\_\_\_

CRITERIA	Development of Professional Knowledge About the Teaching of Reading/ Language Arts	Development of Professional Skills and Abilities Related to the Teaching of Reading/ Language Arts	Development of Personal Reading and Writing Habits
Organization & Professional Appearance			
Reflections			
Quality of Writing			

Comments/Questions \_\_\_\_\_  
Suggested Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B**  
*Continua of Descriptors for Literacy Portfolio: Rubric*

- Sense of Personal Uniqueness  
----- Represents uniqueness of individual student  
----- Reveals gifts/strengths  
----- Reveals areas of struggle and risks taken  
----- Represents sense of growth/change

-----	Makes personal connections with course/field experiences			
-----	Conveys sense of active involvement in learning process			
-----	Demonstrates sense of self as developing reader/writer			
Consistently	Frequently	Sometimes	Not Found	

#### Knowledge Base for Literacy Education

-----	Demonstrates accuracy of understandings related to literacy and literacy learning			
-----	Reveals understandings about the role of teacher and emerging identification with that role			
-----	Displays emerging knowledge of children and their development			
-----	Demonstrates emerging skills/abilities in teaching reading and language arts			
-----	Demonstrates sense of self as developing reader/writer			
Consistently	Frequently	Sometimes	Not Found	

#### Quality of Reflections

-----	Includes sense of elaboration, specificity, clarity, and ability to make connections			
-----	Demonstrates ability to articulate student's own learning process			
Consistently	Frequently	Sometimes	Not Found	

#### Sense of Unity and Selection

-----	Made intentional choices about what evidence to include			
-----	Reflections connect with evidence selected			
-----	Displays sense of purposefulness and/or unity			
Consistently	Frequently	Sometimes	Not Found	

#### Presentation/Organization

-----	Writing is coherent, well-edited, and easy for an outside reader to follow			
-----	Portfolio is neatly constructed and organized in a reader-friendly and accessible manner			
Consistently	Frequently	Sometimes	Not Found	

#### Goal Setting

-----	Makes projections for ongoing learning/change			
-----	Self-assesses for continued growth			
-----	Sets specific goals for personal/professional growth throughout the semester and beyond			
Consistently	Frequently	Sometimes	Not Found	



# More Than Spelling: Widening the Lens on Emergent Writing

Marilyn L. Chapman

Reading can sometimes be a transforming experience. This was the case for me when I first read Glenda Bissex's (1980) book, *Gnys at Wrk* many years ago. Although Bissex was not the originator of the notion that young children invent spellings through a process of active problem solving (the first being Read, 1975), it was my introduction to the concept of emergent writing. Bissex's case study of her son's writing development was so richly descriptive that it changed forever the way I and many others will look at young children's writing. Now it seems commonplace to talk about the process of writing development as emergent writing. The traditional view was that learning to write was a matter of learning specific skills such as spelling high frequency words from memory, forming letters correctly, and so on. We had thought that children could not write until we had taught them the prerequisite skills. Now we understand learning to write as part of emergent literacy, which considers learning to read and write as interrelated developmental processes that begin long before formal instruction (Teale and Sulzby, 1986).

Research has shown us that children's writing evolves from scribble-like shapes through a series of developmental changes to forms which are adult-like. We now speak of

conventional forms and standard spellings rather than correctness; we refer to children's ways of writing as developmental approximations rather than as errors. More importantly, this research has encouraged teachers to allow children to write in the kindergarten and first grade before they are able to spell in conventional ways. However, even though we have come a long way in our understanding, much of the discussion of children's writing development still focuses on mechanics. This is partly because spelling development is so obvious, it is hard to look beyond it to consider other dimensions of children's writing (Calkins, 1986).

But writing is more than spelling. It is a language process, a process of making meaning. We need to move beyond spelling to look at children's writing more as a form of language. In recent studies of first grade writing, I tried to find out if children's writing seems emergent in other ways as well as spelling. The focus of my work was on the ways that children shape their ideas as they write. In other words, the study explored the children's genres, or typical ways of organizing their ideas for particular purposes in specific and recurring contexts. I wanted to know if there are invented genres just as there are invented spellings. I was curious about whether or not there appears to be any consistent developmental sequence. I also wondered about the impact of the genres, or forms of writing, found in the classroom on the children's writing.

### **The research project described**

Like many others interested in writing, I prefer the idea of Writers' Workshop, an approach in which children are encouraged to write for personal and functional reasons, to the traditional use of worksheets and frame sentences. I had used this approach myself for a number of years, but at the time that I was doing my research, I did not have my own



classroom. Fortunately, I met Margaret, a first grade teacher who used Writers' Workshop as part of her daily program. Margaret viewed the children in her class as meaning makers and authors. She engaged them in collaborative teacher-led activities and encouraged them to represent their ideas independently through drawing and writing without concern for adult standards of correctness. She taught printing, spelling, punctuation and other mechanics through demonstrations, contextualized explanations, and mini-lessons, forms of instruction consistent with a transactional model of teaching and learning (Weaver, 1990, p. 13). Luckily, Margaret was interested and willing to have a regular classroom visitor and to share in the process of collecting and examining children's writing done in Writers' Workshop over the course of a whole school year.

Margaret and I wanted to include children of varying developmental levels or abilities, with a balance of boys and girls. We selected six focal children for the study, a boy and a girl each whom Margaret considered advanced, average, and delayed at the beginning of the year. As well as visiting the class on a regular basis, I collected and photocopied all of the writing done by the six focal children in Writers' Workshop. To help us look beyond spelling, we transcribed all of them. Margaret had done much of this soon after the writing was done, especially in the early part of the year. We were able to include 724 pieces of writing in total, ranging from 113 to 135 pieces per child. To help examine differences across the school year, I divided each child's writing into three time segments, or terms: Beginning (September — November), Middle (December — February), and End of Year (March — June).

To analyze the writing, I used an integrated approach which took into account the following:

- Topics — what the children wrote about, for example, their home experiences, friends, imaginative creatures;
- Functions — the purposes for which the children wrote, for example, to express feelings, to talk about their experiences, to create imaginative situations;
- Structures — how children organized their ideas; this included syntax (whether they used single words, phrases and/or sentences) and also the relationships between the various written elements; because children integrate drawing and writing, I also looked at the relationships between the children's writing and their pictures.

Topics and functions were indicated to a great extent by vocabulary, for instance, types of nouns and verbs. Verb tenses and use of adjectives and adverbial phrases also gave clues to functions and structures. I tried to incorporate these three aspects, topics, function and structure, holistically to develop a framework to encompass all of the children's writing. I also incorporated a coherence analysis, which produced an x-ray diagram of each piece of writing.

### **Emergent genres**

In order to understand the ways children organized their ideas and how these changed over time, I first developed a system for classifying the children's genres. This system, which was developed from the writing in the study, is divided first into two major groups: 1) writing about actions or events, and 2) writing about objects or things, often pictures drawn by the child. Both groups included real and

imaginative content. Because actions occur over time, time itself was an important element in the first grouping, chronologies. Here, the children used action verbs, usually in past tense, and when there was more than one action, the ideas were sequenced chronologically. The second grouping includes various kinds of descriptions, in which a child identifies or comments on an object, and word plays, in which a child treats words themselves as things which can be manipulated. The relationships between ideas in description and word play categories are random or logical rather than chronological, and the verbs (usually to be, to have, or to express an emotion, such as like or love) are usually written in the general present tense.

