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A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts



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# *Reading Horizons*

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*Volume 53, Number 2*

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



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Dear Readers,

It has been only a few short months since we took over as the new co-editors of *Reading Horizons*. The learning curve has been steep, but we are excited to say that things are moving ahead with impressive speed. We wanted to share with you an exciting development for *Reading Horizons*. The editors and staff are preparing for *Reading Horizons* to transition to an open access journal beginning in January 2015. The journal will continue to be issued in print until then, but in the next year, everyone will also be able to access all articles online at the following location: [http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons](http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons). The only articles, which cannot yet be accessed at this site, are those which have been published in the past two years.

Some may be wondering how transitioning to an open access format may affect publishing in our journal. We are pleased to share that even though we are becoming a fully open access journal, we are not charging a publication fee to authors. As well, we remain a double blind peer reviewed journal. By becoming an open access journal, authors will be able to reach a much wider audience. We have been receiving a number of high quality submissions, and we look forward to receiving more in the upcoming year.

In this issue, we are pleased to share four peer reviewed articles that explore issues of supporting readers and learners from a number of perspectives. First, author Molly Ness' article entitled "Helping Elementary Teachers to Think Aloud" describes how 31 teachers learned to use the think aloud strategy to effectively support readers in their graduate course. The article provides wonderful details from actual transcripts to demonstrate what an effective think aloud might look like, and when, and how to implement the strategy during instruction. Second, author Aimee Papola-Ellis addresses text complexity and provides insight regarding how factors such as interest and background knowledge about a topic impact how challenging a text may be. The article provides food for thought regarding how lack of experience or prior exposure to information can make a text more challenging for different readers. Third, authors Wilson, Prior, and Martinez provide a thought provoking examination of how second graders interpret characters in picture book illustrations. Close inspections of picture books reveal the rich and varied ways in which visual text contributes to the development of characters (as well as other

aspects of stories). We believe that it is critically important that teachers invite children to delve into illustrations to understand characters and help them extend their understanding of the more subtle devices that illustrators use in developing characters. The fourth article in this issue is written by Rodriquez, Abrego, and Rubin and it addresses the critical issue of supporting English Language Learners through the coaching of teachers. This article will be an excellent resource for coaching courses and for classroom teachers. We believe there is a critical need to support teachers in this area and the authors provide excellent suggestions for our readers.

We hope you enjoy reading these excellent articles as much as we have putting this volume together. Enjoy!

Lauren Freedman

Susan Piazza

Selena Protacio

Co-Editors of *Reading Horizons*







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## HELPING ELEMENTARY TEACHERS TO THINK ALOUD

Molly Ness, Fordham University

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### Abstract

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An essential element in teaching children to effectively comprehend text is the use of teacher-led think alouds. The article follows a semester-long project with 31 in-service teachers, who planned, implemented, transcribed, and reflected upon think aloud lessons to build student comprehension. Through multiple exposures to think alouds, teachers made significant growth in the quantity and quality of reading comprehension strategies they incorporated. Discussion focuses on the successes and struggles that teachers encountered when thinking aloud. Finally, suggestions for supporting teachers in effectively thinking aloud are provided.

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There are many steps between knowing what an effective teaching strategy is, and knowing how to do it. The more I prepared and tried out think alouds, the more confident I became in my knowledge that this was something I both *should* do and *could* do.

Ms. Hynes (all teacher names are pseudonyms) was a third-grade classroom teacher who enrolled in a literacy methods class that I taught at a graduate school of education in a major metropolitan area. The focus of this course was to explore instructional theories, strategies, and practices to improve K-5 students' reading comprehension across content areas. A major portion of the graduate coursework focused on implementing think alouds as a way for teachers to help their students understand the comprehension strategies that proficient readers employ to make meaning of text. As the university instructor, I assigned multiple readings on think alouds, modeled think alouds of both narrative and nonfiction text, showcased video excerpts of exemplary think alouds, and led small-group planning sessions where teachers practiced thinking aloud with their colleagues (see Table 1 for more information on the scope and sequence of think alouds in the graduate coursework).

**Table 1**

*How Think Alouds Were Incorporated into 15 Weeks of University Graduate Course (following the Pearson & Gallagher's 1983 Gradual Release of Responsibility)*

Background Readings Completed by Teachers Across the Semester	Weeks 2 -5 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Teacher candidates were assigned to read several practitioner-appropriate journal articles about how, when, and why to use think alouds (Barrentine, 1996; Block &amp; Israel, 2004; Oster, 2001; Walker, 2005).</li></ul>
Teacher Modeling by University Methods Instructor	Weeks 1 -10 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>University instructor modeled 10 weeks of read alouds of both nonfiction text and narrative text. Modeled texts included <i>Amelia and Eleanor Go For a Ride</i> by Pam Munoz Ryan, <i>Moon</i> by Seymour Simon, <i>The Circus Ship</i> by Chris van Dusen, and <i>Knuffle Bunny Free</i> by Mo Willems.</li></ul>
Collaborative Practice between Teacher Candidates and University Instruction	Weeks 6 - 9 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>During class sessions, teacher candidates watched video clips of teacher-generated think alouds and critically analyzed the lessons.</li></ul>
Guided Practice among Teacher Candidates	Weeks 10-12 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Teacher candidates worked in small groups to lesson planning with assistance, feedback, and evaluation from university instructor. Texts included <i>The Kissing Hand</i> by Audrey Penn, <i>City Hawk: The Story of Pale Male</i> by Meghan McCarthy, and <i>Balloons over Broadway: The True Story of the Puppeteer of Macy's Parade</i> by Melissa Sweet.</li></ul>
Independent Practice by Teacher Candidates	Due in Weeks 12-15 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Teacher candidates planned, implemented, and reflected upon three think aloud lesson plans.</li></ul>

Across the semester, teachers submitted and implemented think aloud lesson plans, audiorecorded and transcribed a short excerpt of a think aloud, and reflected upon how thinking aloud impacted their teaching. This article helps elementary teachers understand how to incorporate effective think alouds into their own classroom practices.

## **Understanding Think Alouds**

Perhaps one of the most challenging jobs that K-5 teachers have is to prepare students to be better comprehenders of the texts that they will encounter in schooling and beyond; teachers must enable students to be flexible and independent in applying a myriad of comprehension strategies. Though helping students become self-regulated comprehenders is a significant instructional challenge for teachers, this process is vastly improved when teachers provide quality interactions and models of how to maneuver through texts. An essential element in teaching children to effectively comprehend text is the use of teacher-led think alouds. During a think aloud, a reader verbally reports his/her thinking as he/she approaches the text. Think alouds require a reader to stop periodically, to reflect on how a text is being processed and understood, and to relate orally what reading strategies are being employed (Baumann, Jones, & Seifert-Kessell, 1993; Block & Israel, 2004). In their book on the cognitive processes of think alouds, van Someren and colleagues (1994) define think alouds as a problem solving process in which “the subject keeps on talking, speaks out loud whatever thoughts come to mind, while performing the task at hand” (p. 35). An essential part of effective think alouds includes teacher modeling of purposeful comprehension strategies (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) (For a list of common think aloud strategies, see Table 2).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Because the present study focuses largely on how to better prepare teachers on how to use think alouds, the literature reviewed here focuses largely on teacher-generated think alouds, as opposed to think alouds as a means to observe and assess student comprehension.

**Table 2**

*Commonly Applied Reading Comprehension Strategies Applied During Think Alouds (Block & Israel, 2004; Davey, 1983; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Maria & Hathaway, 1993; Migyanka, Policastro, & Lui, 2005; Zimmerman & Hutchins, 2003)*

Strategy	Brief Description
Overviewing the text	When a reader looks over the text before reading, paying particular attention to the text features and how those features are relevant to his/her purpose for reading
Visualization	When a reader creates and adapts mental images to make reading three dimensional
Activating prior knowledge	When a reader thinks through what he/she already knows about a topic to make sense of how the text connects to that prior knowledge.
Asking questions	When a reader constructs, revises, and questions the meanings he/she makes during reading
Recognizing an author's writing style	in which readers recognize an author's vocabulary choice, sentence complexity, connection between sentences and paragraphs, length of paragraphs, and introduction of ideas (Block & Israel, 2004, p. 160)
Making inferences	When a reader forms a best guess using evidence from the text to make predictions and draw conclusions
Making connections	When a reader makes personal connections with the text by using his/her background knowledge. There are three types of common connections: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Text-to-Self (T-S) refers to connections made between the text and the reader's personal experience.</li> <li>• Text-to-Text (T-T) refers to connections made between a text being read to a text that was previously read.</li> <li>• Text-to-World (T-W) refers to connections made between a text being read and something that occurs in the world.</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
Making and revising predictions	When a reader uses information from the text and from his/her own personal experience to anticipate what he/she is about to read.
Determining the most important ideas	When a reader distinguishes between what information in a text is most important versus what information is interesting but not necessary for understanding.
Synthesizing information	When a reader not only restates the important points from a text, but also combines ideas to allow for an evolving understanding of text
Monitoring comprehension	When a reader identifies what he/she does and does not understand and applies appropriate strategies to resolve any problems in comprehension
Restatement	When a reader rephrases portions of the text in simpler terms
Determining word meanings	When a reader tries to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words and/or concepts in a text to deal with inconsistencies or gaps in knowledge
Backtracking or rereading	When a reader monitors his/her understanding and makes adjustments in his/her reading as needed

By verbalizing their thought processes and employing fix up strategies to address comprehension break-downs, teachers can help students develop higher thinking and comprehension skills (Baumann, Seifert-Kessell, & Jones, 1992; Davey, 1983). In a landmark study, Duffy and colleagues (1987) showcased that reading comprehension instruction must provide explanations and scaffolding through think alouds. Effective teacher think alouds positively impact student achievement; when given solid models of think alouds, students are more likely to be able to verbalize their own reading strategies and thus score higher on comprehension tests (Anderson & Roit, 1993; Bereiter & Bird, 1985; Loxterman, Beck, & McKeown, 1994; Schunk & Rice, 1985; Silven & Vaurus, 1992; Ward & Traweek, 1993).

Though think alouds are widely recommended as an effective instructional strategy, they may not yet be commonplace in today's classrooms (Pressley, 2002). Walker (2005) wrote "seldom are the teachers modeling the think aloud process as students read" (p. 688). The exclusion of think alouds in classroom instruction may be due to teachers' struggles to model this complex process (Duffy & Roehler, 1989; El Dinary, Pressley, & Schuder, 1992). Many teachers find that modeling their thinking processes, as done in a think aloud, is difficult (Dowhower, 1999; Jongsma, 2000). Though a text may be difficult for students, teachers often struggle to see where and why students struggle with a text that they interpret as easy.

### **How to Effectively Think Aloud**

A wealth of information provides teachers with meaningful and constructive advice on how to approach think alouds in routine classroom instruction (Baker, 2002; Block & Israel, 2004; Davey, 1983; Oster, 2001; Walker, 2005). Wilhelm (2001) suggests that teacher-generated think alouds include the following steps:

- 1) The selection of a short section of a text
- 2) Teacher selection of a few relevant and purposeful strategies
- 3) Teacher statement of the purpose for reading and a deliberate focus on particular strategies
- 4) Reading the text aloud to students while modeling the chosen strategies
- 5) Having students annotate the text, or make notes for possible sources of confusion
- 6) Brainstorming of cues and strategies used



- 7) Teaching students to generalize the strategies
- 8) Reinforcement of the think aloud with follow-up lessons.

While thinking aloud, teachers should intentionally hit upon the reading skills that poor readers often lack, such as making predictions, developing mental images, linking prior knowledge, monitoring comprehension, and correcting comprehension break-downs (Davey, 1983).

## Helping Teachers To Think Aloud

As a teacher educator, my intent was to help early career teachers increase the quality and the quantity of the think alouds that they incorporated into their routine classroom instruction. I viewed my literacy methods coursework as an effective place to increase teachers' own metacognitive awareness of their reading processes (Thomas & Barksdale-Ladd, 2000). During my semester-long project, I worked with 31 K-5 teachers who pursued state certification in elementary (K-6) education. All participants were full-time teachers and enrolled in a two-year alternative certification Masters of Arts in Teaching program. All teachers were either in their first or second years of full-time teaching in urban public schools, in conjunction with 5-8 credits of graduate coursework per semester.

Over the course of the semester, teachers planned, implemented, and reflected upon three think aloud lesson plans. In the lesson plans, teachers selected a K-5 children's book appropriate for their student teaching placement. Texts could be either narrative or nonfiction. In their lesson plans, teachers submitted the following: (a) the overarching lesson objectives and appropriate Common Core State Standards (2010), (b) a justification of how this text was appropriate for their classroom context, (c) a text copy (or excerpts) of their choice of children's books, (d) clearly identified stopping places where they'd stop and think aloud, and (e) a transcript of what they planned to verbalize to the class while thinking aloud at each predetermined stopping point. Teachers were not directed to include a particular number of stopping points for think alouds or to incorporate any specific reading comprehension strategies; rather, they were left to determine both what kind and how many strategies were appropriate for their students and their chosen text. In addition to planning and implementing these lessons, teachers submitted a written reflection, focusing on successes and struggles in thinking aloud. At the conclusion of the semester, participants transcribed a short portion (approximately 10-15 minutes) of their think aloud

instruction. The transcript analysis portion of the project was highly influenced by the instructional recommendations of Kucan (2007):

Transcript analysis allows teachers to capture what cannot be captured in any other way—the talking and thinking that transpires in classrooms on a daily basis. Transcript analysis also allows teachers to see what happens when they are more thoughtful about the kinds of texts they ask students to think about and to become more aware of the kinds of questions they ask and the kinds of responses they make to students. (p. 236)

At the conclusion of the semester, I examined multiple data sources from the 31 teachers including (a) three lesson plans per teacher, (b) transcriptions of a 10-15 minute think aloud lesson, and (c) written reflections. In their reflections, teachers responded to the following prompts:

- What did you notice about yourself as a learner, as a reader, and as a teacher in planning and implementing these think aloud lessons?
- How might planning, implementing, and reflecting upon think aloud lessons inform your instruction?
- What are your future goals in planning and implementing think alouds in your classroom? What might you need to accomplish these goals?
- What was the think aloud process like for you? What about thinking aloud worked for you? What about thinking aloud didn't work?
- What about thinking aloud was easy for you? What about thinking aloud was hard for you?
- Evaluate your own level of comfort in thinking aloud with K-6 students. How ready do you feel to incorporate think alouds in future teaching?

