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Reading Horizons

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**In Memoriam
To
Dorothy J. McGinnis**



Dorothy J. McGinnis, founder of Reading Horizons and esteemed Western Michigan University professor emerita, passed away in January 2013. Friends, former colleagues and students will miss her, however, her presence lives on through her many contributions to and accomplishments in literacy education.

In the Dorothy J. McGinnis Reading Center and Clinic, innovative strategies in the diagnosis and instruction of struggling readers began with Dr. McGinnis and remain the hallmark of the Clinic named in her honor in 1996. She founded this journal, Reading Horizons, in 1960 as a modest newsletter. Since its inception, Reading Horizons has grown into an international literacy journal having published the scholarship of many of today's leading literacy researchers and educators.

Dr. McGinnis dedicated her professional life to working with struggling readers through interdisciplinary approaches to evaluate young learners. In her clinical approaches, she considered multiple factors in discerning a reader's struggle with the reading process. Her books and publications live on as directives in working with the whole child to achieve success.

She will be missed, but her legacy endures.





Reading Horizons

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



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At-Risk Preschool Children: Establishing Developmental Ranges that Suggest At-Promise

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Abstract

The Early Reading First (ERF) program provided grants to transform preschools into centers of education excellence with the ultimate goal of preventing later reading difficulties (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). The intent of ERF grants was to provide preschoolers with the necessary cognitive, early language, and literacy skills for success in kindergarten (United States Department of Education, 2007). Programs that received ERF funds were required to monitor children's progress in specific literacy and language skills (i.e., automatic recognition of alphabet letters, knowledge of the conventions of print, understanding of phonemes and letters, and use of increasingly complex vocabulary) and to identify children who may be "at risk". However, ERF failed to provide guidelines for monitoring progress or definitions of at risk. In this article, we explore an alternative approach to identifying children as at risk in preschool using data from the third year of Project EXEL, a 2002 ERF project. Our study developed a set of benchmarks for end-of-year preschool accomplishments in the areas of alphabet recognition, concepts about print, phonemic awareness and alphabetic principle, and vocabulary development. We also explored how these benchmarks might be used with monitoring assessments to identify preschoolers who may not be making satisfactory progress toward expected end-of-the-year performance.

Introduction

This article is structured in the following manner. We first discuss definitions of reading difficulties and procedures used to identify children with reading difficulties. Second, we relate these definitions and procedures to identifying preschool children who are at risk. Third, we describe the set of benchmarks that we developed for end-of-the-year preschool literacy accomplishments. We conceived of these benchmarks as a range of performance and believed that children who achieve within these ranges have a high likelihood of obtaining expected levels of accomplishment in kindergarten. Fourth, we apply these benchmarks to data from 2005-2006, the third year of Project EXEL. These data demonstrate that Project EXEL produced superior literacy and language outcomes and increased the percentage of children who reached developmental benchmarks compared to a control group of children in similar preschool classrooms. Next, we share children's progress monitoring scores to demonstrate the difficulties of identifying children who are at risk early in preschool programs. It is important to consider that Project EXEL did not include a response to intervention approach in its overall plan. Instead, the project director and other key stakeholders believed that many children who might be identified as at risk merely have not had an opportunity to receive high quality, scaffolded instruction, and would excel given the chance.

Definitions of Reading Difficulties and Methods of Identification

McEneaney, Lose, and Schwartz (2006) describe three ways of defining and identifying reading difficulties: categorical, discrepancy, and transactional approaches. The categorical view of reading difficulties, which emerged from early clinical studies by medical professionals (Hinshelwood, 1917), posits that reading disabilities are related to brain dysfunctions. This position leads to the conclusion that readers with disabilities are deficit in some core brain function involved in reading. Later models, which have posited deficits in cognitive processing, have defined the causes of reading disabilities as breakdowns in critical processes involved in reading such as being able to recode or transform graphemes into phonological units (Castles & Coltheart, 1993). However, research provided challenges for this definition of reading disability as some have found no evidence of a qualitative or categorical difference between children identified with dyslexia and other poor readers (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Therefore, a more compelling model of reading disabilities emerged called the discrepancy view of reading difficulties.

The discrepancy, also called the dimensional approach (Snow et al., 1998), acknowledges that reading abilities, like other human abilities, range on a continuum (e.g., low, average, high) and are based on a norm-referenced assessment, where children's performance is compared to other children in an appropriate comparison population called the norm population. Readers whose abilities are at the low end of the continuum, compared to a norm group, are considered to be different or discrepant from normal readers. Because discrepancy is based on a cutoff point along a statistical distribution of skill in reading, the identification of disabled readers is arbitrary.

A third view of reading difficulties is called the transactional view and is based on theory and research in sociocultural theories of literacy (Jimenez, 2000) and situated cognition (Anderson, 2003). Reading disabilities are considered to be not solely rooted in the individual child, but rather result from the interaction of the child, the teacher, and the context. According to this perspective, any child may experience difficulties when his/her abilities cannot be appropriated into instruction which results in failure to learn. Based on this view, criterion-referenced assessments are employed. In contrast to norm-referenced assessments, children's performance is measured against a standard which identifies the level of achievement children should have acquired at specific points in their education.

Defining Preschoolers as At Risk for Failure in Reading

Because it is clear that some children who struggle to learn to read in first grade continue to be poor readers through the elementary grades (Juel, 1988), researchers have investigated why some children seem prepared to begin reading successfully while others struggle. Thus, researchers have sought to identify early predictors (in preschool and kindergarten) of reading achievement—"some measurable characteristic of a child or the child's home, school, or community that has been associated with poor progress in learning to read" (Scarborough as cited in Snow et al., 1998, p. 100). Researchers identified group factors (e.g., SES, minority status, home language other than English) and community factors (e.g., schools serving high numbers of families living in poverty) related to later reading failure. More recently, individual factors such as knowledge of foundational reading concepts, the nature of preschool and kindergarten experiences (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008), and home teaching practices (Britto, Brooks-Gunn, & Griffin, 2006) have also been identified.

Most children served by ERF grants are minorities, from low SES backgrounds, and may have English as their second language. Thus, the population of

children served is by definition at risk by virtue of group risk factors. However, the regulations of ERF require that grantees use individual factors (achievement in foundational literacy concepts) to further identify children as at risk.

The typical approach to identifying children as at risk in preschool is similar to the dimensional or discrepancy view of reading difficulties in which children on the low end of a continuum of performance on a variety of literacy assessments are identified as at risk. For example, children who score in the bottom quartile or quintile (lowest 20%) on an alphabet recognition test are considered at risk. This approach is problematic for at least two reasons. First, research has shown that low SES preschoolers, the children primarily served by ERF grants, score lower than middle class preschoolers on nearly every measure of language and literacy (Lonigan, Burgess, Anthony, & Barker, 1998). For example, at the beginning of preschool all low SES children in ERF projects are expected to know few, if any, alphabet letters so all children may cluster at the low end of the continuum making it difficult to know which children will move out of the lower end of the continuum after receiving instruction and which children will struggle to do so. The second problem with the dimensional approach to identifying children at risk is that a certain percentage of children are always considered at risk. If the lowest scoring 20% of the children can recognize 40 letters at the end of preschool, these children would be considered at risk. Yet knowing 40 alphabet letters at kindergarten entry may not be a risk factor.

An alternative method of identifying children at risk is to use the criterion referenced approach in which standards of expected achievement are specified. This approach also approximates the transactional view, in which all children are expected to vary at entry, but with personalized instruction most acquire foundational skills; those that do not are considered at risk. In this approach to identifying children as at risk, expected levels of performance that are likely to predict successful entry and progress through kindergarten are identified, and children receive research-based instruction aimed at helping them reach these expected levels of performance. Our benchmarks are based on this approach as we have examined research to determine preschool literacy developmental ranges in alphabet recognition, phonemic awareness, and concepts about print. We assume that scoring within one standard deviation of the mean on a standardized vocabulary assessment is an indication of reaching an expected level of achievement in vocabulary development.

Identification of Benchmark Levels of Literacy Achievement in Preschool

To identify standards of performance and set developmental ranges in literacy foundations at the preschool level, we turned to descriptive studies of what preschoolers know and can do and instructional research or training studies of what preschoolers can learn to do. We summarized many of these studies previously (McGee, 2005) to determine the level of knowledge typical of middle class preschool children or children who received effective research-based instruction. We reasoned that such levels of knowledge might enable children entering kindergarten to perform at least at the average of their class and to benefit from classroom literacy instruction. For example, Byrne and Fielding-Barnsley (1991) found that a small sample of middle SES preschoolers know a mean of 12.6 letters out of 26. Treiman, Tincoff, Rodriguez, Mouzaki, and Francis (1998) examined the knowledge of individual letter names and letter-sound correspondences among 600 preschoolers in two samples. One sample of children recognized 54% of the letters and six letter-sounds, and a second sample recognized 74% of the letters and nine letter sounds. Justice and Ezell (2002) found that low SES preschoolers know a mean of 6.0-6.8 letters out of a set of 20 letters, but with instruction learned a mean of 7.8 to 10.9. Justice, Chow, Capellini, Flanigan, and Colton (2003) demonstrated that children knew 16 of 26 letters. Roberts (2003) found that young ELL children only knew a range of 2.3 to 2.8 letters out of a set of 16, but after instruction learn a range of 6.7 to 11.1 letters. Roberts and Neal (2004) found that at the end of a 16-week instructional program for ELL preschoolers, 58% of the children knew 13 or more letters and the mean number of letters learned was 11 out of 16 letters taught. Taken together, these studies suggested that the mean number of letters that middle class children know range from 50-75% of the alphabet, and low income children can learn a similar range of letters with appropriate instruction. Thus, a developmental range of expected knowledge for alphabet recognition would be 50-75% of the total 52 letters at the end of preschool.

Research on children's concepts about print shows a similar pattern with middle income children knowing more concepts, but low SES children capable of learning within that range. For example, Byrne and Field-Barnsley (1991) demonstrated that middle class children know a mean of 5.4 concepts about print from a set of 24. Justice and Ezell (2002) and Justice et al. (2003) demonstrated that low SES children knew a mean of 5.0 to 9.1 concepts out of 20, but can learn a range of 7.6 to 11.2 concepts. In a later study, Justice, Bowles, and Skibbe. (2006) showed that middle class children knew a mean of 10 out of 17 concepts while low SES

children knew 4 out of 17 concepts. Roberts and Neal (2004) demonstrated that ELL children could learn a range of 8.6 to 12.0 concepts about print out of 23 with targeted instruction. The range of concepts about print that middle class children knew and lower SES and ELL children learned seemed wide with a low of approximately 25% to a high of approximately 60%. However, most studies used a wide range of concepts about print based on Clay (1993), and some of these concepts are intended for children as old as first grade. Thus, we decided that a developmental range from 60-70% of a smaller number of concepts about print (16) more appropriate for the preschool population would work well.

In deciding the range of phonological awareness appropriate for preschoolers, we considered not only the level of awareness, but also the type of assessment used. Justice (2006) argued that, "There is little evidence indicating what level of phonological awareness a child must achieve to be a good reader or on what type of tasks he or she should be able to perform adequately if not masterfully" (p. 291). However, she also indicated that children must demonstrate some threshold level of performance and suggested that level would be with a unit smaller than a syllable. Therefore, being able to segment an onset (a single phoneme in single consonant word) from a rime is likely the threshold that matters in phonemic awareness. For older children in kindergarten, being able to detect a phoneme is the level of phonemic awareness that matters for reading and spelling (Gillon, 2004). Although few studies examine preschoolers' initial ability to segment a phoneme from a spoken word, several demonstrate that a significant percentage of preschoolers can learn to segment phonemes with instruction. Byrne, and Fielding-Barnsley and Ashley (2000)1999 revealed that children could learn to segment 67% of phonemes taught in both initial and final position (Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1991). In fact, 95% of the children segmented most phonemes in both the initial and final position. Hindson, Byrne, Fielding-Barnsley, Newman, Hine, & Shankweiler (2005) also demonstrated that preschoolers identified as at risk could reach similar levels of phoneme segmentation (approximately 50%) with instruction. While other tasks (e.g., rhyme detection or production) have been used to demonstrate children's phonological awareness, our project decided to use isolation or segmentation of the beginning phoneme of a word as the expected level of achievement that would suggest success in kindergarten. Thus, the expected range for phonemic awareness was set at isolating or segmenting beginning phonemes in 50-70% of spoken words at preschool exit.

Finally, we examined research which measured children's knowledge of letter-sound relationships. Byrne and Fielding-Barnsley (1991) found that middle class

children knew a range of five to six letter sounds. Treiman et al. (1998) found that middle class children knew a range of 5.6 to 8.3 letter sounds. Bloodgood (1999) showed that middle income preschoolers knew a mean of 8.26 out of 12 letter sounds but learned 10.11 by the end of the year. Taken together, the research shows that most children in preschool know from five to eight letter sounds, but can learn more. Our project used a set of 10 letter sounds, and determined that the range of knowing 60% to 80% of first letter sounds was a reasonable expected outcome.

The research examining mean performance in alphabet recognition, concepts about print, phonemic awareness, and letter-sound knowledge suggested that a range of values rather than a single benchmark would likely capture most children who are making adequate progress. The developmental ranges were established within the mean level of performance of middle class children and included the range of mean performance of lower SES children who had received instruction. Basing estimates on the mean level of performance suggests that children who reach these levels of achievement should have average or better achievement levels at kindergarten entry.

Methods

Participants

The participants for this study were 268 four-year-old children enrolled in treatment and control classrooms during year three of Project EXEL, a three-year 2002 ERF grant. The treatment group consisted of 128 children who were available for testing in both fall and spring from eight classrooms: two Head Start classrooms, two state-funded preschool classrooms, and four Title I-funded preschools in two southern communities of the United States with a total of 92% of the children identified as low SES. The control group consisted of 140 children from three Head Start classrooms, two state-funded preschools, and four Title I funded preschools located in the same communities with 94% of the control children identified as low SES. The control classrooms were purposefully selected by administrators at the agencies involved in the treatment group. These classrooms were in the same agency or school district as the project classrooms. Since treatment and control classrooms were from the same funding category (Head Start, state-funded, Title I funded), these classrooms used the same early childhood curriculum. Because two of the control classrooms had a mixture of three- and four-year olds, nine control classrooms were selected.

Measures

Two sets of measures were used in this study. Vocabulary data were obtained by the results of the Expressive-One Word Picture Vocabulary Test (EOWPVT; Garner, 1990). The EOWPVT is a standardized expressive vocabulary assessment with a reliability of .96 where children were shown a picture and asked to name it. Foundational literacy data was obtained by the results of Early Literacy Knowledge Assessment (ELKA; McGee & Morrow, 2005). ELKA was developed for Project EXEL and was modified to provide a range of assessments appropriate for capturing literacy development in four- and five-year-olds (McGee & Morrow, 2005). We selected assessments with face validity—those that had been used in previous research of children’s literacy development (Bloodgood, 1999; Lonigan et al., 1998), were included as important predictors of reading and writing (Snow et al., 1998), and were clearly related to the list of required literacy skills presented in the Early Reading First call for proposals.

ELKA consists of a wider range of assessments than were selected for monitoring purposes. Eight subtests were administered to four-year-olds in the fall and spring, and three additional assessments were administered in spring only. The fall and spring assessments included upper and lower case alphabet recognition, writing the alphabet letters, matching pictures by alliteration, matching pictures by rhyming, segmenting phonemes from spoken words, blending segmented words, and concepts about print. In addition, the spring assessments included segmenting ending phonemes, matching a letter to sounds, and inventing spellings. The internal consistency of the entire ELKA battery based on assessments of 278 children was .925.

A comparison of the items in ELKA subtests with items included in other screening tools demonstrated ELKA’s face validity. For example, Get Ready to Read!, a screening tool developed by Lonigan and Whitehurst (Whitehurst, 2001) has been shown to have high validity (.69 correlation coefficient with Developmental Skills Checklist, .66 correlation coefficient with letter knowledge, .58 correlation coefficient with Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test) and reliability (split-half .80). This 20 item screening tool included items related to six of the subtests included in the ELKA: concepts about print, alphabet recognition, beginning letter-sound associations, beginning phoneme segmentation, rhyme, and blending.

The first three subtests of ELKA assessed children’s alphabet knowledge. Upper and lower case alphabet recognition are assessed using an adaptation of Clay’s alphabet recognition task (1993) in which three alphabet letters are presented on a test booklet page rather than presented all together on one sheet. All 52

alphabet letters in upper and lower case are presented. Clay reported a .95 reliability for first graders when assessing alphabet recognition. The third alphabet assessment required children write 15 letters presented orally by the examiner. Bloodgood (1999) reported a reliability of .97 for several alphabet letter knowledge assessments including upper and lower case recognition and alphabet writing when used with three- to five-year-olds.

The fourth subtest of the ELKA assessed concepts about print (16 items) using, among other items, a modification of Clay's Concepts about Print Test (CAP) items 1-9 and 11 (Clay 1993). The 16 items included in ELKA have children identify book orientation concepts (front, back, top, bottom, print versus pictures as read, turning pages in order), directionality concepts (left to right, return sweep), and letter and word concepts (point to an alphabet letter, point to a word, locate a word with a W, find a short word, find a long word, and find a word with four letters). Neuman (1999) used a similar concept about print assessment based on the same items from Clay with preschoolers. Clay (1993) reported a reliability of .95 for the entire assessment for first graders.

The ELKA included several assessments of phonemic awareness. Rhyme and Beginning Phoneme assessments were administered fall and spring. These assessments had 10 items each and were directly modeled from MacLean, Bryant, and Bradley (1987) and used by Lonigan and his colleagues (1998). Children were shown three pictures and asked to choose two pictures that rhymed or began with the same sound. Lonigan (1998) reported that the internal consistency of these measures was .63 for rhyme and .44 for beginning phoneme. Bloodgood (1999) reported reliability of .69 for two similar measures of rhyme and beginning phoneme together. A third phonemic awareness subtest was isolating (segmenting) the beginning sound of ten words. The child provided the initial phoneme of words pronounced by the examiner. A final phonemic assessment administered fall and spring was blending (saying a word after the tester says the word isolated into syllables or phonemes) adapted from Lonigan et al. (1998) and Stahl and Murray (1994). Lonigan (1998) reported .96 internal consistency for the blending assessment for four-year-olds. This measure included a total of 10 items of blending compound words, blending syllables into a word, blending onsets and rimes into words, and blending phonemes into words.

One of the spring-only phonemic awareness subtests was the Sound-Letter Association assessment, in which children matched an alphabet letter to beginning phoneme as shown in one of three picture alternatives (Stuart, 1995). This subtest included 10 items. A second spring-only measure of phonemic awareness was

children's ability to segment ending phonemes (10 items). The final spring-only measure assessed children's ability to invent spellings. The assessment used the procedure outlined in Stahl and Murray (1994) using a scoring rubric in which children gained points for attempting to write with letters or spelling increasingly complex patterns. Children were asked to spell five words for a total possible 30 points.

Procedures

General Procedures

During the fall and spring of their preschool year, children were individually administered the battery of assessments by trained assessors. All assessments were completed within a three-week period, beginning approximately two-three weeks after the start of the school year and three to four weeks prior to the end of school. Before working with the children, each assessor received a standard training to administer each measure which included demonstrations and practice scoring with the first author or an evaluation expert, and practice with one or more children. The first author or the evaluation expert observed the administration of 10% of all assessments, scoring the assessments independently from the assessor. The evaluator and assessors were 100% in agreement on the scoring.

Instruction in the Treatment and Control Classrooms

The treatment classrooms used the High Scope approach to early childhood (Hohman & Weikart, 2002) except for the two Head Start classrooms, which were using Creative Curriculum (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002). High/Scope and Creative Curriculum have similar approaches to preschool programming as both are based on Jean Piaget's ideas where children are expected to learn by actively exploring materials and carrying out projects (Piaget & Inhelder, 1972). Adults support children's initiatives and provide whole and small group instruction daily based on the children's needs and interests. High Scope's and Creative Curriculum's key experiences address children's emotional, intellectual, social, and physical skills and abilities. Classrooms are arranged in centers and children are expected to plan what activities they do in centers, carry out those plans, and later review what they accomplished. Therefore, project classrooms included centers stocked with appropriate preschool materials. Each classroom had a book and writing center, paper and pencil props integrated within several centers, and a computer center.

