Insert Student Here: Why Content Area Constructions of Literacy Matter for Pre-service Teachers
Kristine Gritter, Ph.D., Seattle Pacific University

The Effect of Props on Story Retells in the Classroom
Marie A. Stadler, Ph.D., University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, and Gay Cuming Ward, Ph.D., University of Wisconsin – River Falls

Culturally Relevant Texts and Reading Assessment for English Language Learners
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Celebrate the Magic of Poetry
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From the Editor

The State of Michigan is a very interesting place. We have large cities like Detroit, famous (or infamous) for the American auto industry; small cities with crazy names like my hometown, Kalamazoo; and a place known as the UP, the Upper Peninsula where beauty abounds at Tahquamenon Falls, a state park near Paradise, MI. We also have some very interesting issues here in Michigan. For example, the state legislature has mandated that every public school teacher in the state take a graduate class in reading process and assessment before they can acquire a professional teaching certificate. This semester I am teaching the Professional Symposium in Reading, this state mandated graduate class and, as usual, I have no doubt that it will be an interesting experience as the enrollment includes teachers of all grades and content areas. As I was reading and rereading the manuscript submissions included in this issue of Reading Horizons, I found myself making multiple connections to the content and the students I will have the pleasure of teaching in this and my undergraduate class, Secondary Content Literacy.

Kristine Gritter presents a study of pre-service secondary content area teachers and their beliefs about how to integrate literacy into their content area(s) instruction. Like Dr. Gritter, my undergraduate students come to class with a solid foundation in their chosen field — math, English, social studies, history, foreign language, science, etc. — and often question why they need to take a class in reading. Her research provides a glimpse into the minds of ten pre-service teachers and how they think about teaching and adolescent learners. Personally, I found her findings to be fascinating and affirming what I’ve seen in my own classroom.

Marie Stadler and Gay Ward did a fascinating study with kindergarten and grade one students and how the use of miniature props affected their retells of stories read in school. When giving a retell of a story, these young children handled props intended to aid them in remembering details of the various stories. While these props had no effect on the complexity of the retells, the children did use many more descriptive terms. Many of my graduate students are early elementary teachers who work with emergent readers who struggle with reading; sharing this study with them will no doubt give them yet another tool with which to support their students reading skills.

Working with third grade English Language Learners (ELLs), Ann Ebe found that while her readers generally did well on standardized reading assessments, they would struggle and frequently fail when presented with stories that had no cultural
relevance to their lives. Pulling on this experience, Dr. Ebe created the Cultural Relevance Rubric which asks readers to rate how closely a story relates to their individual lives. She then conducted a study asking her participants to first rate the cultural relevance of the stories used in a standardized assessment and then they took the test. Dr. Ebe found that the reading comprehension was greater for the stories that were rated more culturally relevant by her young students. The issue of English Language Learners is important for all of us and I intend to use Dr. Ebe’s Cultural Relevance Rubric with my graduate students as they learn about assessments and how to use this knowledge to better their teaching, no matter the grade or content area.

Terry Young and Barbara Ward, as usual, present us with fabulous literature for grades K-12. In this issue of Reading Horizons, they discuss many books of poetry, from the oft-used anthology to the novel in verse; these books will become part of my (and my students) literate lives. Poetry, in its many forms, brings forth images of beauty and horror, laughter and tears, and Drs. Young and Ward have highlighted some of the newest voices (Julie Andrews) as well as more well-known poets (Langston Hughes) that are sure to elicit responses from everyone.

Editing Reading Horizons brings out what I think is the best in me as I find myself making connections with the many researchers around the world who send us manuscripts. With this issue, I found myself thinking about the students I am teaching this semester and the many joys and challenges faced on a daily basis as a university professor. Once again I am grateful for the opportunity to be a part of such a vibrant learning community as we have in Reading Horizons.

