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# *Reading Horizons*

A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts



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



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Dear Readers,

As the new co-editors of Reading Horizons, we would like to introduce ourselves and our commitment to continue the successful publication of this internationally recognized peer-reviewed journal. Dr. Karen Thomas served tirelessly as editor and co-editor for over fifteen consecutive years. We thank you, Karen, for the many hours you gave to the journal and to our students in the McGinnis Reading Center and Clinic. We would like to also thank you for your significant contributions to the field of literacy and teacher education.

Three co-editors have assumed the editor's responsibilities of Reading Horizons as of January 2014. We are Dr. Lauren Freedman, Professor of Literacy Studies; Dr. Susan V. Piazza, Associate Professor of Literacy Studies; and Dr. Selena Protacio, Assistant Professor of Literacy Studies in the College of Education and Human Development at Western Michigan University (WMU). Another important member of our editorial team is the publications coordinator, Rosario (Eriz) Hughey who will be corresponding with authors and managing the online submissions in ScholarWorks. The Literacy Studies Unit and the Dorothy J. McGinnis Reading Center and Clinic work closely together to support this publication. We are excited to announce that the journal is making the transition to becoming open access, but will remain a fully blind and peer-reviewed international journal for professional and research-based publications.

As we begin a new calendar year, we note the many challenges still facing teachers and the field of teacher education. However, we are optimistic about the direction of national and international narratives in the field of literacy. Literacy is no longer simply defined as reading and writing text. Literacy is now widely acknowledged as a way of communicating across various contexts and mediums. While literacy is still sometimes viewed as a functional skill, there is no denying that it is indeed a social act that underlies every part of our daily lives. National and international policies are focusing more and more on creating critical thinkers and communicators for successful college and career experiences. Cultural literacies, digital literacies, disciplinary literacies, visual literacies, family literacies, and media literacies are just a few of the areas of research that we find ourselves celebrating and publishing in Reading Horizons. What kinds of literacies do you care about? We invite the submission of scholarly manuscripts related to literacy teaching and learning PK – Adult. For further details about submitting your work, please visit: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading-horizons>

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## **MAKING THEIR VOICES COUNT: USING STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES TO INFORM LITERACY INSTRUCTION FOR STRIVING MIDDLE GRADE READERS WITH ACADEMIC DIFFICULTIES**

**Dr. Carolyn Groff**

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### **Abstract**

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The consequences of lack of reading and poor reading skills are problematic for all students, regardless of background; however, for middle grade striving readers with academic difficulties these problems can lead to lower self-efficacy and motivation to engage in literacy tasks. Using the perspectives of urban, middle grade special education students, this article seeks to demonstrate how teachers can use student interview feedback to differentiate instruction by aligning their voices with appropriate practices. Consistent with previous research, (Roe, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), the data show that supportive contexts increase self-efficacy and interest in reading. These perspectives have the potential to provide teachers with better insight about the needs of striving middle grade readers and inform their instructional strategies and materials.

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## Introduction

“Once you get into that book [Bridge to Terabithia], you can sink your teeth inside and not let go until you read the whole thing!” These words, spoken by an eighth grade struggling reader, Jay, are what every language arts teacher would love to hear from their students on a daily basis. Unfortunately, many of our middle grade striving readers do not feel this way about books. This is due, in part, to the contribution their reading difficulties make to a lack of motivation and low self-efficacy. Further, as Alvermann (2005) points out, the reading problems these learners face became increasingly difficult to ameliorate as they progress through school. In practice, this can lead to further decreases in their desire to engage with text and can result in their falling further behind their peers (Alvermann, 2005; Stanovich, 1986). Moreover, teachers of struggling middle grade readers find themselves becoming frustrated in their attempts to meet the needs of these readers (Ash, 2002).

## Student Perspectives

However, as a new teacher, I never thought to formally ask my striving middle grade readers with academic difficulties about their experiences with reading instruction in an effort to use student feedback for the purposes of differentiating their instruction. Research suggests that talking to students can help educators improve their instructional programs and affect student achievement (Roe, 2009; Serafini, 2010). For example, Pachtman and Wilson (2006) argue that student voices are rarely used when evaluating instructional programs: “Much has been written about best practices in the classroom. However, the people directly affected by such practices are rarely consulted” (p. 680). They suggest that educators increase the significance of student opinions in the decision-making process that affects instructional practices. Similarly, Oldfather (1995) suggests that talking to students can help educators find ways to increase student engagement:

Students are a rich but often untapped resource for teachers who want to find ways to support them in becoming more engaged in literacy learning. They have remarkable insights that can inform teachers’ efforts to help them over the hump when they are not feeling motivated. In fact, the very act of consulting students about their ideas on motivational problems can help dissipate the conflicts that so easily result when students are not meeting a teacher’s (or their own) expectations (p. 14).

Despite the recognition that students' voices can make an important contribution to our understandings of literacy practices, however, only a small amount of research has addressed the problems of striving readers from their own perspectives (e.g., McCray, Vaughn & Neal, 2001).

This small volume of research using students' perspectives, such as the work of Wray and Medwell (2005) and Smith and Wilhelm (2002), has suggested that students' feelings about literacy tasks are not always what adults perceive them to be. For example, in the U.K., Wray and Medwell (2005) found that the perspectives students had about literacy instruction in schools can confirm or disconfirm widely held beliefs by teachers about students' participation, enjoyment and achievement in literacy. Similarly, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) used interviews with adolescent boys to suggest that engagement with literacy tasks is increased when factors such as challenge, social interaction, immediate feedback and feelings of competence are created within specific contexts. Roe (2009) found that using students' voices supported a richer understanding of the practice of differentiation in middle grade literacy instruction. Often teachers choose practices, such as round-robin reading (e.g., Kuhn, 2009; Ash & Kuhn, 2006) that they think may be advantageous to striving readers, when, in reality, those practices can be detrimental to a student's reading achievement and motivation.

In order to identify a place for research on student perspectives on literacy instruction, it is useful to review how student perspectives have been incorporated into assessments designed to evaluate students' affective factors (McKenna & Dougherty-Stahl, 2009). One approach to assessing students' feelings about reading is to administer interest inventories; these focus on students' liking of certain topics, characters and even surface features of texts, such as book covers or titles (McKenna & Dougherty-Stahl, 2009). A different approach assesses students' general positive or negative attitudes toward reading (e.g. McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995); yet another evaluates how students perceive themselves as readers (Henk & Melnick, 1995). While these assessments, as well as the corresponding research, have been helpful in guiding teachers toward appropriate text selection or instructional design, I would argue a broader framework that incorporates the concepts from these assessments would allow us to better see a greater array of the elements that play a role in a reader's relationship with reading. The framework proposed in this article suggests that student feedback from open-ended interview questions should be examined through the lens of perceived self-efficacy and the related constructs of context and interest in order to create a richer portrait of our striving middle grade readers.

### **Student efficacy**

Self-efficacy plays a key role in a reader's belief that he or she can successfully read a text in the first place. The notion of perceived self-efficacy is central to reading and relates to the previous two dimensions, interest and context. Bandura (1993), a pioneer in the research on self-efficacy, argues that perceived self-efficacy plays a critical role in a person's motivation to engage in a task. Bandura (1993) suggests that high levels of self-efficacy contribute to the amount of effort one exerts during a task. He also suggests that a person with positive self-efficacy beliefs spends longer amounts of time undertaking a task and "is persistent in the face of failure when he or she fails to accomplish a goal on the first attempt" (Bandura, 1993, p. 131).

### **Context**

Further, it is important to understand that self-efficacy is context specific. Context begs the following question: What are the features of the space that engage or disengage readers in reading? A great deal of literacy research has been devoted to creating an appropriate physical environment that will engage students in literacy tasks. However, context characteristics are not only physical, but also include the abstract constructs of the space. In fact, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) consider the abstract contextual features of space crucial to literacy engagement. For example, Smith and Wilhelm found that multiple contextual features contributed to adolescent boy's engagement with literacy tasks, including opportunities for being social, being challenged, having control over one's learning, getting feedback and experiencing change in routines. In other words, self-efficacy cannot be divorced from contextual features, such as the opportunity for challenge. As Smith and Wilhelm suggest (2004):

The young men in our study wanted to be challenged, but they wanted to be challenged in contexts in which they felt confident of improvement, if not success. If the challenge seemed too great, they tended to avoid it, instead returning to a domain in which they felt more competent (p. 37).

And context may be especially important in relation to students who are struggling with their reading. While the cause and nature of reading difficulties are often difficult to assess (Spear-Swerling, 2004), many researchers believe they are the result of several factors, including school instruction (Wixson & Lipson, 1996). Unfortunately, it is often the case that students with reading difficulties are placed

in classrooms in which the reading instruction differs from that of their more able peers (Johnston & Allington, 1996).

### **Interest**

A related construct to self-efficacy is that of interest. According to Bandura (1993), people with high levels of perceived self-efficacy are more likely to develop interest and engage in tasks; like self-efficacy, interest plays a critical role in students' academic motivation and achievement (Hidi, 2001). With regard to reading, McKenna and K.A.D. Stahl (2009) state, "An interest area is really an attitude toward reading about a particular topic" (p. 205). However, other factors, can contribute to the interest in reading about particular topics. These factors include "aspects of the learning environment, such as task presentations, and teaching materials, as well as by variations in individuals' self-regulation" (Hidi, 2001, p. 197).

For teachers of striving readers, interest is extremely important. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) in their study of adolescent boys and literacy suggest that the individual interests of boys played key roles in these boys' literacy engagement. The authors also show how certain types of texts were more engaging for the boys than were others and note that teachers can learn to utilize both types of interests in order to lure disengaged students to reading.

A review of the research indicates that perceived self-efficacy, context and interest are rarely put in dialogue in research that uses the voices of the readers themselves. While the literature on contexts and literacy is rich with ethnographic data

(e.g. Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), less research exists that examines the three concepts using qualitative data. By talking to striving readers, we can learn more about how these dimensions combine, or act alone, to engage, or more often disengage, such readers with texts. Further, by giving these readers a voice, we are better able to meet their needs through differentiated instruction that increases both their success and motivation in the literacy classroom (Roe, 2009).

Our striving middle grade readers can find a voice in open-ended interview protocols that assess various aspects of students' home and school literacy practices, views on reading instruction, and more recently, their preferences for the new literacies involved in the use of technological tools. However, for teachers already overwhelmed by the amounts of quantitative data gathered on students' performance, it can be difficult to determine what should be done with these atypical kinds of data. This leads to the central question that will be examined in



this article: How can teachers acknowledge and incorporate striving middle grade students' perspectives on self-efficacy, interests, and instructional contexts when designing literacy instructional practices? While some interest and attitude inventories can be quantified, this article suggests that, in addition to those inventory scores, student interview data be collected and aligned with an established best practice framework in order that students' perspectives on self-efficacy, interests, and instructional needs be taken into consideration during instructional planning.

## **The Study: Voices of Four Middle Grade Readers**

### **Setting and Participants**

The voices used to illustrate the alignment of interview data with middle grade instructional practices are those of four young men: Jay, Andre, Rasheem (grade 8), Robert (grade 7) and one young woman, Kaya (grade 7) in an urban K-8 school in central New Jersey (all names are pseudonyms). The school's population is entirely Latino/a, African-American and Asian. All of the five students were classified on their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) as specific learning disabled and received language arts-literacy instruction in special education resource or self-contained classrooms.

### **Data Collection and Instruments**

Each student was interviewed three times throughout the school year. The three interview guides were based on previously developed reading interviews (e.g. Burke, 1987; Ewoldt, 1986; McCray, Vaughn & Neal, 2001; Johnson, 2005; McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995; Miller & Yochum, 1991) and relevant constructs in the literature that relate to students' self-perceived competence (Bandura, 1993; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; 2004) and feelings about interest and context (Hidi, 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; 2004) during literacy instruction. The interview guides consisted of sets of open-ended questions that provided the students with the opportunity to elaborate or initiate new topics. They were asked about various aspects of reading, including their experiences reading at school and at home, their reading improvement, favorite reading materials, and reading skills. These topics often led to discussions about their teachers' instruction during class.

### **Data Analysis**

These qualitative data were coded through microanalysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, the interviews were parsed into segments by analyzing the transcript

for topic shifts. A segment was formed through two ways. First, a new episode happens when the author, as the interviewer, shifted the conversation by asking a major question not related to the last answer given by the student. Alternatively, although less frequently, a student would change the direction of the conversation by making an unexpected comment. Next in the data analysis process, the episodes were labeled using the three a priori categories (self-efficacy, interest, context) while remaining open to the possibility of new categories. Within each episode labeled by a major category, the words of the participants were used to label the data. Those labels were then collapsed into categories and became sub-categories within the major a priori category already ascribed to that episode. This process occurred in all cases, with one exception. When using the participant's words, it was revealed that students would use words that indicated the passage of time or the expenditure of significant amounts of time, especially when talking about their favorite activities. Phrases and terms such as "practice a lot", "every day", "the whole night", "a few hours" within the context of these episodes indicated that time, rather than one of the other categories, was of utmost important to these students. Therefore, time was not included as a contextual feature because it interacted with self-efficacy and interests in the readers, therefore complicating the three categories.

## **Results**

The learners in this study talked about reading in very different ways because they were all at different places in their literacy acquisitions; however, one common feature is their focus on ways that teachers could help them improve their reading by choosing practices that create supportive environments, boost their self-efficacy, and support their interests. Roe (2009) also found through interviews that middle grade students emphasized ways teachers can assist them in their literacy tasks.

### **Robert's story**

Robert who, in his words, was "twelve years old and can't read" related the following narrative to me each time I spoke with him.

Like when that other teacher was teachin' us, and I was try to sound out the words, and every time I try to sound out the words, she'd be sayin' it to me, and I be keep on saying can you let, can you please let me try it by myself, and she wouldn't listen to me. Which made me mad. And then I didn't want to read no more,

she's just going keep on telling me, without giving me a chance to say I need help, can you help me? I didn't even say that. She just gonna blurt out the words.

Robert, who already "hated" reading, was resentful of the assistance the teacher was trying to give him. From the Vygotskian perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), assistance from another person or tool is critical when one is performing or learning a task. Vygotsky suggests that processes involved in learning are realized because of the dialogic interaction that occurs when a person is being assisted by another; in fact, without that interaction, learning is hindered because the exchange of ideas is not able to take place. However, not all types of assistance are equivalent, and what teachers perceive to be scaffolding is not always welcome. How the assistance is provided and the circumstances in which it occurs are essential components of reading instruction. While the teacher discussed above might have been well-intended in giving Robert each word, when he was denied the opportunity to attempt to identify a word before asking for assistance, he lost his sense of control over his reading. Robert's lack of reading skills, coupled with the instruction he was receiving, completely diminished his enthusiasm for reading:

R: *I hate it, I hate it, I hate it.*

Author: *Okay, so you told me you don't like reading.*

R: *I just hate it.*

Author: *Why do you feel that way about reading?*

R: *Because I can't do it. And when I tried to sound out the words my head starts hurting, and I don't like it.*

Robert communicated his feelings of frustration throughout the interview with statements like, "*I get frustrated when I try to read a book and I don't know the words*" and "*sometimes I get so mad because I'm twelve years old and I can't read*". While Robert had a low sense of self-efficacy about being to read, he told me that he still enjoyed another of aspect of literacy: writing his own action books with his own words and pictures. In Robert's case, a context that gave him control and choice over his literacy tasks allowed him to work on his own level by writing books with words he knows and on topics in which he is interested.