Project EXEL did not use a specific early literacy curriculum although Scholastic's "Building Language for Literacy" (Newman, Snow, & Canizares, 2000)

curriculum was purchased, and, while teachers used the themes and literature selections from this curriculum to guide their instruction, they did not follow the lesson plans. The project required that teachers use six key instructional activities either daily or at least three times a week. First, teachers were required to use interactive techniques to read aloud at least two books daily (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). Second, they were required to engage children in shared writing activities several times a week in order to teach targeted concepts about print. The books selected for reading aloud had to be theme related, and teachers were required to emphasize theme vocabulary during reading and in follow-up small group activities. Teachers were required to teach alphabet letter recognition (using at least three letters per week) and later phonemic awareness and letter-sound associations (teaching two phonemes or letter-sound associations per week) in small group lessons using a scope and sequence developed for the project. During the later part of the year, teachers were required to use two more sophisticated instructional techniques: fingerpoint reading of songs and poems presented on the pocket chart and small group writing lessons in which children were encouraged to invent spellings. The project teachers reported they spent a range of 45 minutes to 1 hour 45 minutes on literacy instruction with a mean of 1.1 hours. Teachers were provided with professional development by outside consultants for five to six days per year of the project and they observed the outside consultants demonstrate instructional activities in their classrooms. A reading coach supported the teachers in implementing the new instructional strategies they were expected to use in the project. All teachers received one to two hours of coaching in his or her classroom twice monthly.

Each control classroom was observed fall and spring for approximately 1.5 hours during the time the teacher specified as their literacy instructional time. The first author conducted these observations over the three years of the project. Based on these observations, it was noted that the control classrooms were using the High Scope approach to early childhood and the Head Start control classrooms were also using Creative Curriculum. Because these classrooms were a part of the same agencies and school systems as the treatment classrooms, they too had center-based classrooms with more than adequate preschool materials. All control classrooms had additional literacy curricula they were expected to follow. The Title I classrooms were using the Open Court PreK literacy curriculum (Bereiter, Campione, Carruthers, Hirshberg, McKeough, Pressley, Riot, Cardamalia, Stein & Treadway, 2003), Head Start Classrooms were using the Alpha Time Letter People Curriculum (Let's Begin with Letter People, 1996), and the two state-funded preschools were not using an additional literacy curriculum. The Open Court PreK Literacy curriculum

is a comprehensive approach to literacy development in which teachers provide explicit and systematic instruction in oral language, book and print awareness, phonological awareness, and the alphabetic principle. Teachers read aloud books focusing on vocabulary and children respond to the books as a way to build comprehension. In whole groups children learn about letters and sounds, with follow-up activities in small groups. The curriculum includes 160 lessons arranged by theme and sequenced by skills. Alpha Time Letter People is an add-on curriculum that teaches names of the upper and lower case letters at the same time as the sounds associated with the letters. Teachers use large inflatable dolls called letter people and songs and stories to introduce children to the letter shapes, names, and sounds. Observations during the second and third year of the project revealed all control teachers were using their curriculum as evident in the instructional activities and materials. During the third-year observation in the spring control teachers reported they spent a range of one-two hours in literacy instruction and activities, with a mean of 1.4 hours. Professional development was provided to control teachers as directed by their centers. Teachers in the control group reported receiving two to three days of professional development on their literacy curriculum.

Results

Statistical Analyses

Table 1 presents the mean scores of pre- and posttests from EOWPVT and ELKA subtests for Project EXEL treatment children and the control children. Data analysis was conducted only on children with complete fall and spring data sets. A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed to determine the project effect on 10 dependent variables, eight ELKA subtests scores given at both pre- and posttests and ELKA total scores, and the standard score of the EOWPVT, using pretest scores as the covariates. The assumption of homogeneity of slopes was supported for all dependent variables. Significant differences were found between the treatment and control groups on the dependent measures, Wilkes' lambda = .80, $F(9,248) = 6.79$, $p < .000$. Analyses of covariances (ANCOVA) on each dependent variable were conducted as follow-up tests to the MANCOVA. Using the Bonferroni method, each ANCOVA was tested at the .005 level. ANCOVAs were significant for the following tests scores: standard score of the EOWPVT $F(1, 256) = 17.73$, $p < .000$; rhyming words, $F(1, 256) = 13.29$, $p < .000$; lower case letters, $F(1, 256) = 10.07$, $p = .002$; isolating beginning phonemes, $F(1, 256) = 31.35$, $p < .000$; concepts about print, $F(1, 256) = 12.14$, $p = .001$; and the total ELKA, $F(1, 256) =$

18.76, $p < .000$. The treatment group produced significantly superior performance on these tests.

Table 1. Mean Posttest Scores (and Standard Deviations) of Treatment and Control Children on EOWPVT and ELKA Assessments

Group		Mean	Std. Deviation	N
EOWPVT	Treatment	95.1858	15.37600	128
	Control		11.87022	140
		86.3929		
upper case recognition	treat		4.93361	128
	cont	22.8828	7.95665	140
		20.6500		
rhyme	treat		3.42049	128
	cont	4.6797	2.97347	140
		3.0857		
lower case recognition	treat		5.70803	128
	cont	20.6797	7.92582	140
		17.6929		
segment begin phoneme	treat		3.76366	128
	cont	7.2656	4.31362	140
		4.1357		
concept/print	treat		3.90323	128
	cont	10.1797	3.14481	140
		8.2286		
write abc	treat		3.96726	128
	cont	11.9063	4.87380	140
		10.9071		
blend word syllable sound	treat		3.00115	128
	cont	4.7188	2.91132	140
		3.7786		
letter sound	treat		3.73968	128
	cont	6.8047	3.82315	140
		5.1286		
segment end phoneme	treat		3.82323	130
	cont	3.1615	2.79790	143
		1.5315		
invented spelling	treat		7.00193	130
	cont	10.8923	6.90705	143
		9.2448		

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine project effects on four additional dependent variables that were only administered in the spring, three additional ELKA subtests scores (i.e., isolated ending phoneme, matching letter-sounds, and invented spelling), and ELKA total spring scores (i.e.,

sum of all ELKA subtest scores). Significant differences were found among groups on the dependent measures, Wilkes' lambda = .92, $F(4, 268) = 5.67$, $p < .000$. Analyses of variances (ANOVAs) on each dependent variable were conducted as follow-up tests to the MANOVA. Using the Bonferroni method, each ANOVA was tested at the .01 level. ANOVAs were significant for: isolated ending phoneme, $F(1, 271) = 16.36$, $p < .000$. The treatment group produced significantly superior performance on this test in comparison with the control group.

Analysis of the Percentage of Children Reaching Age Appropriate Developmental Ranges

The EOWPVT and five subtests of the ELKA were used as monitoring assessments in order to determine children's progress in reaching age appropriate development ranges in vocabulary development, alphabet recognition (the upper and lower alphabet recognition assessments were combined), concepts about print, phonemic awareness, and letter-sound knowledge. Table 2 presents the percentage of children whose scores at posttest were within the ranges of age appropriate developmental levels in the project (treatment) classrooms and in the control classrooms. This table shows that a higher percentage of project children would be entering kindergarten having already reached challenging age-appropriate ranges of achievement for all areas of language and literacy development. For both treatment and control groups a high percentage of children (91% and 83%) reached expected age ranges in alphabet recognition and a low percentage of children (48% and 30%) reached expected levels on the concepts about print assessment. The difference between the percentage of children who reached expected levels of achievement was largest for segmenting beginning phonemes where 76% of project children reached age appropriate levels and only 43% of the control children did so.

Table 2. *Percentage of Children Who Scored within Age-Appropriate Developmental Ranges*

Measure	Treatment	Control
EOWPVT	74.0%	54.8%
Alphabet recognition	90.8%	82.9%
Concepts about print	48.1%	30.1%
Isolate beginning phoneme	76.3%	43.2%
Letter-sound association	65.6%	45.9%

These same assessments were used as progress monitoring in the treatment classrooms throughout the school year. They were administered by teachers in October, January, and March as well as by assessment personnel at pre- and post-test. At early pretesting most children in project classrooms scored at floor levels for both alphabet and phonemic awareness. For example, only 8% of the treatment children knew more than 20 upper case alphabet letters and 54% of the children knew fewer than three letters. Only 2% of the children could segment a single phoneme. As expected, most of the project children exhibited very little knowledge of the foundational concepts about literacy; thus, making it impossible to determine who might really be at risk. Because of the large number of children who had so little knowledge of the alphabet, we decided to monitor the number of children who were not making progress in learning upper case alphabet letters on a sliding scale. Our intent was to identify children who were not making progress in learning upper case alphabet letter names. In October 35% of the children had not yet learned 10 upper case alphabet letters, in January 23% of the children had not yet learned 15 upper case letters, and in March 14% of the children had not yet learned 20 of the upper case letters. However, by end of the year only 6 % of the children knew less than 20 upper case letters, and only 3% could identify fewer than 10 letters.

The results of monitoring were even more striking for phonemic awareness. At pretest 94% of the children could not segment the beginning phonemes of any words, in October that percentage was reduced to 68%, in January it reduced slightly to 52%, and in March was reduced to 34%. By the end of the project only 24% of the children had not reached the developmental range of expected progress; they segmented the beginning phonemes on fewer than five words.

Discussion

This study provides evidence of the effectiveness of this Early Reading First project in raising the level of performance for low SES children and closing the gap with middle class children. Project EXEL, using six key instructional activities as a guide for literacy instruction as well as providing targeted professional development, proved more powerful than control classrooms using commercial literacy curricula with fewer hours of professional development. Children in the project classrooms outperformed control children in alphabet recognition (lower case), phonemic awareness (rhyme, isolating beginning sounds, isolating ending sounds), concepts about print, and expressive vocabulary. The means of the project children on most ELKA assessments were similar to or higher than means found in middle class samples of research reviewed in this article as the mean number of upper case

alphabet letters that children recognized was 22 (even the control children recognized a mean of 20 upper case letters). Project children recognized a mean of 20 lower case letters and even control children recognized a mean of nearly 18 letters. Previous research with a large sample of children (Trieman et al., 1998) showed they knew 13 or more upper case letters and 10 or more lower case letters. Therefore, both project and control classrooms were very successful in helping children learn to recognize alphabet letters. However, project classrooms were more successful in teaching a wider range of literacy skills than the control classrooms. Project EXEL teachers were able to raise children's standard scores on the One Word Expressive Picture Vocabulary Test by 2/3 of a standard deviation. The mean number of concepts about print (10.2) was approximately 65% of the items, higher than found in previous research with other at risk children (Justice & Ezell, 2002). Project EXEL teachers provided children with opportunities to learn a range of phonemic awareness skills including isolating beginning and ending phonemes and identifying rhyme. In contrast to the study by Lonigan and his colleagues (1998) who found that 66% of a sample of middle class children could not identify which picture of three did not have the same beginning sound, our study found a stronger effect: only 24% could not segment beginning phonemes at expected levels.

The second purpose of the study was to set ranges of expected achievement in language and literacy and to determine if the project classrooms were more successful in helping children reach these levels. We examined previous research and used the range of mean performances in these studies to establish our developmental ranges. Unknown to us at the time, Invernizzi, Sullivan, Meier, and Swank (2004) were also establishing developmental ranges on scores for their assessment, the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening test for PreK (PALS, PreK). They also piloted changes in a Beginning Sound assessment, which was like our Isolating Beginning Phoneme assessment. The method they used to establish developmental ranges was to examine the range of preschool scores for children who later were successful in kindergarten and first grade. While the PALS PreK tasks are not identical to our ELKA assessment, they are very similar. Table 3 compares the developmental ranges we used in this study compared to the developmental ranges established for PALS PreK. This table shows that for every assessment, the ranges in both assessments are similar and overlapping. These similarities provide strong evidence of growing consensus about what the important outcomes in language and literacy ought to be at the end of preschool.

Table 3. *ELKA Developmental Ranges Compared to PALS PreK Developmental Ranges*

Measure	ELKA	PALS PreK
Alphabet recognition		
Upper Case	26-39/52	12-21/26
Lower Case		9-17/26
Concepts about print*	10-11/16	7-9/10
Isolate beginning phoneme**	5-7/10	5-8/10
Letter-sounds	6-8/10	4-8/10

*PALS PreK calls this task Print and Word Awareness

**PALS PreK calls this task Beginning Sound

The results of this study also demonstrate that fewer children were considered to be at risk at the end of the year in ERF classrooms than in the control classrooms. Considering that 92% of the treatment classrooms' children were considered at risk at the beginning of their preschool year due to low SES, it is remarkable that many ended the year having made successful progress toward expected goals. More than 90% of the children knew an appropriate number of alphabet letters (50% or more); in fact 50% of the project children knew 40 or more alphabet letters. More than 75% of the project children could segment beginning phonemes on five or more words, and more than 65% could associate five or more letters with sounds. It is noted that all of the benchmarks established for this study were ambitious and required children to reach levels of achievement usually not expected in intervention projects for at-risk children.

One area proved to be particularly difficult for most children to reach: concepts about print. In the treatment classrooms only 48% reached benchmark ranges and in the control classrooms only 30% of the children reached those ranges. More investigation of the nature of concepts about print that could be considered age-appropriate is warranted. The project set ambitious benchmark ranges compared to those found in previous research, and lower ranges may be more appropriate.

Although this study intended to identify benchmarks that would help identify children at risk throughout the project, the monitoring assessments in August, October, and January provided little if any guidance in identifying which children were not making adequate progress toward developmental benchmarks. In August,

nearly all the children's results suggested they were at risk, and even by October, while fewer children seemed to be at risk, depending on the task, 30-60% of the children scored at risk. It was not until March, when much of the school year was complete, that teachers began to see clear patterns of the fewer number of children who truly seemed not to be making progress emerge. While early and frequent monitoring is often suggested, we argue that without clear evidence that this is needed, teachers' time early on might well be spent teaching. This is especially the case when our results demonstrate that large percentages of children entered kindergarten with the promise of success.

There are several limitations to this study. The control and treatment children were not randomly selected; although they shared many common characteristics, it could be that the treatment classroom teachers were more skillful in the craft of teaching as they were selected to join the project. The treatment teachers received more hours of professional development than the control teachers and were assisted by a reading coach. Thus, it is not possible to isolate the factors which made Project EXEL's results superior to the control classrooms. Finally, the children were not followed into kindergarten. It is not possible to determine whether the children who had reached age-appropriated ranges performed as expected in kindergarten, and whether children who had not reached those levels experienced difficulties.

Nonetheless, the results of this study suggest it is possible to close the gap between middle class and lower SES children at kindergarten entry. Many more children in Project EXEL headed to kindergarten with high levels of literacy knowledge reflective of the mean levels of performance of middle class children than control children who also attended preschools intended to serve at-risk populations. More research is needed to demonstrate whether this gap continues to shrink through effective kindergarten instruction that capitalizes on the promise of success that a high percentage of children bring at school entry.



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What Fifth-Grade Students Reveal About Their Literacies by Writing and Telling Narratives

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Abstract

Written and oral literacy narratives produced by seven fifth-grade students are examined to identify the literacy identities students construct when narrating their past and present experiences with reading and writing. The narrative analyses reveal four major findings:

1. The students who contributed to this study have experienced literacy in multiple modes and contexts indicative of relatively broad conceptions of what counts as literacy.

2. They primarily describe literacy experiences in positive or neutral terms; when literacy events are evaluated negatively, it is usually in response to literacy demands that diminished students' feelings of autonomy.

3. Students in this study intuitively understand that literacy is a set of social practices that take place in interactions among multiple actors.

4. Students sometimes portray themselves as having power to control the direction of literacy events; other times, their agency is limited by authoritative actors who are portrayed as enforcers of reading rules rather than as collaborative supporters. These findings are relevant for instructional practice because they present personal narrative writing as a way of infusing student voices into the discourse of the classroom in hopes of creating a more culturally relevant instructional space.

At Granny's table, spread thick with food, this is where your story begins. You are sitting with an open spiral notebook in front

of you, a pencil curled tightly in your fingers. Uncle Joe took you to the store that day in the back of his truck. Your brothers asked for candy bars and sodas; and so did you, at first. But then you saw the stack of notebooks, sitting on the shelf two aisles over beneath rows of Funyuns and hot fries and barbecue pork rinds. You held your breath. There was a reason for those notebooks. They were covered with a thin layer of dust, into which you instinctively inscribed your name with your index finger. Then you blew and watched your name soak into the air around you. And you knew that all the Zero bars and Gatorades in the world would not satisfy you the way that notebook would. So you marched up to the counter and watched Joe's expression as he paid seventy-five cents for the raggedy orange spiral notebook that would change your life forever.

So you are sitting with the spiral notebook in front of you. While everyone else around you eats, you stare at the dingy white pages, then at the point of your pencil which you found under Granny's bed and sharpened with a kitchen knife. If you don't eat now, don't complain later about being hungry, Ma tells you. You hear her, but you continue to be mesmerized by the blankness of the paper in front of you.

The preceding excerpt is from an autobiographical piece I wrote several years ago to share with my fifth-grade students. I included this here as a reminder of Soliday's (1994) assertion that life stories are "dialogical account[s] of one's experience rather than a chronological report of verifiable events" (p. 514). In narrativizing this event from my childhood, I went to great lengths to position myself as a certain kind of person (i.e., an eager writer). This narrative is not a verbatim reconstruction of the past. Yes, I enjoyed writing as a kid; and yes, my uncle once bought me a notebook; but the magnitude of the event is obviously overstated. My narrativized version of this event is a carefully plotted construction of how my adult self wants my child self to be portrayed.

In the analysis that follows, student literacy narratives will be treated as storied retellings in which students seek to construct a particular reading/writing identity (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). These narratives speak volumes about the way students position

themselves in the context of school and out-of-school literacy events.

Purpose and Research Questions

A long tradition of sociolinguistic and sociocultural research has documented the differences between students' community uses of language and literacy and those that are typically sanctioned in school settings. For example, Heath (1983) compared the language practices of an African American community with those of a mainstream white community and found differences in parent-child interactions between the two. More recently, Mahiri and Sablo (1996) documented the complex and meaningful out-of-school literacy practices of two African American teenagers who appeared to be disengaged from school literacy practices. These studies are but a few of the many providing evidence for the existence of multiple, locally enacted literacies (Street, 1993).

Proponents of culturally responsive and culturally relevant pedagogy have stressed the importance of validating and legitimating these diverse literacy traditions (Au, 2001; Au & Raphael, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition, researchers have documented powerful teaching practices that allow students to merge home and school discourse practices (Ball, 1996; Lee, 2000). Nonetheless, for teachers to legitimize these multiple perspectives and create hybrid language/literacy spaces, they must first find a way to deepen their understanding of their students' literacy histories (Willis, 2002). For this to happen, two parallel processes are necessary. First, research must continue to focus on the situated literacy practices of diverse students as this research will add to our collective knowledge of the experiences students bring with them to their reading and writing classes. Second, teachers need to be armed with tools that allow them to make public their students' literacy histories so these histories can be examined as part of the curriculum.

This study seeks to address both of these processes. In my analysis, I use written and oral literacy narratives produced by fifth-grade students to examine what kinds of literacy identities these students construct when narrating their past and present experiences with reading and writing. In this study, narratives are used as interpretive tools (Wertsch, 1998) that shed light on a student's stance toward literacy even when he or she isn't aware of a particular stance. This study was guided by the belief that literacy narratives reveal how students position themselves in relationship to literacy events and other actors in those events. Two research questions guide this analysis:

1. What types of literacy events do the students choose to narrate?
2. How do the students position themselves and others within these narratives?

Method

This study was conducted as I worked with a first-year teacher and her fifth-grade students. The teacher, Ms. Price, is a white female teacher at Success Academy, a middle school campus serving a predominantly African American population (names of all individuals and schools are pseudonyms). The campus is located in an urban center in a mid-size city in the southeastern United States. The majority of students at Success Academy qualify for free or reduced lunch, which is commonly used as a socioeconomic indicator for schools. I worked with Ms. Price to help her develop instructional plans as she implemented reader's and writer's workshops with her students.

Data Sources

Data for the current research are drawn from two sources collected toward the end of the school year.

Written Literacy Narratives

Narrative writing played a large role in Ms. Price's class throughout the school year, in part because of the state requirement that all fifth-grade students take a standardized writing test that focuses on narrative writing, and in part because Ms. Price and I both value the potential of narrative as a site for self-examination (McVee, 2004). For one class assignment, Ms. Price asked her students to write stories about their early memories of reading and writing. The literacy narrative assignment was designed to allow students a chance to reflect on their literacy learning and to share examples of how reading and writing have influenced their lives. Students spent two instructional periods working on drafting two different literacy narratives.

Literacy narratives written by seven students were collected. These students were purposively sampled (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993) to represent a range of ability levels. Based on Ms. Price's recommendations and my own observations of the students during class activities, two high-achieving, two average-achieving, and three lower-achieving students were selected. All the participating students self-identified as African American.