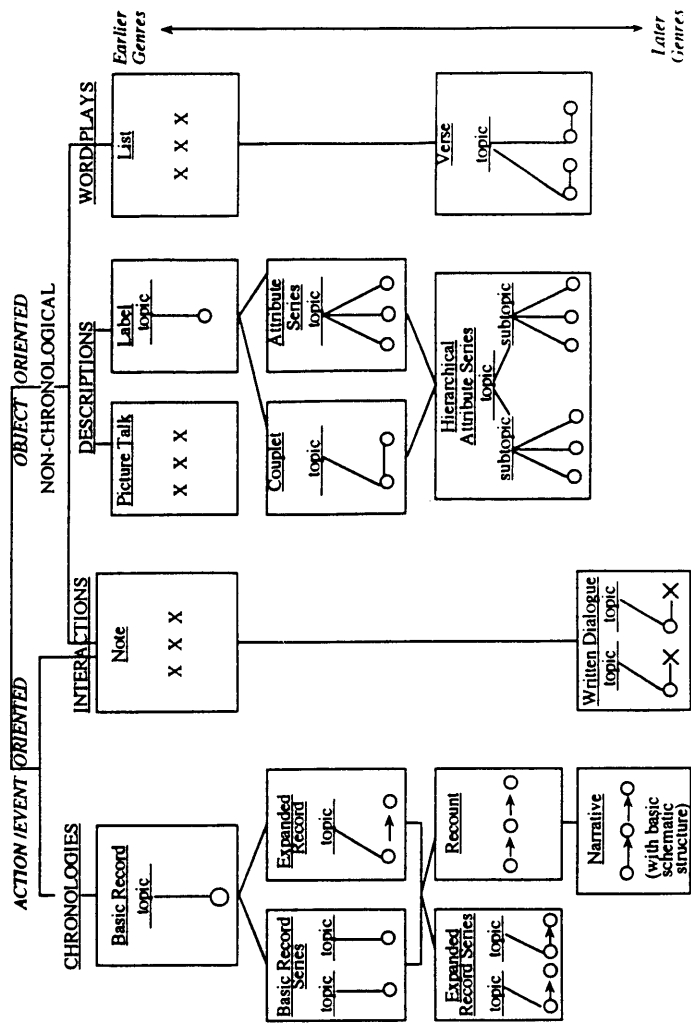
There is a unique category, interactions, that is both action and object oriented — a child creates written language as an object for action, that is, to be given to someone. Thus the children's genres are organized into four major categories of genres: chronologies, descriptions, word plays, and interactions. The chart in Figure 1 provides an overview of the genre classification system, showing the relationships between the children's various genres and the developmental sequence from earlier to later forms. The appendix, provides examples of the 14 different genres identified in the focal children's writing.

## Chronologies

The children's most frequent purposes for chronologies were to refer to their past experiences or to anticipate in upcoming events. Their main purpose was often supported or elaborated by providing additional information and expressing feelings or opinions. Somewhat less often, children wrote about imaginary events, usually created first through drawing. In these imaginative pieces, the children also expressed

emotions about what was happening and sometimes made predictions about what might happen next.

**Figure 1**  
*The Development of  
Children's Genres in a Writing Workshop*



As Figure 1 shows, there is a developmental dimension within chronologies, but the sequence is not strictly linear. The first genre to appear was the basic record, a one-clause statement about an action or event. Next, the children's writing became more complex in one of two ways, both of which occurred at about the same time. One type of developmental process was listing, e.g., adding more action statements (basic record series); the second was through elaborating, adding details to the original topic (expanded record). Two more genres appeared at the next stage in a similar way, through listing or elaborating: expanding record series and recount. Finally, simple narratives appeared, with basic story elements: orientation (setting the scene and introducing the characters), complication (a problem occurs), and resolution (the problem is resolved).

## Descriptions

For the most part, the focal children's descriptions were about one of their pictorial creations or various parts of them. Here too, the children expressed feelings and opinions and made predictions about what might happen. Children's drawings and accompanying written descriptions were both experiential (realistic) and imaginative right from the beginning of the year. A particularly interesting feature was the way in which children wove representations of talk, sound effects and signs into their pictures and later on, into the body of a piece of writing (Figure 2). Sometimes, especially in the early part of the school year, the children's writing was integrated entirely into picture like cartoons. As Figure 1 indicates, picture talk/sound effects and labels appeared at about the same time, early in the school year. At the next stage, we see the two types of development, listing and elaborating, occurring simultaneously in the forms, attribute series and couplet. The attribute series is a list of ideas related to a topic

(usually a picture); the order of the ideas can be changed without really affecting the meaning. Couplets are similar to expanded records, in that the second idea elaborates the first and the ideas are sequenced logically. In the second half of the year, another descriptive genre appeared, the hierarchical attribute series. Here we see the beginnings of paragraph development as the children produced a series of clusters of ideas (Newkirk, 1987).

Figure 2  
*Caitlin's Talking Flower (June)*



Transcription: This is Weirldand. The flower is saying, "I am a baby." I like it.

In picture: I am a baby.

## Word plays

The major purpose of word plays is to create a piece of writing for its own sake and for enjoyment. In word plays the children played with language-as-objects. Early in the year, they would list letters or words they knew, a process Clay (1975) refers to as taking inventory. Later on, they manipulated elements of language such as rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration. Sometimes word plays seemed simply for the purposes of showing off or sharing what they knew with others. These focal children did not create any original songs or rhymes, but instead, reworked ones from their oral repertoires. In all cases, a real sense of playfulness was exhibited in their writing.

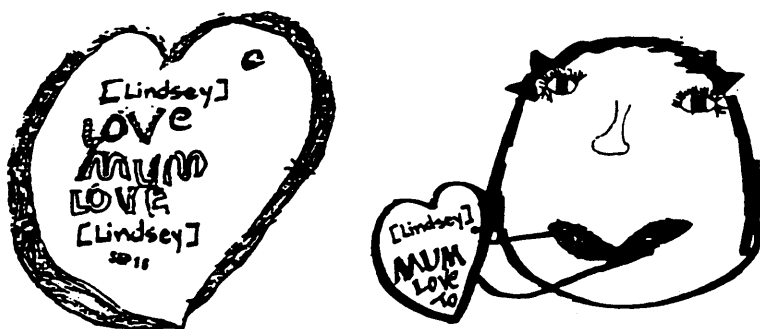
## Interactions

The major purpose of the focal children's interactions was to use words as objects to communicate with others — the written word is an object for inter-action. Sometimes the piece was written by one child (a monologue, a note form). At other times it was a dialogue, like talk written down. Like the other categories, in interactions the children often expressed their emotions as well (see Figure 3).

## Developmental dances

When we look beyond spelling to the ways in which children shape their ideas to convey meaning, we see both quantitative and qualitative changes. In this study, the focal children's repertoires of genres increased from four genres in the first term to fourteen at the end of the year. The most frequent genres in September were the label (49% of the children's writing) and the basic record (18%). At the end of the year, the children wrote mostly expanded records (31%), attribute series (24%), and recounts (13%).

Figure 3  
*Lindsey's Notes to Mom (October)*



More importantly, the children's writing changed qualitatively. As Figure 1 shows, within each of the four major categories, there was a simpler form — either single clauses (basic records and labels) or words and phrases (picture talk, lists, notes). Basic records, notes, picture talk, labels, and lists all appeared during the first month or so of school. As the year progressed, the children's writing became complex, through two processes that occurred at about the same time, listing and elaborating. While there was a general developmental path, the children's progress was more of a developmental dance than a foot race.

The focal children's earliest chronological writing was always about their own experiences, while their early imaginative forms were always descriptive. The pathway that these



children took towards writing imaginative narratives was not one that an adult might predict. Rather than a linear progression through the chronological category, from basic records through narrative, the children's imaginative writing emerged from their creations of imaginary worlds which they first labeled and injected with dialogue, sound effects, and representations of written signs (Figure 4). Couplets and attribute series evolved from these earlier forms as children conveyed, through writing, more of the details about these imaginary worlds. All the while, children were writing about experiences in their real lives through chronological forms. Not until the recount appeared as a genre, did imagination and action combine. Then, with the addition of basic story elements of orientation, complication, and resolution their writing transformed into narratives, which in this study were always imaginative. In this way too, their development was dance-like rather than a march.