Allison L. Baer, Ph.D.
Editor, Reading Horizons
Kalamazoo, MI

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

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Abstract
This article explores content area pre-service teacher beliefs about disciplinary knowledge, perceptions of effective content area teaching, and existing beliefs about how to integrate literacy into the content areas. Ten pre-service teachers across ten secondary content areas were asked to describe three important variables in secondary teaching: 1) the knowledge of their content area, 2) characteristics of a successful content area teacher, and 3) literacy activities that would optimally convey disciplinary knowledge to students. Content area responses to the first two prompts yielded comparatively static, teacher-centered notions of knowledge and teaching. However, responses to the third prompt indicated at least partial resistance to transmission-style teaching and more student-centered pedagogies. The author asserts that content area literacy courses can be a contact zone in which pre-service teachers consider and reconsider how disciplinary epistemology maps onto effective content area literacy instruction.

Introduction
Teaching content area literacy courses to pre-service secondary teachers is a messy and difficult business. First, although presumably secondary pre-service teachers already have some of expertise with the subject matter(s) they are training to teach, most have limited experience communicating that knowledge to adolescents who may not have an intrinsic interest in the subject. Second, a problematic
situation occurs when interdisciplinary pre-service teachers come into a content area course expecting a bag of one-size-fits-all reading and writing strategies. Reading, writing, and critical literacy strategies are not necessarily exportable across disciplines because content area texts and tasks vary widely (Draper, 2008). Content area experts may use literacy (often dissimilar than traditional school-taught reading and writing) in different ways than do content area literacy instructors modeling a particular literacy strategy (Seibert & Draper, 2008). Third, content area literacy coursework may rest on pedagogical frameworks invisible and alien to pre-service teacher’s experiences in content area classrooms. Literacy courses, in contrast to many mathematics courses, for example, tend to endorse constructivist pedagogies not generally embraced in actual secondary classrooms (Draper, 2002).

When content area literacy instructors do not understand valued disciplinary literacy practices, they do not prepare teachers of specialized subjects to meet the needs of students who will likely struggle with the reading and writing required in particular content areas (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). This article is an attempt to understand the role that highly divergent content area literacy practices plays in the formation of pedagogy for pre-service secondary teachers. In this article, I begin by situating important variables of effective content area literacy instruction within three classification systems for knowledge, teaching, and literacy. Next, I examine how metaphors for teaching and literacy often collide and contradict each other using by way of example the voices of ten pre-service secondary teachers training in ten different content areas. Finally, I discuss how content area literacy courses can become a contact zone for future secondary teachers to reexamine content area literacy tasks and texts. This reexamination can aid pre-service teachers in challenging static notions of knowledge and teaching.

**Constructs of Knowledge, Teaching, and Literacy**


Hard disciplines (which claim to produce findings that are verifiable, definitive, and cumulative) outrank soft disciplines where interpretation is the central problem and where findings are always subject to debate and reinterpretation by others. Likewise, pure intellectual pursuits (which are theoretically-oriented and abstracted from particular contexts) outrank those that are applied (where work is more practical and more closely connected to context-bound needs). (pp. 8-9)
Mathematical properties and scientific laws could be labeled as “harder” knowledge, as would any knowledge that would have to be replicated, whereas reader response theories could be labeled “softer” knowledge because interpretation would be more important than arriving at a correct answer. In addition, a national curriculum could be labeled “pure” knowledge, whereas a curriculum dependent on local concerns could be labeled “applied” knowledge.

Labaree (1996) also asserts that the content of teacher education courses is generally soft and applied knowledge giving schools of education a double whammy of low status in the Academy. However, secondary education majors also possess the knowledge that composes their major(s) and/or minor(s). Secondary pre-service teachers may coexist in two (or more) worlds of knowledge and may not be consciously aware of how their knowledge frameworks affect views of good teaching or content area literacy instruction.

Subject matter knowledge may shape notions of job performance and assessment activities, creating stereotypes of “the art teacher” or “the math teacher.” In their work on disciplinary boundaries situating teaching practices, for example, McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) noted that “math teachers are significantly more likely than are teachers of English, social studies, or science to see their subject matter as static and their job as routine” (pp. 56-57).

Metaphors for teaching and literacy may help make disciplinary subcultures explicit as they not only help constrain and categorize ways of thinking, but they allow creative scope to think in new ways about thinking. Although highly abstract, metaphors are practical when developing frameworks for constructions of good teaching.