Oral Literacy Narratives

Each student participated in a 15-minute audiotaped interview during which they were asked to reread or retell their written literacy narratives, and then asked to explain why they chose those particular memories for the assignment. Students were also asked to narrate additional memories of reading and writing, and in particular, their memories of learning to read and write. The stories that emerged in these interviews were transcribed and combined with the written narratives to comprise the data set for each participant.

Data Analysis

Each student's data was separated into discrete narrative units. A discrete narrative was defined as a sequence of temporally arranged clauses that recount past events (Labov, 1972). Each discrete narrative was treated as a single literacy event, which Heath (1988) describes as an event in which comprehension of text plays a central role.

The narratives were analyzed using a framework that took into account three characteristics of narrative structure: setting, activity, and actors. These characteristics were derived from previous work on narrative structure (Bruner, 1991; McCabe & Bliss, 2003; McVee, 2004). To translate this narrative framework into a coding scheme, open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to develop a set of inductive categories. Once these categories were developed and I was able to verify that no additional codes were needed to capture the richness of the data, this grounded coding scheme was applied to the full data set. Qualitative analysis software along with manual coding methods were used to complete the analysis. The coding categories are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of Coding Categories

Code	Description
Setting	
School setting	Narratives that took place in school
Out-of-school setting	Narratives that took place outside of school
Activity	
Alphabet reading	Saying the alphabet, reading letters one at a time when presented by a teacher, matching letters with sounds, etc.

Book reading	Reading fiction books such as novels, picture books, etc.
Word reading	Sounding out words and practicing sight words
Environmental print reading	Reading nonbook print, such as road signs, candy bar wrappers, etc.
Nonfiction reading	Reading informational and expository texts such as newspapers, internet sites, magazines, science books, etc.
Mechanics of writing	Learning to use correct punctuation, spelling practice drills, etc.
Handwriting	Learning how to form letters in print and cursive
Nonfiction writing	Writing expository, informational, and other nonnarrative texts
Word writing	Single word writing
Message writing	Communicative writing such as writing notes to someone else
Name writing	Practicing writing one's name
Story writing	Writing narratives/stories
Note taking	Writing margin notes and highlighting or revising a written text
Text sharing	Discussing a text they were reading/writing or sharing written work with others
Storytelling	Listening to and telling oral stories
Book selection	Choosing and acquiring a text
Hands-on	Participating in hands-on activities related to books
Symbolic destruction	Purposely destroying a book (tearing out pages, etc.)

Evaluation

Positive	The student receives satisfaction from the literacy activity; he or she places value on the event
Neutral	The student does not evaluate the event in the narrative

Negative	The student is frustrated or dissatisfied by the activity
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Actors	
Guardian	Parents and grandparents playing an active role in the narrative
Teacher	Teachers and principals
Sibling/cousin	Brothers, sisters, and cousins who are close in age to the student
Peer	Other students in the school environment
Self only	No other actors appear in the story
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Actor roles	
Criticizing	The actor makes fun of the student or gives harsh feedback
Controlling	The actor controls the literacy event by deciding what will be learned or produced
Instructing	The actor gives information through direct instruction
Supporting	The actor supports or assists the student; for example, helping a student spell or read a word
Praising	The actor provides positive feedback to the student
Collaborating	The actor and student work jointly on a literacy activity; both actor and student have the same goal
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Findings

The findings are organized under two subject headings based on the original narrative framework that steered the analyses. In the first section, I examine the activity of these events, describe the different literacy-related activities the students chose to narrate, and relate these activities to the students' implied evaluations of literacy as evidenced in their stories. These activity-evaluation relationships provide a glimpse of students' affective interpretations of different literacy events they have experienced. In the second section, I focus on the actors that the students include in their narratives and the roles assigned to these actors based on the students' reconstructions of the literacy activities. These actor-role relationships provide a

snapshot of how much agency students give themselves (or perceive to have been given) in their narrated literacy histories.

Literacy Activities

What Types of Literacy Activities did the Students Choose to Narrate?

The seven students chosen for this analysis told a wide variety of literacy narratives. Approximately half of the narrative events occurred in school, and the other half occurred in out-of-school contexts. Table 2 summarizes the activities that students included in their events. These activities were grouped in three broad categories (reading activities, writing activities, and other activities).

Table 2. Overview of the types of literacy activities the students narrated and how they evaluated the activities

	Total # Occurrences	Student's Evaluation of the Event		
<i>Reading Activities</i>		<i>Negative</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Positive</i>
Alphabet reading	3	1	1	1
Book reading	21	6	7	8
Word reading	4	1	3	0
Environmental print reading	4	0	2	2
Nonfiction reading	4	0	2	2
<i>Writing Activities</i>				
Mechanics of writing	5	1	4	0
Handwriting	5	0	5	0
Nonfiction writing	1	0	0	1
Writing words	2	1	1	0
Message writing	2	2	0	0
Name writing	2	0	2	0
Story writing	12	1	6	5
Note taking	1	0	0	1
<i>Dialogic and Nonprint Activities</i>				
Text sharing	2	0	0	2
Storytelling	1	0	0	1
Book selection	2	0	1	1
Hands-on activities	2	0	1	1
Symbolic destruction	5	5	0	0

The range of activities chosen by the students is revealing of their perceptions of what counts as a reading and writing activity. Most of the events they recalled were related to reading and writing letters, words, books, and other typographic sources. For example, Antwon describes a book reading event with his kindergarten teacher:

Antwon: The first book that I read was Dr. Seuss, *Green Eggs and Ham*. I read it with Ms. Ling.

Researcher: This was in what grade?

Antwon: I think it was kindergarten.

Researcher: What'd you think about the book?

Antwon: It was good, and after we got through reading the book, we had green eggs and ham... That was when I was still in Ms. Ling's room. We sat on the carpet. We all read, and we had this little table where we get to sit down at, some of us. And soon as we got through with the book everyone was excited because they seen green eggs and ham. And we cooked it straight in our room because she had a stove thing... and she had a little pot thing and she plugged it into the wall. And everybody got a whole bunch of food.

In addition to these school literacy events, students also narrated events that took place outside of school. For example, Shanika describes an event with her grandmother that shows her family's keen ability to make connections between traditional school learning and activities in the home:

Shanika: When I was younger, I was taking a Spanish class and when I came home my grandma would always have these letters made from pretzels.... She had pretzel letters and she had one in the English alphabetical order and she would have one, the Spanish one. She would mix them all up and then point to which one and say, "Which letter is this?"

Researcher: How did she make the pretzels?

Shanika: I showed her my book about Addy, a slavegirl that ran away to an other place. Her mom was teaching her letters in pretzels, so I showed my grandma that and she was learning how to make pretzels from my cookbook from school.

A similar example is taken from a story Dezmond wrote about a literacy interaction he had with his sister.

When I was little I was 2 my sister and I will ride our bikes or when we were riding in the car. Every word we will see we will ... take our seat belts off and go to a window and we get to a stop sign and she will be like "stope." I will

be like “chop.” Every time we stop we would see a sign and we would look at each other and try to shout it out and go to another window.

In this narrative, Dezmond recounts a literacy event that involved reading environmental print while riding in the car. This out-of-school activity serves as an example of the diverse literacies practiced by the students in this study. The reading and writing events described here illustrate that the participating students view reading and writing as social practices that can take many forms and occur in many different contexts.

How do Students Evaluate their Experiences with Reading and Writing Activities?

In addition to showing the different reading activities included in the students’ narratives, Table 2 also shows how the students evaluated their experiences in those activities. Evaluation is a narrative element that describes the way a narrator feels toward the events in a story (Labov & Waletzky, 1967, as cited in McVee, 2004). Positively evaluated events are those in which the student expresses enjoyment or satisfaction with the literacy activity being narrated; in these events, the student values the activity as something worthwhile, useful, and culturally congruent. In negative events, students express their frustration or dissatisfaction with the literacy activity in question. In a neutral event, the student doesn’t make any particular claims—implicit or explicit—about their evaluations of the activity.

The majority of the literacy activities were positively or neutrally evaluated. For example, Dwayne expresses his positive evaluation of book reading in his written narrative of an experience he had in second grade:

“OK class! It’s time for free time! I’m so excited. You can do anything you want!” my teacher, Ms. Griffith, exclaimed. It was time to have fun. I was reading, but I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I saw my teacher reading a book and I wanted to do it too. I ran to the bookshelf and tried to find a big book. I found one and snatched it off the shelf. I ran to Ms. Griffith and asked her to help me read.

“Why you little genius!” she screamed.

“Hey everybody, Dwayne is asking Ms. Griffith to read him a book. Dwayne is a teachers’ pet!” a boy yelled out from across the room. My heart dropped in sorrow and I didn’t know if I wanted to read anymore. I told Ms. Griffith that I didn’t want to read the book anymore and I started to cry. I heard billows of laughter behind me and I began to cry harder. They sounded like yapping hyenas.

“Stop!! Everyone who just laughed go sit at your desk and you will not go to [P.E.] for the rest of this week and all of next week.” Ms. Griffith hollered. Over half of the children in the room went back to their seats and poked out their lips. A boy named Jayden Barnes came over and asked if he could read with me. She said he could and she began to read. She taught us how to pronounce big words and made us sound out others. When we were able to read the words and understand them, Jayden and I read to each other. We read the rest of the book and told each other what we liked and disliked about the book. We ran to Ms. Griffith and howled “Give us some more books!!!”

Although Dwayne’s narrative chronicles a situation in which his interest in reading was negatively evaluated by his classmates, his evaluation of the literacy activity (book reading) is positive.

An extreme example of a negatively evaluated literacy event is labeled in Table 2 as “symbolic destruction.” In these events, students describe how they became frustrated and angry while being forced to read and consequently destroyed their books by tearing out pages and ripping apart the covers. For example, Kimora recounts the following episode in her written narrative:

... one day I saw this book I didn’t like so I got frustrated and took the teachers broom and I acted like I had a pogo stick except for I had to run and jump just to move so I had launched myself into the air and came down on the book. “Crack” the book went, and everyone became silent I mean dead silence. The book tore into pieces. I tried to hide it but of course I couldn’t because the teacher heard every move you made...

If viewed from a deficit perspective (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), these narratives might indicate violent or antisocial behavior. However, a close analysis of these events across participants reveals that these narratives are meant to be symbolic. The students likely constructed these events to show their negative evaluations of literacy events in which they felt disempowered by authoritative actors. When asked about these events, students acknowledged that they were not true and that they told these stories out of frustration.

Other literacy activities were negatively evaluated as well. For example, Denise’s written narrative describes her dissatisfaction with a story writing activity in Ms. Price’s class:

“Alright,” Ms. Price said. “Start writing.” I didn’t know what to do. She had given us the stupid prompt that said, “Describe a time you were

incredibly happy.” I was so confused, because I had no times when I was incredibly happy. I could write about the time I went to Six Flags but I had wrote that story about 15 times.

I quickly tried to think up something, and finally something came in mind. I wrote about the time when I was in summer camp and started to sing some kind of song that just popped in my head and it got me all excited and happy.

When I was finished with my story I called Ms. Price my teacher, over to come look at it. Turns out she wasn’t really feeling it. “It’s not that strong. Start over.” I couldn’t believe she said that my heart was just torn in little pieces and stomped on by a huge elephant foot. I was as mad [as] a pit bull getting ready to bite somebody because they touched her babies.

Ten minutes had passed. I still couldn’t think of anything to write, and I was still furious with Ms. Price for making me start over.

Finally I just gave up. I didn’t bear to try to think of any thing to write. Then it was time to share I didn’t raise my hand because my story sucked. So for the rest of the day I was angry.

Taken together, the narratives created by the participants in this study show that most of the experiences they have had with literacy have been largely positive or neutral. All of the students constructed at least one positive and one negative narrative. In general, when the students in this study presented negative experiences with literacy, these events contained authoritative actors (teachers and parents) who inappropriately applied demands for performance without considering students’ personal patterns of interest and engagement. The role of these and other actors in the students’ literacy narratives will be addressed in the next section.

Actors

This portion of the analysis draws heavily on Davies and Harré’s (1990) notion of positioning. As described by Alvermann (2001), “young people are often positioned as individuals without agency and autonomy, particularly in instances where adults perceive them as being irresponsible and lacking in good judgment” (p. 678). To investigate how students position themselves and others in their narrative reconstructions of their real-life literacy experiences, the actors that students included in their narratives were identified and the roles the students assigned to these actors were examined. Table 3 provides an overview of the frequency of occurrences of various actors and their roles.

Table 3. Overview of Actors and Roles in Students' Literacy Narratives

	Total	Actor Roles (->decreasing student agency->)					
		Collaborate	Praise	Support	Instruct	Control	Criticize
Peer	6	2	2	0	0	0	2
Sibling/cousin	10	2	0	3	0	2	3
Teacher	26	1	8	7	2	5	3
Guardian	19	1	0	10	0	8	0
Self only	8	–	–	–	–	–	–

What Actors do Students Include in their Narratives?

The student participants narrated reading and writing events that involved their peers, siblings and cousins, teachers, and guardians (parents and grandparents). As Table 3 shows, the majority of narratives included teachers and guardians. For example, Antwon describes an event with his teacher:

And I remember my other teacher, Ms. Gray. She's the one that taught me how to write like in cursive and how to know all the letters. And we had a test on it to give all the letters and we had to write them all in cursive.

Dominic presents an oral narrative in which his mother plays a prominent role:

Dominic: I had learned some writing from my mom because like she used to be a writer – sometimes she would make me books.

Researcher: So she used to be a writer, tell me about that.

Dominic: Like she used to write books. In my family she would write books for people like my cousins.

Researcher: That's cool, what kinds of books did she write?

Dominic: She would write entertaining and a lot of stories about Martin Luther King ... She would give them to people in my family that was going to start learning how to read or she would give it to other people just to read. And like a lot of times I think I get my talent from her because it just comes to me like the story it just comes to me.

Researcher: You started to say that you learned about writing from your mom. What are some things you learned from her?

Dominic: How to get good adjectives, how to get good words, how to get good nouns and adjectives and verbs; and like sometimes she still helps me write on my stories and my homework ... She tells me just let the story come to me, but then I keep on telling her that it doesn't happen, but then one good story came to me and I just started writing...

Although less common, there were several narratives in which peers and siblings played an important role. Dezmond's sister, for example, appeared in almost all of his narratives. She even makes an appearance in a classroom literacy event, as described in the following excerpt from his oral narrative.

Researcher: Okay, so tell me about this Dr. Seuss book you were reading.

Dezmond: It was the book with the ham.

Researcher: *Green Eggs and Ham*?

Dezmond: [nods yes]... I read it with my sister. At school.

Researcher: Were you and your sister in the same class or something?

Dezmond: We were next door to each other and every time I didn't know a word we could get up and go to one of our family members and ask them for a word.

How do Students Position Themselves in Relation to these Actors?

To address this question, the types of roles students constructed for the other actors in their stories were analyzed. The majority of the actors in the participants' narratives were supportive of student agency. For instance, Dwayne orally describes his mother's attempts to scaffold his early reading experiences when he was four years old:

I remember the first book that I read. It was *Go Dog Go*.... I got it at a thrift store, and my mama bought it, and I said I wanted the book, and she started ... teaching me how to read because I didn't understand it. It was a little book, and I kept reading the words over again and I got better. And then one day I forgot what my mama had taught me, but I remembered every word on every single page so when she was reading it to me she told me to read, and I just looked at the picture and I knew what was going on.

In other cases, the students positioned other actors as controlling or criticizing. In particular, guardians were routinely positioned as controlling. In Kimora's written narrative, she presents the following scene:

Another time I learned how to read was in a car. Well it all happened when we were going to North Carolina, My mom gave me a book. I hated it. I hated it more than I hate broccoli without cheese. I hated it so much that when my mom turned her head I would stop reading, and when she turned it back I would stick my head right back in the book. Ten minutes later I would say I am finished. But she didn't fall for it.

In this example, she portrays her mother as an enforcer of reading rules rather than as a collaborator or supporter in the reading event. This type of portrayal was also

applied to teachers, as in Denise's narrative about her third-grade experiences with writing.

Every time I would come in she [my teacher] would have like a prompt on the board and it would say something like – you would have to write a story in your notebook – and it would probably say “Write an imaginary story about you saw somebody in the jungle” or something like that. And I would always write these funny stories and make everybody laugh. This was in 3rd grade.

Although Denise does not evaluate this experience as a negative one (in fact, she seems to enjoy writing these stories), she positions her teacher as the person who decides what gets written in class. At times, students also positioned other students as criticizers and controllers. For example, in several of his narratives, Dezmond portrays his sister's tendency to enact a teacher identity. He states:

If I try to spell *talking* right, I spell it *t-a-l-i-n-g-e*, with an *e* at the end... She'd [sister] say, “You spelled talking wrong, you don't supposed to put the *e* right there.” And I'll say, “I didn't know.” And then if I spell *read* wrong, because I used to spell it *r-a-e-d-y*, read, she would say, “You spelled it incorrectly.” And she would spell it like she's my teacher.

Overall, the analyses indicate that students see themselves occupying a variety of subject positions in literacy activities. In some events, they are more agentive and thus have power to control the direction of the activity. In other cases, their agency is limited by authoritative adults or critical peers and siblings.

Discussion and Implications

These analyses reveal four important points that are theoretically relevant because they add to our knowledge base of how upper elementary students think about and participate in literacy activities both in and out-of-school.

Experiencing Literacy in Multiple Modes and Contexts

First, the students who contributed to this study are not limited in their perceptions of literacy activities as they experience literacy in multiple modes and contexts. With the exception of one student, everyone recounted at least one out-of-school literacy event. This is notable because the students were not explicitly prompted to describe literacy practices in non-school settings.

The range of activities chosen by the students is revealing of their perceptions of what counts as a reading and writing activity. Most of the events they recalled were related to reading and writing letters, words, books, and other typographic

sources; but they also recounted dialogic and non-print events such as storytelling, sharing books with others, and hands-on activities. This suggests that the students recognize the multiple functions and forms of literacy practice in different settings.

However, they did not describe any events that might involve “new literacies” required for engaging with information/communication technologies (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004) such as text messaging, reading and searching on the Internet, or communicating via email; nor did they describe other practices documented in studies of urban adolescent literacy like videogaming, blogging, or reading and writing music lyrics (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008). Thus, while their conceptions of literacy are relatively broad, there is still room for their conceptions of reading and writing practices to expand. It is possible that these students have not begun thinking of these newer and more community-based communication practices as aspects of their literacy identities. It is also possible that the nature of the assignment led them to assume that the teacher and researcher who provided the instructions were interested in hearing about traditional reading and writing activities that have historically had ties to school rather than newly emerging practices that have just began making their way inside classroom walls. This is an important limitation to keep in mind in future studies that examine students’ reconstructions of literacy identities.

Experiencing Positive Interactions with Literacy

Second, more often than not, these students describe literacy in a positive or neutral light. This is an important point that should not be underemphasized – most of the narratives portray experiences with literacy that are voluntary, enjoyable, and rewarding for the student protagonists. Another important point worth noting is that while some negative events were described, no student in this sample negatively evaluated all the events she or he chose to recount. Instead, negative evaluations were limited to specific events. This suggests that students’ evaluations of literacy activities are situated, contextualized judgments.

Furthermore, these analyses suggest a strong link between student autonomy and how a literacy event is evaluated. When negative evaluations of literacy events were implied in the narratives, they were usually in response to literacy demands that diminished a student’s feelings of autonomy; for instance, when a teacher or other authority figure imposed a specific book or activity or provided feedback that the student perceived as overly critical. In short, when students negatively evaluated a literacy activity, they were expressing their feelings about a particular enactment of literacy that was not in line with what they expected or desired in that particular context.

Experiencing Literacy as a Social Practice

Third, these narratives suggest that the participating students tend to view literacy as a social—not individual—practice. Few individual literacy events were recounted even though students were given freedom to describe whatever literacy experiences came to mind. Clearly, the image of a solitary reader sitting with a book or pencil is not the typical representation of literacy for these students. In contrast, most of the narratives portray literacy as a set of practices shared among multiple actors. Memories of reading and writing are intertwined with memories of car trips, forming new friendships, afterschool snacks with grandparents, getting upset with teachers and parents, and learning to take on increased expertise in school and at home. This view is consistent with conceptions of literacy derived from sociocultural and social practice theories of literacy (Bloome & Katz, 1997). Ironically, while it took the field of literacy research several decades to begin a transition from individualistic, cognitive explanations of the reading process to social explanations, many of the social aspects of literacy have been readily intuited by young adolescents through just a few short years of lived experiences with reading and writing.