To examine my data sources, I used a mixed-methods approach. I tallied the frequency of reading comprehension strategies aligned with the previously cited comprehension strategies. To examine the transcripts and reflective journals, I used grounded theory data analyses procedures. After all data were collected, I read and reread the data to identify emerging themes. I triangulated findings across data sources; for instance, I compared think aloud lesson plans with the actual audiotaped portion to confirm findings. My observations are explained below, as well as concrete suggestions for how elementary teachers can incorporate think alouds into their teaching.

Teachers' Successes in Thinking Aloud

Overall, the process of planning, implementing, reflecting upon, and transcribing think aloud lessons proved to be successful. By the end of the semester, the vast majority of participants were able to design think aloud that were effective for a variety of reasons: their think alouds included (a) logical stopping points that capitalized on comprehension opportunities, (b) a variety of comprehension strategies that were relevant to the associated text, and (c) rich monologues designed to help young readers understand the metacognitive processes of reading. For further evidence of effective think alouds, Table 3 includes brief portions from scripts submitted by teachers.

Table 3  
Selected Portions of Effective Think Alouds

Sample Text #1 – <i>Knuffle Bunny Free</i> by Mo Willems		
What The Text Says	Teacher Think Aloud Script	Associated Comprehension Strategies
That night, they had a surprise for Trixie: a brand-new, top-of-the-line FUNNY-BUNNY-WUNNY-DOLL EXTREME! It could walk! It could speak (In Dutch.) It could dance! But it couldn't make Trixie feel any better. Trixie was sure that she wouldn't be able to sleep another night in a strange bed without her Knuffle Bunny. →	<i>"So even though I was right that Trixie really does miss Knuffle Bunny, I was wrong in predicting that her Oma and Opa would take her on many adventures to help her forget. I think that even though the new bunny Trixie's Oma and Opa bought for her was really cool and could do lots of fun things, she just wants her doll back."</i>	Making and clarifying predictions
Before she knew it, she was dreaming...She dreamed of Knuffle Bunny and all the places he would visit. She dreamed of all the children Knuffle Bunny would meet. She dreamed of how Knuffle Bunny would make them feel better. The next morning, Trixie felt better. Trixie had a big breakfast. She played with Oma on the playground swings. She even tried a sip of Opa's coffee at the café! It was a great day. Before she knew it, the trip was over it was time to go home. Trixie hugged Oma and Opa as hard as she could. Then Trixie and her family got back onto the train, and back onto the plane, and listened to the crying baby as the plane lifted off. But can you believe it? Right there, on that very plane, Trixie noticed something... "KNUFFLE BUNNY!!!" Trixie was so happy to have Knuffle Bunny back in her arms. →	<i>"I can't believe it! Trixie must have the best luck in the world! On her flight home, she was on the very same plane and in the very same seat and Knuffle Bunny was still there! Thumbs up if you lost something and then forgot about it. Now keep your thumbs up if you finally found what you had lost, and even though you forgot about it, you were SO happy to have it back!"</i>	Clarification, making connections
Happy enough to make a decision...Trixie turned around and said: "Would your baby like my Knuffle Bunny?" →	<i>"What? I'm going to go back and read that again. I thought I read that Trixie gave up Knuffle Bunny. I'm not sure if that's right. Let me go back and reread."</i>	Reread to clarify confusion

Sample Text #2 – *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn

What The Text Says	Teacher Think Aloud Script	Associated Comprehension Strategies
<p>“I don’t want to go to school,” he told his mother. “I want to stay home with you. I want to play with my friends. And play with my boys. And read my books. And swing on my swing. Please may I stay home with you?” Mrs. Raccoon took Chester by the hand and nuzzled him on the ear.</p> <p>“Sometimes we all have to do things we don’t want to do,” she told him gently. “Even if they seem strange and scary at first. But you will love school once you start.” “You’ll make new friends. And play with new toys. Read new books. And swing on new swings. Besides,” she added. “I know a wonderful secret that will make your nights at school seem as warm and cozy as your days at home.”</p> <p>She took Chester’s hand and carefully wrapped his fingers around the kiss. “Now, do be careful not to lose it,” she teased him. “But, don’t worry. When you open your hand and wash your food, I promise the kiss will stick.” Chester loved his Kissing Hand. Now he knew his mother’s love would go with him wherever he went. Even to school. That night, Chester stood in front of his school and looked thoughtful. Suddenly, he turned to his mother and grinned. “Give me your hand,” he told her. Chester took his mother’s hand in his own and unfolded her large, familiar fingers into a fan.</p>	<p><i>In my mind’s eye, I see a nice, loving Mom who is trying to comfort her child. This reminds me of how my mom used to comfort me when I was sad and did not want to go to school. I bet she will have a great idea to make Chester feel better and stop crying.</i></p> <p><i>I am curious to find out what her secret might be to make Chester feel better while they are apart during school.</i></p> <p><i>Is Chester going to give her a kiss on her hand, too?</i></p>	<p>Visualization, making predictions, making connections</p> <p>Clarifying, setting a purpose</p> <p>Asking a question</p>

Sample Text #3 – *The Circus Ship* by Chris van Dusen

What The Text Says	Teacher Think Aloud Script	Associated Comprehension Strategies
Through chilly water, all night long, the animals swam on, until they reached an island beach just before the dawn. They pulled themselves up on the shore-bedraggled, cold, and beat-then staggered to the village on weary, wobbly feet.	<i>"Wow, there are a lot of big words that I need to take a look at again. 'Bedraggled' seems to talk about how the animals are feeling. If they were swimming all night long, I would think 'bedraggled' must mean really, really tired. Now, 'staggered' is an action word. If they 'staggered' to the village on weary, wobbly feet, they must have been walking but in a way that seemed like they would fall over at any minute. And lastly, 'weary' is used to talk about the animals' feet that were wobbly and also probably very tired"</i>	Activate prior knowledge, determining word meanings
The next day at the crack of dawn, a ship was at the pier, and up the lane marched Mr. Paine, whose voice was loud and clear: "I am the circus owner. My ship sank in the murk. I've come to find my animals and put them back to work." He hiked until he came into the center of the town. His face was red. He scratched his head. He stood there with a frown. Mr. Paine looked high and low, but still he couldn't see the fifteen circus animals of his menagerie. "He ran around the alleyways. He searched the village square. He even checked the chicken coop-his animals weren't there. Mr. Paine was tuckered out. His heavy chest was heaving. Then little Red stepped up and said, "I think your boat is leaving." He ran off in a fit of rage. His ship was leaving sight, so he jumped into a rowboat and he rowed with all his might. And from that day they like to say their lives were free of "Paine." It was a happy, peaceful place upon that isle in Maine.	<i>"I wonder if I can find all of the animals in this picture. How can he not recognize some of them? If he can't find the animals, what will he do?"</i>  <i>"The animals were free from their mean, old boss! I was a little nervous when he first came back in the story, but I am so happy he left empty-handed. I wonder what it would be like to live on an island with a bunch of circus animals. This book showed me a lot about how it is better to be kind to others instead of being afraid if maybe they are a little different."</i>	Asking questions  Revisiting and checking previous predictions, and summarize

These think alouds are exemplars because of the clarity of the script and the relevancy of the stopping point with the associated comprehension strategy. These transcripts showcase teachers as Wade's (1990) good comprehenders, who "construct meaning and monitor comprehension" (p. 444). It is evident in these samples that teachers truly tried to put themselves in the perspectives of their students: to identify sources of confusion and model how to make meaning throughout the text. Furthermore, the teachers' samples here do not treat comprehension strategies as discrete entities, but rather highlight that to make meaning of text readers often apply multiple strategies simultaneously.

It was also interesting to note that teachers grew significantly in the both the number and the variety of reading comprehension strategies they incorporated. In their first lesson plans, teachers most frequently relied upon three basic reading comprehension strategies: making predictions, activating prior knowledge, and making connections. Upon recognizing that their think alouds were fairly limited in the repertoire of strategies, teachers included a wider diversity of reading comprehension strategies in subsequent lessons. A fourth-grade teacher noted, "I couldn't believe that in my lesson I used the same two strategies time and time again. Next time around, I need to expand my comfort zone and include some others!" Though activating prior knowledge, making connections, and making and revising predictions remained the most favored comprehension strategies, teachers demonstrated a willingness to include nearly all of the reading comprehension strategies in some capacity. By the final lesson plan, teachers included some of the more difficult comprehension strategies, such as making inferences (from 0% in the first lesson plan to 10% in the third lesson plan), synthesizing information (from 0% in the first lesson plan to 10% in the third lesson plan), and recognizing an author's writing style (from 0% in the first lesson plan to 8% in the third lesson plan).

### **Teachers' Struggles in Thinking Aloud**

Just as there were successes in teachers' think alouds, there were also stumbling blocks. Table 4 provides examples of think alouds that were not as successful.

Table 4

Selected Portions of Less Effective Think Alouds

Sample Text #1 - <i>Just Plain Fancy</i> by Patricia Polacco		
What the Text Says	The Think Aloud Script	The Associated Comprehension Strategy
Naomi and Ruth looked at each other and hurried outside to hang up the washing. Naomi felt botherment inside.	<i>Now I am wondering why Naomi and Ruth feel worried. Why do you think they are worried?</i>	Predict
Over...Under...Around...Through...Naomi ran after Fancy, trying to catch him before anyone noticed. And that's about the time that Fancy decided to head straight for the elders. He flew at Martha, the oldest member of the gathering. Adjusting her glasses, she gasped as he flew over her head just before landing on the clothesline where the quilts were airing. "Please don't shun him," Naomi cried. "I did this! I made him fancy," she sobbed.	<i>Ugh Oh! What do you think the elders are going to say about Fancy? Do you think he will be shunned from the community?</i>	Question and prediction
At that moment, pleased with all the attention, Fancy ruffled his feathers and did for the guests what he had done for the girls in the henhouse the day before. Those who weren't speechless were stunned!	<i>What do you think Fancy did that left everyone speechless and stunned? In my mind I am picturing Fancy doing something so special with his feathers.</i>	Prediction and visualization

Sample Text #1 – <i>Sarah Plain and Tall</i>		
What the Text Says	The Think Aloud Script	The Associated Comprehension Strategy
<u>Sarah Plain and Tall</u>	<i>I am wondering what kind of character Sarah is in the book and why the author describes her as plain and tall. I wonder how that will effect what happens in the story.</i>	Asking a question
"Did Mama sing every day?" asked Caleb. "Every-single-day?" He sat close to the fire, his chin in his hand. It was dusk, and the dogs lay beside him on the warm hearthstones.	<i>I am wondering who Caleb is talking to and why he is asking about his mother.</i>	Asking a question
"Every-single-day," I told him for the second time this week. For the twentieth time this month. The hundredth time this year? And the past few years?"	<i>I am wondering who the narrator of the story is.</i>	Asking a question

In these less effective think alouds, teachers struggled to apply a broad variety of strategies and were more comfortable in applying simpler comprehension strategies, such as making predictions. In addition, the teachers here treated think alouds not as an opportunity to model what proficient readers do, but rather as an opportunity to elicit students' responses to text. For instance, one third-grade teacher, during a think aloud of *Just Plain Fancy* by Patricia Polacco, asked students "Why do you think they are worried?". While this teacher labeled this stopping point as an example of making predictions, truly the teacher provided a turn-and-talk opportunity for readers. It would have been more effective for this teacher to have modeled a prediction that she had made, along with an explicit explanation of how she reached that prediction and how that prediction helped her to better understand the text. Another less effective think aloud shows a teacher stopping to ask questions, but with very little insight into why those questions are essential to the comprehension process. Wade (1990) might classify this sort of think aloud as an example of a "non-riskier, who assumes a passive role by failing to go beyond the text to develop hypotheses" (p. 446).

While a select number of teachers struggled to use think alouds as models into their metacognitive processes, other teachers struggled with where to stop in a text and what comprehension strategy logically aligned with the stopping point. A first-grade teacher noted, "It was tricky to determine the most appropriate or effective strategy from a comprehensive list of good options". Other teachers struggled with an overreliance on some comprehension strategies and an underreliance on others, as explained by a third-grade teacher.

The think aloud process was more difficult than I expected because I found myself falling back on the same strategies, like making connections and predictions. It was difficult for me to make inferences and to incorporate strategies before reading, like setting a purpose for reading. I also noticed that my tendency is to think aloud in narrative text, but I am not as comfortable in using this approach to model my thinking in nonfiction text.

On a similar note, comprehension monitoring and applying fix-up strategies was equally challenging, as explained by a third-grade teacher:

As a proficient reader, it's sometimes difficult to see where in a text my students are likely to struggle and how I can help model what to do when a comprehension breakdown arises. How can I verbalize the processes which are so inherent to me?



A final struggle for teachers was balancing between too many and too few stopping points. One participant wrote, “I struggled with finding the appropriate number of times to stop since I wanted to make sure these times were meaningful and contributed to their comprehension. I wasn’t always sure when my think aloud was just an interruption or done simply for the sake of stopping.”

## **Trying out Think Alouds in Your Teaching: Classroom Implications**

In looking across the work and responses of teachers, important implications emerge for teachers to improve the quality and quantity of their think alouds, as discussed below.

### **Practice Makes Perfect: Thoughtful Planning of Think Alouds**

One of the sentiments commonly echoed by teachers was the need for diligent planning of their think alouds. As a fourth-grade teacher explained, “A thoughtful think alouds does not happen extemporaneously. It requires multiple perusals of the text, reflection on when and why to stop, and careful thought into exactly what you will say.” Knowing that teachers needed support during the planning and implementation of think alouds, I modeled two strategies during class time. First, I modeled the process of planning a think aloud in a text that was new for me. During one class session, I came in with a new storybook that I had never read before. I modeled how I stopped to think aloud throughout the initial reading. I used an overhead projector to show the notes that I took to remind myself of where I had stopped during this first approach to the text. I then modeled the thought process of reviewing my notes to determine which stopping point and associated teacher talk was worth including in a read aloud for my students. In a whole-group conversation, my teacher participants noticed that I initially had stopped to think aloud 11 times in the duration of a picture book. I led the group in a conversation where we reflected on my notes for each stopping point and think aloud, focusing on the following questions:

- In what ways in this stopping point and think aloud effective or ineffective to showing young readers my metacognitive processes?
- What do young readers gain from hearing my talk during this particular think aloud?
- Is this stopping point a necessary and advantageous one?