O’Brien, Moje, and Stewart (2001) describe three metaphors for teaching: teaching as telling and controlling, teaching as celebrating experience, and teaching as transforming and transgressing. Transmission style teaching, where teachers proscribe discrete sets of disciplinary knowledge to be learned by students, is encapsulated within the metaphor of teaching as telling and controlling. Teaching as telling and controlling may be a response to time and organizational constraints caused by school, district, state, and national benchmarks and standards. Teaching as celebrating experience allows students to explore their individual experiences while deemphasizing the authority of teacher and text. This expressivity teaching metaphor foregrounds personal identity but backgrounds the influences of class, race, or other sociocultural factors that influence individuals. Teaching as celebrating experience, therefore, tends to celebrate the personal identities of dominant cultures. The metaphor of teaching as transforming and transgressing addresses marginalized social groups so that students develop a critical consciousness of oppressed groups (hooks, 1994). O’Brien, Moje, and Stewart (2001) note that teachers
who operate within the metaphor of transforming and transgressing must fight existing dominant ideologies, school systems, and even the knowledge construction of disciplinary experts.

Several metaphors for literacy exist that shape or are shaped by the aforementioned metaphors of teaching. Sylvia Scribner (1984) describes three of these: literacy as adaptation, literacy as power, and literacy as a state of grace. Literacy as adaptation emphasizes functional literacy skills, which allow individuals to operate in daily life, particularly in school and vocational settings. This metaphor reinforces the notion that reading, writing, and critical thinking is necessary for economic survival and centers the knowledgeable teacher at the middle of instructional practices. Scribner’s (1984) second metaphor, that of literacy as a state of grace, offers “special powers” to those who are literate such as opportunities to become more cultured or knowledgeable, a process of self-actualization (p. 209). This metaphor centers the gifted reader, writer, or critical thinker at the center of the curriculum. Scribner’s (1984) third metaphor, literacy as power, “emphasizes a relationship between literacy and group or community advancement” (p. 209). Within this metaphorical framework, collective reading, writing, and critical thinking ability affords the group opportunities to pool resources, find a representative voice in literacy, and challenge societal norms or practices. This metaphor is consistent with constructivist teaching practices that positions students and their communities at the center of curricular practices.

Within constructs of knowledge, teaching, and literacy certain permutations seem most compatible. Hard and pure knowledge seem to work well with metaphors of teaching as telling and controlling and literacy as adaptation. Soft knowledge with its emphasis on personal interpretation seems to work well with teaching as celebrating experience and literacy as a state of grace. Applied knowledge with its emphasis on particular contexts seems to work well with teaching as transforming and transgressing and literacy as power. But do these permutations hold consistent when pre-service teachers examine their knowledge base, perceptions of good teaching, and content area literacy practices as tools for expanding students’ content area knowledge? And at what point in this complicated investigation of constructs do pre-service teachers insert future students into the learning equation?

Context of This Research

The purpose of this research was to probe attitudes of cross-disciplinary pre-service teachers regarding beliefs about the interplay of disciplinary knowledge, good disciplinary teaching, and, ultimately, how to best teach literacy within the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge. Ten pre-service teachers in their early-
mid-20s enrolled in two summer 2004-2005 content area literacy courses at a large, Midwestern school of education were selected to be interviewed about their beliefs of disciplinary knowledge, good teaching, and good content area literacy practices. All were juniors in a five-year program and their particular school of education was highly regarded having received top rankings for curriculum and instruction several years running in popular news media that ranks colleges and universities. Although the 10 participants had preliminary education coursework prior to being admitted into the College of Education, the literacy course from which they were pulled was their first course of record after acceptance. All participants were working towards completion of temporary teaching certificates to work at the secondary level with the exception of the audiology, art, and music participants who were seeking endorsements to teach at both the elementary and secondary level.

The content area literacy course that grounds this research framed literacy within a sociocultural lens and the belief that adolescents have multiple literacies that have fluctuating currencies when they are reading, writing, listening, and/or speaking that are largely based on social context. Typically, in conjunction with this class, students did literacy tutoring at local urban middle schools for partial completion of the course. However, as the two content area literacy courses that ground this research were conducted during summer months, participants did not spend time in local middle schools but instead read multiple tutoring reports from fellow pre-service teachers who had worked with students in previous semesters. There were two instructors for this course. Because my expertise is in adolescent reading, I facilitated seven class sessions, each lasting approximately 3 hours, centering on vocabulary development and reading research. My co-instructor had considerable expertise in writing instruction and conducted class sessions in this area.