### **Weaving, drawing, talking, reading and writing**

One of the key concepts about emergent literacy is that learning to write is interrelated with other symbolic processes (Vygotsky, 1978). The focal children's genres did not emerge in isolation, but in an interrelated fashion with their other ways of communicating as they wove together their drawings, talking and writing (Dyson, 1986). In the early stages, children usually drew their ideas before writing, but writing gradually took on a larger role.

At the end of the school year, the children could convey most of their ideas through writing alone, if they wished, although in most cases, the children chose to draw as part of their writing processes. Because of the interrelationships between drawing and writing, many of the children's written genres were picture related. Their earliest genre was the label, usually written after the picture was drawn. Very soon after,

children began integrating writing with their pictures, creating, for example, single word labels (usually accompanied by arrows), sound effects (e.g., POW), dialogue (YAHOO), and written signs (WATCH OUT!). Towards the end of the year, the children represented talk, sound effects and signs within the body of their texts as well as in their pictures.

**Figure 4**  
*Brandon's Haunted Rock (April)*



Transcription: This is a rock. It is haunted. It has bad words on it.  
In picture: Sign: Beware help,  
Words on rock: Please do not destroy.  
Keep out. Go away.

The genres written dialogue, picture dialogue and sound effects, and note, also reveal the children's weaving of talking, drawing and writing. Less obvious connections are found in the chronological genres, which are similar in nature to children's oral narratives (see Applebee, 1978; and Moningham-Nouro et al., 1988). Children are able to talk about their experiences in a variety of ways and these provide a storehouse of knowledge which they can draw from in their writing. The children's written labels and attribute series are reminiscent of the ways children talk about their pictures (e.g., "This is a haunted castle. I like it. It's neat."). Just as children's written vocabulary resembles their speech (e.g., overgeneralizations of verbs, such as hurted and brang), so too, do children's written genres reflect their oral patterns.

The children also wove literary language, learned from reading or being read to, into their emerging genres. Janet demonstrated this when she wrote, "Once upon a time there was a girl who lived in the woods" as a label for a picture. She also enjoyed reworking songs and rhymes she had learned. Literary genres also appear to have affected Caitlin (although Margaret and I wondered where the particular influence for the following piece came from):

*Another Place, Another Time*

*If there was an answer, he'd find it there. He kept  
on going and he got to a castle. He knew he'd find  
something. And he did.*

## **Inventors or apprentices?**

Research such as that done by Read (1975) and Bissex (1980) has helped us see children's non-standard spellings as inventions. A strong case is made for invention, or cognitive construction, in spelling development because children do not see the spelling SNK for snake (although one could argue

that children might see other children's invented spellings, but this was not likely a factor in either the Read or Bissex studies). But is genre development a comparable process? Are children's emergent genres best thought of as inventions, like invented spellings, which progress through a series of approximations toward conventional forms? Just as children's non-standard spellings provide clues to the invented spelling process, non-standard genres, particularly the basic record series, expanded record series and attribute series genres, could provide us with similar insights into genre development.

A somewhat different perspective, a social constructivist one, could provide an alternative explanation.' In this view, children are seen as actors who act and react to past and future actions within a social context (Bakhtin, 1986; Bloome and Egan-Robertson, 1993; Dyson, 1993). And as younger members of society, they can be thought of as apprentices who learn about writing by interacting with others who are more capable than they are (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Rather than inventing understandings, an individual cognitive process, children are thought to appropriate knowledge, an interpersonal or social process. This process is considered to be active and constructive, too; it is not just imitation. Perhaps the children appropriated their genres from their literate environment rather than inventing them for themselves? If this is so, then the children's emergent genres should all be identifiable in their classroom. In order to explore this alternate hypothesis, I used the genre categories developed from the children's writing to analyze the writing found in their classroom, the commercially produced and teacher-made materials and those written as part of the teaching and learning activities in the classroom, such as the morning news.

Margaret believed that children learn much about written language through immersion, by interacting with written language with an adult who acts as a mentor, and through exploring writing independently and with each other. Every day, Margaret read to and with the children in shared reading experiences of stories, poems and songs with enlarged texts such as charts and big books. She used a variety of stories, especially imaginative fiction and fantasy, and occasionally realistic fiction and biographies. The children were surrounded with a variety of function or classroom workplace literacy as well, such as the daily agenda, attendance records, labels, signs, etc. There was a wide array of trade books and books from the Impressions reading series (Booth, 1985), anthologies containing stories and poetry, available in the classroom for independent and buddy readings. The trade books, big books, and the Impressions books contained illustrations, many of which integrated writing as balloon speech, sound effects and depictions of signs. Several pieces taken from February reveal the children's reactions and responses to this literate immersion through the genres verse and recount.

- *Roses are red, lilacs are blue,  
Honey is sweet and so are you.  
Roses are red, lilacs are true  
And so are you.  
Roses are red, lilacs are?? (not decodable)  
So I can kiss you. (Janet)*
- *These men are trying to destroy Valentine  
because the people are enemies. And there is  
a man fighting with swords. (Brandon)*

The children also participated in a variety of writing experiences each day. In the daily morning news activity, the children shared their ideas orally and Margaret recorded these on the chalkboard so that she could model composing and spelling. Some children contributed ideas as one-clause statements (basic record form) while others were more

elaborate (expanded records). When the children's various contributions were recorded, the resulting genre was either a basic record series or an expanded record series. Thus, the two record series genres that the children produced could be thought of as appropriations rather than inventions. Here is an example of an expanded record series from the morning news:

*Hollis went to Vancouver yesterday. Brandon got his ear tubes out. It didn't hurt. Kelsey has new shoes on today. They are shiny. Janet's Mom bought her a jean skirt and it didn't fit so they are going to the mall after school today to get a new one.*

Margaret made a deliberate attempt to encourage children to expand their ideas and to sequence them logically and chronologically. One of the ways she did this was to use a shared experience as the basis for the morning news. The following example is a recount written on the day that the children went on a walking field trip first thing in the morning. The news that day was actually afternoon news, since it was written collaboratively by the class with Margaret's guidance on their return:

*Today we walked to Goldstream. On the way to Goldstream Park we saw a gorgeous rainbow. We walked to the Nature House. We saw the inside of a fish. Then we saw under the gills. Last of all we had hot cocoa.*

Another daily shared experience was author's circle, which was an opportunity for children to share their writing with the whole class. The child authors sat on the author's chair and read what they had written and then the audience commented on their pieces. Through author's circle and informal conversations during Writers' Workshop time, the children's own written genres became part of the literate environment. Enthusiasm for particular topics and genres was

contagious. Thus, the writing produced by publishing companies, by the teacher and the children all became part of an ongoing dialogue and children were both actors and reactors to the writing of authors known and unknown. Another influence on the children's written genres was the way Margaret conducted Writers' Workshop. She encouraged the children to represent their ideas as they wanted and were able, in any combination of drawing and writing. She did not believe in forcing children to write, but gave lots of encouragement. As she circulated among the children during Writers' Workshop time, she would say to the children, "tell me about your picture" (which often resulted in labels) and to elaborate their ideas, "tell me more about your picture" (which usually resulted in an attribute series, or in the event that the piece was action/event-oriented, a recount).