Finally, I revealed how I place sticky notes on the back cover of the text with my notes and script of exactly what I will say; many of my teachers copied this method and found it to be an effective crutch to develop their own confidence of knowing exactly what to say at the right point.

Equally as effective for the teachers in my study was to take a piece of frustrational text and practice thinking aloud through their confusions. Because many teachers are avid and proficient readers themselves, they may struggle to understand how it feels to struggle during reading and the nature of those struggles. To simulate this experience, I provided difficult texts for my teachers to practice thinking aloud. For example, I allotted class time for teachers to struggle through selected texts from a college statistics textbook, a medical dictionary, and legal documents. As teachers understood how their lack of background knowledge and their limited vocabulary impeded their comprehension of these domain-specific texts, they felt what it was like to be a struggling reader. Many teachers voiced the opinion that the experience of struggling with a text helped them to both empathize with their students and to better understand potential comprehension breakdowns in the texts they chose for their instruction.

Another common sentiment was a request for multiple forms of support to help teachers think aloud. A Kindergarten teacher explained,

Just as we expect with our young readers, we as teachers need a lot of exposure to a topic in order to internalize it and be ready to try it out. It's not enough to read an article about how to think aloud; I needed to watch teachers trying them, to debrief with colleagues on the process, and to collaboratively plan a lesson all just to get me ready to try it out myself.

Though time during this particular semester did not allow it, it may have been useful to have participants work in small groups to collaboratively plan a think aloud in a text that was unfamiliar to them. Much like they saw my thinking process in planning a think aloud, teachers could then have conversations where they evaluated their thought processes and decision making in the process of planning a think aloud. In addition to the process undertaken in this project, teachers may benefit from observing master teachers as they think aloud and then debriefing on the strategy. Ongoing professional development opportunities could include teachers watching their own videotaped think aloud lessons, perusing transcripts of their think alouds, or debriefing about their think alouds in observations with literacy coaches and administrators. It was also outside the parameters of this project to observe teachers in their classrooms as they

implemented their think alouds; these observations and reflective conversations would certainly be a fruitful area of ongoing professional development and support.

### **Future Directions & Concluding Thoughts**

The value of teachers who effectively and confidently think aloud cannot be understated. Though it was outside the realm of this project, it would prove to be useful for teachers to connect think alouds to student performance. Teachers should be encouraged to reflect upon how their think alouds impact student performance. Certainly teachers can be informed of the formal reading research showcasing the effectiveness of think alouds. Yet more powerful than these findings may be having teachers do case studies or inquiry projects where they begin to connect their thinking aloud to the performance of the students in their classrooms every day. Without compelling evidence that their hard work and thoughtful preparation of think alouds translates to a difference in the comprehension of their students, teachers may see think alouds as one more thing in their ever-growing list of things to do.

Additionally, it would be useful for teachers to practice thinking aloud in with a greater variety of text. Though I made efforts to model thinking aloud with nonfiction text, the vast majority of participants conducted think alouds with narrative text. Perhaps they were not as comfortable thinking aloud in less familiar text genres. It is also possible that teachers were unclear on how to translate comprehension strategies to nonfiction text. Whatever the case, teachers must be supported in thinking aloud in nonfiction text, especially as this text genre carries so much weight in the Common Core (2010). It would also be useful for teachers to think through differentiation of think alouds. In the graduate course, I deliberately modeled think alouds for a variety of grade levels in K-6, but teachers only planned lessons for their current teaching placement. It would be useful to examine how to differentiate think alouds differentiated to meet the diverse needs of students of different grade levels, diverse language backgrounds, and various levels and learning needs.

These findings present promising suggestions to improve the quantity and quality teachers' think alouds. Research (Anderson & Roit, 1993; Bereiter & Bird, 1985; Baumann, Seifert-Kessell, & Jones, 1992; Davey, 1983; Duffy et al., 1987; Loxterman, Beck, & McKeown, 1994; Schunk & Rice, 1985; Silven & Vaurus, 1992; Ward & Traweck, 1993) highlights think alouds as an effective way to improve the reading comprehension of K-12 students, yet teachers often experience uncertainty

or reluctance to incorporate them into routine instruction. We must remember, however, that think alouds are a complex skill for teachers to master. Even with the repeated opportunities to engage with think alouds in this study, teachers still expressed uncertainty about logical stopping points and how to incorporate a wide array of strategies. When teachers engage in multiple meaningful opportunities to plan for, implement, and reflect upon think aloud lessons, they are likely to increase the variety of their strategy inclusion, the frequency of think aloud stopping points, and their confidence in employing think alouds in classroom instruction.



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## About the Author

Molly Ness is an associate professor at Fordham University's Graduate School of Education. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Johns Hopkins University and earned her Ph.D. in Reading Education from the University of Virginia. Her research focuses on reading comprehension instruction, the instructional decisions, and beliefs of pre-service and in-service teachers and the assessment and diagnosis of struggling readers.





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## TEXT COMPLEXITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING THE RIGHT STAIRCASE

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### Abstract

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As more districts begin implementing the Common Core State Standards, text complexity is receiving a lot of discussion. It is important for educators to understand the numerous factors involved with text complexity and to have a wide range of strategies to support students with challenging text. This paper shares data from three elementary teachers that were impacted by the text complexity shift. Based on their understandings and interpretations of Common Core, teachers linked increasing the complexity of the text to using grade level text with all students, and changed their instruction significantly as a result. This shift in instruction led to an increase in whole class instruction with the same text, round robin reading, and less student engagement with reading.

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With the release of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) last year, the topic of text complexity has entered the discourse of classroom teachers across the country. In order to help narrow the achievement gap and prepare students for college and the workplace, there is a national focus on expecting students to read and comprehend texts at increasing levels of complexity. The CCSS requires the reading of text in a “staircase of complexity” and asks students to read and comprehend literature at or above grade level by the end of the students’ school year (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010).

A concern associated with the standards is underprepared students entering college and careers. The authors of Appendix A of the CCSS assert that being able to read complex text independently and proficiently is necessary for high achievement in college and careers, as well as numerous life tasks. The document also includes the notion that moving away from complex texts is likely to lead to a “general impoverishment of knowledge, which, because knowledge is intimately linked with reading comprehension ability, will accelerate the decline in the ability to comprehend complex texts and the decline in the richness of text itself” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 4). Some educational researchers support the idea that students who do not continue to climb the staircase of text complexity will face more challenges as an adult when asked to read in college or the workplace (Adams, 2010).

In the following sections, I will share data from a larger ethnographic study (Papola, 2012) that focused on how elementary teachers planned and implemented literacy instruction. The impact of CCSS on the teachers’ literacy instruction was strong during the time of the study, with an emphasis on several shifts, including the shift to more complex text. Through the study, it became evident that the teachers equated “complex text” to grade level text for all students for a much larger portion of literacy instruction. This interpretation of text complexity became problematic, as teachers were sometimes uncertain of how to engage all students and help them achieve success with these texts. I will begin by sharing definitions of “text complexity”, followed by an overview of the study. Next, I share findings related to how the teachers interpreted text complexity and implemented it within their classrooms. I will conclude with further discussion concerning the best way to support teachers with this shift in literacy instruction.

## **Defining Text Complexity**

Defining text complexity is no simple task. The CCSS take a three-part approach to measuring complex text, which includes qualitative, quantitative, and reader/task factors (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). Qualitative factors such as levels of meaning and knowledge demands, and quantitative factors of readability measures, are included as examples in the document. The reader/task considerations in the CCSS include factors such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences. While each of these is expanded upon in Appendix A of the CCSS, one could argue the quantitative factors are given more consideration, particularly because of the wording of Reading Anchor Standard 10 at each grade level. For instance, fourth grade students are expected to, “by the end of the year, read and comprehend literature [informational texts] in the grades 4–5 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.” (p.10). If a teacher focuses on the anchor standard, he or she may be more likely to define complex text as text that is at *or above* a student’s grade level. This can be problematic in instruction if teachers are attempting to solve the text complexity issue by expecting students to read texts that are above their grade level when many teachers are still grappling with helping students succeed with text at their grade level (Pearson, in press).

Literacy scholars recognize the numerous factors involved in determining whether a text is “complex”. Readability formulas often look at vocabulary and sentence structure to determine complexity, but other factors contribute greatly to how challenging a text is. For instance, the organization and general structure of the text is something to consider when determining complexity (Shanahan, Fisher, & Frey, 2012). If a story is organized using a more predictable structure, such as chronological sequence, it might be easier for a reader to navigate than a text that skips around in time through the use of flashbacks. Additionally, the reader plays a large role in determining the complexity of text. According to Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012), “Text complexity is based, in part, on the skills of the reader” (p. 3). Factors including the reader’s interest and background knowledge about the topic impact how challenging a text may be. Lack of certain life experiences or prior exposure to information about certain topics can make a text more or less challenging for different readers.

Another issue to consider regarding text complexity is when this “staircase” should actually begin and how quickly students should advance up the stairs. According to Hiebert (2012), it is unclear if the increase in text difficulty needs to

begin in the primary grade level texts, which is the recommendation of the CCSS. In fact, Hiebert asserts that the bigger problem with texts for beginning and early readers is that they are often too difficult. Other scholars caution teachers about increasing the level of text students are asked to read too quickly (Allington, 2002; Fountas & Pinnell, 1999). There is concern that students will spend too much time reading text that is too challenging. Allington (2002) stressed that students need to spend a large part of their reading time engaged in successful reading, defined as “reading experiences in which students perform with a high level of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension” (p. 3). If students are unable to read with high accuracy and fluency, their comprehension will be significantly impacted. The notion that students need to apply strategies on “just difficult enough texts” is a widely supported idea in literacy (Allington, 2002; Clay, 1993; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

When considering what text complexity should look like in the classroom, teachers should consider all of the factors that go into a text as well as their local knowledge about their students, including their motivation, prior experiences with the content, and readiness to encounter increasingly challenging passages. Few in the field of literacy would argue against a need for students to be exposed to a wide range of texts and levels of text, with varying support given by teachers as they encounter these texts. However, the problem occurs when a narrow understanding and interpretation of text complexity dominates how this instructional shift is implemented in the classroom.

## **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

In this study, ethnography was utilized to explore how elementary teachers implemented literacy instruction. This portion of the study focuses on how the CCSS text complexity shift was interpreted and put into practice. According to Foley (1990), “Ethnography is the craft of writing critical, reflective, empirical accounts of your personal fieldwork experiences” (p. xix). It involves the researcher attempting to think critically about the issue and context that is being studied. A theoretical lens of critical theory made the use of critical ethnography appropriate for this study as issues of power in schooling were explored, particularly through the implementation of new educational policies, and the impact those policies have on literacy instruction. Several existing studies have examined the impact policy has on instruction and on shaping teachers’ beliefs (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Spielman, 2004; Coburn, 2001; Palmer & Rangel, 2010).

In this study, the ways in which text complexity are framed by policymakers and by local administration significantly shape teachers' beliefs and instructional practices.

## **Setting and Participants**

This study took place over the course of twelve weeks at an urban elementary school, Weldon Heights Elementary (pseudonym). Weldon Heights is a Title One school of less than 400 students enrolled between grades kindergarten and six, with half the students classified as English Language Learners and more than eighty percent of students qualifying for the Free or Reduced Lunch Program. The teachers in this study were in their first year of fully implementing the CCSS. Data from three teachers is shared in this paper. Two teachers—Ellen and Katelyn—were primary grade teachers and one—Andrea—taught upper elementary. The teachers ranged in experience from four years to twenty four years as classroom teachers.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

I spent approximately sixty minutes each week observing the teachers in their classrooms during literacy instruction, taking field notes on what I observed. Each teacher also participated in a weekly debriefing interview, during which time the discussion focused on how they planned their literacy instruction and why they made the decisions they did when implementing instruction. As the study progressed, it became clear through the interviews with teachers as well as the observations that the CCSS were the largest influence on the teachers' instruction.

After transcribing the interviews myself, I analyzed data using line-by-line open coding (Charmaz, 2011; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), recording the main idea present in each line of the transcripts and field notes. With specific regard to the text complexity shift, common themes such as “grade level text”, “whole class instruction”, and “round robin reading”, were prevalent in what the teachers spoke about and what I observed in their instruction. I then used these focused codes to code across teachers (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) and look for commonalities shared by all the participants. For this article, I present data related to the teachers' interpretation of the text complexity shift in the CCSS.

## **“They have to read harder text!”**

The school district that includes Weldon Heights Elementary was in their first year implementing the CCSS at the time of this study. All three teachers spoke about the professional development they received throughout the study, which consisted of a variety of district and site-based workshops and sessions. According to the teachers, they were encouraged to focus on the CCSS instructional shifts, with special attention to certain shifts. One of these was text complexity. Each one of the teachers, when discussing the need to use more complex text in their literacy instruction, spoke about this as a shift to using grade level text (or above grade level in certain cases) with all the students in the class. In the following sections, I present how this limited interpretation of text complexity impacted teachers’ selection of “complex text”, as well as the increase in whole class instruction, with a focus on a specific close reading model, as well as round robin reading.

### **Selecting “Complex” Text**

As these three teachers at Weldon Heights began to discuss using complex text as part of CCSS, it became evident that they interpreted this to mean “grade level text”. All three were observed using grade level text with all their students, and they reported using it more frequently than they had in any previous years. The teachers referenced this shift in text complexity when speaking about why they chose those texts. Katelyn, a primary teacher, stated, “I have to give them complex text at their grade level. Big, big part of Common Core”. This statement shows her interpretation of “complex text” to mean “grade level text” based on her understanding of what was expected in implementing Common Core.