### Andre's story

If Robert's story is an example of inappropriate assistance, then what kind of teacher assistance is welcome? Andre provided a good example of appropriate assistance that contributed to his reading performance:

Andre: *Language arts is better than last year.*

Author: *It is? Can you give me a couple of reasons why?*

Andre: *'Cause Ms. (Teacher's name) picks the books that we like.*

Author: *Aha, so Ms. (Teacher's name) might have something to do with it; she knows how to pick the books you like. And what else?*

Andre: *She's a nice teacher.*

Author: *Can you give me some examples of some of the things she does in her teaching that make her seem nice or make the class fun, or make reading fun?*

Andre: *She lets us all take a turn. She stops and asks what you read in the paragraph, like what were they saying.*

Author: *Oh, so she stops and asks you questions about what you just read?*

Andre: *Yeah, she stops at almost every paragraph and then she's like, "What were they saying in the paragraph? What was happening?"*

Author: *So when she stops after every paragraph and asks you questions, how does that help you in your reading?*

Andre: *It helps me a lot 'cause I understand the story as I read when I explain it.*

Author: *Oh, so when you explain to her the answer to her questions, it helps you to understand the story.*

Andre: *It means I understand the part that I read.*

Andre's teacher provided him with the assistance that he needed to maintain control over his reading. Rather than telling him the answers, she made Andre accountable for his knowledge by breaking the text into smaller units and through the use of questions for understanding. Andre's story resonates with the Vygotskian perspective which argues that students must receive assistance through social mediation in order for learning to take place. While providing students with the opportunity to establish control over the situation, Andre's teacher made him articulate the ideas in the text and prompted his understanding through the use of questions. The difference between Robert's and Andre's accounts of teacher assistance is striking and shows that the type of scaffolding a teacher chooses is a powerful factor in the way students view their competence in reading. Similarly, Roe (2009), in her study of middle grade readers' perceptions of differentiation, states, "These students recognize and appreciate the assistance that their teachers

offer and the different paths that the assistance often takes to make their success probable” (16). Student competence is complicated by the practices teachers use when assisting their students.

### Kaya's story

Kaya is very aware of her literacy practices, both in and out of school. She makes it very clear in one short interview that she requires a context in which she has control over her reading, and does not want her self-efficacy compromised:

Author: *Do you like reading out loud?*

K: *No.*

Author: *How come?*

K: *Cause I read better when I read by myself.*

Author: *How come?*

K: *'Cause I get nervous when I read out loud, cause I think when I mess up on a word, I think students are going to laugh at me.*

*(In a later episode)*

Author: *So what kind of reading are you better at? The reading you do outside of school or the reading in school?*

K: *Outside, because when I'm inside, I have to read out loud.*

Author: *So when you're in school you have to read out loud.*

K: *Yes, and when I'm home, I can read to myself.*

Kaya not only relishes control over her reading processes, but when she reads as well. She was upset that her teacher tells her when to read rather than giving her the freedom to choose when to read. Yet, despite the fact that she had little control over when and how she read in class, Kaya still enjoyed one of the class novels immensely.

Author: *So let's talk about the reading you've been doing in class.*

*So you read *Tears of Tiger*. What did you think?*

K: *It's good. I like that book*

Author: *How come?*

K: *Because it's talking about, its effect on how we are today, on how teenage kids act today, and how they go through different kinds of experience in their life.*

Author: *So of all the books you just named which one did you like the best?*

K: *Tears of a Tiger.*

Author: *How come you like it more than the other books?*

K: *I just love that story.*

Author: *How come?*

K: *Because it's nice, it's a nice story.*

Author: *But it's sad at the end!*

K: *Yes, it is sad, but it has poems in it, and it talks the way we talk today.*

Overall, Kaya is a student who relishes her independence and the freedom to control her reading. Kaya is eager to learn and wants to get better at her reading; however, she cannot do that unless she is guaranteed an environment that offers her choices and risk-taking free of embarrassment.

### Rasheem's story

Rasheem is a captain of the school's basketball team. His interest in playing basketball transferred over to his reading and was reluctant to talk in our interview about reading unless we were discussing reading about basketball or sports. In fact, in a few consecutive conversation episodes, he wanted to ensure I understood that he wanted to read about sports:

Author: *Okay. You don't like reading by yourself. How come?*

R: *I get tired after a while.*

Author: *You get tired after a while.*

R: *If I'm reading sports, I'll read it to myself.*

Author: *Okay, so wait, if you're reading sports you read it to yourself and do you get tired after a while of reading it?*

R: *No.*

Author: *How come? Why is that?*

R: *Cause it's players that are in the NBA, everybody's famous in the NBA, the players in the NBA are in the book.*

Rasheem's interest in basketball contributed to the amount of time he spends reading about basketball, which, in turn, contributed to a sense of competence in reading about this material:

Author: *So when you're at home do you still pick up a book and read it?*

R: *No. I go on the computer and read about basketball.*

Author: *So where would you read about basketball?*

R: *The Lakers and some other teams.*

Author: *So there are team sites? Or is it like ESPN?*

R: *Teams.*

Author: *Is that reading hard or easy?*

R: *It's easy.*

Author: *How come?*

R: *I like it. I like some of the teams. I mostly read about the Lakers.*

Author: *So is that kind of reading fun?*

R: *Yeah.*

Author: *Would you say that you are good at it?*

R: *Yeah.*

Author: *How do you know you're good at it?*

R: *Cause I always read it.*

Author: *How often do you read it?*

R: *Every time I get a chance, I go on the computer.*

Author: *Would you say you're better at reading about the Lakers than you are at the story you read in class?*

R: *Yeah.*

Author: *How do you know?*

R: *I read it every day.*

Rasheem's was able to give me definitive answers about his basketball reading. When the reading did not apply to his individual interest, Rasheem did not even care to discuss it. Rasheem's reading about basketball served a purpose; it helped him pursue an interest about which he was passionate, whereas school literacy was unconnected to his interest. Rasheem's story confirms the argument made by Smith and Wilhelm (2002): boys need to see literacy as purposeful and connected to an activity that they value. Rasheem's interest in basketball led to an enthusiasm for playing and reading about the game. Overall, Rasheem was indifferent to school literacy for two reasons: first, the reading was not about his interest (i.e., basketball); and second, he felt that he did not have enough practice in school reading. While Rasheem did not state that he was poor at school reading, he was rather ambivalent toward it and was unable or unwilling to evaluate it one way or the other.

### Jay's story

Jay is an eighth grader who receives his language arts-literacy instruction in the same resource class as Andre and Rasheem. Jay's real passion is playing video games, especially an on-line game in which he interacts with other players. Jay spent a great deal of the interviews focusing on this game, providing me with

specific examples of a typical game session as well as with examples of the literacy skills involved in playing this type of game. Jay had a real sense of what it means to be engaged in an activity.

Author: *So do you think your reading has changed since the beginning of the school year?*

J: *Yes.*

Author: *Why would you say that?*

J: *Because I learn new words, I read new books, and it was fun.*

Jay feels that knowing the words is important to reading, but he also thinks about reading in terms of understanding the text and being able to imagine it; he said that his best reading skill is being able to imagine the story. Jay seems to understand that reading is an enjoyable activity:

Author: *So out of all of those stories, *Bridge to Terabithia*, *Yes Ma'am*, and *Charles*.... (Jay cuts me off)*

J: *Bridge to Terabithia, I have to say it's better.*

Author: *Why would you say that?*

J: *Well, it's longer, but I like it because it's like a nice story. Once you get into that book, you can sink your teeth inside and not let go until you read the whole thing.*

Whether it is video games or reading in or out of school, Jay likes to be involved in what he is doing. He wants to have fun, reap rewards, improve and learn all at the same time. Given Jay's experiences with his game playing out of school, he has the potential to experience school literacy in the same way. It is up to us as educators to provide him with such opportunities. As with any qualitative research study involving young students, there are limitations to the data. First, because of their academic difficulties, the students may not have fully articulated their feelings about particular aspects of reading because they lack the vocabulary to do so. Second, the students may have understated or exaggerated certain aspects of their literacy practices just to please me, as the interviewer, or their teachers. However, to disregard their voices for their occasional lack of clarity as being valuable to our reflective practice would be to disenfranchise these students from a system that is supposed to give them access to social and economic capital (Delpit, 1995; Freire, 2004).



### Discussion: Choosing supportive and beneficial practices based on student interview feedback

Based on the interview feedback, the students in this study would further benefit from instructional methods designed to increase reading fluency and comprehension while maintaining the dignity of striving readers and building confidence. This calls for a wide range of practices that would allow teachers to differentiate instruction using activities for large and small groups, as well as individuals (Roe, 2009). Ash (2002) proposed a framework of middle grade classroom practices linked to instructional activities that would meet the needs of both general education and special education readers within a balanced literacy program. Using Ash's framework, I propose that teachers can link data from their own student interviews to find the most appropriate practices to enhance self-efficacy and interest, while maintaining supportive environments (see table 1):

Table 1

Classroom Practices and Examples of Instructional Activities (Ash, 2002)	Link to data analysis of student interviews	Example from Interviews
Practice: Daily oral or shared reading Activities: Choral reading, Readers' Theatre, teacher read-aloud, repeated readings, taped read-alongs	Self-efficacy and supportive contexts: These activities take the place of individuals reading aloud in front of their peers (round-robin reading); students self-efficacy is built when proper support is offered for reading orally	Robert: Did not want teacher to tell him the words all of the time Kaya: Did not want to "mess up" reading in front of others
Practice: Guided reading in flexible groups Activities: Book club, literacy study circles, guided reading	Supportive contexts and interest: teachers can scaffold comprehension and have students assist with text selection to fit their interests; supportive context also offers choice and control over text selection	Rasheem: reading about basketball Jay: wanted to become involved in the text Kaya: wanted to read books in which she could relate to the topic
Practice: Word study in guided reading groups Activities: Word sorts, making big words, mystery word match, constructing and deconstructing words	Self-efficacy: as striving readers learn to read words, they begin to feel better about themselves as readers	Robert: wanted to try reading the words himself before he asked the teacher for help Jay: wanted to learn new words
Practice: Self-selected extended reading and writing Activities: SSR/SSW, reading/writing workshop, discussion partners, dialogue journals	Interest and context: Students can select their own texts to read or write according to interest; discussion groups allow students to experience the social nature of literacy within a supportive setting; supportive context also offers choice and control over literacy tasks	Robert: liked to write his own action stories Rasheem: wanted to read about basketball Kaya: wanted to have control over how and what she read Jay: enjoyed reading new books and becoming involved in the text
Practice: Comprehension strategy instruction Activities: Reciprocal teaching, making connections, formulating questions	Self-efficacy, interest and contexts: These activities require a context in which learning is scaffolded; as students engage in teaching and questioning, their interest is heightened and their self-efficacy increases	Andre: teacher assisted his comprehension by segmenting the text into smaller pieces and holding Andre accountable for explaining the segment

I encourage teachers to not only ask students about their reading interests, as is typically done in reading interviews, but to also ask about the kinds of school literacy activities and instruction that they enjoy or dislike—even if the answers may not always be what we want to hear. Teachers then can add their own interview data in the third column of the table to align with practices and activities suggested by Ash. For example, Robert and Kaya felt that their self-efficacy was compromised reading aloud in class; Ash suggests that students read orally through choral or readers' theatre activities to provide the oral reading practice with support. Jay loved reading new books and the social aspects of learning new ideas; he would benefit from self-selected reading and discussion partners, as suggested in the framework. In aligning their students' voices with the practices, teachers can begin to eliminate those practices which do not seem to benefit their students based on the feedback and start implementing differentiated instruction using activities designed to meet a wide range of students' needs such as self-selected extended reading or small group word study instruction.

When constructing a supportive and safe environment that would allow striving readers to feel they can take risks in reading, it is essential any practices designed to draw attention to students' reading difficulties or to make them feel embarrassed be avoided. For example, of all the experiences discussed in the interviews, reading out loud was the one aspect to which students reacted most passionately. After years of struggling to read out loud in an inhospitable environment, students felt that the practice affected them in a negative manner. The aversions to reading out loud that these students described echoes research undertaken on "round robin" reading. Based on their own research and that of others, Ash and Kuhn (2006) suggest that round robin reading harms students' self-efficacy in reading by embarrassing them and discourages disfluent reading by interrupting the flow of the text. Kuhn (2009) also argues that this type of reading fails to provide students with adequate practice reading print since the amount they read, usually a few sentences to a paragraph, is not enough to increase reading skills. Furthermore, a classroom of striving readers reading out loud provides poor models of what fluent should sound like (Kuhn, 2009). Rather than round-robin reading, teachers could implement choral reading, echo reading, partner reading or repeated readings (see Kuhn, 2009; Kuhn and Stahl, 2003). Therefore, any frameworks of practices that teachers choose to align with interview data should be ones that contain only supportive, research-based practices, rather than those to which teachers may have been subjected as they progressed through school.

Given the self-awareness that the students in this study articulated, I would argue that the most important idea to emerge from these interviews is the importance of listening to our learners when they speak about their reading. Serafini (2010), advocating for the use of extended interviews, states:

These extended interviews take a while to complete, but I have found that they generate information no other assessment windows provide. Their usefulness more than compensates for any struggle teachers have finding to complete them...Interviews allow teachers to talk with students about a variety of concepts and attitudes that are not readily observable. They provide teachers with students' preferences and feedback about their own teaching and procedures (p. 55).

We must treat this data as carefully as we would other forms of data by recording, analyzing and using it to drive instruction. If, as teachers, we take the time to talk to our striving students individually about their ideas regarding reading and instruction, we may be able to cater more to their needs, whether it is choosing appropriate texts, giving appropriate forms and levels of assistance, or creating instructional contexts that support and challenge each learner. This article suggests that teachers construct a short interview protocol to examine practices that contribute or constrain our students' abilities to complete literacy tasks. Once analyzed, teachers can then begin to link their students' input to appropriate and research-based instructional strategies to use in their classroom using the framework provided (Ash, 2002), replacing ones that do not meet their students' needs as necessary. Reflective practice is the very foundation of good instruction. In addition to our more frequently used forms of feedback such as assessment data, we should insist that voices from our underrepresented students become a part of this reflective process in order to compose accurate and complete portraits of instructional programs in all types of classrooms.



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## Appendix

### Interview Guides

#### Guide 1

What activities do you like to do outside of school?

Of all of those activities, which one do you like the best? Why?

Which one of the activities do you think you do the best? Why would you say this?  
Do any of those activities involve reading? What kind of reading?

How does that kind of reading you do for “activity x/activities x, y, z” compare with  
the reading you do while you in school? (Hint: it is more fun or less fun, is it  
harder or easier)

Which kind of reading are you better at? The reading you do outside of school (for  
the activities you just named) or the reading you do inside of school? Why?

Let’s talk about the reading you’ve been doing in reading and language arts class. I see  
that you are reading “book x”? How do you like reading this book?

What book did you read before this book? Tell me more about that book.

Which book do you like more: book z or book x? Why? Which book are you better at  
reading? Why?

#### Guide 2:

Do you have a favorite book? Can you tell me about it?

What kinds of things do you read besides books (newspapers, instructions for gaming,  
comic books, magazines)?

Which of things do you enjoy reading the most? Why?

Do you read for fun? Tell me more about reading for fun.

How often do your parents or caregivers ask you to read? Tell me more about that.

If someone was having difficulty reading, how would you help them? What would the teacher do to help them?

### **Guide 3**

What kind of reader do you think you are? What would you like to do better as a reader?