Experiencing Literacy with a Variety of Actors Who Help Determine Students' Feelings of Agency

Finally, not all social enactments of literacy are equivalent in the way students perceive their own agency in relation to the other actors in the events. Students think of literacy events as encompassing a variety of actors who play a range of roles. The most common actors in these narratives were teachers and guardians, although peers and siblings made appearances as well. In some events, students portray themselves as having power to control the direction of the activity. In other events, their agency is limited by authoritative others who are portrayed as enforcers of reading rules rather than as collaborative supporters.

The levels of student agency or autonomy made possible by the actors in these narratives can be aligned along a continuum, as shown in Table 3. The actor roles on the left side of the table are generally supportive of student agency, while those on the right-hand side are actor roles described in events in which students portrayed themselves with minimal agency. This continuum is a useful heuristic for teachers, parents, and other individuals who routinely engage in literacy events with children as they can use this continuum to examine their own interactions during literacy events and the way they position children through their relative emphasis on collaboration, praise, support, instruction, control, and criticism.

Conclusion: Literacy Narratives as a Pedagogical Tool

The findings of this study of fifth-grade students' narratives about their experiences with reading and writing are relevant for instructional practice because they present personal narrative writing as a way of infusing student voices into the discourse of the classroom (Delgado, 1990) in hopes of creating a more culturally relevant instructional space (Au, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This study also provides a model methodology that classroom teachers can use to broaden their understanding of their students' past experiences with literacy. As suggested by others (Jiménez, Smith, & Teague, 2009), when teachers have an in-depth understanding of the local enactments of literacy experienced by their students, they are better positioned to legitimize the literacy practices of culturally and linguistically diverse communities. If narrativized experiences can reveal so much about how students perceive literacy, then teachers can use these narratives to uncover and find ways to engage pedagogically with the literacies their students bring with them to the classroom.



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Looking Ahead With Hope: Reviving the Reading Maturity Construct as Social Science for Adolescent and Adult Readers

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Abstract

“Reading maturity” is a construct that looks broadly at reading development encompassing not only basic reading skills but reading habits, attitudes, and dispositions. It has a rich history and this article calls for a need to make reading maturity a necessary part of the literacy curriculum. It offers a working description and reviews past history of the construct, discusses why reading maturity is important, and provides ideas about monitoring progress toward reading maturity. This article asserts that the reading field has developed a solid understanding of how students acquire basic reading skill and content area literacy abilities. However, a compelling and unified larger purpose for reading education seems absent, particularly for adolescent and adult readers. This article suggests that renewed attention to reading maturity could help address this. It contends that attention to reading maturity should involve more than general notions of becoming “well-read.” Instead, it should include a balanced social-science approach to intentionally and systematically monitoring student progress toward reading maturity. Suggestions are offered to help begin this process including free online access to a reading maturity assessment and planning instrument called *The Reading Maturity Survey* (Thomas, 2001).

Introduction

Although we may find ourselves in uncertain economic and geopolitical times, storm clouds can also provide a background of hope. In fact, we may actually be poised for a bright future. Education, particularly reading/literacy, may be in a similar situation. Several years ago, reading researcher Anthony Manzo (2003) suggested in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* the possibility that reading/literacy is not actually in a crisis as is popularly conceived, but may be about to enter a sort of literacy Cambrian Period, a rich transformative era in which life on earth blossomed. More recently, Vickie Jacobs (2008), in the lead article in an issue of the *Harvard Educational Review* dedicated to the topic of adolescent literacy, echoes this optimistic view, calling our upcoming adolescent literacy opportunities unprecedented (p. 13). Although we do still have many literacy challenges to confront, taking a step back to look at the larger picture points toward agreement with Manzo's and Jacobs' optimism. In order to get there, though, we need to give more attention to *Reading Maturity*, a literacy construct that looks broadly at reading development to include not only basic reading skills and abilities, but also reading habits, attitudes, and dispositions.

Six areas comprise the reading maturity construct that is outlined in this paper: reading attitudes and interests, reading purposes, reading ability, higher-order literacy, kinds of materials read, and personal adjustment to reading/transformational reading. Each of these will be more fully discussed as will an assessment tool for this construct, *The Reading Maturity Survey* (Thomas, 2001).

I became involved with this topic in 2001 when completing a study looking at quantitative relationships between five literacy-tethered variables: reading ability, higher-order literacy, proficient reader subtypes, reading maturity, and epistemological maturity (Thomas, 2001). After several years of subsequent reflection and research in a variety of other educational strands, as a professor of education and a literacy researcher, I have been compelled back to working with the idea of reading maturity, asserting that it is quite consequential to reading/literacy education, the educational enterprise in general and to society at large. This article addresses reading maturity through several questions: How might we describe it? Why is it important? What are we doing with it now? How could we start monitoring progress toward it? The purpose of this article is to bring attention to the reading maturity construct for those both concerned with and optimistic about the future of literacy education and the larger mission of education in general.

Background: Reading and Reasoning

A holistic definition of reading could be: the act of simultaneously reading the lines, reading between the lines, and reading beyond the lines (Gray, 1951; Manzo, 2003; Manzo & Manzo, 1993; Manzo, Manzo, & Estes, 2001). “Reading the lines” involves decoding the words to reconstruct the author’s basic message. “Reading between the lines” involves making inferences to reconstruct the author’s implied messages. “Reading beyond the lines” involves judging the significance of the author’s message and constructively applying it to other areas of knowledge and experience.

Social science research in reading and subsequent classroom instruction and assessment has tended to focus on the basic elements of decoding and comprehending. It has paid less attention to reading beyond the lines, or the text-tethered reasoning and decision-making that should naturally be part of meaningful reading experiences (c.f. Manzo & Manzo, 1993; Thomas, 2001). And, beyond this, reading research and instruction has paid relatively little attention to those additional items relating to life-long mature reading such as: reading attitudes and interests; reading purposes; reaction to and use of ideas found through reading; kind and quality of materials read; and transformational reading, or the ways reading might foster personal change and whole-person growth.

As a result, the reading field has developed scientifically-based understandings of the text-dependent reading process, especially for “beginning” and “intermediate” readers (cf. Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Carver, 2000; Chall, 1983). This accomplishment should not be trivialized in any way. The amount of high quality research on the fundamentals of learning how to read is impressive and important (i.e. research on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text-dependent comprehension). Basic reading skill is essential and it is no small task to help whole populations acquire it. It is primary to the mission of reading education, but it is not where we should stop when envisioning what it means to become optimally literate.

The Importance but Present Lack of a Unified Concept of Reading Maturity

It seems important to have a named and unified reading maturity construct toward which we could foster student development. This would provide us with some “so what?” synergy relative to reading instruction, like seeing the benefits of an engine fully firing compared to the separate parts laid out on the workbench. That is, we’ve done well understanding the basics of teaching children to read, but are

we wisely seeing the pieces meaningfully brought together, revealed by adolescents and adults growing into highly literate, life-long maturing readers? As Fisher (2004) has lamented, “At the secondary school level, teachers and administrators have focused on ensuring that students can read and that they understand what they read. Unfortunately, less attention has been focused on providing students time to read and ensuring that they do read” (p. 138).

Additionally, a unified reading maturity construct may provide a psychological boost by clarifying and advancing the deeper and perhaps hidden aspirations underlying our pursuits of literacy. Educators should be able to answer with conviction the questions “Why teach reading?” and “Why read?” The answers should be sensible and coherent but also elevated towards a level of reading maturity. “To do well in school” or “to get a good job” or “to strengthen the workforce,” while important, are not sufficiently inspiring for the long run. We need targets closer to our souls to do our best with them. Teaching students how to read is essential but should be a means for a more significant goal to which we attend with increased diligence and intention: continued progress toward reading maturity. .

Reading maturity is not a new concept to the field of literacy education. Over 50 years ago it was a keen interest of William S. Gray (Gray, 1951; Gray & Rogers, 1956), a most respected scholar in the reading field. It has also been of interest to Jeanne Chall (c.f. Chall, 1983) and Anthony Manzo (Manzo & Casale, 1981, 1983a, 1983b). “Reading maturity” has an entry in *The Literacy Dictionary* (Harris & Hodges, 1995), and a handful of other scholarship has addressed it in some manner (c.f. Casale, 1982; Henk, 1988; Manzo, Manzo, Barnhill, & Thomas, 2000; Maring, 1979; Maring & Shea, 1982; Maring & Warner, 1984, 1986; Smith, 1996; Smith & Sheehan, 1998; Stauffer, 1969; Thomas, 2001; Thompson, 1984). Some elements of the reading maturity construct are currently present in the literacy education field, even if perhaps somewhat fragmented. For example, several key principles are represented in Standard 5 of the International Reading Association’s (IRA) Literacy Standards (c.f. Armbruster & Osborn, 2002) and the IRA’s position statement on promoting adolescent growth (c.f. Jacobs, 2008, p. 13). The “five building blocks for teaching children to read” (c.f. Armbruster & Osborn, 2001) address some key elements of reading maturity, namely the vital role of reading comprehension and the sub-skills for acquiring it. And, of course, literature and language arts are deemed valuable, especially in elementary schools where we see wide-spread influence of Harvey Daniel’s (2002) “literature circles,” a steady stream of Scholastic Book Fairs, read-athons, and the promotion of children’s literature,

and in middle school and high school required communication arts classes.

And yet reading maturity has not been seen on the popular “What’s Hot” or even the “What’s Not” lists published annually by the IRA, by name or as an integrated construct (c.f. Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009, 2009-2010; Cassidy, Garrett, & Barrera, 2006; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010-2011). Nor is it a focus of reports like the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) or the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). It’s also not a focus in the standards for middle and high school literacy coaches (c.f. IRA, 2006). It is part of a relatively recent NEA report (Gioia, 2009), even though the report flatly states that *schooling* is not part of this trend or effort. Although “adolescent literacy” has been increasing in “hotness” in recent IRA “What’s Hot” lists (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009, 2009-2010; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010-2011), as a practical matter, interestingly, acquiring reading maturity still does not seem an essential part of “reading achievement” in education today. Despite the earlier efforts of seminal reading scholars like Gray, Chall, and Manzo, as well as countless others, a focus on reading maturity is not yet included as an indicator of school success or academic achievement. It is not part of secondary teacher training; it is not prominent in reading or educational textbooks; it is not a common topic in our journals; it is not in our standards as a unified construct; and it is not often applied to systematic classroom practice.

Reading maturity as a holistic goal feels absent from the current mainstream conversations of education and we need to bring it back. Perhaps the history and development of the reading field, our educational systems in general, (and/or society, c.f. Chall, 1983) needed time to evolve until this point where we are now prepared for a breakthrough. Again, the recent NEA report (Gioia, 2009) offers glimmers of hope, as do aspects of the IRA’s recent “What’s Hot” lists (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009, 2009-2010; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010-2011). The NEA report draws increased attention to student literacy development at the age in which growth toward reading maturity might gain increased traction and “What’s Hot” lists deal directly and on a national scale with several aspects of the reading maturity construct. Whatever the case, there is still much to learn about text-tethered reading issues, or the abilities and inclinations involved with growth toward reading maturity. This is especially true for adolescent and adult readers who, by conventional measures, may be considered proficient (i.e. they learned to read) but whose lack of growth toward reading maturity goes largely unattended.

Reading Maturity as Social Science

Our practical social science-based reading research and instruction culture, from which educational policies, practices, and funding often arise, focuses on teaching students how to read, and with the growth of content area literacy, how to learn from their reading (c.f. Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; IRA, 2006; Jacobs, 2008; Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas, 2005, 2009; Swafford & Kallus, 2002). However, there does not exist as much on how to systematically promote reading maturity as a life-long pursuit. It is commonly understood as a *philosophical* issue that it is important to be “well-read.” Established movements like the “Great Books” programs, books like Mark Edmundson’s *Why Read?* (2004), the contributions of scholars like Mortimer Adler, Harold Bloom, and E.D. Hirsch as well as the existence and survival of the humanities attest to this issue especially for older adolescent and adult readers (c.f. Adler, 1940; Bloom 2000; Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 1988).

However, as a practical matter in current school culture, reading maturity seems relatively untouched as *social science*: reading maturity is neither discussed, delineated, nor monitored in an organized way. Subsequently it doesn’t receive diagnosis or remediation/ intervention. Paraphrasing Mark Twain, the person who does not read good books has little advantage over the person who can’t. We do little in school in a systematic or research-based way, to help address this. We talk about the idea of being well read and teach basic reading skills and require some minimum English/language arts competencies, but in daily practice we don’t often pull all these elements together in a somewhat coordinated way in order to work systematically and intentionally toward reading maturity as social science. We do, however, teach kids how to read; help kids who struggle with learning to read; have effective approaches for helping kids learn from their reading, although more needs to be done with encouraging advancements being seen in content area literacy (Jacobs 2008; Manzo, 2003; Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas, 2005, 2009); have respected descriptions of reading maturity to draw on; and think that “being well-read” is valuable. However, the question remains, do we have wide-spread systematic routes for seeing kids and adults grow toward reading maturity? We measure basic reading proficiency and we require students to earn English/language arts class credits, but there is not much evidence that we have intentional plans for seeing people through to reading maturity. We pay relatively little attention to alliterates and other non-optimal types of proficient readers. One notable thing we *are* seeing is that basic reading skill does *not* seem to ensure that additional elements of reading maturity will necessarily follow (c.f. Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Chall, 1983; Chase, 1961; Guthrie, McGough, Bennett, & Rice, 1996; Manzo & Manzo, 1993;

Manzo, Manzo, Barnhill, & Thomas, 2000; Thomas, 2001). And this is troubling, particularly considering the demands on citizens of our world today. An alliterate culture might not govern themselves as well as they could, nor as well as they need to in order to flourish.

There has been a general lack of commitment in social science research to understanding proficient readers who may have undetected needs in making progress toward reading maturity (Manzo & Manzo, 1993; Thomas, 2001). Potential reasons for this include: lack of clear, widely known definitions or construct descriptions and the controversial nature of developing or advancing such descriptions; lack of assessment instruments; and lack of resources and/or accountability measures and incentives to address all but “remedial” readers, especially in our high-stakes testing culture. In addition, it is possible that education has not been ready to work on this level of reading development yet, and there has been a tacit lack of valuing the construct by adolescents and the general public, particularly when specific aspects of it are juxtaposed with multimedia-saturated entertainment options. There also may be reluctance by educators to cast light on their colleagues and/or students, i.e. some literacy professionals, school teachers, and/or social scientists who have not made progress toward reading maturity themselves (c.f. Powell-Brown, 2003/2004). This could prove uncomfortable to address or cause the construct to go unrecognized (Manzo & Manzo, 1993; Manzo, Manzo, Barnhill, & Thomas, 2000; Thomas 2001). And finally, growth toward reading maturity involves personal epistemological development (Thomas, 2001) which may lead to critical thinking, reflection, and assumption-challenging that educators may praise but actually find personally unsettling (Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas, 2005). Too much cognitive dissonance can lead to neglect of an issue if not resolved; deep down this may be legitimate cause for resistance toward reading maturity. Nevertheless, the benefits may outweigh the unsettling parts; tackling what challenges us can lead to meaningful advancements. Hopefully we can find the resolve to press on.

Reading Maturity: Historically Described

As the construct has emerged over the past 50 years, relatively few reading scholars have employed definitions or working descriptions addressing the concept of reading maturity. Harris and Hodges (1995, p. 211) define reading maturity as: “a high level of reading development in which the individual reads expertly, widely, profitably, and responsibly.” Casale (1982, pp. 4-5) extrapolated the following definition from Gray and Rogers (1956), the “chief populists of the term:”

Reading maturity is a state of reading ability typically reached in adult life

as a product of overall development, instruction, experience, and years of extensive reading. Its chief features are accurate, high-level comprehension, objective thinking, and the ability to speak back fluently and analytically that which has been read with little or no prompting.

Chall (1983, p. 87) identifies “Stage 4” and “Stage 5” as the highest levels of reading growth in her scheme on stages of reading development. As she describes them, Stage 4 readers read widely from a broad range of complex materials, both expository and narrative, with a variety of viewpoints, acquiring this level of reading through wide reading and study of the physical, biological, and social sciences and the humanities; high quality and popular literature; newspapers and magazines; and systematic study of words. Stage 5 readers read for their own needs and purposes with reading serving to integrate one’s knowledge with that of others, leading to synthesis and creation of new knowledge. This level of reading is acquired through wide reading of ever more difficult materials, reading beyond one’s immediate needs, and by participating in activities requiring integration of varied knowledge and points of view.

Harris and Hodges (1995, p. 211) cite this excerpt from Gray and Rogers (1956):

Maturity in reading as one aspect of total development is distinguished by the attainment of those interests, attitudes, and skills which enable young people and adults to participate eagerly, independently, and effectively in all the reading activities essential to a full, rich, and productive life. . . In the satisfaction of interests and needs through reading, a mature reader will continue to grow in capacity to interpret broadly and deeply.

The following passage about reading maturity from Gray and Rogers (1956, p. 237) uniquely transcends a focus on reading *skills* to express what should be the loftier transformative goals of education:

The crucial point along the route to maturity in reading is the time at which reading begins to inspire the reader, to give him a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction in the activity, and to exert a conscious integrative effect upon him. This is the point at which reading ceases to be a mere intellectual exercise of grasping and remembering meanings. It is also the point at which reading loses its quality of vicariousness and speaks directly to the reader. Stated positively, it is the point at which reading begins to bring about significant conversions, to make changes in one’s core of values, to broaden interests, to open up new horizons, and to provide new and improved ways of thinking about things. When reading begins to

assume these functions in the individual's life, then he is on his way to maturity in reading. The reading-growing-reading-growing process has become self-generating.

Substantial scholarship respects and accepts Gray's work as a meaningful "established precedent" (c.f. Chall, 1983; Manzo & Manzo, 1990; Smith & Sheehan, 1998; Venezky, 2003), although it has not been broadly advanced or applied. Gray and Rogers's (1956) research remains a seminal work on the reading maturity construct, generally neither surpassed nor ardently debated by others showing interest in this topic. For this reason, this article suggests a working description of reading maturity derived from Gray and Rogers' 50+ -year old work, not discordant with the subsequent work of others like Chall and Manzo, which may help carry the construct forward today. As Jacobs (2008) said in response to the encouraging new attention being paid to adolescent literacy, "We would do well in the shock of this most recent 'awakening' to proceed. . . with studied concern that acknowledges and builds on the research and practices of our predecessors" (p. 13).

An Expanded Working Description of Reading Maturity

Gray and Rogers (1956) examined a set of subcategories, after researching various options, which best constituted the reading maturity construct. In my previous research for this article (Thomas, 2001) I interpreted, applied, and in some cases extended or adjusted these into six subcategories, influenced also by the work of Casale (1982), Manzo and Casale (1981, 1983a, 1983b), and Manzo, Manzo, Barnhill, and Thomas (2000). I have identified the following six subcategories of reading maturity: reading attitudes and interests; reading purposes; reading ability; reaction to and use of ideas to apprehend (higher-order literacy); kind of materials read; and personal adjustment to reading/transformational reading (Thomas, 2001).

Because of the complexity of the reading maturity construct, particularly in the richly textured multicultural tapestry of our schools and society, an important caveat is in order. Much like a journey, progress toward reading maturity should be seen more as a *direction* than as a prescribed *destination*. As a direction, reading maturity is something we can agree upon as a primary goal for *all* progressing readers, even as we acknowledge diversity in individual pathways and eventual destinations. In the expansive working description of reading maturity that follows, there is no prescribed reading canon. Further, it is culturally neutral, without specific social mores, save for the assumption shared by many to sensibly move in that direction. In addition, advancement of the reading maturity construct should not be seen as dissuading at all from culturally responsive pedagogy (c.f. Ruggiano Schmidt

& Lazar, 2011), but rather as a useful tool for advancing student-centered curriculum and instruction that promotes individualized progress toward reading maturity for students of all cultural backgrounds.

This article proposes to describe the reading maturity construct, heavily influenced by Gray and Rogers (1956) by delineating the characteristics of a maturing reader. The complex nature of reading maturity does not lend itself to concise definition, previous efforts from respected scholars notwithstanding; however, this should not keep us from attempting to clearly delineate general characteristics of a maturing reader. As such, what follows is not a tightly packaged definition like we're accustomed to in our age of sound-bites but is sufficiently detailed for the complexity of the construct, providing specific characteristics we can evaluate and toward which we can promote growth.

Area 1: reading attitudes and interests. A maturing reader is one who enjoys reading, has a high interest in reading, and finds reading potentially stimulating or exciting. A maturing reader reads frequently and sees reading as an important part of life. A maturing reader has a wide breadth of reading interests, liking to read about many different things. A maturing reader also has a depth of reading interests, reading extensively on certain topics, enjoying reading to learn about things that interest them.