Rather than slowly supporting students on a gradual move up the staircase of text complexity, the teachers jumped from initially providing text at lower levels (usually students’ instructional reading levels) straight to grade level text. The teachers reported that in previous years, they differentiated the levels of text used with students for the majority of their literacy instruction; however, this changed significantly after their interpretation that they should be using more complex text with their students in the wake of Common Core. Andrea, an upper elementary teacher, spoke about using grade level text with all of her students, despite also stating that half of her students came to her reading two years below grade level. According to Andrea, she used to differentiate the level of text she

used with students for most of her literacy instruction, while also exposing them to the grade level reading anthology. She spoke about her decision to begin using the grade level social studies textbook as the main material for reading instruction for all of her students for the remainder of the school year:

Andrea: So...I went to [another teacher] and said what do you think about me using the [grade level] social studies text book with my lowest readers?...She was like, absolutely, they have to read grade level text....So I just started that this week...they're going to read grade level text for the rest of the year. They get all that differentiated stuff in their [reading] intervention groups. They have to be pushed.

Andrea used this decision to use the grade level social studies textbook as her basis for adhering to the CCSS shift to text complexity. She had never taken this approach for her literacy instruction in previous years, but based on her understandings of CCSS, she believed it was necessary this year. From a critical lens, Andrea's instructional beliefs were significantly shaped by the messages she interpreted regarding the CCSS, and her literacy instruction changed significantly based on these interpretations. Because of the shift in Common Core, Andrea believed that outside of the reading intervention time her students had for 45 minutes three times a week, all of her literacy instruction should be with challenging, *grade level* text, even with students whose instructional reading levels were two years below grade level.

Andrea was not the only teacher to interpret "complex" to mean "at grade level". In Ellen's primary grade classroom, I observed a combination of whole class and small group instruction, and she continued to use text at the students' instructional level for part of the day. She did say, however, that she needed to implement more grade level text instruction because of the text complexity shift. This shift guided her planning of a lesson I observed one morning:

In one lesson in Ellen's classroom, the students were given copies of a text about Ruby Bridges. Ellen later stated she chose this book because of its complexity, knowing it was at least at the students' grade level. After briefly previewing the text, she asked students to follow along and point to the text as she read it aloud. After reading a page to the class, Ellen noticed some students off task and remarked that she knew some of them might think the text is boring and hard, but that they were doing this together so they could learn strategies to learn on their own when they get a

really hard book. She asked the students to echo read the next paragraph sentence by sentence with her. When the class struggled on a sentence, she had them repeat that sentence twice with echo reading. As Ellen and the class read more of the text, the students continued to struggle to decode words using echo reading, even when rereading the same sentence multiple times. Ellen decided to chorally read a section with the students, with little improvement. When calling on students to share what they took from the passage, several students were unable to respond and others repeated sentences verbatim from the text. Ellen concluded the lesson by reading another small section aloud to the students and telling them that was all they would read from that today.

In the debriefing interview immediately following the lesson, Ellen was visibly and vocally frustrated with how the lesson progressed. She made decisions to change her instructional approach on the spot, but none of the strategies led to the outcome she had hoped for. When I asked Ellen what she believed was the reason the lesson didn't go well for her students, she immediately stated that the text was too hard. She shared that she chose that text for the first time because it fit with her social studies unit, and it was more challenging. She believed she needed to increase the text complexity when she could because of the shift in CCSS.

Ellen: [I'm] just trying to keep the shifts in mind ...and emphasis on text complexity. So I tried to keep that in mind when I was doing the Ruby Bridges book. I didn't want to throw out this text. Because I wanted to kind of teach them some strategies for accessing that. Text that is too hard. Because a lot of these kids are going to have texts that are too hard all the time now.

Ellen's frustration grew from her students' struggle with a text that was extremely challenging for the majority of them, text that she called "too hard". She said she was exposed to information about the text complexity shift during professional development about the CCSS, and was determined to incorporate this into her regular instruction. However, she was unsure of how to best scaffold and support her students in their confrontation with such a challenging piece. Ellen knew there were other texts she could use that contained the same content as this book, but selected this book because she interpreted the CCSS shift to mean she needed to use grade level text with her class. Her instructional approach



and choice of materials were shaped by her interpretation of the messages she received regarding the CCSS.

In each of the classrooms I visited at Weldon Heights, teachers were choosing grade level text for all of their students much more frequently than they had in previous years (according to them). They always connected their reason for doing so to the CCSS standards and shifts related to text complexity. In most cases, teachers weren't examining other factors related to the complexity or to their students, but rather focused only on providing all their students experiences with grade level text. There was not a gradual climb up a "staircase", but rather a leap to the top of the steps for each grade level. This shift resulted in two common instructional practices, which will be shared in the next section.

## **Whole Class Instruction**

All of the teachers I visited at Weldon Heights reported an increase in whole class literacy instruction over the course of the study. This instruction was always spent utilizing grade level text, which teachers tied to the text complexity shift. At the beginning of the study, Katelyn shared that she used very little whole class instruction during literacy, but at the end was using it daily. She connected this to her increased use of complex, grade level text, stating that she knew many of her students couldn't read those texts independently. Therefore, it made more sense to her to read texts together as a whole class.

At Weldon Heights, these three teachers talked often and enthusiastically about having a lot of professional freedom in relation to their literacy instruction. For some, it was the first time in years they were allowed to choose the materials to use to teach literacy, as well as what instructional approaches to use—as long as they were focusing on the instructional shifts of the CCSS, according to the teachers. While the teachers welcomed this increase in autonomy, it left some uncertain on how to approach their instruction after years of having to follow mandates and scripts telling them how to teach. From a critical lens, unless teachers truly understand the power structures in schools, they might not perceive their freedom as constrained, even if they have limited decision- making (Leiter, 1981). The three teachers perceived themselves as having control over their instruction, but these interpretations of the CCSS in their classrooms show how they were still significantly shaped by others when choosing texts for their students.



Once the decisions were made to begin using grade level text with the whole class, teachers had the challenge of deciding how to approach instruction with these difficult passages. While the teachers may have been exposed to multiple strategies during professional development, the only one they talked about was a very specific model of “close reading”. This, along with round robin style reading, were the two most common instructional approaches observed while teachers implemented complex text with their students.

### **“Close Reading” Method**

One frequently used strategy for using complex text was the use of what the teachers called the “close reading model”. The teachers spoke about professional development on the CCSS which included the implementation of lessons using a “close reading” strategy that teachers said was modeled in videos and shared at faculty meetings. According to the teachers, some of them were given lesson plans that asked them to distribute a specific “complex text” to their class. Students were tasked with first reading the text silently, followed by listening to the teacher read it aloud. Text dependent questions accompanied the lesson plans for teachers to use. When the three teachers at Weldon Heights implemented these lessons, they implemented the plans exactly as they were written. The intent, from the teachers’ perspective, was to try out the complex text with their students, providing minimal support and limited time (if any at all) on pre-reading strategies.

In Andrea’s upper grade classroom, the students were given a grade level text that Andrea received during a training at Weldon Heights. Andrea said she implemented the lesson in the exact manner that was suggested in the lesson plan.

At the start of the lesson, Andrea passed out copies of an excerpt from a grade level novel and told her students they could all read the text. She said after they read it, she would read it to them. Several students groaned, but most began to read the passage. One student, after skimming the beginning of the story, remarked, “This is not interesting to me at all!” Andrea said they all needed to read it anyway. Two other students said it was too difficult. Andrea told the whole class that it was not too difficult because it was a grade level text. She told them she would give them seven minutes to read the two and a half page story. Many of the students began to read through the passage, while others shuffled

the papers, looked around the room at classmates, or sat in their chair waiting for the next activity. After ten minutes, Andrea asked if anyone needed more time. The majority of the class raised their hands, so they were given three more minutes. Andrea stopped the class at that point, while several students remarked they were not finished. She told them she was going to read the story aloud to them now. Over the next twelve minutes, the students listened to Andrea reread the story aloud to them, while some students followed along in their own text. After the read aloud, the students were given questions that accompanied the story. Andrea asked the students to look for evidence in the text to answer the first question. She called on a student to read the first paragraph aloud, which was the third reading of this part of the story. Students were then asked to highlight parts of that paragraph that answered the question about the main character. Two students responded with inferences that did not connect to the text, so Andrea redirected them to the passage. When a student provided the response Andrea was looking for, she wrote the response to the question on the board and told students to copy the answer on their papers.

In a debriefing interview two days later, Andrea expressed that she liked being given the texts with questions because she did not have to search for materials and texts on her own, and agreed with the focus on text dependent questions with these lessons. However, she expressed feeling like this lesson was long, and was unsure of the time spent rereading this text:

Andrea: I think it's sometimes just a lot. The passage was long. They (Common Core) want you to do that whole thing in two days. I'm going on day three. It's a long time for them to sit there. I liked the passage itself and [the students] do because they've seen the movie [based on the book] and some have read the book already. This lesson I think went well...for those reasons. But had it been something more difficult, it might have...I mean, some of the kids after an hour were like, we're kind of bored with this.

Andrea felt that this close reading strategy, which she said was shared with her at a training session, was a way to approach complex texts but could be time consuming and "boring" to her students, especially if the text was less familiar.

She believed this lesson was somewhat successful because of the students' familiarity with the story previously, but was worried about using this strategy with "more difficult" material. The close reading model of reading it twice caused many students to vocalize their disinterest in the lesson. There was evidence that the students who were able to read the passage on their own grew bored when Andrea reread it. They were not attentive to the text and began to talk to other students. These same behaviors were seen by students who struggled reading this level of text during the first reading, when they were asked to read it independently. The reading of this text did not challenge students, or result in students using more complex strategies to tackle the text. Instead, they were disengaged, frustrated, or off task. Despite these behaviors and remarks from the students, Andrea expressed willingness to implement more of these lessons because this was the approach being shared in professional development, and therefore one that she interpreted she should use more often in the classroom. Her reliance on what she thought "they"—Common Core—wanted her to do outweighed other factors in making instructional decisions.

Other teachers tried this same "close reading model" for complex texts, with similar results. Because this framework was the only one teachers talked about being exposed to in professional development, this was used often in some classrooms. However, during this instructional framework, the only strategy dealing with how to help students navigate complex text was reading a passage multiple times. I did not observe discussion on looking at the text structure, how to handle difficult vocabulary, or other strategies related to text complexity. According to the teachers, this framework was emphasized at professional development, so teachers interpreted this as a main method they should use within their classroom.

## **Round Robin and Popcorn Reading**

Another instructional approach that was used in many classrooms when using "complex text" was round robin or popcorn style reading. In round robin style reading, students are called on one after another to orally read a piece of a text to the class (Harris & Hodges, 1995). Its variation, "popcorn reading", (Ash, Kuhn, & Walpole, 2009), is similar but involves students read in a random order, with the teacher, or at times the students, unexpectedly stopping to identify the next reader. Teachers expressed this was a way to engage their whole class in reading grade level text, despite observations of off task behavior, as well as

contradictory research that suggests round robin style reading is an ineffective instructional practice (Ash, Kuhn, & Walpole, 2009; Opitz & Rasinski, 1998).

I observed a whole class lesson in Katelyn's primary classroom where she was using round robin style reading for the very first time in order to have students access grade level text:

Katelyn's students were all seated in their rows of desks and were asked to open to a story in their reading anthology. Beginning with the first student in the first desk, Katelyn asked each student to read one sentence aloud. When students struggled to decode the words, Katelyn used word-by-word echo reading, where she read a word and the student read it back until the sentence was finished. When this occurred, the students typically did not look at the book, but rather echoed the word from Katelyn without referring to the text. One student grew increasingly upset when he struggled to read his sentence, and put his head down in the middle of the oral reading. Three students were able to read their sentence aloud without assistance from Katelyn, but the rest relied on this echo reading style. When they weren't reading aloud, most students whispered to each other, played with pencils, and put their heads down. This round robin procedure continued for approximately fifteen minutes until the story concluded.

During our debriefing interview, I asked Katelyn to talk about her reasons for selecting this instructional approach with the reading passage:

Katelyn: You noticed that the kids that could not read, they just... echo read with me. Ok. But I did not stop the flow of my lesson. I kept my lesson to the standard. Which is the reading standard [dealing with text complexity]. And the kids at grade level were able to read that text. There were only two of them who are actually reading at grade level. The rest can't...But [I kept] the expectation that they were going to read aloud to the rest of the class.

Katelyn used her interpretation of text complexity in Common Core to require all her students to read grade level text aloud to the class. She stated, "That is part of Common Core. Make sure they get the same text." This is actually not a part of the Common Core document, but was a big part of Katelyn's interpretation. She stated that she had to expose her students to text "they couldn't read" because she believed that was a significant part of Common

Core. Although she admitted only two of her students were able to decode the grade level text, she viewed CCSS as requiring all her students to read this level of text. She expressed that the standards were written by “people who know literacy”, so expecting all the students to read “hard texts” was something she should do. Katelyn expressed plans to use this instructional approach in the future with her class so that they could all access complex text. To Katelyn, this lesson was a success because she did what she thought she was supposed to do—had all students in her class encounter and engage in complex, grade level text.

Andrea used the variation of round robin known as “popcorn style” reading, where students don’t read in a set order, but rather jump around the room or around the group. Andrea was observed using popcorn style reading on five different occasions and was her main way of reading the social studies textbook that was the focus of her literacy instruction. During these lessons, students read a paragraph out loud, then called on someone else to read the next paragraph. When I observed these lessons, some students looked at their book while others looked around the room or lost their place if it was not their turn to read. Twice in one lesson, students had to be told where they were in the text when they were called on to read. During the debriefing interview, Andrea stated that the students were engaged because they were all working with the text and expressed excitement to “popcorn” read. She stated that she felt “like they’re actually in the book when we popcorn read” and viewed it as a way to keep them focused on grade level text.

The CCSS text complexity shift held a strong presence in the classrooms at Weldon Heights. Teachers all reported an increase in their use of grade level text, as well as whole class instruction, as a result of their interpretation of this shift, which stemmed from information they reported receiving at professional development and their understandings of CCSS. With limited guidance on how to support students with such challenging text, teachers fell back on the main strategy shared with them, which focused mainly on rereading a passage, or began using strategies like round robin that are counter to what research shows is best practice in literacy.