What things could someone like your teacher, parent, or me do to help you become a better reader?

When you are reading and you come to something you don't know, what do you do? Do you ever do anything else?

Do you think your reading has changed since the beginning of the school year? Why would you say this?

How do you feel about reading now compared to how you felt about it last year? What things could we do to help you enjoy reading more?

Can you tell me something else about your reading or reading in general? It can be anything you want (how you feel about reading; things you like to read or don't like to read).



### **About the Author**

Carolyn Groff holds a B.A. from Mount Holyoke College and Ph.D. in Literacy and Language Education from Rutgers University. She is currently an assistant professor of literacy instruction at Monmouth University. Prior to coming to New Jersey, she taught literacy to an under-served population at a Title I school in rural Virginia.





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## HOW THREE SCHOOLS VIEW THE SUCCESS OF LITERACY COACHING: TEACHERS', PRINCIPALS' AND LITERACY COACHES' PERCEIVED INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

Dr. Kristen Ferguson

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### **Abstract**

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This paper investigates how the participants in literacy coaching (teachers, literacy coaches, and principals) perceive the success of their literacy coaching programs. This qualitative study uses data from interviews and observations of literacy coaching from three schools in Ontario, Canada. Four perceived indicators of success were found: growth in student achievement, improved teaching, an increase in professional dialogue in a safe environment, and a commitment to the literacy coach. While the study did not collect student data, the beliefs of teachers, literacy coaches, and principals are significant as perceptions of self and group efficacy can predict outcomes. This research suggests defining the success of literacy coaching is complex and recommends literacy coaching programs be evaluated using a variety of measures.

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## Introduction

Literacy coaches are educators who work with teachers to improve both teaching and student learning in literacy. Within the last decade, literacy coaching has become a popular form of professional development utilized in schools in Canada and the United States (Lynch & Alsop, 2007). But while popular, it has been noted by researchers and educators that the research supporting the use of coaching is limited (Askew & Carnell, 2011; Casey, 2006; Dole & Donaldson, 2006). There are only a handful of research studies that investigate whether coaching is successful and if, in fact, it has made an impact on teaching and learning. Defining successful literacy coaching is, of course, subjective. What is success in literacy coaching? Is success improved tests scores, a change in teaching practices, or other indicators? Who determines literacy coaching's success –teachers, principals, coaches, administrators, or the government? This paper is a part of a larger research study that also examined the relationships among the players in literacy coaching (Ferguson, 2011a) and the role of the coach (Ferguson, 2011b). This portion of the research seeks to reveal how the participants in literacy coaching (teachers, coaches, and principals) define and view success within their own literacy coaching programs. The research question guiding this paper is: how do principals, literacy coaches, and teachers view success in a literacy coaching program?

## Indicators of Success in Literacy Coaching in the Literature

When reviewing the extant literature on literacy coaching, two main indicators of success emerge: increased student achievement and the changing of teaching practices.

### Increased Student Achievement

There are many anecdotal accounts that describe the positive effects of literacy coaching on student achievement (e.g. Sturtevant, 2004; Walpole & McKenna, 2004) or research implies a relationship but does not make direct links between literacy coaching and student achievement (e.g. Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Frey, 2003; Morgan et al., 2003; Peterson, Taylor, Burnham, & Schock, 2009). Some literature does directly explore the connection between literacy coaching and student achievement; however, the results of these studies are inconsistent. Booth Olson & Land (2008), Elish-Piper and L'Allier (2010), and Carlisle and Berebitsky's (2011) have found a positive connection between literacy coaching and student achievement. But the research of Cusumano, Armstrong, Cohen, and

Todd (2006), Feighan and Heeren (2009), and Marsh, McCombs, and Martorell (2012), report that literacy coaching had no effect on student achievement. These studies are briefly reviewed in the following section.

First, Booth Olson & Land (2008) used a quasi-experimental design to study secondary school literacy coaching in three school districts over three years in California. They found that students in classes whose teachers were supported by literacy coaching showed significant gains in writing achievement. Booth Olson & Land (2008) conclude that when literacy coaching is used in conjunction with professional development, it provides an initial boost to the effectiveness of writing instruction, and this boost is sustained in following years.

Elish-Piper and L'Allier (2010) investigated literacy coaching in the early primary grades (K-1) in one school district in the United States. Elish-Piper and L'Allier (2010) used hierarchical linear modeling and multiple regression modeling to study literacy coaching and its relationship to student reading achievement. The researchers found that in-class coaching activities, such as observation, are more likely to lead to increases student achievement than other coaching activities. While the study is limited to the effects of only 5 literacy coaches, the results of the impact of literacy coaching on student achievement are promising.

Carlisle and Berebitsky (2011) conducted a larger quasi-experimental study researching the impact of 21 literacy coaches on first grade students and teachers in Reading First schools across Michigan. The authors found that teachers who received literacy coaching were more likely to implement a literacy initiative than their peers who had not received coaching as professional development. Moreover, students in the classes of coached teachers showed greater improvement in word decoding than those students in classes whose teachers did not work with a coach. Carlisle and Berebitsky (2011) believe results should be interpreted with caution because the sample was relatively small and because the control and experimental groups could not be randomly assigned, due to the fact that literacy coaches were mandated in Reading First schools.

In Cusumano, Armstrong, Cohen, and Todd (2006) quantitative study, preschool teachers enrolled in a college level literacy skills course were organized into two groups: one group (N=10) received only professional development from the 15-week course on literacy, while the second group (N=12) received professional development from the same course as well as assistance from a literacy coach. Nineteen teacher-participants who were not enrolled in the course served as a comparison group. Overall, there was no significant evidence of coaching increasing children's literacy skills. Cusumano et al. note that one of the

limitations of the study is that data were collected over a short period of time (4 to 5 weeks) and this might not be enough time for coaching to have an impact on literacy skills. The sample for the study was also small and the authors do not describe who the literacy coach was, what his or her qualifications were, the characteristics of the coaching sessions, or the coaching model used.

Feighan and Heeren (2009) researched literacy coaching using a quasi-experimental study design over a two-year period. They found that teachers supported by a literacy coach implemented specific strategies more than the control group who did not have coaching support. In addition, teacher surveys and focus groups revealed that teachers felt that literacy coaching was beneficial and had positive views about the coaches in their schools. Despite these positive perceptions, literacy coaching was found to have no significant impact on student test scores. The study is also limited by the sample being only one school district and involving only six literacy coaches.

Finally, Marsh, McCombs, and Martorell (2012) conducted a study in Florida about middle school literacy coaching in 113 schools in eight school districts. Using surveys, case study visits, and mandated state literacy tests, Marsh, McCombs, and Martorell (2012) found that teacher and principal perceptions of coach quality were not related to student reading achievement. The literacy coaches' qualifications, knowledge, and experience did not result in increased student achievement; in fact, a literacy coach's years of experience had a small negative correlation to student achievement. The authors note that the study is limited by the fact that the student achievement data only represented one year and did not measure the impact of literacy coaching over time.

### **Changing Teaching Practices**

Another indicator of success in literacy coaching is evident in the literature is that literacy coaching has the potential to change teaching practices. With the exception of the research of Poglinco et al. (2003), these studies are limited by their small sample sizes. However, these research studies are significant as they provide detailed descriptions of literacy coaching in real contexts and are thus reviewed below.

Eighteen teachers and two literacy coaches participated in a study by Swafford, Maltsberger, Button, and Furgerson (1997) about the implementation of a literacy framework using peer coaching. Data were collected through interviews, reflections, videotapes and audiotapes of lessons, and conferences. While there were differences among individual teachers, Swafford et al. found that teachers

were able to make procedural changes, affective changes, and reflective changes in their teaching practice with coaching.

In a qualitative case study at the high school level conducted by Hays and Harris (2003), two science teachers successfully integrated language instruction in their science programs with the assistance of a literacy coach. Both teachers stated that they would have not implemented the writing strategies into their teaching without the literacy coach.

In Ohio, Kinnucan-Welsch et al. (2006) report on a state-wide professional development program that used group professional development sessions for teachers as well as in-class literacy coaching. Six literacy specialists (who acted as coaches) and 11 classroom teachers volunteered to participate in a more extensive aspect of the project, wherein classroom teachers teach and audio record, and then transcribe three lessons with the same instructional focus (Kinnucan-Welsch et al., 2006). After each lesson, the teacher and the coach met for a debriefing session where the coach “scaffolded for intentional shifts in teaching” (p. 431). In one example, a teacher wanted to improve the oral language of her first-grade students and collaboratively planned with the literacy coach, teaching, learning, and assessment strategies. An analysis of student work from these lessons showed an improvement in many aspects of oral language, including an increase in the number of descriptive words, multisyllabic words, and sentences.

Peterson, Taylor, Burnham, and Schock, (2009) studied coaching conversations between literacy coaches and teachers in four schools in Minnesota. The researchers shadowed coaches and transcribed conversations between literacy coaches and teachers. They report that reflective coaching, where literacy coaches coach teachers to become more reflective about their practices, helps teachers change their classroom instruction.

Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009) used a quantitative quasi-experimental design to compare the implementation of a specific literacy initiative. The participants were 93 teachers from nine elementary schools who were assigned one of four professional development models to learn and implement a specific literacy strategy: a workshop; a workshop plus modeling; a workshop, modeling, and practice; and a workshop, modeling, practice, and coaching. Tschannen-Moran and McMaster conclude that the implementation of the literacy initiative was significantly higher with literacy coaching than with the other forms of professional development.

Finally, Poglinco et al. (2003) studied 27 schools across the United States using observations and interviews, they found that with literacy coaching, 62% of

teachers were able to implement an America's Choice literacy initiative with fidelity in their classrooms by the end of the first year. The researchers also report a significant correlation ( $r = 0.75$ ) between the teachers' fidelity in the implementation of the innovation with the literacy coach's fidelity. Thus, the implementation and the teachers' ability to transfer new learning into the classroom are linked to the coaches' ability.

### Perceptions of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a person's judgment regarding his/her capability to perform a specific task (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy is a key element in performance and success because, according to Bandura (1986), "what people, think, believe, and feel, affects how they behave" (p. 25). Those individuals who have a positive sense of self-efficacy will be more likely to perform a task successfully. The link between teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy and student achievement has been documented in the research (e.g. Anderson, Greene, & Loewen, 1988; Ashton & Webb, 1986). Bandura (2001) also writes, "to be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one's actions" (p. 1). This sense of agency is not only individualistic, but can also be collective. The concept of collective agency is important in a school setting because educators may work together with shared and common beliefs (Bandura, 2000), and how a group perceives itself may impact the group's outcomes. The collective self-efficacy of teachers in a school has been shown to have a positive impact on both student achievement (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2000) and school-level achievement (Bandura, 1993). In addition, teacher self-efficacy and collective efficacy are linked; according to the research of Goddard & Goddard (2001), collective efficacy is both a significant and positive predictor of teacher self-efficacy. In essence, if the group has positive perceptions of its capabilities, this will predict if an individual teacher has positive perceptions of his/her abilities.

There has been some research exploring the effects of coaching on teacher self-efficacy. First, in a small study of three secondary school teachers, Allan's (2007) qualitative case-study research indicates that coaching helped teachers become more skilled and confident leading to an increase in teachers' perceptions of personal effectiveness. Cantrell and Hughes (2008) studied 22 sixth and ninth grade teachers from eight schools in one state to explore the effects of a year-long professional development program. Using efficacy surveys, classroom observations, and interviews, Cantrell and Hughes (2008) report increases in personal and general perceptions of self-efficacy in literacy instruction from

professional development that included literacy coaching. They also found that professional development supported by literacy coaching increased teachers' sense of collective teaching efficacy. Tschannen-Moran and McMaster's (2009) study (previously summarized in the section about literacy coaching and its impact on changing teaching practices) also reports on self-efficacy and professional development. Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009) found that literacy coaching has the strongest impact on teacher self-efficacy of reading instruction over other methods of professional development, including traditional workshops, demonstrations, and practice. In addition, pre- and post-tests of teacher self-efficacy demonstrate that self-efficacy of reading instruction actually decreased after some other non-coaching professional development strategies. While limited by its small size, Hoffman's (2009) work produced contrasting results to the research of Allen (2007), Cantrell and Hughes (2008), and Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009). Using a mixed methods approach in one elementary school, the teachers in Hoffman's (2009) study reported self-efficacy was a result of supportive relationships inside and outside of school, risk-taking ability, and their personal motivation for change. While teachers appreciated and valued the literacy-coaching role, coaching did not support or increase teacher perceptions of self-efficacy.

The seminal work of Ross (1992) adds to this discussion on coaching, self-efficacy, and student achievement. Ross (1992) conducted a mixed-methods study with 18 history teachers, 36 classes, and six history coaches in one school district in Ontario, Canada. The author found that student achievement was higher in classes whose teachers interacted more extensively with the coach. In addition, student achievement was higher when teachers had high perceptions self-efficacy. While Ross's (1992) study is relatively small and is not a controlled experiment, it makes a significant contribution to the research between coaching, student achievement, and teacher self-efficacy.

## **Methods**

Qualitative research methods were used to answer the research question: how do principals, literacy coaches, and teachers view success in a literacy coaching program? I used a multi-case study to explore literacy coaching programs in three different schools (Yin, 2003). To collect data about the feelings, attitudes, and experiences of the participants, and to provide a retrospective on the coaching experience, I interviewed teachers, literacy coaches, and principals (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Gay & Airasian, 2000). I observed literacy coaches to see coaching



in practice and collected the documents and artifacts used during coaching sessions. The data used to answer the research question were acquired mainly from interviews; however, the information from observations, documents, and artifacts, support the data from interviews through triangulation (Patton, 1990). I previously had been a teacher with this school district, and this familiarity with some of the participants and the school district helped me gain entry into the field. This rapport also helped in setting the participants at ease during observations and interviews (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998).

### **Participants and Data Sources**

The Ontario school district that participated in the study was in its third year of implementing literacy coaching. The three district level literacy coaches were asked to nominate three elementary schools with exemplary literacy coaching programs. Reputational sampling to identify educational contexts that are exemplary is a method used previously by literacy researchers (e.g. Allington & Johnston, 2002; Pressley et al., 2001; Wharton-McDonald, Pressely, & Hampston, 1998). Following the methodology of Pressley et al. (2001), specific criteria for nominations were left to the nominators (the district literacy coaches) but I suggested that they use a variety of indices in making their nominations, including their personal knowledge of the literacy coaching programs, feedback from teachers, literacy coaches, and principals, and student achievement. The rationale for selecting schools nominated as exemplary was not to evaluate exemplary literacy coaching practices, but rather to select literacy coaching programs which are well developed and established thereby providing rich data. I contacted and visited the three schools, literacy coaches, teachers, and principals. All three schools were willing to participate in the study. Because the school district had been focusing on literacy coaching at the primary level, the district requested that only primary teachers (kindergarten to grade 3) be a part of the study.

School A had a population of 220 pupils, five primary teachers (including the literacy coach), a fulltime principal, and a part-time literacy coach who also taught at the primary level. Similar to School A, School B also had a literacy coach who worked part-time as a teacher and part-time as a coach. School B had a population of 221 pupils, five primary teachers (including the literacy coach), and a fulltime principal. Before assuming the role of coaches, both literacy coaches at School A and B had been classroom teachers at their respective schools for several years. School C was one of the largest schools in the district (475 pupils), had a principal and vice principal, eleven primary teachers, and a literacy

coach who worked part-time as a school coach and part-time as a district literacy coach (this coach had no classroom duties). All three literacy coaches were female. School A and B's coaches were in their first year of being a literacy coach, while School C's coach had been a literacy coach for three years. School B and C's coaches possessed reading specialist qualifications, while School A's coach had no specialist qualifications in literacy.