In an attempt to prevent participants from supplying responses they might consider “correct” or regurgitating information they had been directly taught in class, interviews were conducted early in the semester after the second class session. None of the interview questions had been explicitly addressed in class, although in the first session students read case studies of exemplary content area literacy teaching. Ten participants were selected based on content area major and perceived insightfulness and also on availability to complete a 20-30 minute interview between the second and third classes. Pseudonyms were given to the interviewees. Six of the interviewees were female: Crystal, Frannie, Molly, Modi, Renee, and Tia. Four of the interviewees were male: Joel, Jake, Chris, and Dan. Nine interviewees were European-American. One, Tia, was African-American. See Figure 1 for demographic information on the respondents.
Four questions were asked of the interviewees (see Figure 2). The first dealt with knowledge, the second with effective teaching of their subject, and the final questions attempted to address how literacy could be used as a tool for teaching disciplinary knowledge in exemplary ways.

1. How does one (or do people) know what to teach in your subject?
2. Can anyone teach your subject? If not, what special talents or knowledge is needed to teach your subject matter successfully?
3. Do you see yourself using reading, writing, or critical thinking activities in your classroom? If so, describe such an activity.
4. What types of reading and writing is most valued in your subject area?

The four questions were scaffolded in an attempt to trace pre-service perceptions describing how the organizational frameworks of subject matter knowledge (epistemology) map onto notions of good subject matter teaching and content area classroom literacy practices. These questions were asked in order to construct theory about pre-service teacher interpretations regarding the relationship of content area knowledge, good teaching, and literacy instruction (Pressley & McCormick, 2007). The author wondered if typical permutations of knowledge and metaphors for teaching and literacy would emerge in interviews. For example, would descriptions
of pure and hard knowledge correspond with descriptions of good teaching as telling and controlling and descriptions of valuable literacy activities as literacy as adaptation. Questions were influenced by previous research mentioned at the beginning of this article that observed that content area literacy teaching pedagogies often suffer disconnects with teaching pedagogies of content area teachers based on differing understandings of content area knowledge structures that trickle down to classroom teaching practices (Draper, 2002).

All recorded interviews were transcribed and I then looked for meaningful clusters of responses for each question and patterns of responses across questions and developed themes from transcripts (see Figure 3). I used the previously operationalized existing constructs of knowledge and metaphors for good teaching and literacy instruction as basic organizational themes, but used responses to add nuance and challenges to existing binaries of knowledge and metaphors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Content Area</th>
<th>Knowledge Construct</th>
<th>Teaching Metaphor(s)</th>
<th>Literacy Metaphor(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>Art</td>
<td>Hard &amp; Applied</td>
<td>Celebrating Experience</td>
<td>Adaptation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>State of Grace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frannie</td>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>Hard &amp; Applied</td>
<td>Telling &amp; Controlling</td>
<td>Adaptation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Physics and math</td>
<td>Hard &amp; Applied</td>
<td>Telling &amp; Controlling</td>
<td>State of Grace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Soft then Hard</td>
<td>Celebrating Experience</td>
<td>State of Grace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joel</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Soft then Hard</td>
<td>Celebrating Experience</td>
<td>State of Grace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Soft then Hard</td>
<td>Telling &amp; Controlling</td>
<td>State of Grace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modi</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Soft &amp; Applied</td>
<td>Telling &amp; Controlling</td>
<td>State of Grace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>Audiology</td>
<td>Soft &amp; Applied</td>
<td>Celebrating Experience</td>
<td>Adaptation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tia</td>
<td>Family &amp; Consumer Sciences</td>
<td>Soft &amp; Applied</td>
<td>Transforming &amp; Transgressing</td>
<td>State of Grace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Soft &amp; Applied</td>
<td>Celebrating Experience</td>
<td>Adaptation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.** Participant Responses by Theme
Knowledge Constructs Hard and Applied Knowledge: Replicating Professionals

Two of the participants described the knowledge of their content area as a combination of hard and applied knowledge, knowledge accumulated by experts in their fields over the years but yet applicable to the lives of students. For these pre-service teachers, it was the job of the student to replicate the activities of practitioners and it was the job of the teacher to relate and explicate categorical knowledge structures for students. For example, Molly (art), described artistic knowledge in terms of concepts developed by artists over the centuries that needed to be made applicable to individual students. She observed art as hard knowledge when she noted:

There are five basic principles of art including line, shape, and texture. These terms are the frameworks that artists look to when attempting to analyze a work of art or creating and defining their own art.