Occasionally, Margaret would introduce particular types of writing as a way of broadening the children's repertoires. She would then extend invitations for them to try these new ideas if they liked. Some interesting pieces were written by the children in response to such an activity, "Memorable Prose" by Michael Rosen (1989). For example, Matthew and Alan acted upon Margaret's invitation and wrote the following:

*I Have the Flu*

*I am sick. I have the flu. I see the top of my bunk bed. I feel that I am going to throw up. I can't go to school. "Mommy I am sick." "I'll read you a book." (Matthew)*

*I am sick today. And my tummy is sore. I am going to throw up. I have a back ache. I called my Mom and she wasn't home. I have an ear ache. I feel my cat sit on my hand. I hear my cat purr rrr. Both of my legs are broken. Both of my arms are broken. I have a broken neck. I have a broken nose. I have a broken ear. I call my Dad and so I went to the doctor. I am very sick. I am history. (Alan)*

In a similar way, after Margaret demonstrated how two people could have a conversation in writing, some of the girls had a try at written dialogue:

JANET: *Did you have fun at your birthday party?*

KELSEY: *Yes I did.*

JANET: *Are you playing against me?*

KELSEY: *I don't know.*

JANET: *Can you play outside with me?*

KELSEY: *Yes I can.*

On the other hand, the children also developed notions about which genres were not appropriate for Writers' Workshop. Every Wednesday was Project Day, and the children built three dimensional creations and then wrote about them. Yet the children did not do any scientific writing, as Margaret referred to it, during Writers' Workshop time. It seems that the focal children's understandings of what genres were appropriate in the context of Writers' Workshop were influenced by the literacy activities immediately before and after Writers' Workshop — morning news, story time, shared reading, independent reading and author's circle — and the ways in which Margaret encouraged them to write.

All of the emergent genres used by the children were discovered in their classroom. Of particular interest were the non-standard genres, those I had not expected to find and that I originally thought to be inventions. The basic record series and expanded record series forms were constructed by the children and the teacher together as they participated in morning news. The attribute series grew out of Margaret's interactions with the children whereby she encouraged them to write more about their pictures. Likewise, the hierarchical attribute series and written dialogues were very much influenced by the models she exposed them to, wrote with them, and encouraged them to try on their own. That all of the



children's emergent genres were found within their literate environment provides strong support for the notion that emergent genres are likely socially constructed, learned through apprenticeship, rather than invented.

## Discussion

The focal children in this study have shown that when we look beyond spelling, there are other aspects of children's writing that are emergent as well. I have described the emergent genres found in the writing of a group of six children and the ways that their genres developed. I have also provided some evidence that their emergent genres were not inventions, but rather appropriations from their classroom literacy environment. While I have emphasized the social nature of writing development, it may appear that I have dismissed cognitive development. Rather than seeing the two views as opposing theories, however, I prefer to see them as complementary. A cognitive perspective does not necessarily ignore the role of the social context; nor does a social view negate the significance of the individual child. Instead, we can consider social and cognitive processes as transactive, and that children's written genres are sociocognitive constructions.

Even though the children's classroom context was shared, the children were individual actors within it. Their appropriation of genres was an active process of transaction between self and classroom genres, rather than passive imitation or mere copying. The children were also co-creators with their teacher of some of the genres that became part of their literate environment. As Bakhtin (1986) believed, genres are not invariant, fill-in-the-blank models, instead, they allow for individual creative processes as well as social ones. Though these focal children used their classroom genres as cultural resources, they made choices about what they wrote about and

how they wrote, and expressed the uniqueness of their own personalities in their writing.

When young writers invent spellings, they do so by using the alphabet letters supplied by their culture, the names given to these letters and the sounds they associate with particular letters because of these letter names. Children are surrounded by environmental print and written artifacts. When we take these things into account, we can see that there is indeed a social influence on cognitive development in the spelling process. Likewise, genres can be seen as both personal and social, as children express their individuality through the choices they make, as well as in response to literacy immersion and interactions with their teacher. Cognitive developmental and social constructivist approaches may both have something to offer in understanding writing development. While invented spelling may be better interpreted from an individual cognitive perspective, genre development may be better interpreted from a social perspective. However, since writing is a way of communicating with others it provides motivation for children to learn many aspects of written language, including conventional spellings and genres. A child's desire to express ideas and to be read to by others provide good reasons for emphasizing the social nature of written language.

This study also reveals the importance of the active roles of both children and teachers in writing development. It demonstrates how much more than spelling children can learn about writing in the early years of schooling. It also shows that teachers have important roles to play in enhancing and mediating children's literacy learning. As in other areas of literacy development, we want to immerse children in a multitude of written language experiences, to interact with them so that we can demonstrate how written language works, and to provide opportunities so that children can

explore writing independently and collaboratively. A Writers' Workshop approach is clearly a good start in this regard.

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## APPENDIX

### *Examples of Children's Developmental Genres*

#### CHRONOLOGIES

1. Basic Record — single clause  
\* I'm going to a hockey game. [E]
2. Expanded Record — two or more related clauses, such as one action/event + information or two related events:  
\* Yesterday after school Alex came to my house and we played soccer. [E]
3. Basic Record Series — two or more unrelated actions/events:  
\* In fourteen days it is my birthday. I went to the Fox and the Hound. For a week it has rained. Two days ago it was Easter. [E]
4. Expanded Record Series — two or more unrelated actions/events, each of which consists of two or more related clauses:  
\* Garry came to our house. He left today. My tooth is wiggly. It will fall out. My Dad is going. He is going to Vancouver. [E]
5. Recount — three or more related actions, sequenced chronologically  
\* When I was at the beach I caught my pointer finger. It started to bleed. But I didn't cry. [E]
6. Narrative — three or more related actions, sequenced chronologically, with basic story structure: orientation, complication, and resolution:  
\* Far, far away in another galaxy a rocket has been lost. No one has ever found it. The rocket crashed in Blood Land. Everything is blood. The people are blood. The astronauts were running out of the fire. They went out of the rocket. They got chased by the blood people. They got blood on their feet. [I]

#### DESCRIPTIONS

7. Picture Talk/Sound Effects — embedded within a picture; represents talk and/or sounds in a picture:  
\* I love you [E — depicted as words coming out of a person's mouth.]  
\* POW! BANG! [I — depicted as sound effects associated with fighting.]
8. Label — may be a word, phrase or single clause; may be a series of labels:  
\* This is my soccer game. [E]  
\* This is King Kong. [I]
9. Attribute Series — a series of one-clause statements that comment on a topic; random rather than logical order:  
\* I like school. And I like playing soccer. And I like playing on the rocks. [E]  
\* This is Wolfman. He destroys anybody who comes. His friend is Frankenstein. He lives on the rocks. His name is the mummy. [I]

10. Couplet — two related clause units in a logical order, e.g., identification + information, question + answer, statement + reason, statement + example, statement + comment:

\* Brandon is my best friend I have. And I like him. [E]

\* This is Slimer. Slimer has a sandwich. [I]

11. Hierarchical Attribute Series — series of units with more than one related clause, e.g., clusters of ideas:

\* I like Tramp. He is my best friend. I really like him. I always play with him. I love him. I love him so much. I have never loved a dog so much. I love my Mom and Dad too. I love my J-P too. I like you. I like Jackie too. [E]

\* I am sick today. And my tummy is sore. I am going to throw up. I have a back ache. I called my Mom and she wasn't home. I have an ear ache. I feel my cat sit on my hand. I hear my cat purr. Both of my legs are broken. I have a broken neck. I have a broken nose. I have a broken ear. I call my Dad and so I went to the doctor. I am very sick. I am history. [I]

## WORD PLAYS

12. List — a series of words or phrases; in this study lists took the form of an inventory of words the child is learning to write or can write independently (Clay, 1975) as opposed to an aid to memory, which is usually an adult's major purpose for making lists; this apparently random list written by Matthew appeared in September. These are some words he knew how to spell:

\* team I an [E]

13. Verse — can be spoken, as in poems, or sung. The following example occurs in both modes:

\* Fuzzy Wuzzy was a bear,  
Fuzzy Wuzzy had no hair.  
Fuzzy Wuzzy was a wuzzy, a bear wuzzy. [E]

## INTERACTIONS

14. Note — monologue; may be in phrase form (e.g., "To Mom, From Lindsey") or sentence (e.g., "I love you.") and include salutation and/or closing; may accompany another object, for example, a picture drawn by the child:

\* To Mom Love from Lindsey [E]

15. Written Dialogue — dialogue, a conversation written down; may be in word, phrase or sentence form:

* LINDSEY:	Do you want to play with me today?
CAITLIN:	Yes
LINDSEY:	Do you really want to play with me?
CAITLIN:	Yes
LINDSEY:	Do you really want to play with me?
CAITLIN:	No
LINDSEY:	Do you like me?
CAITLIN:	Yes
LINDSEY:	Did you go to the tea party?
CAITLIN:	No [E]

Note: [E] indicates an experiential (realistic) example. [I] indicates an imaginative example.



# Children's Development of Printed Word Knowledge in Sentence-Based Reading Approaches

Darrell Morris

In the second week of school, Ms. Baker stands before a large easel chart in her first grade classroom and leads her 23 students in choral reading a class-dictated experience story. (Note: Ms. Baker is a pseudonym for an experienced teacher whom the author worked with over the course of a school year.)

## Our School

*We went walking in our school.*

*We saw the lunch room.*

*We met Mr. Johnson, the principal.*

Because this is the third time the class has read' this short text, most of the children chime in enthusiastically as the teacher points to each word in the story as it is read.

Later, as the children are illustrating mimeographed copies of the dictated story, Ms. Baker moves from table to table checking each child's ability to read the text. Her assessment is simple and efficient. She models a finger-point reading of the first two sentences of the story, asks the child to finger-point read the same sentences, and then asks the child to

identify one or two words within the sentences when the teacher points to them.

Adam, Betty, and Curtis are the first three children Ms. Baker assesses on this day.

- Adam finger-point reads the two sentences (in fact, all three sentences) with accuracy and confidence. When Ms. Baker points to two words in the text, he identifies them immediately, almost as if they were already in his sight vocabulary.

- Betty trips up in the first sentence, pointing to in as she says the second syllable -ing in walking. On reaching the end of the line, she recognizes her mistake and goes back to reread the sentence, this time correctly matching up the spoken words to the printed words. When Ms. Baker points to our in the first sentence and then to lunch in the second sentence, in each case Betty returns to the beginning of the line, finger-points over to the target word, and correctly identifies it. "Lunch begins with an 'L'," she proudly states.

- Curtis has difficulty with the finger-point reading task. Even given two modeled readings, he is unable to point correctly to each printed word as he recites the first two sentences. He also guesses randomly when Ms. Baker points to individual words in the two lines of print. To provide Curtis with a doable task, Ms. Baker blocks off school in the first line and points to the individual letters in the word. Curtis is able to identify the letters s and o but not c, h, or l.

Today, under the umbrella philosophy of whole language, more children than ever before are being introduced to reading through holistic, sentence-based teaching approaches — e.g., shared-book experience (Holdaway, 1979; Routman,

1988) or the dictated story approach used by Ms. Baker (Stauffer, 1970; Nessel and Jones, 1981). Such approaches offer several advantages, including meaningful stories, natural language patterns, memory support, and a communal, non-threatening context for learning.

One can appreciate the benefits of holistic teaching approaches, however, and still recognize that reading acquisition, to a large degree, involves learning to process the individual printed words on the page. Ms. Baker understands this fact. Although committed to introducing reading selections in a whole-group, meaning-centered context, she sets up "rereading" situations (see above) where she can attend closely to individual students' developing ability to read printed words in text. Through these brief observations, Ms. Baker learns that Adam has internalized a concept of word in reading and is on the verge of establishing a sight vocabulary; that Betty, while less adept than Adam, is able to use spacing between words plus beginning consonant cues to "problem-solve" her way through text; and that Curtis, at present, lacks both word consciousness in text and knowledge of some of the alphabet letters. Moreover, Ms. Baker realizes that each of these children will require different levels of instructional support if they are to move forward as readers.

Using Curtis as a case study, the present article will describe how children develop printed word knowledge when taught with a top-down, sentence-based approach. The description should be helpful to classroom teachers in diagnosing and instructing beginning readers.

## **Stages in word knowledge development**

Stage 1: Word as a nameable object in text. Curtis is a bright-eyed, enthusiastic six-year-old who enjoys coming to school. He especially enjoys the 45-minute "reading circle"



that begins each school day. During this time, Ms. Baker leads the class of 23 children in reading aloud and discussing favorite 'big books', experience stories, and poems. In the reading circle, Curtis listens attentively and contributes willingly to the group discussion. He feels sorry for the "big, bad Wolf," worries about the "third Billy Goat Gruff," and empathizes with the animals under the care of "Mrs. Wishy-Washy." Cognitively and linguistically, Curtis is engaged and growing in the rich literacy environment provided by Ms. Baker.

Still, three weeks into first grade, Curtis can recognize only 12 lower-case letters of the alphabet. Moreover, when Ms. Baker finger-point reads a chart story or big book in front of the class, Curtis attends to the text but has little or no idea how the stream of spoken language matches to the printed words on the page. Reading text is a mystery to Curtis. The alphabet letters, many of which he does not know, just seem to blend together in a long jumbled line.

IcxxrxXxxXbxXxoXtXxtrxiX.

Over the next few weeks, Ms. Baker helps Curtis learn eight more letters of the alphabet. She also has him finger-point read a favorite big book, a dictation, and a rhyme (e.g., "Jack be nimble") each day, both with her and with a partner who can finger-point to words. One morning as Curtis is rereading the dictation, Ms. Baker notices that he is able to match the spoken words to the printed words in an accurate manner. His reading is halting but Curtis honors each word as he finger-points across the line of print. This is an important benchmark. Words, for Curtis, are not identifiable objects in text.

Curtis can point to individual words as she reads memorized texts, but whether he is attending to letter/sound cues within the words (e.g., the beginning consonant) is another

question. Ms. Baker is doubtful for several reasons. When Curtis hesitates in reading a word and the teacher points to the beginning consonant letter as a cue, this seems to be of little help to the child. In addition, Curtis' daily journal writing/drawing shows little evidence of letter/sound use. Even on a short diagnostic spelling task, he shows inconsistent awareness of the beginning sounds in words:

<u>Spelling word</u>	<u>Curtis' spelling</u>
back	R
feet	T
mail	R
step	S
pick	T
side	S

In learning that words are nameable objects in text, Curtis has made a significant advance. However, his level of word knowledge is rudimentary at best. In his mind's eye, the sentence, I can ride my bike on trails, might look like this.

I xxx xxXx xx XxXx xx XxxxXx.

Word length, word shape, or an idiosyncratic letter here and there might offer cues to word recognition, but letter/sound processing awaits further development. (Note: The x's in the example above refer to letter/sound processing, not to letter recognition. That is, Curtis may recognize a few of the alphabet letters in the line of print, but in the act of reading the sentence he is not processing or decoding these letter/sounds. (A child cannot process the letter-sound properties in a printed word [ran] unless he or she is aware, at some level, that the spoken word correlate [/ran/] is comprised of individual sounds [/r/ /a/ /n/]. This is what psychologists refer to as phonemic awareness).