In each school, the literacy coach, principals, and primary teachers were interviewed, for a total of 27 structured interviews. During the interviews, participants were asked, as a teacher/literacy coach/principal, "how do you view success in the literacy coaching program?" and "what makes for an effective literacy coaching program?" Interviews lasted from a half an hour to three hours in length and were either audio recorded or I took notes, depending on the participant's preference. Interviews were scheduled at the participants' convenience and took place where they requested, often in their classrooms or in the library.

In order to gain a deep insight into literacy coaching, I also shadowed the three coaches over an eight-week period, totaling over 110 hours of observation. School A's coach was observed for 27.48 hours, School B's for 31.41 hours, and School C's for 51.70 hours. I observed coaches during their scheduled coaching time, took detailed field notes, and also kept a researcher's journal. I observed coaches working one-on-one with teachers, planning and participating in professional learning communities, organizing resources, and maintaining student achievement data. For further detail and discussion on the roles of the literacy coaches, see Ferguson (2011b). During observations, I took the role of observer-as-participant, meaning I identified myself as a researcher and used my judgment about when to participate in activities (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). By the end of the eight-week observation period, data collected reached saturation, as observations were repetitive and yielded no new data (Flick, 2006). Occasionally, literacy coaches also participated in informal unstructured interviews which were spontaneous conversations between the coach and me with the purpose of clarifying or expanding on what I was observing.

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews with teachers, coaches, and principals proved to generate much rich data about the perceptions of success in literacy coaching, and the observation field notes provided data complementary to the interviews. I transcribed all interviews and observation notes into a word processing program. To make meaning of the data, I used the data analysis strategy outlined by Bogden

and Biklen (1998). By reading through transcripts and making notes in the margins, I color-coded in order to group emerging broad themes together. I then made a list of preliminary categories based on these broad themes created subcategories. Then each piece of data was numbered and placed under the appropriate numbered category. Category 8 was entitled "Perceptions of Success." An example of a subcategory is 8.2, and it was labeled "Perceptions of Student Growth." This subcategory contained all data that was collected related to student achievement. I reread and sorted the numbered data an additional five times, collapsing some categories and subcategories and recoding some pieces of data. During this extensive process, I sorted and coded using a constant comparative method (Gay & Airasian, 2000), continually comparing data and considering multiple interpretations and meanings.

### **Validity and Reliability of the Study**

As the sole researcher and the main instrument in qualitative research (Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1990), I tried to limit researcher bias. I tried to be as consciously aware as possible of my personal biases and subjectivity and how it was impacting my study (Peshkin, 1988). I kept detailed descriptive field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) and in my notes, I recorded both descriptions of observations as well as personal thoughts, feelings, and reactions, which were coded as observer comments (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Gay, 1996). By keeping a researcher's journal, I was able to explore my subjectivity, feelings, reactions, and judgments about the data as well as my role as researcher (Peshkin, 1988). While complete neutrality is impossible, I did my best to retain a neutral, nonjudgmental position towards whatever themes, content, or conclusions emerged during the coding and data analysis (Patton, 1990). I believe observer effects (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1990) and social desirability bias (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003; Merriam, 1988) were lessened due to my previously established relationships with the participants in the study.

In order to corroborate the data during data analysis, I used triangulation of different data sources (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003) to allow for a crosschecking of data (Gay, 1996; Patton, 1990). During data analysis, I also used a constant comparative method (Gay & Airasian, 2000), continually comparing data. I also used member checking (Merriam, 1988) by using informal interviews to corroborate what I saw during observations and to test conclusions with participants.

## Results

I found four themes that the players in literacy coaching programs viewed as indicators of success. These indicators are: 1) a perception of growth in student achievement, 2) a perception of improved teaching, 3) an increase in professional dialogue in a safe environment, and 4) a commitment to the literacy coach. Each of these themes will be discussed in detail in the following section.

### Perception of Growth in Student Achievement

Teachers, literacy coaches, and principals believed that student learning and achievement had improved with literacy coaching, and student success was gauged in a variety of ways. One method was experiential, with teachers sharing various stories about how student achievement had improved. One teacher stated, “I have seen in this school so many kids succeed,” and “I could swear it’s because of this program [literacy coaching].” Teachers linked student success directly to successful literacy coaching: “the sign of a truly good literacy coach is that all the classes are thriving,” and “if we did not have a literacy coach . . . we would not have moved as far along the spectrum as we have, and I think [we] moved more easily and more quickly because of the literacy coach.” This perceived increase in student achievement became an incentive to change teaching practices. One teacher reflected that “we were really thrilled with the results. So it was an easy sell for us.”

Another indicator teachers used to gauge student achievement was each student’s DRA (Developmental Reading Assessment, Beaver, 2001) or GB<sup>1</sup> (Groupe Beauchemin, 2002) scores, which were tracked on the school assessment walls. One literacy coach was proud as she explained, “I see such huge growth in student achievement based on our DRA assessment wall and our board [district] literacy assessment data, and I listen to the success stories that teachers share about their students; that’s a major indicator of success.” During one interview, a teacher told me the evidence of student achievement was clear. He pointed to the tracking wall and said, “Look at the assessment wall and see 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, white cards up there for JKs [junior kindergarteners] reading for level C, B, and A when you know 3 years ago these kids weren’t even tracked on the wall until May/June in SK [senior kindergarten].”

<sup>1</sup> GB+ is a French reading assessment similar to DRA. French Immersion teachers used GB+ to assess student reading and regular English classrooms used DRA. Each student’s DRA or GB+ score was tracked on a large bulletin board called an assessment wall.

However, it is also significant that the results of the Education Quality and Accountability test, the Ontario provincial large-scale assessment (commonly referred to as the EQAO test), were seldom mentioned during interviews as an indicator of student success. One teacher explained, “I don’t think you can just look at the stats, what the tests have done,” and went on to tell me that success in literacy should be viewed more broadly. Another thought it might be interesting to examine EQAO tests in the future: “See it in a few years to see if it actually helps, or see what it does.” During an interview with a principal, I asked if there had been an improvement in the school’s EQAO results, and the principal replied, “Yes, on everything. Everything because we do DRA, GB+, we do Gates-MacGinitie, Canadian Test of Basic Skills, EQAO, all kinds of those standardized tests.” The principal, however, was more interested in describing the visible success of teachers adopting the initiatives and seeing visible changes in teaching practices as indicators of success.

### **Perception of Improved Teaching**

Another perceived indicator of the success of literacy coaching was the fact that teachers and principals believed that teachers’ literacy knowledge had increased and the quality of teaching had improved with literacy coaching. Before literacy coaching, one teacher said, “we didn’t nearly have the background we have now, thanks to the literacy coaches we had.” A teacher at another school had a very similar experience. She told me, “I would say thanks to the literacy coach that we’re all fairly comfortable with literacy now.” Teachers also felt that their teaching had improved with literacy coaching. One teacher stated, “I find my teaching is more effective, the strategies I’m presenting are that much better.” Teachers often explained this idea of improved teaching by using phrases related to teaching being raised: “We’ve brought our level of teaching up,” “high expectations . . . if you put them up there, they respond,” and “the kids raise up.”

Seeing the literacy initiatives being implemented in classrooms was also viewed by teachers, literacy coaches, and principals as an indicator that literacy coaching was successful and that teaching had improved. One teacher stated that “the ultimate test” to measure the success of literacy coaching was to “go walk around the school and you can see that there is evidence” of the initiatives being taught in classrooms. A coach reinforced this idea, telling me, “I do see a difference in the classroom environments, the quality of work displayed, and the quality of assessments given to students.” Principals also mentioned that seeing the initiatives being used in classrooms was an indication that teaching is improving.

For instance, a principal stated, “I do see changes in teaching,” and when I asked how, the principal responded by saying, “seeing visible changes in classrooms when I do my walkthroughs.”

### **Increased Professional Dialogue in a Safe Environment**

Another perceived indicator of success was an increase in professional dialogue amongst teachers. With the literacy coaching program, one teacher said, “I think teachers are more likely to talk to each other.” My observations also confirmed that there was supportive professional dialogue in these schools. For instance, during a professional learning community, I observed teachers helping a veteran teacher, who had over thirty years of experience, by talking her through a specific student concern and offering her practical strategies to try. Later, during my interview with this experienced teacher, she explained how pleased she was with the discussion at the professional learning community, but it had taken three years for the staff to feel comfortable enough to have that kind of dialogue. When I asked her if the suggestions from the staff were useful, she responded, “Oh man, yes! Yes. I’m meeting with the parents soon. Extremely helpful.” This sharing of ideas was helpful for most teachers, especially newer teachers who wanted advice from their peers; one new teacher explained,

It was really, really nice to have this group of teachers because they were so willing to share ideas. And it made it so much easier for me as a new teacher, who only had like a handful of ideas. It [literacy coaching] really does open up the environment, and the classroom, and the school.

One coach shared with me how professional dialogue has evolved at her school and how it has impacted teacher self-efficacy:

I think they [teachers]. . . recognize their worth as teachers more so. You know that belief that teachers make a difference, I think they feel that now; I think they feel that. And I think they have come together and recognize that their doors have to be open and that they can go to each other and that they can share an issue that they’re having with a student and that there will be some recommendations that they can bring forward that are worthwhile and it’s not a critical piece at all.

We went on to discuss how literacy coaching helped to break teacher isolation; the coach shared this story with me:

I remember reading once about this little scenario where they talked about how teachers have all these gold nuggets and how we never want to share them. I'm sure I've been guilty of that myself. You know, wow, this is really working, makes me look good, do I want to share that? You know? And I remember bringing that up, and you could almost see this like, as if I'm going to share mine! But I think over the last 3 years, that has really, really changed.

In order for this sharing to occur, teachers need an environment that is safe and "supportive so you don't feel threatened." For instance, one teacher told me, "I have no problem saying this isn't working for me. Or where do I go next? Or help me out here!" She explained further: "Never once has anyone looked down at me and said, oh my god, she's a bad teacher or what is she doing in this role." But building this type of safe environment takes time. She said, "Like, in the first year, everyone sort of sat back, and it was intense. You sort of didn't know what to say or when to say it and how people would take it, because you didn't really know the people well."

As reported in Ferguson (2011a), teachers, principals, and coaches in this study expressed strong feelings of being a "team" and working as a collective. Working with the coach, said one teacher, made the teachers "rally together" All three literacy coaches were proud of the sense of "team" created in their schools. As one coach said, "We've always maintained that we can do any of it together. . . Nobody gets left behind" (Ferguson, 2011a, p. 261).

### **Commitment to the Literacy Coach**

Another perceived indicator of the success of the literacy coaching program was that the teachers in all three schools supported the literacy coach and her work. Every teacher interviewed stated that, overall, literacy coaching had been a positive experience. Teachers also had positive things to say about the literacy coaches; the coach "is doing an awesome job," and they were "fabulous," "great," "amazing," and "outstanding." Even though two of the three literacy coaches were new to the coaching role that year, teachers and principals were still committed to the coaching program and felt that the coaches were performing very well in their roles. Literacy coaches also felt that the support from the teachers was an indicator of success. One coach reflected, "Success could be measured when I have the teachers coming to visit me, too." She continued, "I'm not having to hunt them down necessarily, they just come to me. You know, which means the relationship has built."

When I asked participants how the literacy coaches themselves impacted the success of the literacy program, I was told by both teachers and principals that a literacy coach generally has to be “the right person” for the job. A principal stated, “it’s the personality that makes it effective,” and that “you need a personality that is going to get along well with staff, but yet still saying this is the way it is, but in a very non-threatening, listening way.” Teachers felt the same way. One teacher told me, “I think the major thing is the personality of the literacy coach. That’s what I would say is the first and foremost of importance [to the success of literacy coaching].” Another teacher also felt strongly that her experience with literacy coaching was so positive because of the coach: “I don’t know if it would be the same if the coach was a different personality. I find her very approachable and supportive.”

The traits of a passion for literacy, dedication, positivity, approachability, flexibility, and humility were common to all three coaches. First, all three coaches were passionate about literacy and truly enjoyed teaching it. Teachers stated during interviews that the coaches were excited about literacy and this passion was almost contagious. The three literacy coaches were also dedicated to their jobs as coaches. During the study, it was a common occurrence to observe literacy coaches missing lunch and breaks to meet with teachers. One teacher told me, “Their time is always our time. They don’t sort of say, well this is my lunch, go away or anything. They’re there anytime you need them.” During interviews, teachers also often made reference to literacy coaches being positive and approachable and said that these are important traits for successful literacy coaching. One teacher explained, “I’m very comfortable going to her. I don’t feel dumb. She puts me at ease. It’s been very positive. Couldn’t ask for a better coach. Right from the get-go, it was great.” Another teacher reiterated this idea when she said, the coach is “very approachable, and every time you get constructive criticism, it feels constructive. It feels like, oh yeah, that’s a great idea! Not like, oh, I’m doing something terribly wrong. It really makes it easy to go to the coach.” The three coaches were also flexible. Several times during my observations, teachers asked literacy coaches to reschedule just before a meeting or would ask for an impromptu meeting with the literacy coach on the spot. The literacy coaches understood how busy teachers are and how teachers often have issues that they need assistance with right away.

When I spoke with literacy coaches about the success of the coaching program, all three coaches were humble and hesitant to take any credit for the program’s perceived success. One teacher explained that their coach is so focused



on making the program work that she doesn't realize what she has contributed. This teacher stated, "you [the literacy coach] believe in what you're doing and just work hard at doing it. You don't really realize [it], [but] the people are around you realize." During my interview with one coach, she thought that being part of this study allowed her to reflect on how she has contributed to the success of the coaching program: "having you sit in here with us, just talking in general, I feel good about what we've done, I feel good. I didn't have a whole lot of faith in myself being able to carry out this job before."

### Discussion

The literature states that it is difficult to isolate the efficacy of literacy coaching from other literacy initiatives that are simultaneously going on with coaching (Bean, cited in Literacy Coaching, 2007; Lapp et al., 2003; Morgan et al., 2003). Moreover, defining successful literacy coaching can result in multiple interpretations of success. However, to add to the literature on the success of literacy coaching, I examined what the participants' in literacy coaching believed to be indicators of success. Teachers, literacy coaches, and principals believed increased student achievement, improved teaching, increased professional dialogue in a safe environment, and a commitment to the literacy coach were indicators of the success of the literacy coaching program.

Analysis of student achievement data was not within the scope of this research study, but the perception of increased student achievement was found to be an indicator of the success of literacy coaching. The literacy coach indirectly worked with students to improve achievement. As one teacher explained, "It's a chain; the literacy coach helps me, then I help the kids." Working with teachers to change teaching practices had a perceived trickle-down effect, which, in turn, was perceived to lead to student achievement. This corroborates other published literature that finds that teachers, coaches, and principals believe that literacy coaching has a positive impact on student achievement (Feighan & Heeren, 2009; Sturtevant, 2004; Stekel, 2009; Walpole & McKenna, 2004). Teachers, literacy coaches, and principals also believed that tests scores such as DRA and GB+ also increased, a finding supporting the quantitative research of Booth Olson and Land (2008) and Elish-Piper and L'Allier (2010) that literacy coaching can improve literacy test scores. It is significant to note that the results of provincial large-scale assessments were not generally viewed as an indicator of literacy coaching success. Instead, participants relied on student data obtained by classroom teachers, such as DRA, GB+. Research indicates the importance of using a variety of student

outcomes, not just standardized tests, when looking at the efficacy of professional development (Hawley & Valli, 2000). It is also important to consider that because literacy coaching was in its third year during the study, it likely took time for schools to see this student growth. As Cusumano, Armstrong, Cohen, and Todd (2006) and Feighan and Heeren (2009) suggest, literacy coaching may take a significant amount of time to impact student achievement. The three schools in the study may not have had such positive perceptions of student achievement in years past.