And yet, Molly continued, students learned the hard knowledge of art in part by doing art, fitting the applied construct of knowledge. She added:

If I was to design a beginning drawing class, I would want the class to be largely hands-on, so the students would immediately start doing art. I would begin the year by having students draw in order for them to learn the importance of using space. This assessment would give me an idea of the talent level of my students and serve as the basis for the rest of my curriculum.

Like Molly, Frannie (journalism), believed that students should replicate existing journalistic artifacts, especially learning how to mimic the writing and layout of existing newspaper articles. As she observed, “I guess student reporting, interviewing, and writing in a journalistic format is an attempt to do what journalists do.” Both Molly and Frannie expressed that students should learn the forms and structures primarily through reenactment of given structures.

Soft Knowledge That Becomes Hard Knowledge: Replicating Knowledge through Expert Content Area Consensus

Other pre-service teachers noted that knowledge of their discipline tended to be softer, more interpretive knowledge that became canonized pure knowledge through large scale consensus. Widespread consensus meant the knowledge tended to be reproduced over time in classrooms and frequently become hard knowledge to the detriment of other knowledge that did not receive such widespread attention.
Jake (music), described proscribed national standards as setting the teaching curricula for K through 12th-grade music teachers while the history and English pre-service teachers observed that society and content area experts shaped the knowledge that is given preferential treatment in schools. Jake observed that state and national standards reflected community concerns that might change over time. He regarded standards in a positive light, a sign of the professionalization of music teachers:

For music we’re very lucky to have national standards set out and defined.

About ten years ago every school district set out to have their school’s goals and music curriculum line up with the national standards for music....There’s nine of them, and they cover everything from the ability to read music all the way to the ability to write and improvise your own music. I think these standards tend to be driven by cultural and societal views that change over time.

Joel (English), observed that the literary canon was the pragmatic result of limited time to teach texts. As Joel observed, “You are always going to have some kind of canon because you can only teach a finite number of pieces. Actually, the literary canon is not open to much debate because what you already have read tends to be emphasized in classrooms.” Chris (history), observed a similar pattern in knowledge reproduction in his discipline when he observed, “The knowledge that is selected to be studied from the past tends to favor large events which are, in turn, passed down to future generations. If you’re doing American History, everybody learns about the Civil War and the world wars.”

These three pre-service responses reflected the notion that hard knowledge is more efficient to teach than soft knowledge because it allows teachers across the country to align curricula, conveniently limits classroom texts, and allows teachers to pass down what they learned in high school and college to a new generation, placing the teacher as content area experts in a classroom. In addition, this knowledge is compatible with what the larger society, including the media, considers valuable.

**Applied Knowledge: Describing the Way the World Works**

Two pre-service teachers — Dan (physics and math), and Modi (biology), - largely described their knowledge base as applied in the sense that it was descriptive of the way the world works. Dan observed that his knowledge base was also hard
in that personal interpretation of knowledge was underplayed and that empirical knowledge was essential:

What’s important [in physics] is what you can think of in terms of mechanics.

If it’s not something that you can logically figure out, then it’s probably not all that important. For instance, if the law of gravity doesn’t make sense to you, then you have a problem because that is a very important kind of concept.

In contrast, Modi (biology), saw biology as highly descriptive of the physical world in which her future students lived, a softer view of knowledge that allowed students more scope to insert their lives into her content area. As she explained, “Biology is based on what is, what their [students] lives [are]. Biology explains to us how we are able to live.” In these responses, Dan seems to view his knowledge base as purer than Modi’s in that the context of students’ lives played a less significant role in the teaching and learning of physics than it did in biology.

**Soft and Applied Knowledge: Tapping into Students’ Lived Experiences**

Three pre-service teachers espoused soft and applied views of knowledge, describing the lives of students or local contexts as the origination of content area knowledge. Crystal (audiology), reflected that she would likely frame her therapy around the central question, “What tools does the student need to effectively communicate?”