Area 2: reading purposes. A maturing reader reads for valuable and varied reasons including: for pleasure; to learn more about things of interest; to gain new knowledge; to improve understanding of life; to understand others better; and to understand herself/himself better. A maturing reader is also aware of his/her purposes for reading and chooses strategies accordingly, making an effort to actively engage with what is being read, reading with both purpose and flexibility.

Area 3: reading ability. A maturing reader can read proficiently and fluently, understanding most of what she/he reads, getting a good grasp on the literal ("reading the lines") and implied ("reading between the lines") meanings presented. A maturing reader is comfortable with his/her reading ability and does not mind reading aloud and often earns grades in school that would indicate good reading comprehension abilities.

Area 4: reaction to and use of ideas apprehended (higher-order literacy). While reading, a maturing reader often thinks about other things she/he already knows about the topic and is often prompted with new ideas and insights while reading. A maturing reader is able to make generalizations and personal conclusions about what is read, and can use reading to help make decisions. When a maturing reader reads, he/she can combine ideas he/she already has with ideas in what is read to

form new personal understandings. A maturing reader reads with an attitude of inquiry and asks her/himself questions while reading. A maturing reader tends to suspend judgment, evaluating the main idea of what of what is read by looking for supporting points. While reading, a maturing reader recognizes ideas that may have personal or societal value, and is able to construct new ideas from what is read.

Area 5: kinds of materials read. A maturing reader reads intellectually challenging material, enjoying reading material that goes beyond “easy-reading.” A maturing reader likes to read things that inspire thinking, reading materials that contain rich ideas. A maturing reader enjoys reading about mentally stimulating topics and frequently reads materials at relatively difficult reading levels. A maturing reader enjoys reading materials that foster better understanding other people and that broaden understanding the world. A maturing reader is intellectually enriched by most of what he/she reads, enjoying reading materials that teach her/him things he/she did not know before.

Area 6: personal adjustment to reading/transformational reading. Reading may help a maturing reader change perspectives about things and provide motivation for personal changes. When a maturing reader learns something valuable from credible reading sources, she/he usually applies it to actions in her/his life. Reading can transform actions, thinking, and values of a maturing reader, and a maturing reader can recall personal transformations as a result of things read. Reading makes a maturing reader carefully consider changes that he/she should make in life, causing personal reflection. Some of the character of a maturing reader is shaped by what she/he reads.

Because of the importance of the construct, we should treat reading maturity deliberately, not leaving it to chance as a hoped-for by-product of schooling that some students acquire but others apparently do not. To do this we should move next to issues of measurement or monitoring.

How can Progress toward Reading Maturity be Measured or Monitored?

Gray and Rogers’ (1956) efforts at measuring reading maturity and subsequent refining efforts by Manzo and Casale (1981, 1983a, 1983b) represented ambitious and ground-breaking attempts to promote reading maturity by evolving practical definitions, measurement, and intervention strategies. As noted in Casale’s prologue (1982, p. x), however, the classic paradox of not adequately measuring a construct for lack of construct definition, and not defining a construct for lack of adequate measurement, have challenged efforts to define and measure reading maturity. And this chicken/egg quandary may contribute to the rather narrowly focused high-

stakes reading assessment culture that we currently see across the nation. Our ideals sometimes wilt from the pressures of day-to-day demands so we eventually tend to most value, in practical terms, what we are held accountable for. In many cases this means we value what we can or choose to measure (c.f. Schein, 1992). If we measure only limited aspects of reading development (basic skills and basic comprehension), those become what we pursue, rather than the broader and deeper reading maturity literacy construct for which I argue in this article. If, however, we could bring renewed attention to this bigger picture of reading development, starting with efforts in a *direction* rather than one set *destination*, we can start making improvements to this problem. If we can (re)gain a collective sense of valuing progress toward reading maturity, we can also find ways to assess and monitor it. And, if we can assess and monitor it, it may expand our current school testing culture from its present narrow focus to a healthier, broader state, thereby fostering further pursuit of progress toward reading maturity.

Although Chall (1983) did not thoroughly address assessment of her 4th and 5th stages of reading development, Gray and Rogers used an ethnographic case study approach for assessing reading maturity while Manzo and Manzo (1983a; 1983b) constructed an assessment battery. These efforts could be re-examined as possible points to resume reading maturity assessment. Additional traditional assessment tools could be created and applied, perhaps in combination: anecdotal records; teacher checklists; student-teacher conferences; student journals or literacy logs; peer assessment; and student portfolios. Something as simple as a self-assessment instrument could move us at least one step forward.

The Reading Maturity Survey

I designed *The Reading Maturity Survey*, originally called *The Reading Survey*, (Thomas, 2001), a simple self-report instrument available online (for free) at: www.ucmo.edu/readingmaturity. The six subcategories of the survey directly address the six elements of reading maturity described earlier. It contains 60 questions, 10 from each of the six reading maturity subcategories. Each question is answered on a 5-point Likert scale (5 = "a lot like me," 3 = "somewhat like me," and 1 = "not like me"). The score for *The Reading Maturity Survey*, treated as interval scale data, is the mean of the 60 item scores for an individual. The subcategory scores for each of the six areas of reading maturity can also be generated. The split-half reliability of the instrument was calculated in an earlier study (Thomas, 2001), when it was given to 82 college students, using the six subcategory scores of each instrument. The correlation between halves was .85 and when the Spearman-Brown formula was

used to estimate the reliability coefficient for the whole instrument, it was .92. It has no time limits but is estimated to take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Over the last several years this instrument has proved useful in varied settings. It has been helpful when applied in programs designed to improve secondary school-wide literacy. It has been a tool for secondary teachers to use in their classrooms and literacy programs—recently several different teachers and schools in different parts of the country have used it with their students. It has also been applied to a study measuring the reading development of preservice teachers (Theiss, Philbrick, & Jarman, 2008-2009). And it has been a valuable teaching tool for challenging preservice teachers and graduate students through integration in teacher preparation coursework, addressing the premise that for teachers to be good literacy providers, they should be making progress toward reading maturity themselves (c.f. Powell-Brown, 2003/2004). Development of a shorter version of the instrument is also underway, as well the addition of “next-steps” scaffolding materials to aid in student reflection and planning for progress toward reading maturity. This information about *The Reading Maturity Survey* is shared to illustrate that it is not terribly difficult to begin assessing and promoting progress toward the lofty reading maturity target; further use of this tool by others is certainly welcomed.

Advancing Reading Maturity: What's Next?

In her seminal work on stages of reading development, Chall (1983) organizes the reading development process into five stages. Stages 1 and 2 address the basics of learning to read; Stage 3 addresses beginning to learn from reading; and Stages 4 and 5 describe key aspects of reading maturity. The future of reading in schools should involve a three-part focus which could align with Chall's reading development scheme. First, we should continue the emphasis, currently in the spotlight, of doing all we can to help students with the basics of literacy (Chall's Stages 1 & 2), helping them *learn to read* (i.e. doing an excellent job with instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text-dependent comprehension). Next, we should bolster the good start taking place with content area literacy (Chall's Stage 3), or equipping students to learn *from* their reading as they progress through higher grades (c.f. Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; IRA, 2006; Jacobs, 2008; Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas, 2005, 2009; Swafford & Kallus, 2002). Then, as the larger vision rousing these literacy efforts, we should systematically and with a balanced social science rigor, become more serious about Chall's 4th and 5th Stages, the task of literacy education aiming toward reading maturity.

Specific Suggestions for Educational Practice Involving Reading Maturity

The following suggestions may be sensible for us to consider. First, teacher education courses and graduate studies in literacy education should discuss the importance of teaching toward reading maturity rather than only to avoid illiteracy. We need renewed emphasis on the idea that mature reader profiles, as diverse in detail as they will be, should be the highest goal of literacy education. Reading maturity, despite its complexity, should be (re)raised as the expressed goal of literacy education (and perhaps education in general). This may start through simple avenues like reviving Gray and Rogers (1956), Chall (1983), and Manzo and Casale (1981, 1983a, 1983b) and by referencing articles like this one and others previously discussed that have addressed reading maturity. This should also include more coverage of reading maturity in literacy education textbooks and in teacher education courses. This increased awareness of and appreciation for the importance of progress toward reading maturity would then hopefully carry into conversations with educational policy makers and eventually to the general public, impacting this second item, next, as well.

Second, we should honestly look at how our current high-stakes testing environment, focused on basic reading skills, diverts attention from progress toward reading maturity. Pursuing reading maturity sometimes conflicts with classroom realities in current school culture. We need stakeholders from all facets of the educational enterprise, including teachers, administrators, teacher preparation institutions, parents, policy-makers, and law-makers who can advocate for more thorough/more broad assessment of reading development, that ideally includes progress toward reading maturity as the target. As described earlier, basic reading proficiency is essential and it is no small task to acquire it. It is a primary part of the mission of education but it is not where we should stop when envisioning what it means to become optimally literate. Only avoiding illiteracy, as vital as this is, may be akin to building half a bridge—it's important but not complete. For our society to thrive into the future, basic reading skill is not enough; unwise is the society that confronts illiteracy but leaves alliteracy unchallenged. Our large-scaled approaches to reading assessment need to take account of this and until our current testing culture improves, progress toward reading maturity will remain unchallenged.

In addition, and as one possible partial remedy for the problem identified in the previous item, all students in grades 6-12 should have a literacy profile or portfolio. Thankfully, as more attention is being given to secondary/adolescent literacy development (c.f. Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009, 2009-2010; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010-2011; IRA, 2006; Jacobs, 2008; Manzo, Manzo, &

Thomas, 2005, 2009), the suggestion of these profiles or portfolios is no longer as novel as it would previously have been. This profile should travel with students through middle and high school. It should contain data on literacy skills from a traditional variety of basic reading and writing proficiency measures, but should also include intentional monitoring of progress toward reading maturity, including reading habits and dispositions. *The Reading Maturity Survey* (Thomas, 2001) described earlier could easily be used to facilitate this process; it is the type of practical tool that could be a key element for assessment of and reflection on literacy development beyond basic reading skill. Literacy profiles or portfolios could be created and updated in English/language arts class, in the sort of reading-focused classes that are currently emerging in middle schools and high schools, or even in the typical home-room hour common in many secondary school settings. For instance, one simple requirement of a middle school reading class or a high school English/language arts class could be the creation, updating, monitoring, and presenting of such a literacy profile/portfolio as a semester or annual project. This portfolio could then travel with students as they progress through grades 6-12, not unlike the other files and records that students have. In this way we could begin to systematically monitor and report on student progress toward reading maturity and develop appropriate interventions or literacy mentoring where applicable.

Finally, we should attempt to leverage the opportunity we now have with adolescent literacy moving more prominently into the spotlight (c.f. Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009, 2009-2010; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010-2011; Jacobs, 2008). Secondary principals and other school leaders across the country are paying increased attention to adolescent readers and are aligning curriculum and resources accordingly. As they establish solid school-wide literacy programs (c.f. Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas, 2009), they could pursue programs, including curriculum, professional development, faculty and financial resources, and program assessment, that promote both basic reading proficiency and the goal of progress toward reading maturity. In so doing, basic reading proficiency should increase, while growth toward life-long literacy development is enhanced.

Conclusion

There is no shortage of philosophical claims about the importance of being well-read. It has the potential to quicken our consciences, spur reflection and growth, broaden our horizons, and change the direction of a person's life. It arguably has soul-shaping potential (Adler, 1940 & 1977; Edmundson, 2004) and is a cultural and societal asset (c.f. Chall, 1983; Guthrie, McGough, Bennett, & Rice,

1996). Becoming well-read also relates to intellectual and epistemological development (Chall, 1983; Thomas, 2001). Clearly, the broad reading maturity construct transcends reconstructive reading, moving into the realm of constructive reading with a strong relationship to issues in general maturity and overall development (Thomas, 2001). It is not my intention to naively suggest that reading maturity is a panacea for all the challenges facing us, nor a golden pathway to all we aspire to become. Overall health, wellness, and human flourishing surely involve many factors including physical fitness, nutrition, sleep, spiritual growth, relational contentment, mental health, and sound general learning and appreciation of life. However, reading maturity can make important contributions to overall human and societal well-being. It seems reasonable to expect growth in reading maturity to positively impact people on a personal level which should in turn impact the health of society (c.f. Chall, 1983). The long-term wager behind this paper is that working to delineate, monitor, and intentionally promote progress toward reading maturity should help us grow, even if only in relatively small degrees, closer to our ideal selves, becoming more content, intelligent, compassionate, and responsible citizens, helping us work together to shape a better world.

This article suggests a working description of the reading maturity construct, why it's important, how we could start monitoring growth toward it, and ideas for next steps. It contends that in our educational system we currently do fairly well with teaching students the basics of how to read and are now improving with content area reading advancements as well. However, the remaining concern is that we still don't acknowledge a compelling unified and higher-level aspiration for reading. In short, I suggest that this missing goal should renew our attention to reading maturity. Importantly, a key point is that this pursuit needs to involve more than generalized notions of becoming "well-read." Instead, we need to take a balanced, organized, and intentional approach to systematically monitoring student growth toward reading maturity using tools such as the *Reading Maturity Survey* (Thomas, 2001). We can work together to get the reading maturity construct back into the conversation. Now is a great time to begin.



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Improving Oral Reading Fluency through Readers Theatre

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Abstract

In order for students to learn how to construct meaning from text, teachers must apply instructional strategies that will help readers transition from simple decoding of words to fluent word identification. This article will provide an overview of the literature related to the role of fluency in reading; explain research-based recommendations for fostering fluency with struggling readers; discuss the use of repeated readings, in particular Readers Theatre, as an instructional strategy for developing fluency; and present the findings of a study in which a third-grade teacher applied Readers Theatre to improve the fluency levels of her struggling readers.

Improving Oral Reading Fluency through Readers Theatre

Reading is a process where readers strive to understand and respond to ideas that are expressed in written text. It is a complex, interactive process that consists of multiple interactions between variables such as the reader's background, reading materials, developmental levels, learning context, and learning goals to name a few (Author, 2007). Even with all these complexities, reading can be conceptualized as consisting of two separate, but highly interrelated aspects - word identification and comprehension (Hook & Jones, 2002; Pressley, 2006). As children's reading skills develop, they are expected to read words in print both effortlessly and quickly. Word recognition must become automatic: something that is done both instantly and independently in order to free up cognitive processes for higher level comprehension and connections with texts (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). They cannot take time to analyze or decode every word they encounter if the goal is higher level thought processes and enjoyment of reading (Richek, Caldwell, Jennings, & Lerner, 2002). With practice, the beginning reader becomes a more fluent reader, learning more and more sight words, so that those words can be recognized at a glance (Unrau, 2004).

Struggling with word identification can be a hindrance to constructing meaning. Many struggling readers have difficulty moving to a level of fluency that allows them to easily comprehend what they are reading. If students cannot recognize a substantial number of words encountered while reading texts, then their reading becomes laborious and slow; the comprehension of the text declines (Hoffman & Isaac, 1991; Levine, 2002; National Reading Panel, 2000; Stanovich, 1993/1994). It is well established that a reader's ability to effectively comprehend what they are reading is significantly affected by difficulties in fluent and automatic word recognition (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; May, 1998; Stanovich, 1993/1994). In fact, mild difficulties in word identification can draw a student's focus away from the underlying meaning, reduce the reading rate, create the need to reread selections in order to grasp meaning, and decrease the overall enjoyment of the experience.

When successful readers read aloud, not only do they read fluently and with adequate speed, they also use appropriate phrasing, intonation; their oral reading mirrors their spoken language. The opposite is true of struggling readers. Their reading tends to be evidenced by a slow, halting, and inconsistent rate; poor phrasing; and deficient intonation patterns that convey a lack of understanding of the text's intent (Dowhower, 1989). Slow reading requires the reader to take more time to complete a reading task than students who are fluent decreasing their exposure to

more reading situations.

Many teachers provide systematic and synthetic phonics instruction to compensate for initial reading problems experienced by struggling readers. Often, these students become accurate decoders, but fail to reach the level of fluency needed to become efficient readers (Allington, 1983). Fluency can be viewed as a stepping-stone to comprehension, and it has been found to impact comprehension in the primary grades and beyond (Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnson, 2009). In order for students to learn to construct meaning from text, it is necessary for teachers to apply instructional strategies that will help readers transition from simple decoding of words to fluent word identification.

The repeated reading method, which is used with Readers Theatre, is one research-based strategy that has been shown to increase children's fluency. Rereading the same passage repeatedly has been found to have a positive impact on both fluency and comprehension (Dowhower, 1989; Hoffman & Isaacs, 1991; Samuels, 1997). Additionally, Readers Theatre is purported to be an effective strategy providing practice in oral reading for struggling readers in a non-threatening environment (an environment in which they can gain confidence in and a self-efficacy for oral reading (Tyler & Chard, 2000).

This article will provide an overview of the literature related to the role of fluency in reading; explain research-based recommendations for fostering fluency with struggling readers; and discuss the use of repeated readings, in particular Readers Theatre, as an instructional strategy for developing fluency. The implementation and outcomes of one teacher's experience implementing Reader's Theatre with her class of struggling third-grade readers will be presented.

The Role of Fluency in Reading

A review of research associated with reading fluency substantiates that fluency is an essential component that supports the goal of reading comprehension (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; Author, 2009). Fluency affords the reader the ability to develop control over surface-level text processing in order that the reader can focus on understanding the deeper levels of meaning that are embedded in the text (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). If children are to interact meaningfully with a variety of text, they must be competent in word recognition, read at a suitable rate, and understand how to project the phrasing and expression of the spoken word upon the written word (Zutell & Rasinski, 1991).

A theory that is particularly important in fluency development is the theory of automaticity in reading (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). Young and Rasinski (2009)

define automaticity as, “the ability of proficient readers to read the words in a text correctly and effortlessly so that they may use their finite cognitive resources to attend the meaning while reading” (p. 4). According to automaticity theory, readers are required to engage simultaneously in two critical tasks: decoding the words and comprehending the text. Due to the limited amount of attention available to any reader, attention that is devoted to the decoding of words cannot also be used for constructing meaning. Therefore, readers who require considerable cognitive effort for decoding might compromise comprehension due to their inability to devote a sufficient amount of attention to understanding the text. Automaticity of word recognition plays a key role in the development of fluency (Author, 2009).

A second theoretical component of reading fluency lies in the role of prosody: The ability of the reader to read with appropriate intonation, expression, and phrasing (Schreiber, 1991; Young & Rasinski, 2009). Fluent readers not only demonstrate accurate and automatic word recognition, they also read with good phrasing as well as expression. The prosody component of reading fluency stresses the appropriate use of expression and phrasing (Dowhower, 1989; Richards, 2000; Schreiber, 1991; Schwanenflugel, Hamilton, Kuhn, Wisenbaker, & Stahl, 2004) as well as reflects an understanding of meaningful phrasing and syntax (the way words are organized in sentences and passages) (Rasinski, 2000). The prosodic reader reads text in a manner that expressively and naturally reflects spoken language (Author, 2005). Thus, meaning of the script is conveyed through their oral interpretation of the passage. When this happens, readers are engaged and motivated to read fluently. While reading rate often receives a disproportionate degree of emphasis in fluency instruction and assessment, recent studies emphasize the importance of prosody in reading fluency and suggest a causal link between prosody and comprehension (Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2006; Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnson, 2009; Whalley & Hansen, 2006).

Engagement theory provides another underlying principle of reading fluency. Students need to be motivated to engage in practice that enables them to increase their fluency. Therefore, readers demonstrate prosody as they engage in reading text fluently. As students learn to read in a meaningful and expressive fashion they are also learning to construct meaning (Kuhn, 2004/2005; Griffith & Rasinski, 2004). Fluency, then, serves as a bridge between word identification and comprehension (Rasinski, 2004). Because fluent readers are able to identify words automatically and accurately, they are able to focus most of their attention on other components of reading, particularly comprehension. They focus on doing all the things that good readers do – making meaning from the text, connecting it to their prior knowledge, elaborating and reflecting on concepts presented.

The word identification of struggling readers, on the other hand, has not become automatic (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974); it has not yet reached a point where it is quick and accurate. Struggling readers must focus much of their attention on recognizing the words in the text. They cannot consistently identify words rapidly; therefore, they may read word-by-word, sometimes repeating or skipping words. They will often group words in ways that are unlike natural speech. As a result, non-fluent readers have little attention to devote to comprehension (Dowhower, 1989; Nathan & Stanovich, 1991; NRP, 2000; Rasinski, 2004; Rasinski & Padak, 1994; Stanovich, 1993/94; Tyler & Chard, 2000; Unrau, 2004; Zutell & Rasinski, 1991). Inadequate capacity for comprehension robs reading of its inherent enjoyment due to so few available resources left over in the brain from high demand on word recognition. This leads to less involvement in reading-related activities. Lack of exposure and practice leads to further delays of development of automaticity and speed at the word recognition level for ineffective readers (Nathan & Stanovich, 1991).