A perception of improved teaching was another indicator of success found in the study. A number of teachers explained that literacy coaching had increased their content knowledge in literacy. This supports the existing research indicating that teachers can acquire new knowledge about teaching literacy from the literacy coaching experience (Hays & Harris, 2003; Swafford et al., 1997). Another indicator of success related to improved teaching from coaching programs included the implementation of the literacy initiatives in the classrooms. Teachers frequently referred to the visible “evidence” of the new initiatives that they were implementing. This supports the previous literature that literacy coaching can change teaching practices (Hays & Harris, 2003; Kinnucan-Welsch, Rosemary, & Grogan, 2006; Peterson, Taylor, Burnham, & Schock, 2009; Poglinco et al., 2003; Swafford, Maltsberger, Button, & Furgerson, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Teachers in the study felt more confident about teaching literacy, believed that they were teaching better, and that their teaching ability had been “raised up.”

Literacy coaching was also perceived to increase dialogue among teachers, and this also helped improve their practice. Teachers, literacy coaches, and principals felt that coaching helped make schools a more open environment by breaking the isolation of teaching; as one coach told me, “those silos are coming down.” Teachers in the study often shared their best practices, supported one another with student concerns, and helped one another with teaching strategies. This new sense of team resulting from literacy coaching was also found by Symonds (2003), who reported that this collegiality helps change teaching practices, and by Steckel (2009,) who found that literacy coaching helps break teacher isolation and provides a safe environment for collaboration and risk-taking. While the effect of breaking teacher isolation and creating a team environment is discussed in the literature as a benefit of literacy coaching, it has not yet before been presented as a perceived indicator of successful coaching.

Teachers and principals also highly credited the literacy coaches themselves as a key component to the success of literacy coaching in their schools. Character traits, such as a passion for literacy, humility, positivity, and flexibility were considered crucial for a literacy coach in order for coaching to be successful. These traits helped the teachers trust the coach, and thus, they were willing and eager participants in literacy coaching. There has been other literature written about the characteristics of coaches needed for effective coaching (e.g. Blamey, Meyer, & Walpole, 2008/2009; Poglicco et al, 2003) and resistance towards literacy coaching (Dole & Donaldson, 2006; Ferguson, 2011a; Morgan et al., 2003). The coaches in this study have a trusting relationship with teachers and there was little teacher resistance towards working with the coach (for a full discussion of resistance in the study, see Ferguson, 2011a). This study finds that the participants in literacy coaching believe that teachers voluntarily utilizing the coach and teachers valuing the coach and her work were indicators of success of coaching. This commitment to literacy coaching is an indicator of success not previously mentioned in the literature.

While Rodgers and Rodgers (2007) caution against relying on perceptions and self-reports of literacy coaching efficacy, self-efficacy is an important construct that influences actions (Bandura, 1986). Teachers, principals, and literacy coaches in the study believed that their teaching and student learning had improved with literacy coaching. The participants felt self-efficacious in their ability to teach literacy due to the literacy coaching program, a finding also reported by Ross (1992), Allan (2007), Cantrell and Hughes (2008), and Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009). The participants believed that they had improved their ability to teach, thus increasing student achievement. While this study did not collect student achievement data, the teachers, coaches, and principals did use assessments such as classroom observations and DRA and GB+ scores as measures of achievement. Increases in student achievement and its relationship to teacher self-efficacy have also been documented by Anderson, Greene, and Loewen (1988) and Ashton and Webb, (1986). The three schools in the study also appear to have a positive sense of collective efficacy (Bandura, 2000). During interviews and observations, the three schools had a definite sense of team and each school had a feeling of a safe, supportive environment for educators. Teachers, coaches, and principals often referred to themselves as a team, reiterating that “we can do any of it together.” Literacy coaches helped teachers open up to engage in more discussions and professional dialogue. This new professional dialogue combined with successful student achievement, I argue, created a sense of group agency.

Self-efficacy is an important factor in each of the indicators of success found in this study. Teachers believed their teaching was better than before and that they were more effective because they saw success with students. To quote one teacher, literacy coaching “was an easy sell for us” and as one coach said, teachers “recognize their worth as teachers more now” and believe that “teachers make a difference.” Being a part of this study even helped some of the participants reflect on their self-efficacy, realizing that they “feel good about what we’ve done.” Teachers felt that they were a team, working together to better student achievement. Because of this self and group sense of efficacy, I argue that teachers developed a strong sense of loyalty and commitment to the coach and to literacy coaching. Teachers and principals truly believed that the coach herself was a key component to the success of literacy coaching in these three schools.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research and Practice**

Due to the small size of the study, the results should be generalized with caution. This study also took place in one school district in Ontario and thus is limited by the characteristics of the school district and the participants. The study is also limited by the use of reputational sampling, as the schools in this study were nominated as having exemplary literacy coaching programs. It is plausible that there could be different perceptions of success in schools where coaching was not deemed as successful.

The sample for the study also has limitations. For instance, in two of the three schools in the study, the literacy coaches were new coaches and prior to their roles as coaches, they were established classroom teachers in their respective schools. These previously established relationships, while beneficial for gaining trust within a coaching relationship, might have impacted teacher and principal perceptions about the coaching program. Teachers and principals may be committed to the coach as an individual and as a colleague more so than as a coach. Also, over the three years that the school district had been implementing coaching, the individuals acting as literacy coaches in these three schools have changed. It is plausible that perceptions of literacy coaching and its success could vary significantly year to year, depending on the individual coach. However, despite these variables, all participants felt committed to the literacy coach and the coaching program.

Another limitation is that this research does not examine student achievement data, but instead focuses on perceptions of teaching and learning. It

is plausible that even though teachers perceive increases in student achievement, these increases may not be statistically significant, as was found by Cusumano, Armstrong, Cohen, and Todd (2006), Feighan and Heeren (2009), and Marsh, McCombs and Martorell (2012). The study is also limited because I did not observe teachers in the classroom, and changes in teaching practices are limited to the reports of teachers, principals, and literacy coaches. Moreover, the subjective nature of defining success may make comparing perceptions of success problematic. What one school context perceives as an indicator of success may not be perceived as an indicator of success in another context; thus, duplicating this study or generalizing the results are challenging.

More studies in different contexts are needed to expand our knowledge of successful literacy coaching. Further research investigating the relationships among literacy coaching, teacher self-efficacy, collective-efficacy, and student achievement would be beneficial. Studying self and collective efficacy longitudinally would also add to the literature on how literacy coaching develops over time. Finally, I urge educators, researchers, administrators, and government officials to measure the efficacy of coaching programs and decide future of literacy coaching in their schools using a variety of measures. Relying solely on student achievement data, such as provincial or state standardized tests, may not provide an accurate or complete picture of coaching, teaching, and student learning (Hawley & Valli, 2000). As described in this study, there are other methods that can be used to reflect on whether coaching has made an impact, including teacher-collected student achievement data (such as DRA and GB+) and teacher, coach, and principal feedback.

## Conclusion

The research question guiding this research was: How do principals, literacy coaches, and teachers view success in a literacy coaching program? The participants in the three schools in the study viewed perceived increases in student learning, improved teaching practices, an increase in teacher dialogue, and a commitment to the literacy coach, as indicators of success. Teachers, literacy coaches, and principals also measured success using their perceptions of student achievement, teacher collected assessments, and observations of teachers implementing changes in teaching practices. These perceptions of improved teaching and learning are significant because according to Bandura (1997; 1993), perceptions of efficacy can be influential in determining outcomes. In addition, success in the study was viewed as more than just improved teaching and student learning. Teachers

sharing and collaborating with each other, teachers voluntarily using the literacy coach, and believing strongly in the value of literacy coaching were all perceived as evidence of the success of literacy coaching. These indicators of success cannot be measured using standardized tests. Defining success in literacy coaching is complex, multifaceted, and is also context specific. Literacy coaching is worthy of continuation in schools not only for its impact on teaching and learning, but for its impact on teachers and school culture. This paper fills a void in the current research on literacy coaching by giving the educators actually involved in literacy coaching a voice in determining the success of their literacy coaching programs and by stressing the need to evaluate the success of literacy coaching programs using a variety of measures.



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## COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTION FOR ELEMENTARY LEARNERS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF PROFESSIONAL LITERACY TEXTS

Dr. Margie Garcia, Dr. Mary Beth Sampson, Dr. Wayne Linek

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### Abstract

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This study examined how reading comprehension was addressed in literacy texts used with preservice teachers at five universities in the southwestern United States. Universities were selected based on the highest number of graduates receiving their initial Early Childhood through 4th grade (EC-4) teaching certificates. An introductory Reading course was selected from each university. A total of 11 required textbooks were examined for definitions of reading comprehension, the presence of reading instructional incidents (RIIs), and reading comprehension instructional incidents (RCIIs). Overall, more RIIs (reading instruction) than RCIIs (reading instruction related to comprehension) were found.

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## Introduction

*The Literacy Dictionary: The Vocabulary of Reading and Writing* (Harris & Hodges, 1995) defines reading comprehension as “a process in which the reader constructs meaning interacting with text . . . through a combination of prior knowledge and previous experience” (p. 39). In general terms, reading comprehension is thought of as the progression of extracting and creating meaning from text (Conner, Morrison, & Petrella, 2004; Durkin, 1993; Pressley, 1998, 2000) or the ability to learn from text (Snow, 2001, 2004).

Within the context of reading instruction, many theorists, researchers, and teacher practitioners concur that without comprehension, there is no meaning, and therefore, without meaning, no learning can take place. Readers learn to construct meaning as they broaden their knowledge base and understand what they read (Anderson, 2004; August & Hakuta, 1998; Cohen, 2007; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). Most importantly, time spent immersed in actual reading of text is critical in order to build a strong foundation for future learning (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, [NICHD], 2000; RAND, 2004).

Studies have shown that effective reading comprehension instruction is an essential component for all learners because of the significant repercussions of reading as a life-long skill (Conner et al., 2004). Yet according to the National Reading Panel (NRP) Summary Report (NICHD, 2000) many children are falling short in the area of reading comprehension. The NRP Report asserts that comprehension can be improved when students are explicitly taught to use specific cognitive strategies or to think critically when they encounter barriers to understanding what they are reading.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate how reading comprehension was addressed in professional literacy texts used to teach elementary preservice teachers. This was done using a content-analysis method. In addition, the texts were examined to determine the frequency of reading instructional incidents (RIIs) and the categories and frequencies of reading comprehension instructional incidents (RCIIs). For the purpose of this study, RIIs were defined as directions, explanations, ideas, and/or suggestions of reading instruction that were found within a professional literacy text. RCIIs were directions, explanations, ideas, and/or suggestions of reading comprehension that were found within a professional

literacy text that can be used to engage students in developing, enhancing, improving, increasing, and/or supporting reading comprehension.

The primary researcher examined 11 professional literacy texts used in an introductory Reading course at five universities in the southwestern United States. The universities were chosen based on the number of graduates from their traditional teacher- education programs. These graduates received their initial EC-4 Generalist certification from September 1, 2007 to August 31, 2008 (State Board for Educator Certification [SBEC], 2008).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were developed for this study:

1. How and with what frequency was reading comprehension defined in professional literacy texts used in introductory Reading courses?
2. What were the frequency and percentage of the RIIs and RCIIIs found in professional literacy texts used in the introductory Reading courses?
3. What categories emerged from the RCIIIs found in professional literacy texts used in the introductory Reading courses and what was the frequency and percentage of each category?

### **Review of Related Literature**

Research has supported that comprehension instruction should be a fundamental component of classrooms across the country. Since the essence of reading comprehension (what students understand) and effective reading instruction (what teachers should do to help students understand) are intertwined, it is critical that teachers be knowledgeable and flexible in order to meet the needs of their students (Alexander & Jetton, 2000; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2004; Pressley, 2000; RAND, 2004). Professional literacy texts are a venue for teachers to gain information about comprehension instruction. These texts are used in many university teacher-preparation programs (Pomerantz & Pierce, 2004).

Therefore, a content-analysis method was used to examine professional literacy texts used in introductory Reading courses for EC-4 preservice teachers to determine how reading comprehension was defined. In addition, the content analysis determined categories and frequencies of reading comprehension instructional incidents (RCIIIs) which were documented. For the purpose of this

study, RCIIIs were operationalized as examples, directions, and explanations of comprehension instruction.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The foundation of this research study was constructed around the theoretical framework which was divided into three sections: (a) Reading Comprehension, (b) Reading Comprehension Instruction, and (c) Professional Literacy Texts for Preservice Teachers.

#### **Reading Comprehension**

Just what is reading comprehension and what does it mean? Reading comprehension has been defined in a multitude of ways. The National Reading Panel viewed reading as a process. Beginning in the 1970s, reading comprehension was recognized as an active process that engaged the reader instead of a passive activity (NICHD, 2000). Reading was viewed as an interactive process between the reader and the text through which meaning was constructed, but importantly, it was also seen as an intentional thinking process (Durkin, 1993). The RAND group (2001) defined reading comprehension as “The process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language” (Snow, 2001, p. 11).

Additionally, Anderson and Pearson (1984) stressed that reading could not occur without comprehension, and, in doing so, the reader constructed meaning by interacting with the text. Still others including Fielding and Pearson (1994) maintained that while reading comprehension was once thought of only in terms of decoding, the notion that it was much more complex and combined knowledge, experience, thinking, and teaching was more readily accepted. They concurred that in order to be effective, comprehension must include three elements which were (a) the reader, (b) the text, and (c) the activity. The reader, defined as the person who was doing the comprehending, the text as what was being comprehended, and the activity was the vehicle for the comprehension to take place (RAND, 2004).

#### **Historical perspectives of reading comprehension.**

The history of reading comprehension has run the gamut from oral reading to silent reading, from hornbooks and primers to basals and scripted curriculum (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2004; Venezky, 1984). Prior to the 1970s, reading comprehension instruction was geared toward teaching specific skills for students

to practice and master. This included skills focusing on comprehension such as identifying the main idea or distinguishing fact from opinion (NICHHD, 2000).

Reading is a far more complex process than had been previously envisioned by early reading researchers, but most importantly it was perceived merely as a set of skills to be mastered (NICHHD, 2000). These early pioneers of reading research believed that by mastering skills such as the differentiation between fact and opinion or identifying the main idea of a story, the reader would systematically build toward the capacity to comprehend. This way of thinking mistakenly gave the reader and the teacher false confidence that comprehension had actually occurred. The opposite may in fact be true because readers were passive recipients, and true meaning only existed through interactions with the text (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985).

Louise Rosenblatt challenged the concept that reading was merely a set of skills to be learned and emphasized that reading was an interactive process, a “transaction” of sorts between the reader and the text. She referred to this as a “poem.” She stressed that readers must interact with the text and reflect on what they read in order for successful comprehension to occur (Rosenblatt, 2004). Rosenblatt took this a step further by asserting that there are two types of stances readers take when having a meaningful interaction with the text. The efferent stance occurred when the reader was looking for information or facts to absorb, as in a non-fiction text. The aesthetic stance took place when the reader had a more emotional connection with the text (1978).