What I need to know is those survival tactics students need to communicate in their classrooms. My most critical knowledge would be a student’s skill level. This would come from referrals from parents and teachers.

Tia (Family and Consumer Sciences), also viewed the curriculum of her discipline as highly malleable. She believed that preexisting issues and the personal experiences of her students should determine what she taught.

If I know that I’m in a school with a lot of teenage pregnancies, then I’d ... really emphasize contraceptive use, or not necessarily that, but just sexuality and the development of a child and fetal alcohol syndrome. Things like that. It’s really my discretion and would vary widely by class.
Renee (French), saw knowledge of her discipline centering on the French language itself, the French culture, and the differences between French and American cultures.

You can’t teach a language without teaching the culture that it comes from.

If you don’t understand the mentality of the people who speak the language, it really gets in the way of understanding the language itself. You can’t sift anything out....

I would start teaching about contemporary French society, perhaps focusing on literary or artistic movements to provide elaboration or to put students in the mindset of the French culture. Then I would work backwards historically to trace the mindset of the people to track the trend.

It should be noted that soft and applied responses came from pre-service teachers outside of the four core content areas of math, science, social studies, and language arts, disciplines that may have less proscribed curricula in terms of state expectations, benchmarks, and standards.

Although responses of views of knowledge varied from hard to soft to pure to applied, only five of the pre-service teachers mentioned the role of students when defining content area knowledge: Molly (art), Frannie (journalism), Modi (biology), Crystal (audiology), and Tia (Family and Consumer Sciences). The remaining five mentioned the role of disciplinary or teaching experts, including the professional voices manifested in state standards and benchmarks, culture, and empirical knowledge in constructing knowledge. Such varied responses regarding the structure of content area knowledge suggests that content area literacy teaching that relies largely on teaching reading and writing strategies with the expectation that pre-service teachers will easily implement them in their instruction is foolish. Varied responses also demonstrate that knowledge constructs predicate how literacy is used and valued in content areas classes and that literacy instructors may well need to consult with experts in the content areas about how literacy is used and valued in a particular content area.

**Metaphors for Good Teaching**

**Teachers at the Center of Instruction: Teaching as Telling and Controlling**

Views of knowledge affected metaphors of good content area teaching. Most pre-service teachers described good teaching within a metaphorical framework as
telling and controlling, locating teachers and their knowledge base at the center of good teaching. Most of the pre-service teachers glossed over the role of the adolescent in good teaching and the fact that good teaching relies on relationships with adolescents or the accumulation of content area knowledge by adolescent students. Even Modi (biology), who located the lives of students at the center of her curriculum, took on the metaphor of teaching as telling and controlling. In her metaphor she emphasized content area expertise as most fundamental to good teaching:

The key to being able to teach biology is the appropriate knowledge base. As long as they [teachers] have a good background knowledge of the subject, then [a teacher] can teach it, but everyone doesn’t have that background knowledge. You have to have broad-range training in general biology, chemistry, biochemistry, genetics, physiology, anatomy.

Chris also emphasized the importance of the history teacher’s knowledge base in the teaching of his discipline:

It’s possible for most everyone to teach [history], but to be effective I think it requires, first of all, a broad knowledge base in the subject, and, even more importantly, an ability to be adaptable and open-minded about issues because the way we perceive history can change over time.

Frannie was not sure if teacher education classes were necessary to teach journalism. She did note that deep knowledge of journalism certainly was necessary when she observed, “If you have background course work or journalistic experience, I think you could effectively train a journalism teacher. A practicing journalist could probably teach high school students effectively.” This response was echoed by Dan, the physics and math pre-service teacher, who was the most open to uncertified teachers being able to teach his disciplines - if they were mathematically knowledgeable, they could teach.

Teaching as Celebrating (Teacher’s) Experience

Other participants foreground teacher knowledge as the focus of good teaching but reframed the metaphor of teaching as celebrating experience by observing that at least part of the knowledge teachers were to convey was personal passion for the subject matter. Teaching, therefore, was a means to celebrate love of content area.
Joel (English), observed that a passion for language was paramount for teachers of English to be successful in the classroom.