## Discussion

The three teachers in this study were caring, educated, and intelligent teachers who wanted the same thing—to help their students succeed in literacy. Each one of the teachers in this study, through implementing the CCSS, believed

they had to shift their instruction to include complex text, and each one did this. Their professional knowledge base was strong enough to know that most of their students could not successfully read and comprehend grade level text without support; therefore, none of the teachers simply assigned grade level books and sent the students on their way to read it without any guidance. However, they were left without being strongly supported with implementing such a shift in instruction, which led to practices that included less active student engagement and little connection to strategies students could utilize independently. A narrowed interpretation of text complexity received more attention at professional development, according to interviews with teachers and classroom practices that were observed, and a very specific framework of close reading was emphasized to teachers at Weldon Heights. This caused frustration in some cases, as was seen in the vignette describing Ellen's lesson with *Ruby Bridges*. In other cases, it led to troublesome literacy practices, like the strong use of round robin and popcorn style reading. This interpretation of text complexity has the potential to be widespread as more schools begin to implement the CCSS. Professional development needs to exist to support teachers in understanding the many factors that contribute to the complexity of a text, as well as how to help support students in navigating challenging texts.

## **Implications for Teachers and Administrators**

For years, many teachers have been “deskilled” through the use of scripted programs, federal mandates, and local directives about their instruction (Apple, 1999; Shannon, 1987). While the teachers in this study perhaps had more decision-making power than many others in the field, they still were strongly shaped by the messages they claimed to receive at professional development regarding the CCSS. Whenever I asked the teachers where they obtained their information about CCSS, they *all* reported “from the district”. “The district” meant different things to different teachers—district level professional development sessions or building level faculty meetings—but none of the teachers reported seeking information about CCSS from other sources, nor did they talk about a wide range of literature related to the concept of text complexity. This means that as more district administrators begin to implement professional development for teachers regarding CCSS, careful attention needs to be paid not just to the messages actually delivered, but to the ways in which classroom teachers interpret these messages and implement them into classroom practice. Follow up support

within teachers' classrooms can help bridge gaps in understandings, support teachers with instructional practices, and redirect misinterpretations.

Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012) remind us that "...students should be provided with opportunities to struggle and to learn about themselves as readers when they struggle, persevere, and eventually succeed" (p. 11). Additionally, students need to balance these times to struggle with opportunities to successfully read and comprehend texts independently (Allington, 2002). The skills and strategies teachers share with students to help them when they encounter challenging text should be reinforced and practiced with texts that students read at their instructional level. If we only allow them to struggle, but do not create opportunities to learn about themselves as readers through that struggle, we are not truly supporting our students and helping them to succeed. As more districts take on the task of implementing the CCSS standards in schools across the country, they should be mindful of the need for supportive professional development for teachers, particularly in how text complexity is defined and strategies that link whole class lessons with students' independent reading. Additionally, teachers should be encouraged to play an active role in interpreting the shifts and standards of the Common Core, and engage in strong, collaborative work to make decisions on how these will look in their individual classrooms.

### **Reconsidering the "Staircase" of Complexity**

When considering this "staircase of text complexity", we might need to envision a staircase that is unlike others. This staircase should allow students to begin on different steps, climbing as appropriate to their unique needs and levels. Not every student begins the school year on the same step, so the support they need while climbing should reflect that range in levels. This particular staircase needs to allow room for climbing up and, at times, even down, depending on the content and challenge of the text. After all, as adult readers, we sometimes seek less challenging texts if we have less background knowledge about certain topics. When we skip steps on a staircase, we often find ourselves exhausted when we reach the top, having benefited little, if at all, from the support that each individual step was created to offer us. The same is true when we ask students to skip steps on the text complexity staircase. Finally, there may be times when the staircase should resemble more of an escalator, with gradual and steady support offered to students while they ascend. By considering the needs of individual

students, we can create the right staircase, one that is most appropriate for each of our classrooms and learners.





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## CHARACTER INTERPRETATION IN PICTUREBOOKS

Lori Ann Falcon, University of Incarnate Word  
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### Abstract

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This qualitative research study explored second graders' use of visual information to understand characters in picturebooks. Students participated in whole class read-alouds of three picturebooks. Immediately following each read-aloud, students were individually interviewed and invited to talk about the visual text in pre-selected illustrations. Findings revealed that the children used pictorial information, including character actions, body posture, and facial expressions, to support their inferences about characters. They also attended to color and line in justifying their insights. However, the children did not tend to some critical pictorial information in interpreting character including pictorial symbols, the position and size of characters in illustrations, and the pictorial device of breaking the frame.

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## **Second Graders' Interpretation of Character in Picturebook Illustrations**

Characters in picturebooks often are the most memorable element of stories. Curious George, Frog and Toad, and Peter Rabbit are likely to be remembered long past the primary years and after most book titles have been forgotten. Students often relate to characters by empathizing with them as a way of understanding their actions, intentions, and problems. These character understandings may, in turn, lead children to thematic understandings and even to the development of children's social imagination (Lehr, 1991; Lysaker & Tonge, 2013). While the literary elements of character, setting, plot, and theme can all serve as dynamic tools that enable readers to construct and interpret literary meanings (Lukens & Cline, 1995), character may be a particularly important element in helping children "step into" and "move through" story worlds (Langer, 2011). The importance of character understanding to literary meaning-making has been recognized by many scholars. For example, Martinez and Roser (2005) note that "[c]haracters...are a conduit through which readers enter, move through, and are affected by narratives" (p. 7). Emery (1996) asserts that character states such as feelings, beliefs, and desires are "the glue that ties the story together" (p. 534). Children's understanding of characters may be central to critical interpretation and literary meaning-making.

We know that young children's early literacy experiences tend to be in the context of picturebooks, and in this format stories are told through both visual and verbal texts. While written texts in picturebooks supply important information about characters, the illustrations often provide rich clues. In fact, Hassett and Curwood (2009) maintain that written words are no longer central in many of today's picturebooks, and that illustrations require more attention because they supply information critical to the development of the story.

In recent years, authors and illustrators have more consistently utilized the unique affordances of illustrations with seemingly unrestricted options as more and more picturebooks reveal the complex relationships between written text and the visual text. Consequently, children are compelled to simultaneously employ the use of these two semiotic sign systems in order to discover literature and art expressed in more creative ways.

Given the importance of visual information in today's picturebooks, young children must attend closely to the illustrations and understand the ways that illustrators develop characters. The purpose of this study was to provide an

in-depth description of the kinds of visual information in picturebooks that children utilize in interpreting characters.

## **Theoretical Framework and Review of Related Literature**

In exploring children's use of visual information to understand characters, we employed an interdisciplinary research stance, drawing on both response theory and semiotic theory. Rosenblatt (1978) views reading as a transaction in which readers act upon a text and in turn are guided by the signs and symbols present in the text. When the text is a picturebook, semiotic theory converges with response theory to provide a basis for understanding children's literary meaning-making. Semiotic theory maintains that any sign, verbal or visual, signifies something other than the actual written or visual element itself (Barthes, 1977; de Saussure, 1974; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The reader is never passive but is constantly reflecting on and responding to the signs or symbols present in the verbal and visual text. This transactional process requires readers "...to bring their own answers [and] resolutions to the works, and join forces with the authors/illustrators in creating the scenario, the story, and the interpretations" (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006, p. 259). Yet for readers to fully respond to the visual signs and symbols in a text requires an understanding of the semiotic codes employed by illustrators. Like Sipe (2008), we believe that a "...semiotic perspective provides a foundation for viewing children's literary understanding of picturebooks" (p. X).

### **The Nature of Picturebooks**

While scholars offer various definitions of the picturebook, at the core of each definition is the recognition that the verbal and visual text work together to tell the story (Nodelman, 1988; Schwarcz & Schwarcz, 1991). The interplay of verbal and visual texts can vary from picturebook to picturebook (and even within a picturebook). For example, illustrations and text sometimes tell parallel stories; while in other instances they may present contradictory information (Agosto, 1999; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). The basic nature of the picturebook requires that readers process both sign systems interdependently.

There is not complete agreement among scholars regarding the contributions of visual information to character development in picturebooks. Nikolajeva and Scott (2006) believe that illustrations largely lend themselves to developing external facets of character while words more effectively develop

internal facets. Nonetheless, these scholars note that illustrations can reveal inner character through “poses, gestures, and facial expressions [that] can disclose emotions and attitudes” (p. 82). Moebius (1986) and Nodelman (1988) discuss semiotic codes that have the potential to convey information about character; in particular they note that color and the position of characters on the page are codes that convey important character information. In their investigation of picturebooks for younger and older readers, Martinez and Harmon (2012) found that pictures and text work together in conveying key facets of the inner character including personality traits, motivation, interests, and emotion. They also identified ways in which character information was revealed visually including through pictorial content (e.g., facial expressions, character actions) and through the use of pictorial tools (e.g., color, line, breaking the frame).

### **Valuing the Visual Text**

The importance of the visual sign system cannot be ignored. In fact, Arnheim (1986) argues, “the visual image always dominates the cognitive aspect of experience” (p. 306). In a similar fashion, Sipe (2008) maintained that “visual perception is the sensory equivalent of understanding on the cognitive level” (p.18). Furthermore, Sipe suggested “if the perception of the visual image is not automatic, but learned and formed by experience, [then] ...literary understanding of picturebooks includes learning the conventions and principles of visual art” (p. 19). Working from a semiotic perspective, Moebius (1986) identified clusters of codes that convey meaning in picturebooks: codes of position, perspective, frame, line, and color. An understanding of these codes enables readers of picturebooks to more fully make sense of the visual text.

### **The Role of Character in Literary Understanding**

As we argued earlier, character understanding can play a central role in literary meaning making, and research provides insights into children’s understanding of this literary element. In an interview study of children in first through eighth grades, Martinez, Keehn, Roser, Harmon, and O’Neal (2002) found that younger children attended more to external facets of character while older ones were more attentive to the inner character. Yet in rich instructional contexts, young children also focus on inner facets of characters. For example, Wollman-Bonilla and Werchadlo (1995) found that nearly a quarter of their first grade participants’ journal responses focused on understanding “characters’ thoughts or feelings, either stated or implied in the text” (p. 564). Likewise, in her study of young children’s dramatic responses to literature, Adomat (2012) found

that first graders focused extensively on inner facets of character including character feelings, traits, and motivations.

In his investigations of young children's responses to picturebooks, Sipe (2008) found that kindergarten, first, and second grade students engaged in extensive analysis of the picturebooks read aloud to them, including analysis of the characters they encountered. The children described, evaluated, and made inferences about character actions, focusing on both external and internal facets of character. They also talked about external facets such as appearance, location, and identity of characters and posed questions about characters' relationships with one another. Internal facets of character that the children talked about included feelings, thoughts, and personalities.

Of particular relevance to this investigation is children's use of visual information to understand characters. Sipe (2008) described some of the types of visual information that children in his study used to better understand this literary element. In particular, his participants attended to details of facial expression to fill in gaps in the written text, and they also attended to illustrators' uses of color to convey information about character emotions.

Existing research does reveal that young children utilize visual information to understand characters in picturebooks (Sipe, 2008). However, there have been no systematic analyses of the types of visual information that children draw on to understand this literary element.

As a result, this study explored students' attention to visual information to better understand character. The guiding question of this investigation was: What facets of pictorial information do children use to understand characters in picturebooks?

## **Method**

This study was a qualitative research study conducted in a second grade classroom. The students had story-time as a regular part of their daily schedule.

### **Participants**

The school was located in a rural public school in South Texas. The participants included twelve children, four boys and eight girls. Eight of the children were White and four were Hispanic as per parental self-reported school documents. Six were on free or reduced lunch.



Materials

Three picturebooks were used in the study—When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry (Bang, 1999), Leonardo the Terrible Monster (Willems, 2005), and Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse (Henkes, 1996). Each book was judged to be character- rich with characterization conveyed through the visual text (as well as the verbal text). Summaries of each book are included in Table 1. The classroom teacher reported that she had not read the three books to her students. For each of the picturebooks, we selected three illustrations to use during the interviews. The illustrations were chosen to ensure that character information would be conveyed in a variety of ways in the illustrations used as interview prompts. The various techniques used in the nine illustrations are described in Table 2.

Table 1

Summaries of Picturebooks

Book	Summary
<i>When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry</i> by Molly Bang	Sophie is very, very angry. Her sister has snatched her toy gorilla away; their mother has taken her sister's side, and Sophie has tripped over a toy truck. Feeling like a volcano about to explode, she runs out of the house. Seeing the rocks, trees, and ferns, hearing a bird, and climbing an old beech tree calm her down. Feeling the breeze on her hair and watching the water and the waves help comfort her. Sophie feels better now and goes home where her family welcomes her.
<i>Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse</i> by Kevin Henkes	Lilly gets in trouble with her beloved teacher, Mr. Slinger, for showing the treasures she has brought to school in her brand new purple plastic purse. When Mr. Slinger takes her purse away, she draws an unkind drawing of her teacher and sneaks it into his book bag. At the end of the day when Mr. Slinger returns the purse, Lilly finds a kind note from Mr. Slinger inside. She feels terrible about her actions. The next day, she finds a way to apologize, and Lilly has a better day.
<i>Leonardo the Terrible Monster</i> by Mo Willems	Leonardo is terrible at being a monster. So one day, he decides to find the perfect victim to scare. After an extensive search, he finds Sam. Leonardo sneaks up on Sam and tries everything to terrify him. When Sam begins to cry, Leonardo is delighted by his success—until Sam reveals the real reasons for his tears. At this point Leonardo makes a big decision—to be a wonderful friend rather than a terrible monster.