Stanovich (1986) demonstrates the importance of fluency through his connection of the Matthew Effect to reading development. In brief, the Matthew Effect reflects the familiar saying that, “the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer.” When applied to reading development, this means that good readers become increasingly motivated to read, receive instruction that focuses on higher order comprehension skills, acquire additional cognitive skills through the process of frequent reading, and are expected to achieve more. Poor readers, by contrast, read less and their instruction is predominantly centered around phonetic and word recognition skills instead of comprehension. Reading isn’t enjoyable; therefore, it is avoided preventing development in fluency and vocabulary that comes from wide reading. To complicate matters for the student struggling with fluency, beginning in second and third grade, the type of text being read in classroom settings typically shifts from primarily narrative to both narrative and expository, and the language complexity of the written text, including vocabulary level, sentence complexity, and text structure, begins to increase dramatically. Students who struggle in developing fluent reading will be further disadvantaged by the increasing difficult texts they will encounter.

Fostering Fluency in Struggling Readers through Repeated Readings

Students with reading problems need numerous opportunities to read if they are to achieve fluent word recognition. Unfortunately, many low-performing readers do not enjoy reading and avoid it as much as possible. This results in their inability to develop good sight word vocabulary. In turn, sight word deficiency causes reading to be more difficult. Thus, a vicious cycle develops (Nathan & Stanovich, 1991).

So, the question becomes: How can teachers increase fluency and, thereby, enhance comprehension and enjoyment of reading?

Current research has given us some direction about methods that effectively increase fluency (National Reading Panel, 2000). Some of these methods include modeling, tape-recorded assistance, choral reading, paired oral reading, buddy reading, and repeated reading (Rasinski, 1989; Richards, 2000). Repeated reading has been identified by the National Reading Panel (2000) as a widely used instructional approach for building reading fluency. Reading the same passage repeatedly has been shown to significantly increase reading rate and accuracy, comprehension, and the benefits are carried over to unpracticed texts (Dowhower, 1989; Hoffman & Isaacs, 1991; Rasinski, 2004; Rasinski, 2000; Rasinski & Padak, 1994; Samuels, 1997; Schreiber, 1991; Tyler & Chard, 2000). The repeated readings method is effective with older students as well as with elementary school-age children (Dowhower, 1989). It can be an excellent motivational device because it increases the level of confidence in struggling readers as it increases their level of reading ability (Samuels, 1979).

The basic format for repeated reading was developed by Samuels (1979) based on his observations of classroom reading instruction. He most often examined instruction centered on reading selections from students' basal readers. They read a new selection with new words each day. When many students were asked to read orally in class, they were unable to do so with fluency and were embarrassed by their slow, laborious reading. The pace of instruction for these students was too fast. They seldom had the opportunity to practice reading any selection more than once. This, Samuels noted, was contrary to the manner in which most people, who reach high levels of performance in a particular field, gain their abilities. People who obtain success in a given endeavor tend to practice over and over until they become proficient in their craft. When applied to building reading fluency, it follows that, rather than asking students to navigate a new text selection on a daily basis, students should, instead, be allowed time to practice reading the same selection several times if they are to reach a desired level of fluency.

Teachers, then, can do two things to help students achieve automaticity in word recognition: They can give instruction on how to accurately recognize words and they can provide the time and motivation for students to practice word recognition skills until they become automatic. A number of instructional procedures have emerged over the years from this basic repeated reading form. Yet, simply reading faster does not guarantee prosody in reading. Readers Theatre requires repeated reading but also requires intonation and phrasing aspects of prosody.

Readers Theatre

In Readers Theatre, the reader interprets the author's intended meaning through oral interpretative reading. Using the Readers Theatre technique, the student repeatedly reads short, meaningful passages until reaching a high level of fluency. The student receives explicit guidance and feedback from a fluent reader, and after reasonable success, moves to a new selection (Dowhower, 1989; Hoffman & Isaacs, 1991; May, 1998; Rasinski, 2004; 2000; Rasinski & Padak, 1994; Samuels, 1997; Schreiber, 1991; Tyler & Chard, 2000). Tierney and Readence (2000) state that Readers Theater integrates reading while providing motivation to read. According to their findings, Readers Theater allows students to improve oral reading skills, interpretative skills, and comprehension. Sloyer (1982) suggests that Readers Theater provides interpretive reading benefits for all children by allowing readers to use expressive reading to portray the characters and messages in a text. Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1998/99) found that the repeated readings associated with Readers Theater were viewed by students as practices and rehearsals which, in turn, made the process of repeated readings "both purposeful and fun" (1998, p. 326).

In addition to improving fluency and comprehension, Readers Theatre also engages readers and serves as a motivational tool for students. For struggling readers, motivation may be the key to their success in using this strategy. Guthrie and Humenick (2004) define a motive as "the sense of engagement in an important task". The performance of Readers Theatre becomes the important task that engages students in the repeated reading process. They suggest that, when students are motivated in a reading task, they commit cognitive energy toward reading while increasing their aesthetic experience. Readers Theatre provides students with choices about to how they will interpret the text. When students are provided with open-ended tasks that include choice; children are more interested and tend to expend more effort learning and understanding the material (Turner & Paris, 1995). By selecting Readers Theater as a vehicle for repeated readings, students are able to construct meaning from text while sustaining their motivation to do so.

Several studies have examined the impact of Readers Theatre on reading proficiency. Millan (1996) used Readers Theatre with a small group of second graders in a pull-out title I class. He found that students read faster and more fluently, had higher comprehension and had a more positive attitude toward reading as a result of Readers Theatre. In their study of second-grade, Title I students use of Readers Theatre, Millin and Rinehart (1999) observed increases in both oral reading fluency and reading achievement that transferred to other reading materials. In another study, a 10-week implementation of Readers Theatre, where a small group of second

graders were introduced to, practiced, and performed a new script each week, reported significant gains in reading rate and overall reading achievement (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999). Rasinski (1999) found that those who participated in Readers Theatre gained an average of 17 words per minute, the expected gain for an entire year. Students engaged in more traditional reading activities made less than half the gains of the Readers Theatre students (Rasinski, 1999).

Carrick (2006) used Readers Theatre with a fifth grade class and found that Readers Theatre improved reading rate and word accuracy. Young and Rasinski (2009) observed positive gains in word recognition, accuracy, reading rate, and prosody when Readers Theatre was used as part of a balanced literacy program throughout the course of the school year. As they explained, “(Readers Theatre) gave an opportunity for struggling readers to read fearlessly in the limelight” (p. 12). Rinehart (1999) found Readers Theatre to be an effective and motivating approach for students experiencing difficulties in reading. Clearly, Readers Theater can have a positive impact on reading development.

Implementing Readers Theatre

Finding a text that is appropriate for the reader is paramount to nurturing fluency. It is imperative that students have texts that are well within their easy or slightly challenging range (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998; Rasinski, 2004). This means that the students only make 5-6 errors every 100 words. Readers Theatre seems well-suited for the abilities and needs of struggling readers because it provides an appropriate text along with an authentic rationale for the repeated reading of that text. In Readers Theatre, students perform a story while reading directly from a script without relying on costumes, props, movement, or scenery to express meaning. These “productions” afford students the opportunity to select, rehearse, and present short skits to audiences without the pressure of memorizing lines. The performer’s goal is to read the script aloud effectively, enabling the audience to visualize the action (Rasinski, 2000; Rasinski & Padak, 1994; Tyler & Chard, 2000; Worthy & Prater, 2002). Readers Theater scripts can be found on the Internet, in many professional catalogs, and even in basal readers. Readers Theatre scripts can be found at www.readinga-z.com, www.aaronshp.com/rt, www.readinglady.com, <http://www.readerstheatre.ecsd.net/collection.htm>, and www.timrasinski.com. Books of commercial scripts, many of which contain various text levels, can be purchased from publishers.

Readers Theatre appeals to students for a number of reasons: Readers Theatre is implemented in a cooperative format with peers, so that individual students don’t

feel isolated as they read aloud. Scripts don't appear as daunting as other reading materials because the student does not have to read the entire text alone. Parts for which each student is responsible are intermingled with parts for which other students are responsible, affording students frequent breaks in oral reading. Roles varying in length allow children to select or be assigned to roles that suit their reading levels (Tyler & Chard, 2000). Finally, Readers Theatre provides reluctant readers with an authentic reason to reread the same text (Rasinski, 2000; Tyler & Chard, 2000). When readers embed appropriate phrasing, tone, emphasis, and volume in their oral reading, their interpretation of the selection is evident.

Finally, conducting Readers Theatre for struggling readers is not accomplished in a two day setting; rather it takes several days to provide enough practice so that students feel comfortable performing in front of others. The following example describes a study undertaken by one third grade teacher who investigated the degree to which Readers Theatre could help to improve the fluency and comprehension of her struggling third grade readers. The example below describes the fluency needs of the students in her class, the framework and timeframe she used to implementing Readers Theatre into the language arts block, and the findings of her investigation of Readers Theatre.

Implementing Readers Theatre with Struggling Third-Graders

While the research-base of Readers Theatre sounds promising in theory, teachers understandably respond with a skeptical, "Yes, but will it work in *my* classroom?" Such was the case for the teacher who conducted this study in her own classroom to investigate the impact of Readers Theatre on the fluency development of her struggling readers. The site for this study was a third grade classroom in a large urban elementary school, within a large city in the South. Participants for this study were 19 third-grade students who ages ranged from seven to nine. This-high poverty school was labeled "Equity-Plus" having more than 85% of its population on the free or reduced lunch program. Seventeen students in the targeted class fell into this category, meaning that the majority of the participants were from low income families. All of the students—nine girls and ten boys—were African American. Thirteen of them were from single-parent homes and resided in one of the most impoverished areas of the city. Many of the parents of the children had little spare time to devote to their children's educational needs. Two children were being raised by extended family members. Only two children had parents whose educational backgrounds went beyond high school. Three students were repeating third grade. Three students received special services four days weekly due to learning disabilities, one of which

included serious vision difficulties. None of the children in this class were on grade level when the study began.

The pretest scores of the participants on the third-grade Johns Basic Reading Inventory (2004) ranged from a high of 81 to a low of 9 WCPM, with a class average of 55 WCPM (The district's goal suggested that all second graders will read 90 WCPM by the end of the year). In addition, the students' prosody measure on the same third-grade passage ranged from 4-7 out of a possible 16 points, with a class average of 5 on Rasinski's Multidimensional Fluency Scale (2005). The students scored an average of 49% on measures of comprehension associated with the same passage. In summary, prior to the Readers Theatre intervention, all the students in this third grade class were struggling in all aspects of fluency.

After the pretest was administered, each student participated in six interventions using Readers Theatre materials and activities. Using the pretest data, the STAR Reading Test and the districts quarterly reading assessment, the classroom teacher chose six Readers Theatre scripts that were at the students' challenging instructional level and which had previously been developed and published. The program and scripts were read daily during the first 30 minutes of the two-hour literacy block. The program was administered as outlined by Authors (2005) which provides for repeatedly reading each new script.

A Weekly Cycle

Day 1 - Shared Reading: In a whole class setting the story was introduced. Background knowledge was activated and developed during this initial reading. New and important vocabulary was also introduced. There were discussions about genre and other literary concepts and skills relevant to current course of study and district curriculum guidelines. The teacher modeled expressive reading in order to demonstrate what accuracy, automaticity, and prosody should sound like. Next, the shared reading approach was used where students followed along in their text as the teacher read the story out loud to model automaticity and prosody. This provided a model in order to demonstrate how fluent reading sounds when reading the selected script. At the completion of the initial shared reading there was discussion again about the script's meaning or theme. After this initial read students were allowed to read the script several different ways including: chorally, with partners, and independently. To provide additional practice the text was sent home each day so that students could rehearse their scripts at home with a guardian.

Day 2 - Echo Reading: Still utilizing a whole class setting the teacher read a portion of the selected text aloud and then the students read the same section back

to the teacher chorally. This process continued until the entire text was completed. Echo reading provided a time to practice right after hearing an adult, like the teacher, read the section fluently. This instructional technique required the students to read the entire section once again before focusing on their selected/assigned parts.

Day 3 - Paired/Partner Reading: At this point in the lesson students were divided into pairs and took turns reading alternating sections of the script until the entire text was read. Afterwards, students reread the text reading the opposite sections that were read during the first reading. Once again, this emphasized the reading of the entire text. Buddy reading or partner reading is an excellent way to provide additional practice while reading with another person. The partners were encouraged to provide positive feedback to one another regarding the reader's fluency efforts. Once the entire script had been read by each of the reading partners the students could now begin rehearsing different parts in the script.

Day 4 - Choral/Expressive Reading: During this phase students participated in another whole class choral reading of the text. It was read a second time with each student focusing on assigned parts. Choral reading again provided practice and motivation for another reading as students read together as a class and then took on their selected parts. After the whole class activities the teacher placed the students in small guided reading groups where they could continue to practice their selected/assigned parts and make final decisions about how they wanted to present the script to the class.

Day 5 - Performance: After quickly reading through the selection one final time in their assigned parts and having a final discussion regarding aspects of the performance, the script was performed before another third grade class.

Results

Using this procedure, the teacher examined the impact of Readers Theatre on the oral reading fluency of struggling readers, as defined by word recognition accuracy, word recognition automaticity, and prosody. At the end of the six week intervention, pre-test results were compared to post-test results. Word recognition accuracy was measured by the number of words read correctly. Automaticity was measured by reading rate. Prosody was measured using the Multidimensional Fluency Scale, which uses a rubric to rate four aspects of prosody on a 4-point scale, with 1 indicating poor performance and 4 indicating good performance.

Word Recognition Accuracy

Post-test results indicate that students' word recognition accuracy, the number of words read correctly, improved dramatically. Seventeen WCPM is the approxi-

mate gain to be expected for an entire year (Rasinski, 1999). All of the participants scored above this benchmark. Twenty-one WCPM was the smallest increase of all the students that took part in the Readers Theatre experiences in this investigation. The highest increase, 64 WCPM, is 47 words above the predicted yearly gain - almost three times the expectancy. The class as a whole went from a class average of 55 WCPM to 93 WCPM. Words that had been practiced repeatedly during the Readers Theatre treatments were recognized and read accurately during the posttest. A decrease in reading errors is another benefit of repeated reading (NRP, 2000; Samuels, 1997). Every student, with the exception of one, had fewer miscues, indicating an increase in accuracy and a decrease in errors from pretest to posttest. During the pretest the class on average had 6.7 errors and on the posttest recorded an average of only 1.2 errors. Many of the miscues that students made during the initial assessment were nonexistent during the posttest.

Word Recognition Automaticity

LaBerge and Samuels (1974) stated that there should be as little mental effort as possible expended on decoding so that readers are able to use their finite cognitive resources for construction meaning. Outcomes indicate that, through the repeated readings inherent in preparation for Readers Theatre performances, reading rate increased for each participant. Words students were unable to identify in the pretest were read quickly and accurately during the posttest. Students were given one minute to read the pretest selection. After the six-week intervention, these students acquired automaticity that enabled them to read more words within the same allotment of time. Additionally, the teacher observed that students exhibited enthusiasm toward engaging in these activities.

Prosody

Prior to the intervention, students had difficulty in the area of prosody as reflected in their low pretest performance. Each child's combined score was less than 8 which, according to Rasinski (2004), shows severe weakness and is cause for concern. Students were likely experiencing problems that could affect their interpretation and understanding of text, as indicated in their class average of 49% on the comprehension measure. At the end of the six weeks, students read in expressive, rhythmic, and melodic patterns (Dowhower, 1991). According to the posttest Multidimensional Fluency Scale the class average increased from a score of 5 to an average of 11 on this measure. This indicates an increased understanding of meaningful phrasing and syntax and aids students in the understanding and interpretation of language (Rasinski, 2000). By listening to models of fluent reading, children were able to hear how the reader's voice made text make sense (Martinez, Roser, &

Strecker, 1999). Since the ultimate goal of this fluency intervention was to increase students understanding of text the post measure on comprehension also revealed encouraging results. As a whole the class comprehension went from an average of 49% to a class average of 86%. The class as a whole went from frustrational to almost independent in comprehension for a grade level passage in a 6 week period.

The outcomes indicate that reading through the use of Readers Theatre positively impacted the oral reading fluency and comprehension of struggling readers by significantly improving word recognition accuracy, word recognition automaticity, prosody and comprehension. In addition, observations of participant behavior during the intervention period suggest that Readers Theatre had a positive effect on every child's attitude toward reading. Many had previously responded negatively to reading assignments and displayed frustration during engagement in reading activities. Readers Theatre's cooperative format and authentic rereading the same text was highly motivational to these reluctant readers.

Conclusion

Readers Theatre provides teachers with a meaningful and purposeful context for incorporating repeated reading, even in the most challenging of learning contexts. Research recognizes the effectiveness of tested methods and practices that exist for the improvement of the oral fluency of struggling readers. Of these methods, repeated reading appears to be among the most successful (NRP, 2000). Readers Theater is one enjoyable way to authentically engage readers in repeated readings. Research has also overwhelmingly linked reading fluency to multiple measures of reading comprehension (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999). Oral reading fluency development through repeated readings has benefits that include: improving both fluency and comprehension; increasing speed and word recognition while decreasing word recognition errors (Samuels, 1997); increasing factual retention and encouraging deeper questioning and insights (Dowhower, 1989); and it is an excellent motivational device (Samuels, 1997). Oral reading fluency is a vital component for proficient reading. Performance activities, such as Readers Theatre, provide authentic reasons to read and reread selections focusing on fluency as well as text understanding, and interpretation.

Readers Theatre should be given teachers' highest consideration. Readers Theatre integrates many methods used to improve oral reading fluency such as modeling, echo reading, buddy reading, choral reading, and repeated reading. When teachers make fluency a major focus and provide instruction and materials that are engaging, students can accomplish the major goal of reading instruction - reading independ-

ently for learning and enjoyment (Worthy & Broaddus, 2001/2002). Research and practice indicate that the use of Readers Theatre has the potential to enhance both the fluency and the comprehension development of students, particularly those students who struggle to develop fluency and comprehension.



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An Investigation of the Efficacy of One Urban Literacy Academy: Enhancing Teacher Capacity Through Professional Development

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Abstract

In order to systemically improve student achievement in elementary literacy, a large urban school district partnered with a local university to develop a model for high-quality professional development that hopefully would result in long-term changes in teachers' literacy instructional/practices. Schools were selected based on their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in reading/language arts' status. The resulting literacy academy provided approximately 150 hours of professional development over time through two semesters of graduate level course work; 60 hours of it job-embedded. The Literacy Academy was based on a capacity-building model to build teacher knowledge and expertise in reading instruction, specifically in the areas of classroom assessment and use of student data to inform instruction; effective teaching methods in such areas as phonics, phonemic awareness, comprehension, fluency, vocabulary development, and writing; adapting instruction for students having special needs; and family involvement techniques. Weekly literacy coaching supported the translation of the new learning into practice. A mixed method design was used in this study and the results of this work are presented.

Introduction

Currently in America, school reform occupies a significant place on the political and social agenda. Urban literacy education is a significant field of research as is teaching expertise focusing on the diverse needs of urban children. Children's literacy development in inner-city schools is often impacted by high student mobility, poverty levels well in excess of the national average, majority-minority populations, large concentrations of English Language Learners (ELL), socio-political factors, unstable and ineffective school leadership (e.g., principals, superintendents), inadequately trained educators (i.e., teachers, principals, central office supervisors), and/or excessive teacher turnover. Unfortunately, many children are failing due to these inadequacies in our systems and resources (Neuman & Celano, 2006). As a result, researchers in the field of urban literacy education study literacy factors, characteristics, and solutions that differ significantly from suburban school environments.

Several studies have indicated that non-White and children of poverty are more likely to be taught by under-qualified or under-prepared educators (Darling-Hammond, Berry, & Theorson, 2001; Dilworth, 1992; & Haycock, 1998). The U. S. Department of Education (2001a) noted that even though there is a heightened awareness of the need for quality teachers, the United States continuously fails to meet the challenge of placing a competent teacher in every classroom though the primary goal of the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001b) was for each child in this country to have a highly qualified teacher. It has also been indicated in several studies that the achievement gap between more between more and less advantaged students is the result of the excessive disparate access to high quality teachers (Barr & Dreeben, 1991; Ferguson, 1991).