You have to like to read, and you have to read a lot. Even in the teaching of writing it helps if the teacher is immersed in language because what you do is work with words and pass knowledge of words and how they work in our language. If English teachers do not read and write themselves for their own enjoyment, they are unlikely to have the passion necessary for teaching English well. Students will never get this passion either.

The idea of good teaching celebrating the teacher’s experience was also expressed by Jake’s (music), response: “If you don’t have the passion for it, you really don’t have anything that’s going to engage your students in it. The teaching of music requires personal investment on the part of the teacher which students pick up.”

More Student-Centered Pedagogy: Teaching as Celebrating Experience

Crystal (audiology), described her opinion of good teaching as more clearly aligned with teaching as celebrating the experiences of students.

Audiologists have to have oral and written communication skills and have excellent rapport with student clients. I especially look forward to giving that one-on-one emotional support. You need to be able to relate to students well and understand how emotional circumstances affect communication. Kind of like a mind reader. Kind of like a counselor too.

Molly believed that art teachers play many roles: they should act as practicing artists and art historians, and should celebrate the art of students when she observed, “Art teachers are different from artists because art teachers have to also learn how to draw art from the student. Students have different kinds of art. It’s up to us to recognize the kinds of art that exist in students and guide them to go deeper in their own personal art.”

Renee (French), observed that student metacognition, making visible to students why learning a foreign language is valuable, was the basis of good teaching:

French teachers have to be able to speak French and be familiar with French culture and society, so they could convey that knowledge to students. They should be able to explain to students why they’re learning what they are learning.
Molly and Renee’s perceptions of teaching align with their view of knowledge as soft and applied. Crystal (audiology), had previously espoused a view of knowledge as pure and hard. She expressed that as someone who was interested in working in secondary schools, a rarity in her program, personal connections with students would be necessary for speech therapy to be effective. She believed that student motivation would be an important variable for her clientele’s success.

**Teaching as Transforming and Transgressing (For the Teacher)**

Tia (Family and Consumer Sciences), most closely hinted at good teaching as transforming and transgressing, but she too located good teaching at the level of the teacher as someone who could understand his or her students.

You [need] to have an open mind. You cannot be a closed-minded person and try to teach this because you run into so many kinds of people. You don’t know what someone else’s beliefs are, what they think. You don’t want to offend them, but yet instead you want to open up their minds to other possibilities. A closed-minded or conservative person or someone who is just extremely liberal, they couldn’t teach this. You have to have a love for people, must want the well-being of society, and should like to talk a lot.

Pre-service teachers tended to locate content area teacher knowledge at the center of their frameworks for good teaching. In fact, only four pre-service teachers even hinted that the existing and future lives of students matter in good teaching: Crystal (audiology), Molly (art), Renee (French), and Tia (Family and Consumer Sciences). Given this prior knowledge, it seems likely that content area coursework that espouses constructivist teaching practices centering on what secondary students already know and bring to classrooms would suffer disconnects with what pre-service teachers already believe about good teaching.

**Metaphors for Valued Literacy Activities**

When students described valued literacy activities in their disciplines, metaphors became mixed and more complex. Some pre-service teachers demonstrated clearly discernible metaphors of literacy as adaptation, emphasizing the importance of student mastery of those literacy forms that affect everyday life or the potential vocations of students. But many pre-service teachers also began to mention students for the first time when describing valued teaching practices.
Notions of Struggling and Developing Literacy Learners: Literacy as Adaptation

Crystal (audiology), observed that the literacy tasks important to her future high school clientele were content area literacy tasks and everyday communication skills. She articulated that her literacy practices would be structured so that adolescents with communication struggles could adapt to the marketplace:

I would help my students work through assigned work by showing them the necessary logic and order to complete the assignment. For students with general language delay, I would have students replicate stories, specifically reading and summarizing a story and elements of the story such as plot, characters, and setting. How well you can retell a story is a direct correlation with your future economic success.

Renee (French), also took on the metaphor of literacy as adaptation when she observed that in foreign languages the spotlight should be on “language to communicate everyday needs because that’s going to be the most immediate thing they’re going to use.” Frannie (journalism), also seemed to evoke a metaphor of literacy as adaptation when she described how students should do literacy in journalism classes in order to parallel the writing of practicing journalists: “They need to do the critical, objective writing of journalism. Perspective, or point of view, is the single most important concept in journalism.”