Durkin’s (1979) landmark study revealed that classroom teachers were talking about comprehension, but there was little, if any, explicit comprehension instruction taking place. Furthermore, this type of methodical instruction was followed by what Durkin termed “mentioning, practicing, and assessing.” Teachers mentioned a particular comprehension skill that students were to apply such as identifying a cause and effect relationship. Durkin’s own words paint the true picture of what was actually going on in the classroom: “Mentioning is saying just enough about a topic to allow for an assignment related to it” (Durkin, 1981, p. 453).

Next, students were expected to practice the aforementioned skill by working on a number of workbook pages, and last, the teacher assessed their work to determine if they had understood and used the skill correctly. Durkin’s conclusions were that this type of instruction did little to aid in students’ comprehension because students were assessed on what they understood, but they were not being taught to comprehend text.



Following Durkin's (1979) pivotal study, several researchers in the literacy field decided to look further and examine what constituted effective comprehension instruction. Durkin's research paved the way for other prominent researchers to explore reading comprehension to see if any progress had been made (Dole et al., 1991; Pressley, 1998, 2000).

Findings from the classroom research from the 1970s and 1980s supported Durkin's study which revealed that children were spending a small amount of time actually reading texts. Fielding and Pearson (1994) asserted that this interaction with authentic text was a critical piece of reading comprehension instruction because it gave students the opportunity to practice skills that were essential to reading, including comprehension. Moreover, since reading helps to build background knowledge, this aided in the comprehension process as well.

#### **Rand and The National Reading Panel.**

The National Reading Panel (NRP) was assembled in 1997 when Congress asked the Director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to organize a national panel on reading (NICHD, 2000). The purpose of the panel was to assess the nationwide status of reading, including the assortment of approaches to teaching children to read and to rate their effectiveness.

The NRP was made up of 14 people, including leading authorities in the field of reading research, representatives of colleges of education, teachers, educational administrators, and parents. Furthermore, the panel took the previous research of the National Research Council (NRC) into consideration and built upon their efforts (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The NRP examined the five components of effective reading instruction, namely: (a) Phonemic Awareness, (b) Phonics, (c) Fluency, (d) Comprehension, and (e) Vocabulary (NICHD, 2000). Although all five areas are critical to the successful implementation of reading instruction, this literature review focused solely on the area of comprehension.

The NRP met over a period of two years to discuss their findings, and the results were documented in two reports titled Report of the National Reading Panel and the Report of the National Reading Panel: Reports of the Subgroups (NICHD, 2000). Given that reading was a crucial factor not only in academic content areas but as a lifelong skill, the NRP's findings after analyzing extensive reading comprehension research suggested that there were three common themes. These included (a) The process of reading comprehension is cognitive and cannot exist without vocabulary instruction, (b) Reading comprehension requires a

purposeful interaction between the reader and text, and (c) Quality teachers must be able to provide effective comprehension instruction, which is directly linked to student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Sykes, 1999).

Additionally, the NRP recommended eight comprehension strategies with which to build a strong foundation of reading comprehension instruction: (a) Comprehension Monitoring, (b) Cooperative Learning, (c) Graphic Organizers, (d) Answering Questions, (e) Generating Questions, (f) Story and Text Structure, (g) Summarizing, and (h) Multiple Strategy Instruction (NICHHD, 2000).

### **Effective Reading Comprehension Instruction**

With differing beliefs and opinions regarding reading comprehension, additional research was necessary in order to determine what constituted effective comprehension instruction. While research supported the necessity for effective classroom instruction, it was vital to examine what had been identified as effective.

Research has consistently documented that effective classroom instruction is a significant contributor to the development of comprehension skills for children (Aarnoutse, Van Leeuwe, Voeten, & Oud, 2001; Conner et al., 2004). In order for students to develop comprehension proficiency, effective instructional support was essential. Teachers who successfully implemented and exemplified methods of reading comprehension that engaged students “for the purpose of advancing thoughtful, competent, and motivated reading” (RAND, 2004, p. 721) are a fundamental part of this process.

Conner et al. (2004) examined the growth of reading comprehension skills of 3rd graders. The degree of the impact instruction had on the students was also observed along with the language and reading skills children brought to the classroom. Results indicated that the growth of reading comprehension was largely dependent upon the reading abilities the students had already acquired. For example, students whose language skills were strong at the beginning of the year achieved higher reading comprehension growth with less teacher explicit instruction. By contrast, students whose reading level and skills were below average at the beginning of the school year attained greater comprehension growth with more teacher interaction coupled with explicit instruction.

### **Best Practices**

One method of accomplishing the goal of making text comprehensible for the elementary student is through the use of “best practices.” Best practice in the

area of literacy instruction was defined as, “solid, reputable, state-of-the-art work in a field” (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005, p. vi). The term “best practice” was borrowed from other professions including engineering, law, and medicine because no such term existed in the area of education. Best practice has also been distinguished by engaging and meaningful literacy activities which give students what they need in order to become proficient and motivated learners (Morrow, Gambrell, & Pressley, 2003).

Research has consistently documented that effective reading comprehension instruction was a key ingredient for all students (Pressley, 2000). Therefore, it was necessary to determine how teachers were being prepared to teach comprehension.

### **Connecting Theory to Practice**

Research leads practice, and teacher educators can learn to be more effective by staying current on literacy research and textbooks that offered support and insight into preparing preservice teachers for the classroom (Gaffney & Anderson, 2000). Because students’ needs can vary from class to class and year to year, researchers and practitioners have concurred that it is imperative that teacher educators expose preservice teachers to numerous ways literacy can be implemented with all students (Gaffney & Anderson, 2000; Hord, Rutherford, Huling, & Hall, 2004; Schlechty, 2002; Schmoker, 2006). In addition, preservice teachers must also be taught to understand and implement differentiated instruction so that all students can learn. Effective teaching comes from the knowledge that teachers possess regarding how students learn best (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

### **Professional Literacy Texts for Preservice Teachers**

Research has validated that in order for teachers to be effective facilitators of instruction for all students, they must be knowledgeable, not only in what they teach, but also how children learn best (Cunningham & Allington, 2003; Reutzel & Cooter, 2008; Sampson, Rasinski, & Sampson, 2003). Therefore, it is important for preservice teachers to have access to numerous ways to implement literacy instruction and reading comprehension strategies.

Ultimately, the goal of reading research was for the students’ comprehension abilities to improve. There were two factors which impacted this process. The first issue was that reading research should detail how instruction must be implemented and second, teachers must be willing to implement that instruction (Dole et al., 1991). Even if quality research dictated changes in instruction, if

teachers do not use what they learn to perfect their instructional practices, their students' reading comprehension proficiency will not improve (RAND, 2004). Teachers must have ownership and the all important "buy in" in order to fully embrace changes being made. For those who are dedicated to furthering educational research, it would be reassuring to know that their scientific-based practices would not have been in vain (Sykes, 1999).

Pressley and El-Dinary (1997) found that there was a large body of research on reading comprehension instruction and the challenge was to determine how educational research can be transformed into educational practice. Gersten et al. (1997) affirmed that there was a plethora of research entailing how instructional practices impacted student achievement. However, instruction will only improve if teachers are willing to change the manner in which they instruct students by imparting their new knowledge to better address students' needs. One method of reaching this goal is by the use of professional literacy texts with elementary preservice teachers. Through university teacher-education programs, a combination of texts and methods can help disseminate this critical information to students.

### **Methods and Procedures**

This study employed content analysis (Berg, 2007) to examine professional literacy texts used to teach preservice teachers. State reports were evaluated to determine the five universities that had the largest number of graduates receiving initial EC-4 teacher certification. Furthermore, this study only included those teachers who graduated from traditional teacher-education programs.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was conducted and reflected the following limitations:

1. The content analysis of professional texts did not include the table of contents, appendixes, and other supplemental material.
2. The study was limited to the required texts for both the introductory Reading and ESL methods courses. No supplemental materials were examined.
3. The study was limited to the researcher's ability to recognize reading instructional incidents, reading comprehension instructional incidents, and definitions for reading comprehension.
4. In looking for the presence of reading comprehension instructional incidents, comprehension was not implied. The

word(s) “comprehension,” “understanding,” and/or “meaning” had to be found within the text surrounding the RCII.

Textbooks used in this *content analysis* were the required texts for Reading courses at each of the universities. This course was a required introductory Reading course which explored the theoretical foundations of reading and literacy along with strategies for effective reading instruction. The required texts for each course were chosen based upon information from each university’s online bookstore. A total of 11 texts were identified for analysis.

Berg (2007) suggested that a content analysis can help identify the relationship or patterns between topics, concepts, themes, or any ideas that are consequently found in a particular body of material. For the purpose of this research study, these concepts focused on the definitions of reading comprehension and the identification of RIIs and RCIIIs in the professional Reading texts.

This practice is referred to as conceptual analysis because specific ideas are established, in this case, reading comprehension, RIIs, and RCIIIs. A relational analysis was completed to verify if and how any link between the various concepts that emerge existed. Moreover, a content analysis is basically viewed as a coding operation and a data interpreting process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Morse & Richards, 2002). Therefore, a mixed-design content analysis using both conceptual and relational content analysis was appropriate for this study.

### Textbooks

After the courses were determined, online bookstore listings of each university were examined to verify the required texts for each of the selected courses. Some courses had one required text while others had two or more. All texts listed as “required” were included as part of this content analysis including texts from all sections of each course, regardless of the number of texts. However, it was not possible to know what, if any supplemental reading material was used for individual courses. Therefore, only books listed as required for each course were examined and analyzed.

### Data Collection

This study was conducted through the four phases as outlined below:

Phase One: The selected texts were examined at the onset for the definition or definitions of *reading comprehension*. This was done by first consulting the index and looking under reading comprehension and/or comprehension. If a definition was not listed, the researcher continued to look for phrases such as

“comprehension is,” “reading comprehension is,” or “comprehension occurs when” throughout the text examination process. Information was recorded in a data analysis instrument designed by the researcher and included the definition of reading comprehension, book title, and page number.

Phase Two: Every page of each textbook was first scanned for the presence of RIIs. These were defined as *directions, explanations, ideas, and/or suggestions of reading instruction* that are found within a professional literacy text. Once the RIIs were established, the researcher reviewed the list of RIIs for each text. Within the larger group of RIIs, the possibility of RCIIIs existed because an RCII was an RII that specifically addressed comprehension and, therefore, was a subset of an RII. Therefore, all RCIIIs were also RIIs, but not all RIIs were RCIIIs.

For this study, all incidents that were recorded and identified as RIIs could also be considered an RCII if and only if, comprehension was acknowledged. The definition of an RCII was *directions, explanations, ideas, and/or suggestions of reading comprehension* that were found within a professional literacy text. They offer teachers a method to aid students in developing, enhancing, improving, increasing, and/or supporting reading comprehension.

The researcher then conducted a methodical examination of the RIIs for each text. By reviewing each set of RIIs, any time an RII specifically addressed comprehension using the words “comprehension,” “meaning,” or “understanding,” it was also coded as an RCII. The same information was recorded as with the RII including the text, page number, and label given by the author(s). Next, the researcher performed a recursive examination of the labels that emerged during the data collection process. Each different label (given by the author) was written on note cards. This was done only for the labels that emerged from the RCIIIs. From these labels, categories were merged. Using the note cards, those with similar wording and/or characteristics were placed together. This process continued until categorizing of the labels was complete.

Phase Three: A frequency count was conducted of the incidents in which reading comprehension was defined and also for frequency of the RCIIIs.

## Results

### Definitions of Reading Comprehension

During data collection, the researcher examined the 11 textbooks for definitions of reading comprehension. These definitions were found by looking in the index for “comprehension” or “reading comprehension.” The words, “. . .

definition of” or “comprehension is. . .” helped to identify definitions of reading comprehension.

Of the 11 texts examined, only 6 addressed reading comprehension by giving a specific definition. A content analysis was also conducted on the reading comprehension definitions. The definitions for the reading group contained 10 different categories: (a) Understanding/Meaning, (b) Goals, (c) Reading Instruction, (d) Process, (e) Reader, (f) Text Factors, (g) Thinking, (h) Multifaceted, (i) New Information, and (j) Existing Knowledge. These, in turn, were collapsed into five categories: (a) Understanding/Meaning, (b) Process, (c) Text Factors, (d) New Information, and (e) Existing Knowledge. Figure 1 displays the frequency counts of each of the five merged categories for the Reading texts.

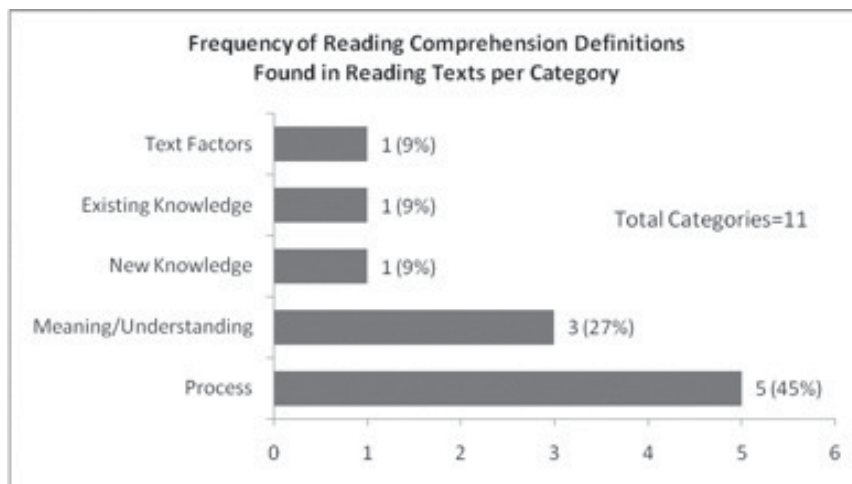


Figure 1. Frequency of Reading Comprehension Definitions Found in Reading Texts per Category

### Total Reading Instructional Incidents per Data Source

Of the 11 Reading texts, the RIIs totaled 7,422. In the group of Reading texts, the lowest percentage was 1% which was the same for three different texts, 50 Content Area Strategies for Adolescent Literacy (Fisher, Brozo, Frey, & Ivey, 2006), Self-Paced Phonics: A Text for Educators (Dow & Baer, 2006), and Phonics They Use: Words for Reading and Writing (Cunningham, 2008). The total RIIs and percentages for these three texts was 50 (1%), 82 (1%), and 95 (1%) respectively. Literacy for The 21st Century: Teaching Reading and Writing in

Prekindergarten through Grade 4 (Tompkins, 2007) had the highest percentage at 25% with 1,828 RIIs when compared to the total of RIIs (7,422) in the reading group. Figure 2 portrays the number of RIIs for each Reading text and the percentage when compared to the total number of RIIs for the group of texts.