**Table 2**

Descriptions of Illustrations Used as Interview Prompts

Book	Description of Opening	Character Element(s)	Illustrator Device Used
<i>Leonardo the Terrible Monster</i>	Opening 1: A double page spread with Leonardo sitting dejectedly in the lower right corner. The written texts reads "Leonardo was a terrible monster..."	Character feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facial expression</li> <li>• Positioning of character</li> </ul>
<i>Leonardo the Terrible Monster</i>	Opening 12: (right hand page): Leonardo is smugly strutting away from the boy (opposite page). Leonardo does an "arm tuck" and says, "Yes, I did it! ..."	Character feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Character actions</li> <li>• Facial expression</li> </ul>
<i>Leonardo the Terrible Monster</i>	Opening 16: The double page spread is a close-up of Leonardo's face. The written text says "Then Leonardo made a very big decision." The word "big" is in red.	Change in character's thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Size of character</li> <li>• Facial expression</li> </ul>
<i>When Sophie Gets Angry-Really, Really Angry</i>	Opening 8: Sophie, outlined by red and looking angry, assumes a fighting stance. A volcano is erupting and spewing the word "EXPLODE". "...And when Sophie gets angry-really, really angry..."	Character feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Color</li> <li>• Line</li> <li>• Body posture</li> <li>• Facial expression</li> <li>• Symbol</li> </ul>
<i>When Sophie Gets Angry-Really, Really Angry</i>	Opening 13: Sophie, outlined in orange, is sitting on a huge, white tree trunk and looking towards the water. "She feels the breeze blow her hair. She watches the water and the waves."	Change in character's feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Color</li> <li>• Body posture</li> <li>• Setting</li> </ul>
<i>When Sophie Gets Angry-Really, Really Angry</i>	Opening 17: A smiling Sophie, outlined in yellow, is at the door with her hands outstretched to her family. "... Everyone is glad she's home."	Change in character's feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Color</li> <li>• Relationships</li> </ul>
<i>Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse</i>	Opening 8: A series of panels illustrate Lilly's feelings and thoughts towards her teacher- from dejection to anger to elation over thinking of a good idea. A light bulb symbolizes Lilly's good idea.	Character feelings and thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facial expression</li> <li>• Character actions</li> <li>• Use of line</li> <li>• Use of a symbol</li> </ul>
<i>Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse</i>	Opening 10: Lilly feels 'small' as she reads the note from her teacher. There are "broken" musical notes. A series of frames appear at the bottom of the page depicting Lilly becoming increasing smaller.	Change in character's feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facial expression</li> <li>• Line</li> <li>• Symbol</li> <li>• Change in size</li> </ul>
<i>Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse</i>	Opening 16: Lilly is smiling, running, skipping, and leaping out of the page. "Lilly ...flew all the way home, she was so happy..."	Change in character's feelings and thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facial expression</li> <li>• Character actions</li> <li>• Breaking the frame</li> </ul>

## Procedures

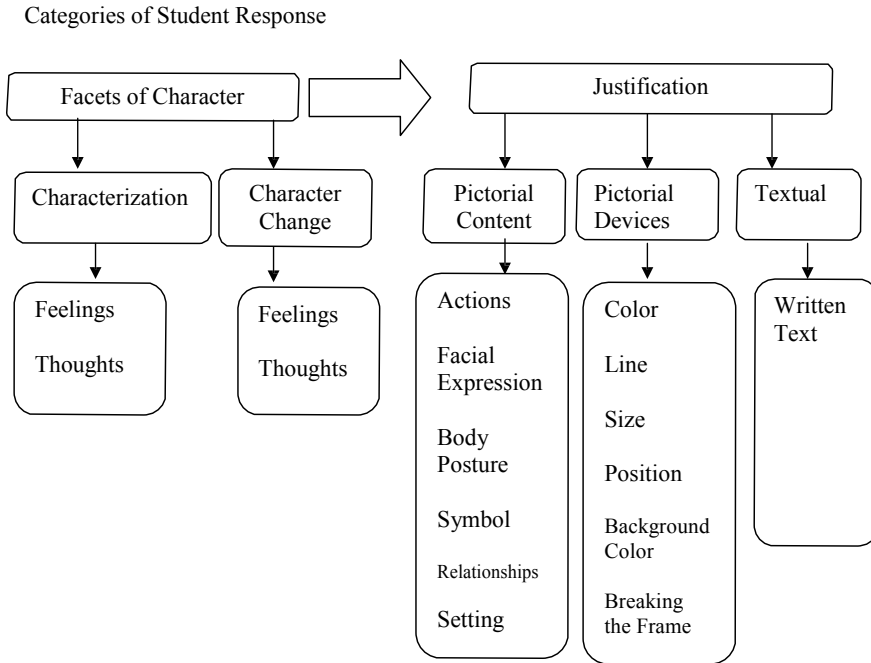
The classroom teacher read aloud the three picturebooks to the whole class, reading one book a week over three weeks. She was not given any instructions for the read-alouds except to follow her usual procedures when reading a book to her class. Each read-aloud was audio-taped in order to document any attention to character development that might occur during the read-alouds. An inspection of the transcripts from the read-alouds confirmed that the teacher did not focus any discussion on character during or after the read-aloud. In addition, field notes were taken during the whole class read-alouds by two of the researchers.

Immediately following each read-aloud, student participants were called out of the classroom individually for interviews that were conducted in the school library. One researcher conducted the interview while the second one took field notes. Students were shown each of the three pre-selected illustrations from the target picturebook and asked the following open-ended questions for each illustration, “What is happening?” and “How do you know?” Interview questions did not focus on character. Students were told that there were no wrong answers and were invited to say whatever they wanted about each picture. Each interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed.

## Data Analysis

Observational field notes and written transcripts from the audio recordings of the whole class read-alouds were analyzed to determine if attention was focused on character during the read-alouds.

Written transcripts of the student interviews were examined. Student responses were coded in two ways—the *focus* of the response and the *pictorial justification* for the responses. Using constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), initial categories for focus were developed through multiple readings of the transcripts. Two major foci of responses emerged through this process—*characterization* and *character change*. Sub-categories of *characterization* and *character change* that emerged were *character feelings* and *character thoughts* (see Figure 1). Examples of student responses in each sub-category appear in Table 3.

**Figure 1****Table 3**

Facets of Character: Characterization and Character Change

Characterization	Example
Feelings	"Sophie is sad."
Thoughts	"Leonardo is happy because he thinks he scared someone!"
Character Change	Example
Feelings	"Sophie is getting angry in this picture ...because there is a volcano...and an explosion here."
Thoughts	"She has an idea in this one...because she has a light bulb right here [next to her face]."

In addition, to classifying student responses according to focus, responses were also categorized based on the pictorial justification(s) students provided for their observations about characters. Two types of pictorial information were identified that students used in justifying their character interpretations—pictorial content and pictorial devices. We identified the sub- categories of pictorial content and pictorial devices based upon our own analyses of the illustrations used as interview prompts in order to ensure that all the different ways in which the illustrators conveyed character information were represented in our category system. Sub- categories of pictorial content included character actions, facial expression, body posture, setting, relationships, and symbol. Pictorial devices included color, line, size of character, position of character, breaking the frame, and background color (see Figure 1).

Using this category system, interview transcripts were coded independently by each of the researchers. We then came together to discuss and reconcile differences to ensure consistency in coding. It is important to note that while students shared some (few) responses not focused on character, only character-focused responses were analyzed. In addition, in a very few instances, students justified their character observations with references to text; however, these textual justifications were not further analyzed given the focus of this investigation.

## Findings

Rather than combining the children's responses across books, we present our findings on a book-by-book basis because the devices used to convey character information visually in the three books differed, sometimes in significant ways.

### ***Leonardo the Terrible Monster***

In responding to the three illustrations from the book, *Leonardo the Terrible Monster*, the children primarily talked about what Leonardo was like; 86% of the total responses focused characterization. Of these, the large majority (approximately 73%) focused on Leonardo's feelings. Students talked far less about character change in this story; only 14% of the total responses focused on character change, even though this facet of character was central to the information conveyed in opening 16 of the book (one of the openings used as an interview prompt).



The children were less likely to support their observations about Leonardo's feelings by referring to the illustrator's use of pictorial devices. Those who did so were most likely to refer to the illustrator's use of line in conveying the character's expression. For example, in talking about Leonardo's expression in the first illustration, one child observed, "His eyes are pointing down ... and his mouth is just like straight." While our own analysis of the illustrations identified the code of positionality as being particularly important in conveying character feelings in the illustrations in *Leonardo the Terrible Monster*, none of the children mentioned Leonardo's placement on the page when talking about the illustrations.

While the children talked more about characterization than character change, some did talk about changes in Leonardo's thoughts and feelings. In justifying their observations about character change, they most often referred to Leonardo's facial expressions as seen in the following interview segment:

Shane: He's trying to figure out a hard decision.

Interviewer: Leonardo is trying to make a hard decision right? And how do you know that?

Shane: Because the way his eyes are. Interviewer: And what do his eyes tell you?

Shane: He's having a little trouble with something. Interviewer: Right and what tells you? What are the clues?

Shane: His eyes look a little bit sad and, like he's gonna have to do something really big or he's scared.

Interviewer: So why do you think it's really big? Shane: So you can see his expressions.

For the third illustration, we identified two elements used by the illustrator that conveyed a change in Leonardo's thinking—his facial expression and the marked change in the size of the character's face through the use of the cinematic technique of zooming in. While a number of the children talked about the significance of the character's expression, only one child justified her thinking about character change through a reference to this zooming technique:

Mary: He was making a decision... a big decision.

Interviewer: And what gives you a clue that it's a big decision?

Mary: Because of how they drew his face, everything is big.





When the children were asked to justify their observations about character feelings, they most frequently talked about Sophie's facial expressions and the illustrator's use of color. For example, in reference to the first illustration, one child explained that he knew Sophie was angry because "she['s] pointing her eyes toward her nose and her mouth is angry and her hair is flopping up and down." The children also appeared to be attuned to the ways in which the illustrator used color to convey character feelings in *When Sophie Gets Angry... Really, Really Angry*:

Ciera: ... she's mad and covered in red.

Interviewer: What does red mean?

Ciera: It means that you're super mad.

In opening eight the symbol of a volcano conveys important information about character feelings. The text describes Sophie as "a volcano ready to explore," and the accompanying illustration includes the depiction of the volcano with the word "explode" serving as lava erupting from the volcano. A number of children talked about the significance of this symbol. For example, Caren noted, "She's getting really, really angry in this picture...because there's a volcano over here and there's an explosion."

In our own analysis of *When Sophie Gets Angry... Really, Really Angry*, we identified two additional types of pictorial content that were important in revealing character feelings - depictions of relationships between characters, and the use of setting. Yet the children only infrequently referred to these elements as they justified their insights into the character. In opening 13, setting serves as way of showing that Sophie is beginning to calm down, and one child did note this when she observed, "She's looking at the ocean and trying to relax... She's up in a tree and that's where most people relax sometimes." Also, in talking about opening 17, one child referred to character relationships: "Everyone's happy that she's home... Her mom has a smile, her dad has a smile, and she has a smile. She's happy that she's home too." However, few other children made note of this pictorial information in talking about the character.

### ***Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse***

In talking about the three illustrations from *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*, 28% of the children's comments focused on character feelings, 68% talked about changes in character feelings, and 4% focused on changes in character thoughts.

Our own analysis of the three illustrations used as prompts for the interviews yielded an array of pictorial content and pictorial devices that Kevin Henkes, the author/illustrator, used to develop character. Pictorial content of particular note in these three illustrations included character actions, facial expressions, and the use of symbols. We also identified three pictorial devices of note—line, changes in size of character, and the device of breaking the frame (in which a character breaks out of a frame surrounding an illustration).

When the children were asked to justify their observations about the character, they most frequently talked about the main character's actions, facial expressions, and the use of line (see Table 6). For example, in talking about Lilly's feelings in the first illustration, one child referred to the illustrator's use of line explaining that he knew Lilly was angry because "her eyes are red and she has the squiggles." (These squiggles are swirling lines.) When asked what the squiggles mean, the child responded, "That she's really angry."

**Table 6**

Justification for Characterization/Change: *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*

	Pictorial Content						Visual Devices					
	<u>Actions</u>	<u>Facial Expression</u>	Body Posture	<u>Symbol</u>	Relationships	Setting	Color	<u>Line</u>	<u>Size</u>	Position	Background Color	<u>Breaking Frame</u>
Character Feelings	7	12					2	5	3			1
Character Thoughts												
Character Change Feelings	17	21	1	1			7	17	10			1
Character Change Thoughts	1			4								

When invited to talk about opening ten, many of the students talked about the significance of the series of frames showing Lilly getting smaller and smaller.

Mike: She's getting smaller

Interviewer: Do you think that Lily's really getting smaller? What do you think is happening?

Mike: She's thinking about what happened.

Interviewer: And so what does this mean when the picture shows her getting smaller?

Mike: It means that when you're being mean to somebody it means that you're going as low as them.

Openings eight and ten both contain symbols, and many of the students talked about these. For example, one child talked about the light bulb that appears in opening eight:

Chloe: She has an idea.

Interviewer: How do you know she got an idea?

Chloe: There is a light bulb right here.

Even though three students pointed out the broken musical notes in the second illustration, only one talked about their symbolism:

Quin: The music notes are broken.

Interviewer: So if the music notes are broken what does that tell you

Quin: That she feels bad.

In opening 16, Henkes depicts Lilly joyously leaping out of the frame that encloses the illustration. Only two students talked about this pictorial device:

James: ... she's hopping out of the picture.

Interviewer: She is; look at that! And what does that tell you?

James: That she's really happy.

## Discussion

As with all research investigations, there are limitations to this study. There were only twelve participants in the study, and a limited number of illustrations were used as interview prompts. Nonetheless, we believe that the findings provide important insights into the kinds of pictorial information that young children utilize—and do not utilize—in understanding the characters they meet in picturebooks. In particular, the second grade students' interview responses showed that they were attuned to characters' feelings and thoughts, as well as changes in their feelings and thoughts. In explaining their insights into characters, the children appeared to be particularly attentive to three types of pictorial content—character actions, facial expressions, and body posture. The pictorial devices they mentioned most often in explaining insights into characters were color and line.

In the nine illustrations used as interview prompts in this investigation, there were other types of pictorial content and pictorial devices that conveyed important information about characters. These included character relationships, setting, symbols, size, positionality, background color, and breaking the frame. Relatively few responses (and sometimes none at all) focused on these pictorial elements, suggesting that children may not be as familiar with the use of these elements in depicting characters.

## Implications

Characters in picturebooks are developed in a variety of ways. Textual information is, of course, important. This textual information includes what the character says, thinks, and does, what other characters say about the character, and what the narrator says about a character. However, in a picturebook, illustrations also play an important part (and sometimes the most important part) in the development of characters through the use of pictorial content and pictorial devices. Elements such as facial expressions, body language, actions and symbols, as well as art elements like color and line and devices such as positionality and breaking the frame are all part of the visual text and may contribute in important ways to the development of character. In fact, sometimes visual information may be the most critical information for students to use when making inferences about character traits, feelings, thoughts, and motives.