Stage 2: Word as an object in text with a beginning element. By the first week of October, Curtis has learned most of

the letters of the alphabet (q, v, y, and z can wait). Daily reading and writing/drawing lessons continue, but Ms. Baker now engages Curtis and a few other children in picture sorting activities, where the task is to focus on the beginning consonant sound in spoken words. Curtis is able to sort the pictures by beginning sound and soon learns to match the various sounds to their corresponding alphabet letters. There is abundant practice in saying a word, identifying its beginning consonant sound, and then writing the letter that represents that sound.

After a set of three or four consonant letter/sounds (b, m, s, and r) have been mastered in the sorting context, Ms. Baker begins to hold Curtis responsible for these letter/sounds in contextual reading and writing activities. For example, when he hesitates in reading a word that begins with a b, the teacher points to the beginning consonant and urges Curtis to "sound" the first letter in the word. Analogously, when Curtis asks how to spell a word when he is labeling a completed drawing, Ms. Baker might say, "What's the first sound you hear in 'rocket'? Good, Curtis! You know how to make that letter." With the concentrated work on beginning consonant letter/sound relationships, Ms. Baker begins to notice a qualitative change in Curtis' reading behavior. He now finger-point reads familiar texts with accuracy, using a few known words (e.g., the, and, to, my) along with beginning consonant cues to guide his performance. Nonetheless, his sight vocabulary is still meager (fewer than 15 words) and even with several rereadings of a story Curtis has difficulty committing individual words to memory. His mental processing of word units in text might be diagrammed as follows:

I cxx rxxx my bxXx xx txxxXx  
(I can ride my bike on trails.)

Stage 3: Word as an object in text with a discernible beginning and end. Weeks go by. In his writing, Curtis now represents beginning consonant sounds consistently.

M D K K F  
(My dog can catch flies.)

Acknowledging the child's control of the beginning sound in words, Ms. Baker begins to probe for additional sounds:

"Curtis, you heard the first sound in 'dog' and put down a d. Say 'dog' slowly. What comes after the d? (Child says /g/.) Good Curtis! What letter should we put down?" (Curtis writes a g.). The same probe is repeated successfully with 'can' (again, Curtis perceives only the final sound), and then Ms. Baker moves on to another child.

At this point in the fall, Ms. Baker introduces word families or rhyming words in Curtis' small skill group (five children). By sorting one-syllable short vowel words into rhyming "families," the children not only strengthen their beginning consonant awareness but also learn to attend to other letter-sound properties in a word, specifically the ending consonant and the medial vowel.

<u>h</u> at	<u>m</u> an	<u>c</u> ap
cat	pan	lap
mat	ran	
	tap	

The short a word families, above, are worked with until the children gain a degree of mastery with the words. That is, through daily sorting, word games (e.g., Concentration, Bingo), and spelling checks, the children learn to read many of the short a words not just in column sorts but also in isolation. At this point, another set of word families is introduced

— for example, short i or short o families. [Note: The introduction, sequencing, and pacing of word family sorts are described in detail in Morris (1992).]

With teacher-supported reading and writing practice and developmentally appropriate word study activities, Curtis becomes a stronger reader. Although his sight vocabulary is still small (fewer than 40 words) and he continues to finger-point cautiously in text, Curtis can now attend consistently to the consonant boundaries of printed words. His print-processing skill has advanced once again:

I cxn rxdx my bxxkx on txxxls.  
(I can ride my bike on trails.)

Stage 4: Word as an object in text with a beginning, middle, and end. In mid-November, Ms. Baker readministers the short spelling test (see Stage 1) to Curtis. He confidently represents beginning and ending consonants but shows little awareness of vowel sounds in words.

<u>Spelling word</u>	<u>Curtis' spelling</u>
back	BK
feet	FT
mail	ML
step	CTP
pick	PC
side	SD

Knowing the importance of vowel awareness in the beginning reading process, Ms. Baker continues the short vowel, word family sorts with Curtis' skill group. Notice how the following sort highlights the vowel element in the one-syllable words.

<u>cat</u>	<u>man</u>	<u>sit</u>	<u>big</u>
mat	fan	bit	wig
hat			
		hit	

After column-sorting and possibly a game to reinforce sight recognition of the individual words, the children take a spelling test on six of the words. They, then, self-correct their mistakes under Ms. Baker's guidance. Curtis spells four of the words correctly (hat, man, bit, and fan), but has to correct two misspellings (BAG for big; HAT for hit). Ms. Baker points out that the children must begin to listen carefully to the vowel sound in each word.

Ms. Baker also starts to call Curtis' attention to vowels in his journal writing:

I KT A CL FM MY SDR.  
(I caught a cold from my sister.)

"Curtis, look at 'caught.' You put down the beginning and ending letters, but you left out the vowel letter. Say 'caught' — what do you hear after the /k/? (The child says /o/ like in 'bought.') OK, what letter should we put down . (Curtis changes his spelling from KT to KOT.) Good, that's a good choice. Now, let's look at your spelling of 'cold.' I think you can improve that one easily ..."

Curtis is developmentally ready for such instruction. His awareness of vowels in both reading and writing contexts is heightened, and Ms. Baker soon notices the results. For example, in reading, Curtis begins to acquire sight vocabulary at a faster rate; he is also more analytical and independent when attacking new words in a text. In writing, Curtis begins to

"sound through" words, representing both the consonant and vowel sounds in his spellings.

I CAN KEK A SIKR BOL.  
 (I can kick a soccer ball.)  
 SIKRS MY FAVRT SPOT.  
 (Soccer's my favorite sport.)

Notice that at this stage Curtis' spelling of short vowel sounds is unconventional, with the letter name E substituting for short i in kick, and the letter name i substituting for short o in soccer. These substitutions are phonetically appropriate, however, and actually provide concrete evidence of Curtis' emerging grasp of the vowel element in spoken and written words (Beers and Henderson, 1977; Chomsky, 1979; and Read, 1971).

Vowel awareness is a critical step forward. Because Curtis can now perceive the sequential sounds or phonemes in a spoken word (e.g., /kik/ = /k/ /i/ /k/), his ability to process letter/sound relationships in printed words advances once again:

I can ridx my bikx on traxls.  
 (I can ride my bike on trails).

## Discussion

In the hypothetical case study above, Curtis' knowledge of printed words progressed through four stages:

- |          |   |
|----------|---|
| Stage 1: | Word as a nameable object in text.<br>(I xxx xxXx xx XxXx)                  |
| Stage 2: | Word as an object in text with a beginning element.<br>(I cxx rxXx my bxXx) |

- Stage 3: Word as an object in text with a discernible beginning and end.  
(I cxn rxdx my bxlxx)
- Stage 4: Word as an object in text with a beginning, middle, and end.  
(I can ridx my bikx)

This stage-like theoretical framework is neither new, nor revolutionary. Both psychologists who study reading processes (Ehri and Wilce, 1985; Perfetti, 1992; Stuart and Coltheart, 1988) and reading educators (Henderson, 1980; Holdaway, 1979; Morris, 1993) have proposed similar models. [See also the work on developmental spelling stages (Bear and Barone, 1989; Henderson and Templeton, 1986).] My purpose in this article has been to provide teachers who favor a holistic introduction to reading with a practical map or guide for observing their students' developing word knowledge.

Alphabet knowledge is critical in learning to read and write printed English (Adams, 1990). Assuming a minimal level of alphabet knowledge, a first step forward in learning to read is the development of a concept of word in text — learning how the spoken words match to the printed words (Stage 1). But note that even when the beginner is able to finger-point to individual words as he reads, what he sees (processes) on the page (Stages 1, 2, 3, and 4) is qualitatively different from what the mature reader sees. In fact, the beginning reader's underlying word concept must evolve through the stages (toward more and more mature processing) if his/her reading skills are to advance.