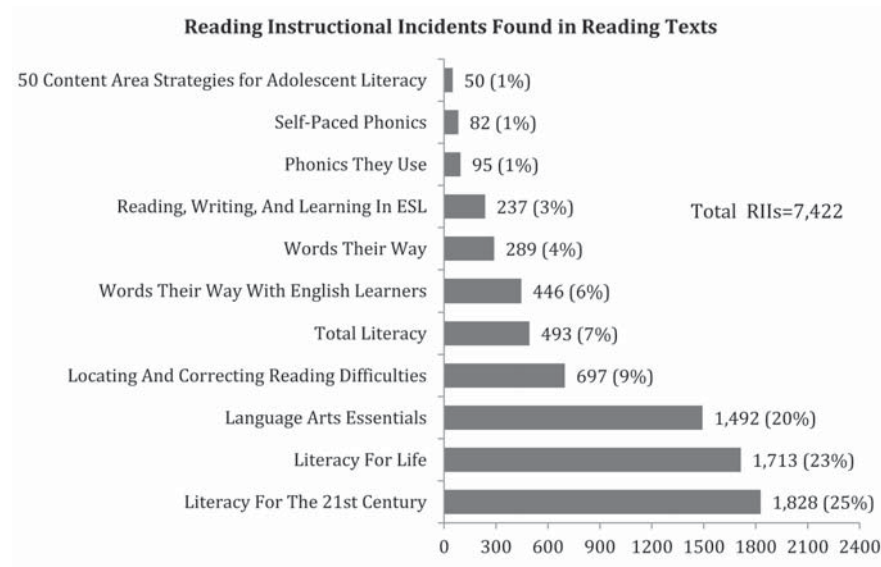


Figure 2. Reading Instructional Incidents (RIIs) Found in Reading Texts.

### Total Reading Comprehension Instructional Incidents by Data Source

RCIIs were found within the larger category of RIIs. The total number of RCIIs in the reading texts was 988, which came from 7 of the 11 texts. The four remaining texts contained no RCIIs. Literacy for Life (Norton, 2006) had the highest number of RCIIs with 274, which is 28% of the total number of RCIIs. This is depicted in Figure 3.



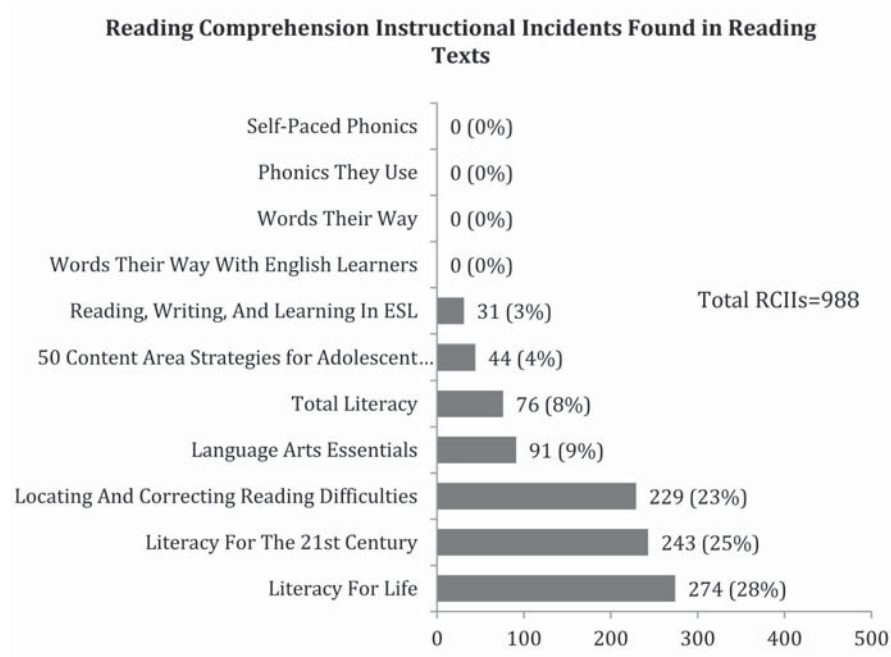


Figure 3. Reading Comprehension Instructional Incidents (RCIIs) Found in Reading Texts.

### Total Reading Comprehension Instructional Incidents by Category

Of the 988 RCIIs found in the Reading texts, 48 different categories emerged from the content analysis. The 48 original categories were collapsed into 14 categories, grouped by similar concepts and characteristics. The category with the highest frequency count was strategy with 436 (44%), and the lowest was vocabulary with 17 (2%). The 14 categories for the Reading texts are shown in Figure 4 along with the frequency counts for each one.

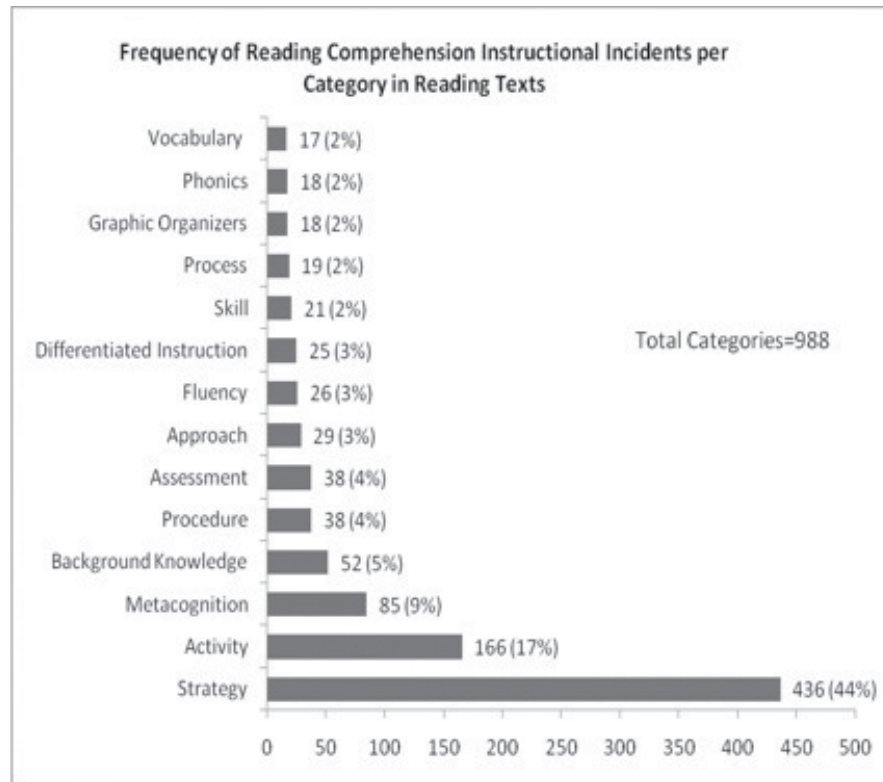


Figure 4. Frequency of Reading Comprehension Instructional Incidents (RCIIs) per Category and Text.

## Discussion

Throughout the years, research has proven that comprehension instruction should be a fundamental component of reading instruction (Durkin, 1979; NICHD, 2000; Pressley, 1998). However, in order for comprehension to be implemented, it is critical that teachers be knowledgeable about how to effectively meet the needs of their students (RAND, 2004; Pressley, 2000; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2004). One way of helping teachers gain information about reading comprehension is through professional literacy texts that are used in university teacher-education programs.

### Definitions of Reading Comprehension

This study examined 11 texts used in Reading courses at five universities. Surprisingly, of the 11 texts, only 7 definitions of reading comprehension were found. This finding is interesting considering that all 11 texts were used in university courses for preservice teachers regarding reading instruction and reading comprehension. Yet, fewer than 50% of the texts actually addressed what reading comprehension is. How can preservice teachers know what is expected of them when there may or not be a definition of what it is they are supposed to be doing? Based on the review of the literature, reading comprehension is an essential component of reading instruction (NICHHD, 2000). It was almost as if the definition and concept of reading comprehension and reading instruction was assumed or understood, but not openly discussed just as Durkin's (1979) seminal research concluded.

### RIIs and RCIIIs

The RII was the "umbrella" term and encompassed how reading instruction should be taught. They were directions, explanations, ideas, and/or suggestions of reading instruction that are found within a professional literacy text. On the other hand, the RCIIIs were a subset of the RIIs. They were directions, explanations, ideas, and/or suggestions focusing on reading comprehension that were found within the RIIs. They offered teachers a method to aid students in developing, enhancing, improving, increasing, and/or supporting reading comprehension.

When examining the RIIs found in the Reading texts and comparing them to the RCIIIs, the researcher found there to be a vast difference. There were a total of 7,422 RIIs, yet only 988 or 7% of those were RCIIIs relating to comprehension. This is a surprisingly small percentage considering that these professional literacy texts are used in Reading courses that focus on effective reading instruction, reading strategies, and reading comprehension in the elementary classroom. In exploring the reasons behind these findings, the researcher found it necessary to examine the reasons why comprehension is central to reading and what can happen if it does not exist.

According to the National Reading Panel (NICHHD, 2000), reading is more than just decoding words. It is an interactive process that is intentional (Durkin, 1993) and through which meaning is constructed. Without comprehension, there is no understanding; therefore, no learning can take place. So, if comprehension is necessary for the reader to actively construct meaning, and the three components of the reader, text, and activity must be present in order for comprehension to be

effective (RAND, 2004), then it is natural to conclude that in order for students to learn to comprehend, they must be taught.

Therefore, the person responsible for implementing instruction is the teacher. One method that university teacher-education programs have used to prepare preservice teachers was through coursework and professional literacy texts. After successful completion of this program, a preservice teacher is fully certified to be a classroom teacher. It is through these courses and texts that a preservice teacher is first exposed to reading instructional methods and the implementation of reading comprehension strategies.

If comprehension is the ultimate goal for reading, or any lesson for that matter, one has to wonder why only 7% of RIIs in the Reading texts were directly related to comprehension. Could the impact of high-stakes testing be part of the explanation? Although teaching comprehension strategies could have a direct, positive influence on the outcome of high-stakes testing, is it possible that comprehension continues to be taught as Durkin (1979) termed by “*mentioning, practicing, and assessing?*” If so, it is highly likely that students are being assessed on what they have understood, such as the test-taking strategies they are being bombarded with, but they are not being taught to comprehend text.

### Reading Texts

The lack of instructional incidents focusing on comprehension, or RCIIIs is disturbing since effective instructional practices are essential to the development of comprehension proficiency. Research has frequently substantiated that effective classroom instruction is a significant contributor to the development of comprehension skills for children (Aarnoutse et al. 2001; Conner et al., 2004).

Results from the category of graphic organizers were 18 (2%), which was another unforeseen finding since visual representation of content is advantageous for all students to aid in their comprehension of unfamiliar material. According to the NRP’s summary report, the use of graphic organizers is one of the eight recommended comprehension strategies which aid in effective reading instruction (NICHD, 2000). Therefore, this strengthens the argument that visual representation of facts is not only an effective way to aid students in comprehension of text but is substantiated by seminal national research.

That being said, it is also important to point out that it was virtually impossible to know how university professors and instructors used these textbooks. It is quite probable that supplemental material for those textbooks that were lacking in both RIIs and RCIIIs was used. These materials could be videos,

handouts, journal articles, class discussion, and the like. Furthermore, it is not known what kind of impact, if any, the instructor had or how instructional practices and reading strategies were modeled. However, research has validated the enormity the teacher's influence can have on students, regardless of the program or materials used. Indeed, it is the teacher who makes the difference (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Reutzel & Cooter, 2008; Sampson et al., 2003).

### Recommendations for Further Research

One area that might be worth delving into is to examine the current EC-6 Generalist program and compare it to the EC-6 ESL program. Data for the certification information could be acquired through SBEC for a specific year in order to select the criteria for the universities.

Garcia et al. (1993) examined academic reading journals and manuals for literacy instruction related to second-language learners. Results indicated that there was little information for mainstream or general-education teachers to help ELLs develop a second language successfully. Ten years later, Eakle (2003) replicated Garcia's study by examining *The Reading Teacher* and *Language Arts*. While the study showed some progress has been made, there still is so much that is not fully known.

Even though the data collected for this study focused primarily on courses for preservice teachers, it is reasonable to suggest that more research is needed in the area of informing and educating inservice teachers who are currently working with ELLs in classrooms nationwide. Preservice teachers go through various stages during their preparation to becoming classroom teachers. This training can be done through professional development, graduate courses, and state, local, and national conferences.

Another topic worth mentioning involves the scarcity of incidents regarding metacognition within the Reading texts. Only 9% of the categories that emerged from the RCII's dealt with the metacognitive component. Barton and Sawyer (2004) conducted a study in which elementary students were exposed the comprehension process through specific vocabulary and instructional concepts. Metacognition, or "thinking about one's own mental processes," was one of the six areas that were studied (Harris & Hodges, 1995). One conclusion from the study confirmed that teachers need ample support in order to effectively teach comprehension to students, therefore, indirectly linking professional literacy texts that are used with preservice teachers while preparing them for the classroom.

### **Implications for University Teacher-Education Programs**

At the time this study was conducted, the degree option for elementary certification was Early Childhood through 4th Grade Generalist (EC-4). At the time of this writing, the degree option had been changed to Early Childhood through 6th Grade Generalist (EC-6).

As with all sound research, while some questions are answered, many more opportunities emerge. The idea for this study presented itself through course work in a doctoral program while working concurrently with preservice teachers in undergraduate Reading courses. Through this particular university teacher-education program, students are given opportunities to learn a variety of instructional methods and strategic approaches to teaching literacy. The perspectives and opinions on the most effective instructional approach were varied and this became the catalyst to conduct research and find out more.



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## READING IS A BLAST! INSIDE AN INNOVATIVE LITERACY COLLABORATION BETWEEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Dr. Maria T. Genest

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### Abstract

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Public libraries have long supported the literacy goals of public schools in their communities by providing access to printed and electronic resources that enhance learning and teaching. This article describes an ongoing collaboration between the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's BLAST outreach program and the Pittsburgh Public Schools that has positively impacted thousands of students by increasing access to library resources while also emphasizing vocabulary, text-based discussion, and writing using both fiction and informational texts. This program can serve as a model for similar community partnerships that have the potential to enrich the literacy lives of students.

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There has long been a close relationship between public libraries and public schools. Often it is based on the material resources that the public library is able to provide to teachers, with the latter borrowing bags of books every few weeks to supplement classroom libraries, complete author studies and support math, science or social studies units. In addition, teachers have often asked students to utilize the public library for assignments, with children's librarians assisting with homework and research reports. More recently, Internet access has become an important service that the library makes available to students, and this is especially critical in urban, high-poverty areas where technology may not be available in each child's home (Economic and Statistics Administration & National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2011).

Until recently, libraries within schools have often been the source of additional materials and support for classroom teachers. However, with funding for school libraries in decline, public libraries are increasingly providing critical literacy services to students and teachers in their communities (Celano & Neuman, 2001). In addition, recent educational policy initiatives call for Comprehensive Literacy Plans that emphasize the vital role of community partners in facilitating student learning (Pennsylvania Comprehensive Literacy Plan, 2012). This article describes one such partnership: a collaborative literacy project between the Pittsburgh Public Schools and Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, which aimed to enrich the language arts experiences of urban elementary school students.

### **An Innovative Partnership**

Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (CLP) has been an influential institution in Western Pennsylvania since its inception in 1895. Early staff members included Frances Jenkins Olcott, a prominent children's librarian, who incorporated educational services to children as a primary goal of the library. The library has grown to include 19 locations in the Pittsburgh area, with staff creating baby, toddler, and preschool storytimes, as well as a plethora of other children's programs which are highly valued by the local community. This appreciation of the library's importance to the area was highlighted in 2011 when residents of the City of Pittsburgh voted overwhelmingly to provide dedicated funding to Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, a telling feat for this former steel-mill city in the middle of an economic recession.

For decades, CLP children's librarians regularly made visits to local public schools to complete book talks, which are brief, engaging book descriptions, and promote library resources. However, in 2002, a School Outreach program was

established, with staff hired and trained for that purpose. *Bringing Libraries And Schools Together*, or BLAST, was created to enable collaboration between library outreach specialists and literacy professionals in the Pittsburgh Public Schools in order to deliver high-quality literacy programs, books and materials to children in Pittsburgh (DeFilippo, 2010).