This study holds important implications for the use of picturebooks in classrooms. First, teachers must recognize the important ways in which visual text

contributes to the development of characters, and in preparing to share literature with children, teachers must carefully attend to illustrations themselves. The findings of the study suggest that young children are adept at utilizing many of facets of visual information in making inferences about characters, but teachers must give children the time to linger over illustrations in order to mine them for important clues to characters. However, we found that there are some facets of the visual text to which many children are not attuned as they explore characterization and character change in picturebooks, facets such as symbols, positionality, size, and breaking the frame. So it is important that teachers guide children in exploring these important but sometimes subtle devices that often provide important insights into characters.

Too often adults tend to be text bound—even when reading picturebooks. Yet close inspections of picturebooks reveal the rich and varied ways in which the visual text contributes to the development of characters (as well as other aspects of stories). We believe that it is critically important that teachers invite children to delve into illustrations to understand characters and help them extend their understanding of the more subtle devices that illustrators use in developing characters.



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## COACHING TEACHERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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### Abstract

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The following qualitative study examined how Reading First Literacy Coaches refined their literacy coaching to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of Hispanic English language learners (ELLs) in 30 elementary schools located along the US Mexico Border. Data were gathered from the coaches through written surveys and a focus group. Findings from the coaches' practices identified three themes: 1) Coaches understood bilingual programs and the theory underlying such instruction; 2) Coaches supported teachers of ELLs by sharing their knowledge and experiences about ELLs; and 3) Coaches faced challenges in meeting the needs of teachers of Hispanic ELLs. This study is an addition to the literature that describes and contextualizes the work of instructional coaches. It has practical implications for schools seeking to build the capacity of teachers of ELLs. Guidance is suggested related to hiring coaches with special dispositions and the professional development of existing coaches.

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## COACHING TEACHERS OF ELLs

Schools in the United States have been faced with rapidly changing student demographics over the last decade. In particular, there has been a large increase in the number of English language learners (ELLs). The ELL population has grown by 60% making it the fastest growing student group in the country (Escamilla, 2007). Statistics indicate that as many as 1 in 9 students is an ELL (Goldenberg, 2008). Ballantyne, Sanderman and Levy (2008) note, "Given the growth of the ELL population over the past ten years, it is probably safe to assume that a majority of American teachers now have at least one ELL in their classes" (p. 9).

Although most of the responsibility of educating ELLs is traditionally placed on the teachers, this responsibility should be shared by all stake holders (Clair & Adger, 1999). In other words, teachers need to be supported when educating ELLs. Providing relevant professional development is one form of support (Clair & Adger, 1999). Many school districts have selected coaching as a professional development model (Borman & Feger, 2006; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Russo, 2004). This article reports the results of a study that examined the relationship between coaches and teachers of ELLs. The purpose of the study was to investigate what coaching adjustments instructional coaches made to meet the needs of diverse teachers and students.

### Definition of ELLs

An ELL can be defined as "a child whose native language is other than English and who is learning English as a second language" (Escamilla, 2007, p.1). However, the term ELL includes a heterogeneous group of students. First, ELLs are at varying levels of English oral language and literacy development (Goldenberg, 2008). Some ELLs have developed reading and writing skills in English while others have only developed oral proficiency in their second language. Some ELLs started to learn English in their countries of origin while others arrive in the United States not speaking any English. Second, ELLs also vary greatly in the level of literacy they have developed in their native language (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). For example, some ELLs fall under what Freeman and Freeman (2008) call "*recent immigrants with adequate schooling* [italics added]." These students arrive in the United States with native language literacy skills, content area knowledge, and academic skills appropriate for their grade level. In contrast, "*recent immigrants with limited or interrupted schooling* [italics added]" arrive in U.S. schools behind their grade-level counterparts. Many of them have

very poor reading and writing skills in their native language. Some of them have never been in school. Third, it is very important to point out that not all ELLs are recent immigrants. In fact, most ELLs were born in this country (Escamilla, 2007; Goldenberg, 2008). Many fall under the category of *long-term ELLs*. These students have been in the United States for more than seven years (Freeman & Freeman, 2008) and yet, they are still not proficient in academic English.

## Achievement Gap

Schools and teachers are under enormous pressure to help ELLs meet national and state accountability demands. Assessment results indicate that ELLs are achieving well below the national standards. ELLs perform lower than their English-dominant counterparts on large-scale assessments (Durán, 2008). Goldenberg (2008) reports:

On the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress, fourth-grade ELLs scored 36 points below non-ELLs in reading and 25 points below non-ELLs in Math. The gaps among eighth graders were even larger - 42 points in reading and 37 points in Math. (p. 11)

In addition, ELLs are falling behind academically in all content areas, especially in those that demand higher levels of English language proficiency (Abedi & Gándara, 2006). ELLs have a higher drop-out rate than their non-ELL counterparts (Bowman- Perrott, Herrera, & Murry, 2010; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). While 10% of English speaking young adults do not complete high school, 31% of ELLs drop out before graduation (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Drop-out rates are influenced in part by grade retention. About 40 or 50% of 15 to 17 year old Hispanic students are below grade level, which indicates that they have been retained (Bowman- Perrot et al., 2010). Moreover, Hispanics have the lowest level of bachelor degree completion among ethnic groups (Gándara, 2010), and most ELLs (75%) are Hispanic (Escamilla, 2007).

Accompanying the achievement gap is the critical issue that ELLs need high quality teachers in the classroom. Villarreal (2005) argues the achievement gap between minority and White students is primarily due to teacher quality. The number of certified bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) teachers needs to increase and so does the instructional capacity of teachers serving ELLs in the mainstream classroom (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Horowitz et al., 2009; NEA Research, 2005).

## Teacher Quality

The Council of Great City Schools, a group of the top 65 urban districts in the country, has acknowledged that urban school districts have been struggling with the challenges of teaching ELLs (Horowitz et al., 2009). The Council's research identified six enduring challenges to the improvement of achievement for ELLs. One challenge was that of the critical shortage of qualified teachers for ELLs faced by districts. Nationally, only 29.5% of teachers working with ELLs in their classrooms report having had the training to do so effectively and 57% of teachers report needing more professional development in this area (Ballantyne et al., 2008). Moreover, close to 40% of teachers working with ELLs in 2005 had not received professional development in the field, and about 20% of teachers had less than 10 hours of in-service on how to address the needs of ELLs (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). The U.S. Department of Education reported as early as 2001 that "addressing the needs of limited English proficient students is the professional development area in which teachers are least likely to participate" (NEA research, 2005, para.10). Based on this challenge, the Council of Great City Schools recommended that school districts "ensure that all teachers of ELLs have access to high quality professional development that provides differentiated instructional strategies, promotes the effective use of student assessment data, and develops skills for supporting second-language acquisition across the curriculum" (Horowitz, 2009, p. 35). Most recently, the 2010 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher revealed that 63% of the teachers surveyed believed better instructional strategies for teaching ELLs would have a major impact on their ability to address diverse learning needs of students (MetLife Survey, 2010).

## Professional Development

Quality professional development is essential for creating quality schools for minority students (Villarreal, 2005). Such programs enhance teacher quality and upgrade teachers' capacity to influence achievement for all students, especially ELLs. Studies of promising practices of districts that have been successful in the education of ELLs have found that such districts provide 'high quality and relevant professional development' for the teachers of ELLs (Horowitz et al., 2009, p. 22). The Council of the Great City Schools reported,

Given the importance of access to quality teachers for student achievement – particularly among ELLs – it came as no surprise that access to high quality professional development for general

education teachers and ELL teachers alike was instrumental in the reform initiative of improving districts. (p. 22)

In particular the team found that higher quality professional development programs: ...went beyond merely transmitting information and involved hands-on, site-based strategies such as lesson or technique modeling, coaching [emphasis added] and providing feedback based on close monitoring of practice. (p. 22)

Their description of quality professional development is consistent with research on best practices that support teacher learning. In particular, research supports professional development that expands teachers' knowledge of content and pedagogy; offers opportunities for active, hands-on learning; allows teachers to apply new content and reflect on outcomes with peers; links curriculum, assessment, and standards teacher learning; and is intensive, ongoing and sustained over time (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009).

Likewise, a panel of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners convened by the Center for Applied Linguistics and working on behalf of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, proposed literacy coaches as a potential solution to the inadequate teacher capacity to work with ELLs (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). The International Reading Association has recommended that literacy coaches receive special training on issues related to ELLs. Coaches, in turn, would be expected to instruct teachers on second language acquisition, serve as resources for teachers, and share strategies with teachers addressing literacy and content area instruction for ELLs (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

## **Coaching**

Of particular interest to the authors of this article was the specific identification of coaching as part of the professional development program for improving the instructional capacity of ELL teachers. Over the last decade, districts interested in systemic change for school improvement have been encouraged to utilize peer coaching as a professional development model for teacher growth (Brown, Stroh, Fouts, & Baker, 2005; Wagner, 2007). Districts such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Denver, and Boston have utilized coaching to build instructional capacity of the district and teachers (Borman & Feger, 2006; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Russo, 2004).

The rationale for coaching as a preferred means for professional development has been established in the literature. The increased use of coaching is largely due to the lack of change in teachers' practices or children's achievement

from traditional one-day in-service professional development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). In addition, teachers want more continuing support in implementing new practices (Miller, 1998). Joyce and Calhoun (2010) identified peer coaching as the most effective means for transfer of new learning to classroom practice.

The National Staff Development Council acknowledges the role of coaching in developing teacher capacity. They state,

Good teaching occurs when educators on teams are involved in a cycle in which they analyze data, determine student and adult learning goals based on that analysis, design joint lessons that use evidence-based strategies, have access to coaches for support [emphasis added] in improving their classroom instruction, and then assess how their learning and teamwork affects student achievement. (Hirsch, 2009. p. 10)

Coaching provides the type of ongoing, contextualized support that has an impact on teacher learning and practices (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Knight, 2009).

### **Reading and Literacy Initiatives**

Ongoing professional development for teachers is often provided by literacy coaches (Joyce & Calhoun, 2010). Research indicates that literacy coaching is a superior method of implementing change when compared to short-term presentations or workshops (Sailors & Price, 2010). However, questions have been posed concerning the effectiveness of Reading First coaches, especially in low-income schools with multilingual students (Cummins, 2007).

Reading First was a program designed to close the achievement gap between Title 1, low income schools, and schools in higher socioeconomic areas (Deussen, Coskie, Robinson & Autio, 2007). One of the important components of Reading First was having literacy coaches to support teachers in implementing the components of the program. More than 5,200 schools hired literacy coaches as part of Reading First (Deussen et al., 2007) to help teachers implement the five major components of Reading First: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension (Carnahan et al., 2004).

Although funding for Reading First has ended, questions remain about which parts of Reading First may have been effective and should be continued and which parts did not work (Manzo, 2008). Researchers have especially questioned the rigidity of the Reading First coaching (Cummins, 2007; Mallozzi, McLean, & Hu, 2008). Mallozzi et al. (2008) refer to professional development

presented by Reading First coaches as “redelivery” of professional development that the coaches have received as some even used “scripted and formulaic PowerPoint presentations” to present professional development to teachers (p. 15). Cummins (2007) indicates this approach leads to inflexibility in the classroom with an emphasis on skills that fail to engage students with reading. He further asserts that students’ individual culture and language are not valued when rigid programs are implemented.

Not all school districts implemented Reading First rigidly. One example was the San Francisco Unified School District which noted improved academic performance of ELLs in schools served by Reading First. Reading First literacy coaches delivered additional professional development to equip teachers with the skills to support English language development among ELLs (Horowitz, et al., 2009). Reading First provided the infrastructure for the delivery of the ELL teachers’ professional development.

A different example is presented in this article. The following research looks at ways some Reading First coaches did adjust their coaching for the cultural and linguistic differences of teachers and ELLs in their classrooms.

## **Method**

The purpose of the study was to investigate the coaching adjustments instructional coaches made to meet the needs of diverse teachers and students. Three questions guided the research:

1. What is the role of the coach?
2. How is coaching adjusted to meet the needs of culturally and/or linguistically diverse teachers?
3. How is coaching adjusted to meet the needs of culturally and/or linguistically diverse students?

## **Participants and Setting**

Thirty elementary school literacy coaches, working in schools along the Mexican border, participated in the study. At the time of the study, they were working at thirty different schools as Reading First Coaches, focused on kindergarten through third grade classrooms. About 34 percent of the students in the schools were ELLs (English language learners) and 96 percent were categorized



as economically disadvantaged. All coaches were females, and all but one were Hispanic. Most of the literacy coaches had 3 or more years of coaching experience before the study and had extensive teaching experience before becoming coaches. Of the 26 coaches who answered an online follow-up survey, 20 had more than 8 years of teaching experience before becoming a coach.

## **Data Collection**

Data to answer the three research questions came from three sources in order to triangulate and validate findings (Creswell, 2002). The first data were collected in a survey given before a professional development session for the literacy coaches. The survey focused on the role of the coach and the adjustments coaches make to meet the needs of culturally and/or linguistically diverse teachers and students.

Although the survey was anonymous and voluntary, participants could include their name if they were willing to participate in a follow-up focus group. The researchers left the room during the survey and had a volunteer place the surveys in an envelope. Of the 36 coaches at the meeting, 30 chose to participate in the first survey.

The second source of data was a focus group with four coaches who had volunteered to participate in follow-up research, and were available the evening of the focus group. The primary purpose of the focus group was to clarify and expand on the responses to the initial survey. The researchers wrote a few focus group questions in advance and then followed up on those questions based on the responses of the coaches. Responses were audio taped and transcribed.

Due to a desire to collect follow-up data from more than the four focus group participants, the researchers designed an anonymous online survey. Twenty-six of the 36 coaches responded to the survey. This survey included multiple choice as well as open-ended questions.

**Figure 1:** Survey administered at meeting of literacy coaches.

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

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

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

4. Years of experience in coaching \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions in detail:

5. What is your role as a coach?

6. How do you adapt your coaching to meet the needs of diverse teachers? (coaching style and/or content)

7. How do you adapt your coaching to meet the needs of diverse students?

8. What role does students' first language play in your coaching? Why?

9. What factors do you take into consideration when you coach a teacher? (teacher and/or students culture, language, age, gender, religion, abilities/disabilities, years of experience, etc.)