Some will argue that the four word knowledge stages are just another way of saying that phonological awareness (children's awareness of sounds within spoken words) is important in learning to read (Adams, 1990; Gough and



Hillinger, 1980; Liberman and Shankweiler, 1979). I am saying that. However, I am also saying that those teachers who use top-down, whole language approaches to introduce reading must assume responsibility for fostering their students' developing word knowledge. While two-thirds of the children in a first grade classroom may acquire such word knowledge quite naturally in their daily reading and writing of meaningful stories, the other third — the bottom third, Curtis' third — will likely require some direct assistance from the teacher.

In a classroom where writing is emphasized, invented spellings will offer the teacher direct and ongoing insight into individual children's developing awareness of sounds within words (bike = B, BK, or BIC). The teacher can also use writing (or spelling) as a means of advancing an individual child's phoneme awareness (see intervention examples in Stages 2, 3, and 4).

In the present article, the teacher (Ms. Baker) used simple categorization activities with one-syllable words to help her students develop sound awareness and letter/sound knowledge. Importantly, these activities (beginning consonant and word family sorts) were carefully paced to the children's underlying level of word knowledge. However unfashionable such instruction may be in this current period of whole language influence, the fact remains that it works. Focused word study can facilitate beginning readers' emerging knowledge of word structure (Invernizzi, Abouzeid, and Gill, 1994).

Today, many kindergarten and first grade teachers believe strongly in a whole language introduction to reading, including the group reading and rereading of rhymes, chants, and captivating stories. The advantages of such an approach are not to be denied. Still, the successful whole language

teacher, the one who reaches all children in the class, will be a teacher who carefully monitors and facilitates individual students' developing knowledge of printed words. Perhaps the late-Edmund Henderson, a thoughtful proponent of the language-experience approach who was not averse to teaching beginning readers about words, put it best (1980, p. 2):

*We contend that an understanding of what children know about words is crucial for effective instruction in reading and writing. Children do, of course, learn letters and words directly from exposure to written language. But what they can learn — indeed, even what they can see on the page — depends upon the conceptual frame they bring to the task. Where instruction is paced to the child's underlying conceptual grasp, almost any methodology is likely to succeed. Where this state of mind is violated or overreached, almost any method is likely to fail and lead to difficulty ...*

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# **Student Choices: Book Selection Strategies of Fourth Graders**

**Sherry Kragler  
Christine Nolley**

In many literature-based reading programs, students are encouraged to self-select their own reading materials. However, self-selection causes apprehensions for many teachers. They are concerned not only about their students' ability to select books that are appropriate for their reading level but they are also concerned about the types of books the students may choose. Consequently many teachers may decide to use anthologies or whole class texts where they maintain some control over the students' reading material. However, student interest and student choice should be an integral part of an elementary reading program if students are going to be turned onto reading (Rasinski, 1988) and become lifelong readers.

This project investigated book selection strategies of fourth grade students involved in a literature-based reading program. The project examined types of information that guided the students' selection of books for their instructional reading program.

## **Rationale and theoretical base**

Having students choose their own reading material is based in Olson's (1959) theory of child development. His theory states that children are "self-seeking, self-selecting, self-pacing organisms" (p. 402). Children will seek and select from the environment experiences that are consistent with their developmental levels. With teacher guidance, they will pace themselves through these learning experiences. With reading then, children will self-select books at levels that are appropriate for them as well as pace themselves through their chosen reading materials.

Allowing children to self-select their reading materials is a powerful motivator for children. It allows children the latitude to be deeply involved with the learning process, thus fostering an interest in as well as developing an ownership of the reading process that allows for growth in reading along many dimensions (Harmes and Lettow, 1986; Jenkins, 1955; New England Consortium, 1976). Students learn to make decisions regarding the types of reading they are going to do. They decide what ideas they will gain from the reading experience as well as learn how to develop different purposes for reading (Harmes and Lettow, 1986; Lazar, 1957; Ohlhausen and Jepsen, 1992).

Allowing students to self-select their instructional reading books can be a motivator for reading. Self-selection also helps to alleviate some of the pressure teachers have regarding students reading books of a particular difficulty level. When students have a strong interest in a particular book topic, finding books at a certain reading level becomes less important. Students' interests will help them read more difficult material (Belloni and Jongsma, 1978; Hunt, 1970; Powell, 1971; Shnayer, 1967). In choosing books at an appropriate level, how do students decide? Students tend to pick books at

their independent, frustration as well as instructional levels. They tend to move across the levels in a pattern of moving from easy to more difficult back to easier books (Fresch, 1991; Jenkins, 1955; Mork, 1973; Smith and Joyner, 1990; and Timion, 1992).

## Methodology

Subjects. The study took place in a fourth grade classroom in an elementary school in Indiana. The students were heterogeneously assigned to the class by the principal. There were seventeen students in the class. At the beginning of the project, to determine placement levels, the teacher listened to the students read. She scored significant miscues (substitutions, omissions, insertions, unknown words, and mispronunciations). She also listened for other recordable miscues, such as reversals, dialect, hesitations. A rate check was also done. Powell's (1971) criteria were used to make placement decisions. After listening to the students read, the range of the students' reading placement levels fell between the second and sixth grade level.

Classroom library. The room was stocked with books at a variety of difficulty levels as well as a variety of genre. Because of the range of the students' instructional reading levels, the difficulty levels of the books ranged from first through eighth grade. There were approximately 100 books in the class. The teacher rotated some of the books every six weeks. Books related to the students' interests were added to the class library during the year. Students also brought in books from home as well as from the public library to read. Parents donated books to the class library as well.

Description of the program. The reading period was divided into four sections. The first section took approximately five minutes. During this time, students needing books

would go to the class library to select their new books. Students who did not need books would begin to read at this time. While the students were selecting books and getting started with their reading, the teacher rotated around the room to monitor the students and to help them settle into the reading period.

Except for the classroom bay window, students could sit where they wanted to during their reading time. Two or three students could sit in the bay window but the students took turns as this was a popular place to read. While some chose to sit on the floor, most students stayed at their seats. If the students wanted to listen to quiet music during this time, a tape was used. The students read for 30-35 minutes.

During this time, the teacher held reading conferences as well as occasionally monitored the students at their seats. The students signed up for the conferences at the beginning of the day. The teacher used the conference to monitor the students' reading. The students were asked why and how they had selected the book. Next, they read a small portion to the teacher while she did a miscue analysis as well as rate check. After this, they discussed the book as well as discussed any difficult vocabulary. Finally, she had the students rate the book as well as ask who else might enjoy the book.

After the silent reading time was over, the students wrote in their journals and/or did other book related activities. This third component lasted approximately fifteen minutes. The reading period ended with a general book sharing time. The students as well as the teacher did book talks and generally discussed books the students were reading. Students also shared book related projects and occasionally participated in readers' theater.

In addition, the teacher presented focus lessons two or three times each week. These were mini lessons the teacher did to teach a variety of reading strategies, such as teaching students to summarize. The teacher did mini lessons at the beginning of the program to orient the students to the program. Some of these lessons covered book selection, preparing for conferences and exposing the students to the variety of genre in the library.

### **Determining book selection strategies**

Book selection: How and why. To determine how and why students selected their instructional reading books, the teacher interviewed the students during their reading conferences. The students were asked the following questions: "How did you select this book?" and "What made you select this book?" If the students could not answer the first question, the teacher gave prompts to help the students generate an answer. For example, the teacher might ask if they had used an algorithm (an adaptation of the five finger method), had they skimmed the book, or leafed through the book to look at other clues to see if the book was going to be at an appropriate difficulty level.