For the last decade, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's BLAST outreach team has implemented three major literacy outreach programs for students enrolled in grades K-5 in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. The primary goals are:

- Increase equitable access to the public library resources for children in the city of Pittsburgh, particularly in low-income neighborhoods
- Support the literacy instruction occurring in the Pittsburgh Public Schools
- Provide children with multiple exposures to high-quality fiction and informational text

In the early formation of BLAST, it was determined that certified elementary school teachers early in their careers would be ideal program designers and implementers of the BLAST literacy programs. With knowledge of classroom management, read-aloud techniques, and curriculum design, teachers who desired an opportunity for a unique and innovative application of their educational knowledge and skills would be comfortable working intensively with students and teachers in grades K-5. As employees of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, they would gain access to one of the best children's library collections in the country as well as a deeper understanding of the library's role in the community. This staffing choice has proven to be a very successful component in the ten years of the outreach program. The teachers, serving as outreach specialists on the BLAST team, gain confidence in their skills in the classroom and have opportunities to collaborate with professional children's librarians at CLP as well as public school district staff to provide coherently designed literacy programming for thousands of students in Pittsburgh. The BLAST staff members serve as critical liaisons between the literacy resources and community-education mission of the public library and local public school students. In fact, many BLAST staff members have gone on to pursue Master's of Library and Information Science (MLIS) degrees and become school librarians in the community.

BLAST programs are designed to complement the instructional practices and topics in the school district curriculum. In particular, BLAST programs often include interactive read-alouds, a critical feature of successful literacy classrooms.

Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey (2004) identified interactive read-aloud practices that were common among 25 expert teachers. These features included high-quality, appropriate texts that had been previewed and practiced by teachers, and read with fluency, animation and expression. In addition, teachers paused to identify difficult words and ask questions to prompt class discussion. BLAST utilizes these read-aloud techniques in its programs to support best practice literacy instruction in classrooms. BLAST has incorporated informational text into all of its programs, based on research that demonstrated the need for increased emphasis on nonfiction for younger students (Duke, 2000). All program sessions are designed to last for one 40-45 minute class period.

*There are three key programs in BLAST: the Third Grade program, the Thematic program and the Summer program (See Table 3). Each program is described in detail below.*

### **Third Grade Program**

The program for third grade classrooms was created to support the literacy experiences of students in the lowest-performing schools in Pittsburgh. While the numbers of schools and students have varied over the years due to school closures and other district changes, in the 2010-2011 school year, BLAST presented 217 literacy programs to third grade students. The programs include both fiction and informational texts. When reading fiction and biographies, the emphasis is on high-quality interactive read-alouds with an emphasis on vocabulary and discussion. This design of the interactive read-aloud is based on Questioning the Author techniques (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan 1997) and Text-Talk (Beck & McKeown, 2001). Table 1 is an example of a third grade program.

Using knowledge of research-based vocabulary instruction (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002), the BLAST staff also selects two words for emphasis during the interactive read-aloud. The words are introduced and discussed with students using the text as the anchor for deriving meaning. These words are typed on cards, which are then given to classroom teachers to display for student reference throughout the year. Figure 1 is an example of a vocabulary card used for the biographical text, *Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai* (Nivola, 2008).

Table 1
<i>Example of a Third Grade program</i>
<b>Text: Planting the Trees of Kenya by Wangari Maathai</b>
<b>Vocabulary words:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Inspiring</li> <li>2. Exposed</li> </ol>
<b>Sample Discussion Questions:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What does it mean that “the earth was clothed in its dress of green”?</li> <li>2. What does Wangari mean when she says, “When we see that we are part of the problem, we can become part of the solution”?</li> <li>3. Why did Wangari give seeds to the soldiers?</li> </ol>
<b>Journal Response:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Wangari said, "When we see that we are part of the problem, we can become part of the solution." What are some small things you can do here at your school that can help the environment?</li> <li>2. Wangari Maathai is a real person who accomplished a lot of amazing things. If you had a chance to meet her, what would you say? What questions would you ask?</li> </ol>

**exposed**
left or being without shelter or protection

From the story:

*"When the soil is **exposed**, Wangari tells us, 'it is crying out for help, it is naked and needs to be clothed in its dress. That is the nature of the land. It needs color; it needs its cloth of green.'"*




Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh
BLAST School Outreach 2011-2012

Figure 1. Example of vocabulary word card provided to third grade teachers



As a final task, third grade students are asked to write a response related to the read-aloud text. The inclusion of a writing activity was added in the early years of the program, upon consultation with the program's external evaluator, Dr. Rita M. Bean, currently Professor Emeritus of Reading at the University of Pittsburgh. Her expertise in evaluating effective literacy instruction led to this significant change to the program, which has continued to be part of its current design. Figure 2 is an example of a writing task given to third grade students.



**Soar, Elinor!**  
 by Tami Lewis Brown  
 Illustrated by François Roca

Elinor dreamed of being a pilot and worked hard to become one.

***What do you dream of doing?***

I dream of being an architect, because I love building things. It's my favorite hobby. I have a big table stacked with boxes that I use to build barbie doll houses. I even built a barbie doll house for my friend's sister to play with.

Figure 2. Example of one student's written response to a picture book biography

Informational texts, primarily from the Time for Kids series and National Geographic Kids readers, are also used in the Third Grade program to demonstrate the features of a nonfiction text and initiate discussion around the content. BLAST staff members introduce the topic, (recent ones include butterflies, frogs and volcanoes), and guide them through pre-reading inquiry tasks, such as a KWL chart, to launch into the topic. BLAST provides a copy of the text for each student to use during the program, and then guides the class through the Table of Contents, to look for sections that may have answers to their initial inquiries. This is done to show students that nonfiction text can be read selectively to locate information. Students have time to read interesting sections with partners and are given a sticky note to write down a fact that they learned. Students share the notes and post them on the KWL chart, which is then displayed in the classroom.

One of the highlights of the Third Grade BLAST program is an end-of-the-year field trip to the neighborhood Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh location. Students either walk or take a bus (funded by BLAST) to the library to meet the local children's librarians at that location. Students participate in an interactive read-aloud on-site, are led on a tour of the public library by the professional children's librarian at that location, and create small books, which are then displayed in the library. The display serves not only as a celebration of literacy, but also as an incentive for students to bring their parents into the library and potentially become regular library users. This culminating activity provides students with a tangible connection to this invaluable resource in their neighborhoods. BLAST provides a link between school and home literacies by demonstrating that reading and writing are valued in many places in the community.

### **Thematic Program**

BLAST staff members also design bimonthly thematic literacy programs for students in grades K-5 in all Pittsburgh Public Schools. In the 2010-2011 school year, BLAST implemented 347 thematic programs in local classrooms. The programs include an interactive read-aloud of one or two texts related to the curriculum content, booktalks that describe other texts on that topic, and a hands-on activity. Due to funding limitations, texts used in the thematic programs are not purchased for the classrooms. However, because most participating schools schedule these programs regularly, students benefit from multiple exposures to an interactive-read aloud, as well as to the many literacy resources that the public

library can offer. Table 2 provides examples of thematic programs for grades K-2 and 3-5.

Table 2 <i>Examples of Thematic programs</i>	
Grades K-2	Grades 3-5
<b>Theme: Imaginary Gardening</b>	<b>Theme: Urban Art</b>
<b>Texts:</b> 1. <i>The Curious Garden</i> by Peter Brown 2. <i>The Imaginary Garden</i> by Andres Larson 3. <i>Looking Closely Inside the Garden</i> by Frank Serafini 4. <i>Rose's Garden</i> by Peter H. Reynolds	<b>Texts:</b> 1. <i>Magic Trash</i> by J.H. Shapiro 2. <i>Diego Rivera: His World and Ours</i> by Duncan Tonatiuh 3. <i>Sidewalk Canvas: Chalk Pavement Art at Your Feet</i> by Julie Kirk-Purcell 4. <i>Pavement Chalk Artist</i> by Julian Beever
<b>Hands-On Activity:</b> Students will have the opportunity to design and create their own "imaginary garden" flower or plant to take home.	<b>Hands-On Activity:</b> Students will create chalk-art of their own after learning about famous artists that create murals and pavement art in everyday spaces.

### Summer Program

Like many school districts, the Pittsburgh Public Schools operate summer school programs throughout the city of Pittsburgh. Students who enroll in these supplemental programs are often struggling readers in need of additional academic support in order to diminish learning loss over the summer months. BLAST continues its literacy outreach in those locations for four weeks in the summer. BLAST staff members offer one program each week for students in grades K-4 during the summer school session. They design 30-minute interactive read-alouds utilizing fiction and nonfiction selections that connect to Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's Summer Reading program theme. For Summer 2012, the theme is "Dream Big", which will emphasize books about nighttime, nocturnal animals, inventors, and other people who accomplished great things. The BLAST staff will deliver these literacy programs to 1,200 summer school students each week.

A particular highlight of the BLAST summer program is a book exchange with students. Each week, BLAST outreach specialists bring hundreds of new paperback books for students to "borrow" for the week. If they bring that book

back the next week, they get to choose another book. Since every student will get the opportunity to choose one book to keep and add to their home library at the end of the program, students who do not bring back their books are not penalized; the book becomes the one that they will keep as their own. Table 3 describes the features of the three BLAST programs.

Table 3 <i>BLAST Programs</i>			
Program	Participants	Frequency	Literacy Components
Third Grade	Third grade students in high-poverty city schools	Monthly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactive read-aloud</li> <li>• Multicultural texts</li> <li>• Vocabulary emphasis</li> <li>• Open-ended questioning and discussion</li> <li>• Library visit</li> </ul>
Thematic	Students in grades K-5 in any city school	Bi-monthly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactive read-aloud on relevant curriculum topic</li> <li>• Hands-on activity that relates to theme</li> </ul>
Summer	Students in PPS summer school sites	Weekly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactive read-aloud</li> <li>• Book exchange and giveaway</li> </ul>

### The Growth of a Partnership

This highly successful partnership between the Pittsburgh Public Schools and Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh BLAST program has evolved greatly in the decade since it began in 2002. Initially, the BLAST program applied for and received significant grant funding from three philanthropic foundations in the city of Pittsburgh. However, over time and with the overwhelming success of the program, funding has shifted so that the primary cost of BLAST is included in the CLP operating budget with some additional assistance provided by the Pittsburgh Public Schools. The elementary schools pay a small fee out of their site-based budget each year for the BLAST program. This has only been possible because teachers, school district administrators and CLP executives have seen the value of the BLAST program and want it to continue and succeed. Dr. Barbara Rudiak, Assistant Superintendent for K-5 Pittsburgh Public Schools states, “When principals learned that they would need to pay for BLAST out of their school based budgets, they very willingly agreed to do so. In fact, more schools chose to be included. This validated for me the impact that BLAST had on our students

and teachers. Although school budgets continue to decrease, it is important to note there is no decrease in the number of schools who have asked to participate in the 2012-13 school year” (personal communication, June 25, 2012).

The positive impact that BLAST has had on students in Pittsburgh is quantifiable. As stated previously, in the early years of the program, Dr. Rita M. Bean of the University of Pittsburgh was invited to be an external evaluator for the third grade program, due to its particularly strong emphasis on vocabulary and comprehension. The rigorous evaluation and design improvements recommended by Dr. Bean also lent credibility to the BLAST program, because informal assessment results over the years consistently demonstrated that students enjoyed listening to and discussing the texts, learning new words, and tended to visit the library more frequently after participating in the BLAST third grade program (Bean & Curley, 2005; Bean & Curley, 2006; Bean & Genest, 2004; Genest & Bean, 2007; Bean, Curley, & Villella, 2003).

Another condition that has made BLAST a valued community program is the emphasis on alignment with the Pittsburgh Public School curriculum and Pennsylvania Academic Standards. The teachers hired as BLAST staff members have a familiarity with lesson design and best practices in literacy instruction, as well as classroom management, so that the program content and design complemented the goals of classroom teachers. This was only possible because of the willingness of school district administrators to provide BLAST with curriculum topics and materials that were utilized in classrooms.

While knowledge of school culture and classroom literacy instruction is an important aspect of the success of BLAST, it has been critical that the outreach specialists who implement BLAST have continuously participated in professional development in literacy instruction over the years. The initial stages of collaboration with the Pittsburgh Public Schools was enhanced by the invitation to jointly participate in district professional development on *Questioning the Author* (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan 1997) and *Text-Talk* (Beck & McKeown, 2001). This launched the program’s emphasis on vocabulary and whole class discussion around text. Since then, BLAST staff has attended many statewide and regional professional development conferences to remain current on best practices in literacy instruction in both school and library settings, including The Penn State Summer Literacy Institute, the PA Governor’s Institute for Educators, the Pennsylvania Library Association Annual Conference, and the local Allegheny County Intermediate Unit literacy workshops.

## Teacher and Student Responses

Over the years, teachers who have participated in the BLAST program have been asked to complete surveys at the end of each year to articulate the factors that support the implementation of BLAST in their classrooms. Generally, teachers from the third grade program valued the following features:

- Questioning during the story
- Exposure to informational text
- Another teacher reiterating the strategies/style/modeled reading that already occurs in the classroom
- Making a connection with Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh
- Stressing strategies good readers use

In addition, participating teachers were interviewed to gain specific insights into their perspectives on the third grade program. They stated the following:

- o “[BLAST] enriched [student] vocabulary. They enjoyed their discussion about other cultures.”
- o “I love that you gave a book to the classroom. This allows further interaction with the book and encourages rereading. It inspires a love of reading as the BLAST books are among the most popular in our class today.”
- o “Overall organization of the program- I was in awe of the program since the first day. Kids listened. The way she read the story really blew my mind.”
- o “Informational text is often brushed aside by students. Therefore the exposure is critical.”
- o “BLAST linked every strategy and skill that PPS models for ‘good readers.’”

Teachers also have positive feedback about the thematic programs.

- o “The exposure the children have to a variety of books is wonderful! The students are very responsive to the ideas and activities that are presented.”
- o “The programs are well-organized and are presented in a very professional, yet fun manner.”

Teachers who participated in the summer program also gave input about the implementation of BLAST.

- o “It exposed the students to good reading material. I became more familiar with student literature and good authors.”
- o “The students were introduced to a variety of literature.”

- o “PA academic standards were identified with each visit. Students were motivated to read.”
- o “The library coming to the children was great!”

Students have also had opportunities to provide feedback on the BLAST program. Students who have participated in the third grade program stated the following:

- o “I like when you read us the best questions when you read us the stories. It makes me want to write my own stories. My mind is ready to answer your questions.”
- o “When you come, everyone gets real calm. You read interesting books-that’s all I read.”
- o “...when somebody reads to you, you can exchange thoughts that you have about the text or stories.”
- o “Learning new words are good for your education, and actually knowing what they mean is better than just saying words and not knowing what they mean.”

### **Innovation Through Collaboration**

BLAST enriches the literacy experiences of thousands of students every year in Pittsburgh. It began because students needed additional support in literacy and school district officials and teachers were willing to allow well-trained, enthusiastic library staff, all certified elementary educators, into the classrooms. Many factors have contributed to its success. There are ongoing discussions with all participants on how to improve the program for both classroom teachers and students and the programs are continuously examined for design improvements and alignment with the ever-shifting language arts curriculum goals and standards. Formal evaluation enhanced the implementation of the program by providing evidence that students made significant gains in vocabulary and access to library services. Engagement in professional development sessions provides the latest literacy instructional knowledge for BLAST outreach specialists. These design features have been critical in demonstrating that everyone is on the same team and has the same goal: supporting the literacy learning of Pittsburgh students.

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### **About the Author**

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