Research clearly indicates that the quality of teaching has great impact on the learning of children (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). Insuring that there are highly qualified teachers in the classroom "does more to assist students who are academically at-risk than any other policy-controllable issue" (Denson, 2001, p. 34) such as smaller pupil-teacher ratio or adopted materials (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Fuller, 1999). Teacher capacity-building focusing on evidence-based reading instruction has been found to be the most productive investment for schools and far exceeds the results of teacher experience or class size (Duffy-Hester, 1999; & Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996). There has been an increase in the funding of professional development in high-poverty schools due to an apparent need; this need must be a priority (Williamson, Morrow & Chou, 2008).

Individual Teacher Capacity Building

The United States Department of Education (2009) cites seven characteristics that contribute to high quality teaching stating that participating in professional development focused on content and curriculum ranking second only to teacher cognitive skills (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). There is little argument that professional development specifically tailored to address the necessary content and match the school improvement needs enhances student achievement (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Desimone, Porter, Birman, Garet, & Yoon, 2002). The research publication, *Every Child Reading: An Action Plan of the Learning First Alliance*, queries “What will it take to ensure the reading success of every child?” The answer was clear:

1. Effective new materials, tools, and strategies for teachers.
2. Extensive professional development for the purpose of learning to use these strategies.
3. Meaningful, ongoing professional development opportunities to ensure that all elementary teachers receive specific training in how to teach reading and how to implement well-designed reading programs should be provided (Learning First Alliance, 1998). Intensive and continuous professional development that is aligned with standards and has proven to be a significant force in shaping a school’s instructional quality and effectiveness (Corcoran & Goetz, 1995; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin 1995; & Little 1993.)

School Instructional Capacity Building

Newmann, King, and Youngs (2002) studied “school” organizational capacity as a factor in student achievement. In their work, they examined program coherence which they defined as the extent to which student and faculty programs at a school are coordinated, directed at clear learning goals, and sustained over time (p 646.) Although there is as yet a paucity of empirical evidence that coherence is an essential element, researchers Newman, Smith, Allensworth, and Bryk in 2001 found a strong relationship between program coherence and student achievement in their work with the Chicago Public schools. Rolhieser, Fullan, and Edge (2003) describe the power of systemic focused professional development in Toronto and the notable gains made system wide in their early literacy efforts.

In an article labeled *Inside the Black Box of School District Spending on Professional Development: Lessons from Five Urban Districts* (Miles, Odden, & Fermanich, 2004), the funding of professional development and the results of the ex-

penditure were measured in five urban districts. The findings indicated that school systems lacked formal systemiccoordinated nor integrated professional development strategies. This lack of cohesion created fragmented professional development opportunities with common but mixed delivery systems and significant variability in costs.

The Memphis Literacy Academy

During 2003-2004, a collaborative partnership developed between lead administrators in the Memphis City Schools (MCS) and a group of faculty leaders focused on urban literacy education in the College of Education at the University of Memphis. Their goal was to create an innovative joint venture that would achieve several important objectives. These included:

1. Raising dramatically the reading abilities of elementary students in Memphis City Schools as measured by state and nationally normed standardized tests.
2. The creation and implementation of a 90-hour, two semester training model for MCS elementary teachers in grades K-5 with the goal of developing deep expertise in addressing the reading needs of Memphis children through the implementation of *scientifically-based reading research* (SBRR) in every classroom. This model would become known as *The Memphis Literacy Academy*.
3. Ongoing evaluation by MCS and the U of M Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP) for the purpose of program refinement based on the performance outcomes of Memphis children on state and nationally normed tests.

The Academy's program was is adapted from the Dallas Reading Plan (Cooter, 2004), and updated with current research findings. It was is designed to provide teachers with deep learning of scientifically-based reading instruction content and strategy training, together with peer coaching in the participants' classrooms. At its inception, the Academy served 24 elementary schools with 144 teachers; the principal from each school enrolled. The schools were chosen from among those where more than 25% of the students were reading below TCAP proficiency level, in addition to where the Reading First program was not in place. The students in the schools were are overwhelmingly African-American in ethnicity, and the large majority of them qualify for federal free or reduced lunch programs through Memphis City Schools. There were nine instructor/coaches; the coaches were are all full-time employees of Memphis City Schools. Five of the coaches along with two

University faculty members served as instructors.

The teachers learned new strategies each week and had an implementation goal referred to as Classroom Action Plan, which they implemented in the classroom with input from the coaches. In the first semester, the course content of the Academy addressed the “big five” (National Reading Panel, 2000) areas of reading and in the second semester it covers small group instruction, reading comprehension, and writing instruction were addressed. The primary element of the Memphis Literacy Academy implementation was that, MLA would act upon the belief that the power to change the academic achievement of children is firmly in the hands of highly trained and compassionate teachers. MLA provided materials, tools, strategies, constant classroom feedback, and professional development that promoted teacher capacity building and thus student achievement gains were observed. Student achievement is clearly influenced by the capacity of the individual classroom teacher (Youngs & King, 2002).

Design

The mixed method evaluation design used both qualitative and quantitative data to examine participant perceptions and experiences, methods of instruction, and student achievement. The study analyzed data from teacher participants, classroom observations, and analysis of student achievement data.

School District

Memphis City Schools is the largest school system in the State of Tennessee and the 21st largest Metropolitan school system in the nation and serves more than 119,000 students among 191 schools in grades K-12. There are 112 Elementary schools in this district with approximately 87% African American students, approximately 9% are Caucasian and 4% represent other nationalities. Seventy-one percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Created as a special school district by a private act of the Tennessee General Assembly in 1869, Memphis City Schools (MCS) employs 16,500 people, including about 8,000 teachers, making it the second largest employer in the City of Memphis (Memphis City Schools, 2010).

Schools

Schools whose principals and teachers participated in the program were came from the from the district schools where over 25% of the students were below proficient on the TCAP reading results. From that pool, with the exception of those

schools involved in the Reading First program, all those interested in participating were selected. This resulted in a cohort of 24 elementary schools that taught students in grades Kindergarten through fifth (or sixth) grade. All but four of the participating schools contained more students eligible for free/reduced lunch than the district average (74.9%).

Participants

According to enrollment data, the majority (66.7%) of the 144 teachers who participated in the program taught in grades K-3, which were the target grades for the program. Nearly one-fourth (23.6%) were in specialists' roles in their schools (special education, instructional facilitator, literacy leader, or reading specialist). Table 1 summarizes the distribution of teaching assignments of teacher participants.

**Table 1: Teacher Participants by School Roles
Memphis Literacy Academy, 2005**

Position	N	%
Kindergarten	18	12.5%
1st Grade	25	17.4%
2nd Grade	25	17.4%
3rd Grade	28	19.4%
4th Grade	4	2.8%
5th Grade	9	6.3%
6th Grade	1	0.7%
Special Education	14	9.7%
Instructional Facilitator	16	11.1%
Literacy Leader	3	2.1%
Reading Specialist	1	0.7%
	<u>144</u>	

Instruments

One survey, two interview protocols, a focus group, and a classroom observation tool constituted the data collection instruments. The Teacher Survey focused on the teachers' experiences and their perceptions of resources, capacity, program development, and outcomes pertaining to the Academy. The Teacher Focus group questions focused on teacher perceptions of course delivery methods, design, content, and principal involvement. The Literacy Observation Tool (LOT©) was developed by researchers at the Center for Research in Educational Policy, College

of Education, University of Memphis (Smith, Ross, & Grehan, 2002; Sterbinsky & Ross, 2003), and is an instrument for observing elementary school classrooms in which teachers are engaged in teaching reading as well as other reading practices.

Procedure

Data for this evaluation were collected during the Spring and Summer semesters of 2005. Spring data collection occurred prior to May 20 which was the end of the 2004-2005 academic year for students. Teacher surveys were administered in April, 2005, by course instructors during a regularly scheduled class session. Principal surveys were administered by the program director in April, during a regularly scheduled session of the Principal Fellowship. Instructor surveys were administered in April during a regularly scheduled weekly meeting held by the program administrator.

Trained observers conducted twenty-three separate targeted classroom observations using the Literacy Observation Tool (LOT©). Observations thus represented 15.97% of the teacher participants. The study used a “targeted” LOT approach. In the targeted LOT, the observer spent forty-five minutes in a single classroom, making separate notations every ten minutes. The four sets of notes were then summarized to comprise one targeted LOT. Sites for the targeted LOTs were randomly selected from participating schools. Once the schools were selected, two teachers who participated in the program were randomly selected for the classroom observations. Teachers were not provided with advance notice. (In one case, due to scheduling conflicts, only one teacher was observed.) The first set of observations was conducted in March, shortly after the program started, at three schools resulting in six targeted LOTs. A second set was conducted in May at six different schools, resulting in eleven targeted LOTs. The third set of LOTs (conducted during summer school) came from three schools, with six teachers being observed. For the first two sets of LOTs, the classroom teachers were instructing the group of students with whom they began the 2004-2005 academic year with. For the third set of LOTs, teachers were observed working with a different group of students. These students were enrolled in the district’s school-based summer school program, which ran from May 27 through June 24.

Data Analysis

Teacher Survey

Of the 144 teachers participating in the program, 126 (87.5%) completed the Teacher Survey. Of these, 104 teachers also answered the open-ended questions in

which comments were requested. Survey questions centered on participants' overall perception of the value and impact of the program, as well as components of the program's content and method (including instructors and logistics). In addition, the teacher survey sought respondents' impressions of the impact on their principals, since their principals were participating in a parallel program.

As evident in Table 2, overall perception of the value and impact of the program was positive: nearly all (89.7%) thought the program had been effective in preparing them to teach elementary students to read. The response to the similar item (9) corroborates this finding: in all, 92.8% agreed (or strongly agreed) that the Academy effectively prepared them to improve the literacy skills of their students ($M=4.492$ on a 5-point scale). Consistent with these two responses, 94.4% indicated they found the professional development of the program valuable ($M=4.589$).

Table 2: Teacher Survey

(n=126)	% Strongly Agree	% Agree	% Neutral	% Disagree	% Strongly Disagree	M	SD
1. I find the course materials (texts, readings) relevant to my teaching practice.	69.8	29.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.704	0.458
2. Visits from my reading coach help me implement what I learn in the Academy.	49.2	37.3	6.3	4.0	0.8	4.333	0.836
3. Instructors have made clear the scope and sequence of the Literacy Academy curriculum.	53.2	34.9	6.3	4.8	0.8	4.349	0.861
4. Overall, the Academy blends theory and practice in ways suited to classroom teachers.	57.9	33.3	5.6	2.4	0.0	4.480	0.714

Table 2: Teacher Survey

(n=126)	% Strongly Agree	% Agree	% Neutral	% Disagree	% Strongly Disagree	M	SD
5. The professional development provided by the Academy has been valuable.	62.7	31.7	3.2	0.8	0.0	4.589	0.598
6. My principal is committed to the implementation of the Literacy Academy strategies for our school.	39.7	39.7	16.7	1.6	0.0	4.203	0.778
7. The Academy has helped me routinely use running records or other informal classroom assessment strategies as part of daily literacy instruction.	35.7	48.4	12.7	1.6	1.6	4.151	0.820
8. The Academy has helped me use practical strategies for providing reading instruction in flexible, small groups.	42.1	44.4	10.3	2.4	0.0	4.272	0.745
9. I believe the strategies I am learning during the Academy are positively impacting student achievement.	49.2	43.7	5.6	1.6	0.0	4.405	0.671

Table 2: Teacher Survey

Table 2: Teacher Survey								
(n=126)		% Strongly Agree	% Agree	% Neutral	% Disagree	% Strongly Disagree	M	SD
		Yes			No			
10.	In general, has the Memphis Literacy Academy been effective in preparing you to teach elementary students to read?	89.7			2.4		1.026	0.159

Response Scale, items 1-16: 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree

NOTE: Item percentages may not total 100% because of missing input from some respondents.

In terms of specific components of the program, responses were also strongly positive. Most notably, teachers indicated the course text and readings were relevant to their teaching practice ($M=4.704$), in addition, the program succeeded in blending theory and practice in ways suited for classroom teachers ($M=4.48$). According to the teacher responses, the instructors succeeded in clearly communicating critical content ($M=4.643$), and teachers largely agreed (88.1%, $M=4.349$) that instructors made the scope and sequence of the program clear. They were likewise largely in agreement that visits from reading coaches assisted them with implementing what they had learned in the Academy ($M=4.349$).

Strategies Learned

In terms of the influence of what they had learned, these teachers were most enthusiastic in their belief that the strategies they were learning were having a positive impact on the achievement of their students ($M=4.405$). They thought the program helped them with practical instructional strategies for instructing flexible, small reading groups ($M=4.272$). Also, making daily use of informal classroom assessment strategies was another positive aspects of their program participation ($M=4.151$). They even felt that developing the required classroom action plans helped them improve their instruction ($M=4.264$).

Participant Comment Section

Many respondents used the comment section to indicate how valuable they found the strategies they were taught at the Academy to be. While some teachers indicated they had already been using most or all of the strategies, one participant pointed out that they were now implementing them more effectively. Comments indicated that the program helped participants learn to use assessment techniques (such as reading inventories) and other tools to assess students' reading levels. As a result, teachers were better able to differentiate instruction. Respondents noted appreciatively the research-based nature of what they were being taught as well as the opportunity to immediately implement the concepts with their students. Program participants were also enthusiastic about being able to share strategies with other colleagues at their respective schools.

Teacher Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus group participants were from two randomly selected course sections. From these two, subsets of participants were further selected (again randomly) and invited to participate in the focus groups. One group contained nine teachers, the other, eight. These were conducted during one week in April, in lieu of the latter half of one of the regularly scheduled classes. (Course instructors were not present.) The discussion questions focused on course delivery methods, design, and content. The focus groups also pursued the topic of the involvement of their principals. The following sections address the emerging concepts that are highlighted throughout [this](#) article.

School Teams

Discussants were enthusiastic about the program's selection of school teams to participate in the coursework and its implementation at their home schools. The team approach made it possible for them to share strategies with other teachers at their home schools as well as with each other. However, participants noted that the teaching of different grade levels at their respective schools did lessen the extent to which they could support each other at "home." They noted they actually found little time while "on the job" to interact with fellow participants. They would have found a formal meeting time with each other during the school day useful. The groups of schools that comprised a cluster (course section) of participants did not all have the same dismissal times. Thus, participants noted that it was difficult for some of them to complete their school day, travel to the host school, and still be on time for class.

Instructors

According to the focus group participants, their instructors had a wealth of real-world public school experience with which they enriched the coursework. Instructors were able to keep the class time engaging, with no “dead time.” The course used a “step by step” approach and featured a high level of group discussions, according to those who participated in the focus groups. Pedagogy also included teacher modeling. The hands-on experience was noted appreciatively; some participants indicated the need for even more hands-on activities, particularly for the more abstract concepts within the curriculum. Participants were able to collect useful “carry-out” materials from the course to use with their students. While the coursework was noted as being based in research, some observed that there was overlap in some of the course readings while others actually appeared contradictory. It was noted that some readings were more feasible for application to classroom practice than others. One critic of the semester-based program, who thought a three-hour instructional period each week was not warranted, noted that a workshop format would have been a more effective delivery system than the extended course approach.

Literacy Coaches

Participants were also enthusiastic about the coaching component of the program. This element provided them opportunities to personally discuss their classroom action plans with an expert. Coaching also assisted them in improving their implementation. However, some noted that the coaching visits needed to adhere more faithfully to the scheduled times.

Content of Program

With respect to the actual content of the program, teachers recognized that in addition to the strategies that the program helped them develop, they also found they had developed their academic vocabulary, which now meant they could better understand the professional literature. Participants noted the program grounded them in the basic importance of assessment. They also noted learning the significance of including all five essential components of reading in their instruction. Using “read-alouds” and retelling during instruction are two examples of specific techniques they learned. Miscue analysis was helpful as well; by documenting the difficulties their children were experiencing with reading (e.g., transitions from sentences to stories, and simply “calling words” which indicated a lack of comprehension), teachers demonstrated their own conceptual understanding. Some indicated

concern, however, about incorporating what they had learned with their adherence to the basal reading program adopted by the school district.

Participants expressed concern of a “parent piece” seemed lacking from the course. As a remedy, leaders of the Academy and others participated in parent meetings, offering parents expert advice. Take-home packets were provided for parents with ideas to help their children with reading. A textbook was included in the courses taught weekly that assisted the participants with parental involvement including diverse family types and cultures. Presentations and discussions (case studies) during class time addressed the benefits of family involvement and suggestions on involving parents in the educational process throughout their children’s lives.

Administrators’ Involvement

The focus group discussions acknowledged that having a parallel program for school principals was important; however, they heralded this as unusual in the world of teacher professional development. Having teachers and principals “on the same page” and possessing the same goals would indicate that the principals would have a better sense of what teachers were doing in the classroom. Shared professional readings further enhanced the professionalism. Teachers noted that their principals had found new ways to support them, via providing a teacher’s assistant while the teacher was completing the RICs to committing to send a cadre of teachers to the 2005 International Reading Association Conference.

Literacy Observation Tool

As indicated in the description of the LOT, the observation procedure primarily focused on six categories of basic elements of literacy instruction: Instructional Orientation, Instructional Components, Assessment, Learning Environment, Visible Print Environment, and Materials Used, while utilizing a five-point rubric (0=not observed, 1=rarely, 2=occasionally, 3=frequently, and 4=extensively). In the following descriptive analysis, percentages were frequently and extensively combined unless otherwise specified.

Since the first LOTs were conducted shortly after the program was initiated, the data collected were considered baseline results. The interval between these baseline LOTs and those that followed was, in some cases, less than ninety days. With this interval, comparisons were made, but should be viewed cautiously in light of the brief time that elapsed between baseline and post-program observations.

Baseline LOT (Administered March 2005)

Instructional Orientation

The most-observed instructional orientation in the baseline period was direct instruction to the whole class, seen extensively in 50% of the observations¹. Learning centers and cooperative/collaborative learning were used much less, at 33.3% and 16.7% respectively. Small group instruction was not seen frequently or extensively during any observations.

Table 3. Literacy Observation Tool (LOT®) Data Summary: Baseline LOTs

Number of Targeted Observation Visits for 2004-2005: N = 6					
The extent to which each of the following is present in the school:	Percent Not Observed	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
INSTRUCTIONAL ORIENTATION					
Small group	66.7	0.0	33.3	0.0	0.0
Whole class	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.0
Learning centers	66.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	33.3
Cooperative/collaborative learning	50.0	33.3	0.0	0.0	16.7
INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENTS					
Reading - The Teacher:					
Concepts of Print					
Book/print conventions	50.0	16.7	33.3	0.0	0.0
Alphabetics					
Letter naming/knowledge	83.3	0.0	16.7	0.0	0.0
Phonemic awareness instruction	83.3	0.0	16.7	0.0	0.0
Rhyming	83.3	16.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Explicit phonics instruction	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Fluency					
Models fluent oral reading	50.0	16.7	16.7	16.7	0.0
Has students read/reread orally together	83.3	0.0	0.0	16.7	0.0
Vocabulary					
Introduces/reviews key vocabulary	66.7	16.7	16.7	0.0	0.0
Explicit vocabulary instruction	50.0	16.7	33.3	0.0	0.0
Text Comprehension					
Explicit comprehension strategy instruction	50.0	16.7	16.7	16.7	0.0
Makes connection to prior knowledge	16.7	0.0	66.7	16.7	0.0
Asks students for predictions	66.7	33.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Uses higher level questioning	66.7	33.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Guides visual imaging	66.7	16.7	16.7	0.0	0.0
Guides interactive discussion	50.0	0.0	0.0	16.7	33.3

Table 3. Literacy Observation Tool (LOT®) Data Summary: Baseline LOTs

Number of Targeted Observation Visits for 2004-2005: N = 6

The extent to which each of the following is present in the school:	Percent Not Observed	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
Independent Reading - The Student:					
Reads self-selected materials	83.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	16.7
Writing - The Teacher:					
Letter formation/handwriting	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Writing process	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Language mechanics lessons	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Conferences with students	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Provides for students' sharing	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Writing - The Student:					
Writes independently	66.7	0.0	0.0	33.3	0.0
Response writing	66.7	0.0	0.0	33.3	0.0
ASSESSMENT					
Formal testing	83.3	16.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Portfolios	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
IRI, running records	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
LEARNING ENVIRONMENT					
Conducive to cooperative interactions	16.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	83.3
Students actively engaged	0.0	0.0	16.7	50.0	33.3
Effective classroom management	0.0	0.0	16.7	0.0	83.3
Teacher actively monitors	50.0	0.0	16.7	0.0	33.3
VISIBLE PRINT ENVIRONMENT					
Alphabet	16.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	83.3
Word wall	83.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	16.7
Labeling (names, objects, areas)	83.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	16.7
Classroom library	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.0
Evidence of student writing/work products	66.7	16.7	0.0	0.0	16.7
MATERIALS USED					
Basal texts	66.7	0.0	0.0	16.7	16.7
Big books	83.3	16.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Books on tape	50.0	16.7	0.0	0.0	33.3
Computers	83.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	16.7

Table 3. Literacy Observation Tool (LOT®) Data Summary: Baseline LOTs

Number of Targeted Observation Visits for 2004-2005: N = 6					
The extent to which each of the following is present in the school:	Percent Not Observed	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
Fiction books	33.3	16.7	33.3	0.0	16.7
Non-fiction books	50.0	0.0	33.3	0.0	16.7
Poetry	83.3	0.0	16.7	0.0	0.0
Newspaper/magazines	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Word/vocabulary materials	33.3	0.0	16.7	16.7	33.3
Worksheets/workbooks	83.3	16.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other	50.0	16.7	0.0	33.3	0.0

Note: One targeted observation visit equals approximately 4 individual observations in a single classroom

Neither concepts of print nor any of the alphabetic components were observed frequently or extensively. Explicit phonics instruction was actually “not observed” in 100% of the observations. Among the fluency activities, modeling fluent oral reading and having students read/reread orally together were each observed “frequently” at 16.7% of the time (but never “extensively”). Neither of the vocabulary activities was observed frequently or extensively. The predominant text comprehension activity observed was guiding interactive discussions, which was observed frequently/extensively 50% of the time. Explicit comprehension strategy instruction and making connections to prior knowledge were observed “frequently” at 16.7% each (never “extensively”). Teachers were never observed questioning students for predictions, nor using higher level questioning, or guiding visual imaging. Students were observed “extensively” reading self-selected readings in 16.7% of observation. Writing instruction activities were not observed but students were each observed writing independently and participating in response writing during 33.3% of the observations. No assessment activities were observed frequently or extensively.