The statements from these two questions were compiled and categories of responses were created. Gläser and Strauss (1975) "constant comparative" was used as a guide for understanding the data. The students' comments were coded into tentative categories. As other students' comments were collected, they were analyzed and compared to the initial categories.

Book selection results: Categories of responses. In analyzing the data, students did not consider the 'fit' of the book very often. Even with the teacher prompts and the algorithm, the students focused on the topic of the book rather than if the



book was at an appropriate difficulty level for them. Consequently, only fourteen percent of the responses were about getting a book that would be a good fit. Students predominantly responded to why they selected a book.

From the results of the interviews regarding book choice, the following information emerged. The pattern seemed to follow results of other studies (Hepler and Hickman, 1982; Lynch-Brown, 1977; New England Consortium, 1976; Sampson, 1988; Wendelin, and Zinck, 1983). As seen in Figure 1, recommendations by peers as well as the classroom teacher were mentioned most frequently as the guiding factor in choosing a book. Many comments were: 1) others in the class had read the book; 2) a friend said that it was a good book; and 3) the book was good. The physical characteristics of the book was the second factor in the choice. The students' comments were: 1) the book looked neat; 2) I liked the cover of the book; 3) it looked exciting; and 4) I liked the pictures. The third category of responses was related to the specific topic of the book. Such comments related to information the student was going to learn from reading the book. These comments were related to general topics of interest as well as specific information students wanted. Some general comments were, I wanted to learn about football, dirt-bikes, ducks, money, the president ... Specific comments were connected to wanting information about specific people such as Abraham Lincoln and Magic Johnson. The fourth major category had to do with the 'fit' of the book. Only fourteen percent of the responses were in this area. In this, students mentioned how they selected the book. They mentioned flipping through the book, looking inside the text, reading the first and last paragraph as well as looking at the difficulty of the words.

The next category had to do with authors and book characters. Students seemed to like to read books by particular authors as well as following a character in other sequels in a particular series of books. Reading books based on TV and movies minimally influenced book selection strategies. Finally a small, miscellaneous category emerged. Unrelated responses to the other categories fell into this category. Examples of miscellaneous comments were: 1) I couldn't find anything else to read; or 2) I don't know why I selected the book.

**Figure 1**  
**Reasons given for selecting books**

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Percentage of responses</u>
Recommendation	27
Physical Characteristics	23
Subject	16
Selection Strategy	14
Author/character	13
TV/Movie	4
Miscellaneous	3

Book selection: Reading levels. The second aspect of book selection dealt with students choosing books at appropriate difficulty levels. Three conference records were randomly selected to be used to determine the students' ability to self-select books at appropriate levels. The following data was collected: 1) readability check on each of the books; and 2) the teacher listened for significant miscues as part of the reading conference. As mentioned earlier, she listened for substitutions, omissions, insertions, unknown words, and mispronunciations. Powell's (1971) criteria were used to monitor the students' placement levels. The Flesch Kincaid readability formula was used in determining book difficulty level. As indicated in Figure 2, the students predominantly chose books

at their independent or instructional reading level. In choosing books, 62% were at the independent level while 25% were at the instructional level and 18% of the choices were at the frustration level (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
**Reading levels of chosen books**

<u>Book choice</u>	<u>Book Level</u>		
	<u>Independent</u>	<u>Instructional</u>	<u>Frustration</u>
Book 1	8	2	3
Book 2	8	7	0
Book 3	10	2	2

\*Note: Totals will be different due to student absences on conference days.

In analyzing individual patterns of these three books, six of the students consistently chose books at their independent level. There was a variety of patterns of book selection for the other ten students. Three of these students followed an easier to harder book selection pattern. The other seven chose books at a harder level and gradually moved to easier books. Due to the sample size of three books, no conclusions can be drawn regarding the relationship between book selection and reading growth during this program.

## Conclusions and implications

Using a literature-based reading program that allows the students to self-select their books proved to be very successful with these students. The program was a motivating factor for these students because their attitudes toward reading improved. Some of the comments they made regarding their program were that they liked being able to pick their own books for reading. They enjoyed the fact they could read during their reading time rather than do worksheets. Book sharing was another aspect that the students mentioned as

being a positive of the program. The students eagerly looked forward to sharing their books with other members of the class.

The program also developed the students' awareness of themselves as readers. They enjoyed the independence they developed during this program. Several comments mentioned by the students confirmed this aspect. The students felt they had become better readers because they could read more often and had more time to read longer books. They could choose books of interest or for a particular purpose. Consequently, many students thought the self-selection process helped them become better readers. They were aware they were beginning to read more fluently. Being able to keep a notebook of difficult vocabulary encountered in their reading was another aspect they thought was helping them become better readers.

Some teachers may feel uncomfortable with having students predominately read books at their independent reading level during their instructional reading program. If so, they could teach and monitor the students use of an algorithm to determine if the book would be at an appropriate level. To become successful with this procedure, the students will need to practice and use this strategy over time (Henry, 1992; Mork, 1973). The five finger method is an example of such an algorithm. In this particular method, the students read a page from a selected book, as they read the page, the students hold up a finger for each word they don't know. If they hold up five fingers, the book is too hard (Richardson, 1983). Another approach is the Goldilock strategy. This strategy teaches children to recognize books that are too easy, just right, or too hard (Ohlhausen and Jepsen, 1992). Using algorithms are helpful but they would need to be amended for the length and type of books the students are choosing. In this class, the

students needed more prompting to use an algorithm as they selected their instructional reading books.

While algorithms may be helpful in guiding the students' choice, it is imperative that students not be made afraid to choose a book for fear of not getting just the right selection. Putting too much emphasis on choosing just the right book will defeat the purpose of the self-selection process. Many students will not attempt to select any books if teachers and media specialists continually question their choices or limit their choice of books by not allowing students in various parts of the library. If students, over time, are consistently making inappropriate choices then some gentle guidance may be needed.

To maximize reading growth, students should be reading books at all their reading levels. Occasionally, students attempted books near their frustration levels. The students read these books with difficulty but persisted in finishing the books. This provided them with a transient expansion reading experience (Powell, 1994). Since their interest was high and they were comprehending the story, there was no reason to subvert this effort. However, students should not continually read at this expansion level because they do need time to refine their developing reading behaviors. Consequently, students do need time to read easy books.

While this study did not address the issue of teacher selection of books for the class library, teachers do need to think about the books they choose to put in their rooms. If students are selecting from the classroom library and then making recommendations to their peers, what is included in the classroom library becomes very important. Teachers need to include books that fit the range of students in their classes. A wide variety of reading materials should be included to span

the range of students' interests. Some thought needs to be given to the literary merit of the books to be used in the classroom. Because of the number of considerations to be regarded, there should be some thought underlying teachers' book selection process. Students need to experience quality literature of interest to them and within their reading ranges to become truly literate people capable of making sound decisions regarding their reading.

In closing, students who are encouraged to self-select their own reading materials are more motivated and enthusiastic as readers. The process puts the learning responsibility on the reader thus providing early lessons in decision making and life-long learning. If taught effectively, most students are quite competent when it comes to selecting their instructional reading books suitable to their individual levels.

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## Correction

In *Reading Horizons* Volume 36, No. 3, "What Counts as Good Writing? A Case Study of Relationships Between Teacher Beliefs and Pupil Conceptions" by Zhihui Fang, pages 254 and 255 the following underlined words should read student instead of teacher:

One teacher justified the need for elaboration, saying that it helps paint a vivid picture.

Another teacher exemplified what elaboration means this way:

Another teacher was able to identify other qualities of good writing such as presence of story grammar and audience orientation.

According to some of the teachers, a good piece of writing represents "100 percent effort," which is indicated by absence of grammatical errors, use of challenge words and elaborations.



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