10. Why do you feel those factors are important?

~~~~~

**Optional**

Please include your contact information if you are willing to provide additional information:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Home Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

Cell Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address \_\_\_\_\_

## Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis by searching for repeated words and phrases and patterns (Grbich, 2007). Then the data were categorized according to the patterns that emerged (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Each of the three researchers analyzed the data for patterns separately and subsequently met to discuss areas of overlap and broad themes. The themes included in this article are only those that address the ways the coaches adapted their work for teachers of ELLs.

**Figure 2:** *Questions used to guide a follow-up focus group session.*

1. What data do you collect?
  - a. Student data
  - b. Teacher data
  - c. During observations (specific forms)?
2. Describe what you do with the data collected.
3. Elaborate on the significance of teachers' years of experience.
  - a. Does coaching differ for more or less experienced teachers?
4. What are some suggestions you give teachers to address the needs of diverse students?
5. Describe the process of mentoring a teacher.
  - a. How does diversity influence?
  - b. Does the amount of mentoring time vary?
  - c. Specific practices
6. What is your philosophy of bilingual education?
7. What role does students' first language play in your coaching?
8. How does campus or district leadership influence your role as a coach?

## Results

The analysis of the data obtained from this study revealed that most of the strategies and trainings participants described are standard practices that coaches who followed Reading First guidelines usually performed. However, there were distinctive aspects of the coaches' practices that emerged based on their work with teachers of ELLs. Findings from the literacy coaches' practices in this study can be organized in three major themes: 1) The coaches understood bilingual programs and the theory underlying such instruction; 2) The coaches supported teachers of ELLs by sharing their knowledge and experiences to meet the needs of ELLs; and 3) The coaches faced challenges in their attempt to meet the needs of teachers of Hispanic ELLs.

**Figure 3:** Anonymous online follow-up survey administered to literacy coaches.

1. What do you feel is your greatest contribution to your campus as a coach?
2. How many years did you teach before becoming a literacy coach?
3. What type of teacher preparation program did you go through?
4. What is the highest degree you have earned?
5. In what areas do you hold certifications?
6. Are you currently pursuing any degrees or certification?
7. What are your future career plans?
8. Please choose the approximate percentage of your work time spent on each task below. The percentages should total about 100 percent.
  - a. Modeling lessons or team teaching in classrooms
  - b. Observing and providing feedback to individual teachers
  - c. Data analysis
  - d. Attending professional development
  - e. Planning and providing professional development
  - f. Meeting with administrators
  - g. Other
9. If you answered "other" to the question above, please describe the task(s).
10. Approximately how often do you visit or meet with individual teachers?
11. How does your coaching differ for new teachers versus experienced teachers? Please be as specific as possible.
12. What are the main purposes of meetings with campus administrators?
13. Did you provide or arrange for any professional development in addition to the Reading First professional development? If so, please give examples and indicate if the professional development was provided by you or someone else.
14. Which of the following best describes the bilingual/English as a second language program at your school?
  - a. Early exit (initial instruction in Spanish with transition to English as quickly as possible)
  - b. Late exit (maintaining first language while learning English)
  - c. Dual language (all student, including English dominant students, receive instruction in English and Spanish)
  - d. Structured English immersion (instruction in English with support as needed in Spanish)
  - e. English only
15. If you would like to further describe the bilingual/ESL program at your school, please do so below.
16. What percentage of the students at your school learn to read in Spanish first?

### Understanding Bilingual Education

The literacy coaches who participated in this study demonstrated an understanding of the needs of teachers of Hispanic ELLs. This understanding stemmed from their initial teacher preparation. The majority of the coaches (92%) held a bilingual teacher certification. These coaches worked in a region with large

numbers of ELLs, therefore holding a bilingual or English as a second language (ESL) certification was very important. The coaches explained that most of the schools where they worked opted to implement an early-exit transitional bilingual model to provide education to ELLs. The primary objective of these kinds of bilingual programs is to help students achieve English language proficiency as quickly as possible and move them into an all-English curriculum. Nevertheless, students' first languages are used as a medium of instruction to keep students on grade level while they acquire English proficiency. The coaches who participated in this study indicated that Spanish, the students' first language, was used for instruction; the amount and type of Spanish instruction and/or support varied considerably from campus to campus.

Coaches believed in providing a strong foundation in the students' first language. They understood the importance of developing the students' first language in order "to make the transition into their second language more successful." Moreover, the linguistic needs of the students impacted the work coaches engaged in with the teachers of ELLs.

### **Supporting Teachers of ELLs**

Coaches explained that the Spanish language was sometimes used to communicate with Spanish dominant teachers. One coach explained, "We have many teachers, like many students, whose native language is Spanish... [who] need to feel respected... when spoken to." Likewise, the coaches who participated in this study took into consideration the needs of the students when coaching the teachers. One coach explained that "coaching the teachers on strategies to use during instruction helps students." That is, teachers' needs stem from their students' needs; therefore, students' first language was perceived as a factor that impacted coaching. Moreover, one coach stated that "language is the primary factor considered when instructing children in literacy." Coaches added that students' first language impacted testing and grouping decisions. They explained the campus Language Proficiency Assessment Committee assesses the students' first and second language proficiency. The assessment results are used to make both instructional and testing decisions. As one of the coaches stated, "data drives the instruction." Students are categorized according to language proficiency. They are assessed in their dominant language (English or Spanish), using the state standardized early literacy assessment. Data from these assessments are analyzed and students are grouped accordingly to provide literacy instruction. Part of the coaches' role is to support teachers by planning together, modeling instruction in

their classrooms, and team teaching lessons. Therefore, coaches felt that it was important for them to be able to model lessons and team teach in the students' first language when working with teachers who delivered literacy instruction in Spanish.

One of the most important roles of the coach is to support teachers in the delivery of literacy instruction. In their attempt to support those teachers who work primarily with ELLs, coaches shared with them a variety of strategies. Coaches paid special attention to vocabulary development when working with teachers of Hispanic ELLs. One coach explained her rationale by stating, "Because we have a large population of ELLs, we need to address vocabulary instruction. The explicit instruction of vocabulary is what I believe is the key to improving reading comprehension." Several coaches indicated that students' first language is drawn upon when teaching vocabulary by providing specific strategies on the use of cognates. Cognates are words in two languages that are similar in spelling and meaning because they have the same origin or root. One coach explained, "I give teachers a way to help students understand the English language better by using cognates."

Literacy coaches also used other strategies to support teachers of Hispanic ELLs. Coaches encouraged teachers to use ESL strategies and scaffolding. Scaffolding is providing temporary assistance for students and reducing such help as students become more proficient. One coach explained that "it is imperative to differentiate the delivery of instruction when dealing with ELLs." She added, "I do not use 'water down' [*sic*] instruction, but I do provide many scaffolding strategies." Coaches also stressed the importance of "making content comprehensible while developing academic language." This strategy is aligned with sheltered instruction. ELLs must develop academic language, or the language of schooling and the content areas, to succeed in school. Sheltered instruction is used to help ELLs develop academic English and content knowledge simultaneously in a risk-free environment where specific strategies, such as read alouds, visuals, and hands-on activities, are used to make instruction comprehensible for ELLs. Literacy coaches also worked with teachers on strategies to activate background knowledge and experiences. "It is critical to keep in mind student background, primary language, and especially search for what types of prior knowledge students bring into the classroom. With this in mind, I highly stress the use of manipulatives, songs, [and] games that will assist student learning to the highest level." Learning centers were used to address the needs of ELLs.

Coaches explained that some students receive large group instruction in English, but receive Spanish instruction and/or reinforcement in the centers.

While some coaches stressed the use of specific strategies to address the needs of teachers of ELLs, others focused on adapting the strategies that are used with English dominant students to fit the needs of ELLs. After all, as one coach stated, “reading is reading regardless of the language.” Another coach stated that “the techniques, activities, lessons, etc. can be used with all students by adjusting the language and level of difficulty.” One more participant mentioned that “all effective strategies may be utilized with all students as long as language adaptations are made.”

### **Challenges**

Some of the challenges faced by coaches when working with teachers of ELLs were finding materials and providing adequate professional development. Coaches felt that resources in Spanish were limited or more difficult to find. They also felt that some available materials were not authentic, that is, they were just literal translations from the English material. Coaches felt a need for additional professional development for teachers working with ELLs. Therefore, several coaches took the initiative to provide the required training on how the bilingual program works, on how students acquire language, and on research-based practices.

Despite the challenges, coaches displayed a good disposition towards teachers of ELLs. One of the most important indicators of the coaches’ commitment to support teachers of ELLs was valuing the students they work with and their strengths. One coach stated that students “like to know that someone genuinely values them.” One more participant explained “These children can learn a second language if we are there for them and consider their academic as well as language needs.” Another coach eloquently wrote, “Well, I share what I know about our student’s population [*sic*]; I know our students are very similar to me. I was a bilingual student; I know and understand their needs.”

### **Discussion and Implications for Practice**

Our study of Reading First coaches explored the coaching adjustments made to meet the needs of teachers of ELLs. Each of the three themes that emerged from the research not only add to the body of knowledge about coaching teachers of ELLs but also have implications for practice.

## **Understanding Bilingual Education**

The results of this study showed, as indicated by the first theme, that participating literacy coaches understood bilingual education and the theory on which it is based. Districts should consider hiring literacy coaches who possess specialized knowledge about ELLs. Knight (2006) suggests that hiring the right instructional coaches is the most critical factor related to the success or failure of a coaching program. However, in reality, it may not always be possible to hire coaches with extensive background knowledge and experience in bilingual or ESL education.

Districts must focus on providing relevant professional development for its practicing literacy coaches related to bilingual and ESL education. Specifically, our findings suggest possible topics for literacy coaches' professional development: research and instructional practices related to first and second language acquisition, characteristics and needs, program models, and differentiated instruction for ELLs. Such topics may be used to build and develop coaches' capacity to support teachers of ELLs. Although the literature supports these topics as a foundation for teachers of ELLs (Freeman & Freeman, 2007; Ovando & Combs, 2012), little research exists on the background knowledge needed by coaches who work with these teachers. Literacy coaches can also take college courses to expand their knowledge or look for books and articles that explain the basic principles and theories of second language acquisition and their implications for instruction. Then coaches and teachers can engage in book studies to understand ELLs, their needs, and practical applications of second language acquisition theory.

This theme also indicates that a positive disposition or attitude about bilingual education and ELLs is important for literacy coaches. Coaches in this study repeatedly expressed the importance of developing literacy in the first language to serve as a foundation for literacy in English. In addition, they mentioned specific strategies, such as the use of cognates that draw on students' first language. Successful coaches of teachers of ELLs should value students' languages and encourage teachers to do the same. Coaches and teachers do not need to speak the students' languages, although it certainly helps. They can show they value the students' language by encouraging students to continue developing their native language especially by inviting families to engage in first language literacy activities at home. They can have books, reference materials, and other resources in the students' first languages available in the classroom and school



library. They can also invite guests to read and speak to the students in their first language.

### **Supporting Teachers of ELLs**

As indicated by the second resulting theme, coaches supported teachers of ELLs by sharing their knowledge and experiences. Coaches encouraged teachers to pay special attention to vocabulary development. They also encouraged them to use a variety of ESL strategies and scaffolding techniques. Most importantly, coaches mentioned the importance of making instruction comprehensible for ELLs while delivering instruction at grade level by using strategies that help students see and experience new English vocabulary.

In addition to sharing specific strategies with the teachers of ELLs, the coaches held high expectations for ELL students. The region where this study was conducted has a high number of ELLs, and the pressures of accountability are felt by everyone. ELLs are expected to perform satisfactorily on state assessments, just like English dominant students. Coaches worked closely with teachers to help ELLs develop literacy in English and to have high expectations for their success.

### **Challenges**

The third theme from our data identified the challenges that coaches face when working with teachers of ELLs. Coaches' challenges included finding adequate and authentic materials in students' native language and the need to provide additional professional development on the needs of ELLs over and above the Reading First curriculum. The coaches in this study were able to modify and add to the "basic Reading First professional development sessions" offered to teachers of ELLs because they possessed specialized knowledge, skills and dispositions related to bilingual education.

This study supports the findings of the San Francisco Unified School District of how Reading First literacy coaches can modify a curricular initiative to meet the needs of teachers and students who serve a large ELL population. San Francisco modified their Reading First program to include a professional development component that focused on ELLs for targeted schools. This component was successful in supporting teachers' efforts to improve student achievement of ELLs through a reform initiative focused on literacy (Horowitz, et al., 2009).

## **Significance**

Especially in light of growing numbers of ELLs in districts which previously did not have large numbers of non-native English speakers, this research is significant because it looks at how literacy coaches can support teachers of ELLs. The research found coaching teachers of ELLs requires an understanding of second language acquisition, high expectations, and an emphasis on strategies that make English comprehensible to ELLs. Teachers of ELLs need the support, and literacy coaches with appropriate knowledge and dispositions may be able to help them.

Literacy coaches and teachers of ELLs also face many challenges, including a lack of materials in the students' native languages and some curricula written for native English speakers. In this study, literacy coaches' practices and beliefs were modified to take into account students and teachers' culture and language. Such modifications address Cummins' (2007) criticism of Reading First for its rigidity and failure to attend to the culturally and linguistically diverse needs of students.

In the past, little research looked at how literacy coaches modified their practices for teachers of ELLs. Researchers have called for peer reviewed empirical research that describes and contextualizes the work of instructional coaches (e.g., Gallucci et al. 2010). Our study begins this research effort. Further research needs to be conducted to link the steps coaches take to increase teachers' effectiveness for teaching ELLs and the impact on student learning.



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## **History, Philosophy, and Mission of Reading Horizons**

*Reading Horizons* began in 1960 by Dorothy J. McGinnis as a local reading education newsletter and developed into an international journal serving reading educators and researchers. Major colleges, universities, and individuals subscribe to *Reading Horizons* across the United States, Canada and a host of other countries. Dedicated to adding to the growing body of knowledge in literacy, the quarterly journal welcomes new and current research, theoretical essays, opinion pieces, policy studies, and best literacy practices. As a peer-reviewed publication, *Reading Horizons* endeavors to bring school professionals, literacy researchers, teacher educators, parents, and community leaders together in a collaborative community to widen literacy and language arts horizons.

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