The learning environment appears to have been relatively positive in the classrooms observed. Classrooms were observed as conducive to cooperative interactions in 83.3% of the observations. Similarly, students were frequently/extensively viewed as actively engaged, and effective classroom management was likewise observed 83.3% of the time. Teachers were less often seen actively monitoring; this was only noted frequently/extensively in 33.3% of the observations. Classroom print environments were somewhat sporadic. The alphabet was displayed in 83.3% of classrooms, but only 50% of classrooms had libraries, word walls and labeling were observed only 16.7% of the time. Evidence of student writing or work products were seen “extensively” in 16.7% of the observations.

The materials most often utilized were word/vocabulary materials, which were seen frequently/extensively in 50% of observations. Basal texts, audio book and “other” materials were observed 33.3% of the time. Computers and fiction or non-fiction books were next in frequency at 16.7%. Big books, poetry, newspapers/magazines, and worksheets or workbooks were never observed frequently or extensively.

Post-treatment LOT

“Post-treatment” LOTs were conducted in May, 2005 and during Summer School, 2005. The primary instructional orientation viewed in the post-treatment observations was direct instruction to the whole class, observed frequently/extensively in 76.5% of observations. This was followed by small group instruction, noted in 17.6% of observations. Learning centers and cooperative/collaborative learning were seen in only 5.9% of observations.

Table 4. Literacy Observation Tool (LOT®) Data Summary: Post-Treatment LOTs

Number of Targeted Observation Visits for 2004-2005: N = 17					
The extent to which each of the following is present in the school:	Percent Not Observed	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
INSTRUCTIONAL ORIENTATION					
Small group	58.8	11.8	11.8	5.9	11.8
Whole class	11.8	5.9	5.9	11.8	64.7
Learning centers	88.2	0.0	5.9	5.9	0.0
Cooperative/collaborative learning	76.5	11.8	5.9	5.9	0.0
INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENTS					
Reading - The Teacher:					
Concepts of Print					
Book/print conventions	88.2	5.9	5.9	0.0	0.0
Alphabetics					
Letter naming/knowledge	94.1	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Phonemic awareness instruction	76.5	11.8	5.9	5.9	0.0
Rhyming	94.1	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Explicit phonics instruction	76.5	11.8	5.9	5.9	0.0
Fluency					
Models fluent oral reading	41.2	29.4	17.6	11.8	0.0
Has students read/reread orally together	58.8	17.6	5.9	11.8	5.9
Vocabulary					
Introduces/reviews key vocabulary	35.3	29.4	11.8	23.5	0.0
Explicit vocabulary instruction	76.5	17.6	0.0	5.9	0.0
Text Comprehension					
Explicit comprehension strategy instruction	70.6	11.8	0.0	17.6	0.0
Makes connection to prior knowledge	29.4	58.8	5.9	5.9	0.0

Table 4. Literacy Observation Tool (LOT®) Data Summary: Post-Treatment LOTs

Number of Targeted Observation Visits for 2004-2005: N = 17

The extent to which each of the following is present in the school:	Percent Not Observed	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
INSTRUCTIONAL ORIENTATION					
Small group	58.8	11.8	11.8	5.9	11.8
Whole class	11.8	5.9	5.9	11.8	64.7
Learning centers	88.2	0.0	5.9	5.9	0.0
Cooperative/collaborative learning	76.5	11.8	5.9	5.9	0.0
INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENTS					
Reading - The Teacher:					
Concepts of Print					
Book/print conventions	88.2	5.9	5.9	0.0	0.0
Alphabetics					
Letter naming/knowledge	94.1	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Phonemic awareness instruction	76.5	11.8	5.9	5.9	0.0
Rhyming	94.1	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Explicit phonics instruction	76.5	11.8	5.9	5.9	0.0
Fluency					
Models fluent oral reading	41.2	29.4	17.6	11.8	0.0
Has students read/reread orally together	58.8	17.6	5.9	11.8	5.9
Vocabulary					
Introduces/reviews key vocabulary	35.3	29.4	11.8	23.5	0.0
Explicit vocabulary instruction	76.5	17.6	0.0	5.9	0.0
Text Comprehension					
Explicit comprehension strategy instruction	70.6	11.8	0.0	17.6	0.0
Makes connection to prior knowledge	29.4	58.8	5.9	5.9	0.0
Asks students for predictions	82.4	17.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Uses higher level questioning	58.8	29.4	11.8	0.0	0.0
Guides visual imaging	58.8	29.4	11.8	0.0	0.0
Guides interactive discussion	17.6	35.3	41.2	0.0	5.9
Independent Reading - The Student:					
Reads self-selected materials	94.1	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
<i>Table 4. Literacy Observation Tool (LOT®) Data Summary: Post-Treatment LOTs, continued</i>					
The extent to which each of the following is present in the school:	Percent Not Observed	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENTS, continued					
Writing - The Teacher:					
Letter formation/handwriting	88.2	5.9	5.9	0.0	0.0
Writing process	88.2	5.9	5.9	0.0	0.0
Language mechanics lessons	76.5	11.8	11.8	0.0	0.0
Conferences with students	82.4	5.9	11.8	0.0	0.0
Provides for students' sharing	94.1	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Writing - The Student:					
Writes independently	76.5	11.8	5.9	0.0	5.9
Response writing	70.6	11.8	11.8	0.0	5.9

ASSESSMENT					
Formal testing	64.7	0.0	23.5	11.8	0.0
Portfolios	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
IRI, running records	94.1	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
LEARNING ENVIRONMENT					
Conducive to cooperative interactions	11.8	0.0	0.0	23.5	64.7
Students actively engaged	0.0	5.9	5.9	17.6	70.6
Effective classroom management	0.0	0.0	5.9	5.9	88.2
Teacher actively monitors	5.9	23.5	11.8	35.3	23.5
VISIBLE PRINT ENVIRONMENT					
Alphabet	41.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	58.8
Word wall	29.4	0.0	5.9	5.9	58.8
Labeling (names, objects, areas)	58.8	5.9	0.0	5.9	29.4
Classroom library	23.5	11.8	0.0	11.8	52.9
Evidence of student writing/work products	41.2	5.9	5.9	11.8	35.3
MATERIALS USED					
Basal texts	70.6	5.9	5.9	11.8	5.9
Big books	94.1	0.0	0.0	5.9	0.0
Books on tape	82.4	11.8	5.9	0.0	0.0
Computers	76.5	0.0	5.9	11.8	5.9
Fiction books	58.8	11.8	11.8	0.0	17.6
Non-fiction books	94.1	0.0	0.0	5.9	0.0
Poetry	82.4	17.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Newspaper/magazines	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Word/vocabulary materials	58.8	5.9	5.9	11.8	17.6
Worksheets/workbooks	76.5	11.8	5.9	0.0	5.9
Other	35.3	5.9	11.8	23.5	23.5

Note: One targeted observation visit equals approximately 4 individual observations in a single classroom.

Beginning reading and readiness activities (“alphabetic”) were rarely seen in many of the classrooms. Most frequent were phonemic awareness instruction and explicit phonics instruction, each seen “frequently” in 5.9% of observations (never “extensively”). Letter naming/knowledge and rhyming were not observed frequently/extensively; nor were concepts of print. Fluency activities were observed somewhat more frequently, with the teacher frequently/extensively observed requiring the students to read/reread orally together during 17.6% of the observations, and modeling fluent reading in 11.8% of the observations.

Among vocabulary activities, teachers were viewed frequently introducing or reviewing vocabulary in 23.5% of the observations and providing explicit vocabulary instruction in 5.9%. Text comprehension activities were not extensively observed. Explicit comprehension strategy was frequently (never extensively) observed in 17.6% of the observations; and connecting to their prior knowledge during 5.9% of the observations. Teachers were never observed asking students for predictions,

using higher level questioning, guiding visual imaging, or guiding interactive discussions. Independent reading also was not observed.

None of the observations revealed frequent or extensive writing instruction by the teacher. Student independent writing and response writing was noted extensively in 5.9% of the observations. Of the assessment activities, only formal testing was observed frequently/extensively (in 11.8% of observations). Neither portfolios nor running records were observed frequently or extensively.

These observations suggest a positive learning environment. Effective classroom management was frequently/extensively observed in 94.1% of the visits. The classroom was conducive to cooperative interactions and the students were actively engaged in 88.2% of the observations. The teacher was less frequently observed actively monitoring (58.8%). The most often observed print items were word walls and classroom libraries, each were noted 64.7% of the time. The alphabet was displayed in 58.8% of the classrooms. Evidence of student writing was observed 47.1% of the time, and labeling 35.5%.

Interestingly, the most frequently-observed materials utilized were “other”, at 47%. Next were word/vocabulary materials at 29.4%. Basal texts, computers, and fiction books were frequently/extensively seen in 17.6% of observations. Rarely seen were big books, non-fiction books, and worksheets/workbooks (5.9%). Neither poetry nor newspapers/magazines were viewed frequently or extensively.

Descriptive Comparison of Baseline to Post-Treatment LOTs

Preliminary comparisons of baseline and post LOT findings do indicate some changes in teacher practice (see Table 5). While the most pervasive instructional orientation continued to be whole class, the post LOTs evidenced demonstration of small group orientation, frequently or extensively, in 17% of the cases, compared to none in the baseline LOTs. Learning centers and cooperative learning, however, were observed less than in the baseline LOTs.

Table 5: Comparison of Baseline and Post Targeted* LOTs, 2004-2005

	Baseline	Post
The extent to which each of the following is <u>frequently or extensively</u> present in the school:	(n=6)	(n=17)
INSTRUCTIONAL ORIENTATION		
Small group	0.0	17.7
Whole class	50.0	76.5
Learning centers	33.3	5.9
Cooperative/collaborative learning	16.7	5.9

INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENTS**Reading - The Teacher:****Concepts of Print**

Book/print conventions	0.0	0.0
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Alphabetics

Letter naming/knowledge	0.0	0.0
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Phonemic awareness instruction	0.0	5.9
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Rhyming	0.0	0.0
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Explicit phonics instruction	0.0	5.9
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Fluency

Models fluent oral reading	16.7	11.8
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Has students read/reread orally together	16.7	17.7
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Vocabulary

Introduces/reviews key vocabulary	0.0	23.5
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Explicit vocabulary instruction	0.0	5.9
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Text Comprehension

Explicit comprehension strategy instruction	16.7	17.6
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Makes connection to prior knowledge	16.7	5.9
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Asks students for predictions	0.0	0.0
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Uses higher level questioning	0.0	0.0
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Guides visual imaging	0.0	0.0
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Guides interactive discussion	50.0	5.9
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Independent Reading - The Student:

Reads self-selected materials	16.7	0.0
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Writing - The Teacher:

Letter formation/handwriting	0.0	0.0
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Writing process	0.0	0.0
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Language mechanics lessons	0.0	0.0
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Conferences with students	0.0	0.0
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Provides for students' sharing	0.0	0.0
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Writing - The Student:

Writes independently	33.3	5.9
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Response writing	33.3	5.9
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ASSESSMENT

Formal testing	0.0	11.8
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Portfolios	0.0	0.0
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IRI, running records	0.0	0.0
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LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Conducive to cooperative interactions	83.3	88.2
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Students actively engaged	83.3	88.2
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Effective classroom management	83.3	94.1
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Teacher actively monitors	33.3	58.8
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VISIBLE PRINT ENVIRONMENT

Alphabet	83.3	58.8
Word wall	16.7	64.7
Labeling (names, objects, areas)	16.7	35.3
Classroom library	50.0	64.7
Evidence of student writing/work products	16.7	47.1

MATERIALS USED

Basal texts	33.4	17.7
Big books	0.0	5.9
Books on tape	33.3	0.0
Computers	16.7	17.7
Fiction books	16.7	17.6
Non-fiction books	16.7	5.9
Poetry	0.0	0.0
Newspaper/magazines	0.0	0.0
Word/vocabulary materials	50.0	29.4
Worksheets/workbooks	0.0	5.9
Other	33.3	47

**Note: One targeted observation visit equals approximately 4 observation periods in the same classroom over 45 minutes.*

While no alphabetic components were observed frequently or extensively in the baseline LOTs, phonemic awareness instruction and explicit phonics instruction were observed in small numbers (5.9%) of the post LOTs. Both of the vocabulary components were noted in post observations, but not in the baseline. Notably, introducing/reviewing key vocabulary was observed frequently or extensively in nearly a quarter (23.5%) of the post LOTs.

While all the text comprehension components observed at baseline continued to be seen in post LOTs (see Table 9), two actually decreased in frequency (connection to prior knowledge from 16.7% to 5.9%, and guiding interactive discussions from 50% to 5.9%). Student writing was also noted less often (5.9% vs. 33.3%) in post observations than at baseline.

Post LOTs found one of the assessment techniques (formal testing) frequently in 11.8% of the observations, an improvement over baseline where it was observed only rarely. The visible print environment changed from baseline to post, according to the LOTs—while the pervasiveness of the alphabet decreased slightly, all of the other elements (word walls, labeling, classroom library, and evidence of student writing products) increased in the extent to which they were observed frequently or extensively.

In terms of materials used, reliance on basal texts decreased almost by half (from 33.4% to 17.7% extensively or frequently as observed) from the baseline. Three types of materials observed during baseline (audio books, 33.3%; non-fiction books, 16.7%; and word/vocabulary materials, 50%) were evidenced less frequently in post observations (observed 0.1%, 5.9%, and 29.4% respectively). While worksheets/workbooks were not viewed frequently or extensively during baseline, there was a small (5.9%) presence during the post LOT observations.

Nearly two-thirds (64.7%) of the LOT observations during the “post” period were conducted at the end of the regular academic year, in classroom situations comparable to the situations where the baseline observations were made. During this time, teachers were completing the first of their two semesters of course work as part of the Literacy Academy. The remaining post period observations (35.3%) were conducted during summer school. During this time, the teachers were enrolled in the second semester of their program. As a result of the summer school program, the observed teachers may or may not have been in their home schools or in their own classrooms. Further, the students with whom they were working may or may not have been students with whom they had been working over the course of the previous academic year. What was consistent throughout all the observations, however, was the teachers’ ongoing participation in the Memphis Literacy Academy.

Discussion

Teacher Survey

Teachers generally were very positive about the content and relevance of the Academy curriculum and its effectiveness in preparing them to teach reading. Although overall, the teachers were appreciative of the principals’ involvement in the Fellowship, they indicated reservations concerning the knowledge enhancement of the principals.

Literacy Observation Tool (LOT®)

In both the Baseline and Post-Treatment LOTs, the most-observed instructional orientation was direct instruction to the whole class. Of instructional components, the beginning reading and readiness activities (“alphabetic”) were rarely observed.. Fluency activities were noted somewhat more frequently. During the Baseline LOT, neither of the vocabulary activities were observed frequently or extensively; although, during the Post-Treatment LOT both were observed. During the baseline LOT, the predominant text comprehension activity was guiding interactive

instruction. Other text comprehension activities were observed in baseline and post LOTs, but during fewer observations. Writing instruction was never observed frequently/extensively. Independent writing and responsive writing were observed in more baseline observations than during the post-treatment period. Assessment activities were not observed except formal testing. The Learning Environment was positive in both LOTs. All elements of visible print were observed, and several with greater intensity in the post-treatment period than in the baseline were noted.

Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program Results

The impact of the Memphis Literacy Academy on the reading achievement of Memphis children is reflected in the results of the 2005 TCAP Reading Test Scores. According to the Memphis City Schools Report to the Board of Commissioners (2005), children enrolled in the classrooms of MLA teachers improved 14.9% at the “proficient” level on the state’s TCAP when compared to the 2004 results.

Recommendations

The researcher suggested that the Memphis Literacy Academy leadership consider the following recommendations, which reflect observations of data gathered during the evaluation.

1. Review the instructional process relating to the administration of the Reading Inventory for the Classroom (RIC). The teachers appeared to value this instrument, but indicated frustration with the amount of time involved in administering the assessment. They also appeared (at least at the time data were gathered) to be uncomfortable concerning whether they were “doing it right.” The administration of the RIC apparently is rather difficult during initial administration, and it may require another semester of experience to make a huge difference to the teachers. Nonetheless, it would seem sensible to assess whether adjustments in the instruction, modeling and/or feedback could make the RIC more “user-friendly” from the outset.
2. Consider methods to lessen the difficulties some teachers experienced in arriving to Academy classes as scheduled.. Possible adjustments may include later class start times; more central location of classes (the Teaching and Learning Academy was suggested as a possibility); or allowing the classes to “float” from one cluster school to another, making a few meetings more convenient for each teacher.

3. Arrange for the same individual to serve as instructor and coach for each academy participant.
4. Consider ways to allow coaches more time for actual coaching of strategy implementation in the classroom. This could probably be accomplished to some degree by the implementation of the previous (3) recommendation. Other possibilities include adjustments to the locations of schools from which teachers are assigned to specific coaches, or adjusting the number of teachers assigned to some coaches.
5. Enhance the “Parent Involvement” component of the curriculum. Both teachers and principals indicated that this would be a welcomed adjustment.
6. Carefully examine assigned readings.
7. In the future, arrange for new cohorts in the Academy to start in the Fall semester and thus receive a full academic year of Academy participation and learning.
8. Consider surveying the first cohort of participants after the start of the new academic year and conducting LOTs in a random selection of their classrooms to ascertain perceived program value and the extent to which new reading strategies were implemented.

Recommendations Addressed

All of the above recommendations were considered and addressed:

1. Teachers no longer administered the RIC. Teachers were taught to analyze the data from the districts assessment such as DIBELS and the Formative Assessments from the district’s basal series.
2. All classes were moved to school sites with less travel distance and time for teachers.
3. The majority of the instructors were coaches; only one U of M professor served as an instructor.
4. Adjustments were made by assigning coaches to schools that were closer in distance and coaches were allowed to spend more time in each of their assigned schools.
5. Parent Involvement was enhanced during both semesters. Also, a textbook was purchased for each academy participant.
6. Outside reading assignments continued but decreased.
7. A new cohort began in August of 2006 and 2007.
8. We did not address this recommendation due to budget constraints.

Conclusion

The Memphis Literacy Academy was the recipient of the “Urban Impact Award” from The Council of Great City Schools. This award acknowledged the academy’s collaborative efforts of enhancing the professional development of educators. As of the publication of this article, over 500 teachers and administrators had participated and continue to utilize the literacy strategies and information in their schools and classrooms. The collaboration proved to be an effective model because the teachers benefited; consequently, students’ reading levels improved. As data continues to be collected, the state assessments’ scores continue to improve. Upon completion of the academy, many teachers shared they thought they were teaching reading prior to beginning the academy, conversely after a year of the intensive professional development, they now know that they are teaching reading.



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