In all three interviews that were classified primarily as valuing literacy as adaptation, discourse emphasizing the literacy needs of secondary students became apparent. These participants highlighted how mastery of language form and function afforded students the ability to gain additional entries into the workplace and world. Several pre-service teachers, even some participants who classified content area in terms of pure knowledge, observed that literacy activities can afford secondary students opportunities to go against deeply entrenched teaching practices that reinforce teaching as telling and controlling. These teachers particularly railed on the pitfalls of using textbooks to shape what counts as knowledge in their disciplines.

Going Beyond Textbooks: Literacy as a State of Grace

The responses of Modi (biology) and Dave (math and physics) emphasized engaging texts as a tool for deeper personal content area insight.

As Modi noted:

Scientific journals can teach topics such as cloning that can be understood by high school students if the teacher uses the appropriate literacy strategies to break down information. But I don’t like textbooks.
Textbooks tend to be really dull and dry, just giving you straight facts back to back, and I think it’s important to include other types of reading in your class. Like a novel *The Double Helix* by Watson and Crick or *Frankenstein*. They’re both stories, but they have a lot of science in them...they’re [students] going to be more accepting of reading them because there’s flow to it instead of just straight facts.

Dan believed that the most typical writing in physics for high school students tended to focus on mathematical correctness, different than the reading and writing he personally preferred that allowed more critical thinking. In the following quote, Dan bemoans the fact that scientific literacy does not often move past the metaphor of literacy as adaptation:

There is one right answer in physics at the high school level, so students tend to focus on the answer rather than thinking about multiple ways it might take to get there. Students don’t tend to like problems where you kind of figure what’s going on. I’ve noticed students tend more toward [problems] where you get a concrete number answer. Why that is...is beyond me because, personally, I think the more philosophical aspect of how does this work...is more interesting. Students, particularly students who have take physics in high school, have had several years of mathematics courses and are used to getting a right answer.

Chris (history), emphasized the importance of directing students’ attention back to primary sources and having them write about particular passages, focusing on making inferences and text-to-self connections as a means to foster critical thinking.

They need to read the Constitution and writing about what the founding fathers thought as they composed the original document. They have to read beyond traditional textbooks because it is more valuable to go to the primary source because it’s free of other people’s interpretations. This allows students to be engaged in material, so they can write about what it means to them....

Chris focused on how literacy as a state of grace could purvey soft knowledge, but Joel (English), discussed how valued school literacy practices should contribute to the literacy practices of non-school lives and should be intrinsically interesting to students:
There’s a faulty dichotomy when certain teachers pit popular books and authors that can be bought at Target, like Stephen King, against literacy text. I think the critical question as to what should be valued is what is worthy of being studied? I think we should work with what interests students. Dickens and Shakespeare were extremely popular while they were alive, but my primary struggle will be to engage students in reading in the first place.

For these pre-service teachers, student motivation became an important variable in content area literacy instruction. Student motivation was addressed in text selection and a more interpretive reading of text, which are often incompatible responses with the notions of knowledge that many pre-service teachers described in their first interview question.

**Mixing Metaphors: The Complexity of Framing Literacy for a Single Content Area**

Mixing literacy metaphors within a content area demonstrated the complexity of framing literacy for one single content area. Molly (art), combined metaphors of literacy as adaptation, using reading and writing activities to join in artistic conversations, with fainter allusions to literacy as a state of grace, the importance of framing existing artistic conversations for personal relevance:

I would definitely have them read and write. They would research particular artists by looking at their personal writings, especially letters in which artists explained their art. I would likely follow that up with asking students to produce similar art with their own twists. I would want students to explain their own work. These are called artist’s statements.

Molly’s descriptions of valued content area literacy activities reinforce how knowledge of the literacy practices of artists are likely to shape the literacy genres of her students affecting how students would adapt writing traits such as style and organization. Molly’s descriptions also seem to hint at the possibility of students going beyond understanding popular artistic genre to reinventing genre using “their own twists.” Tia (Family and Consumer Science) echoed Molly’s descriptions of valued content area literacy, noting that the point of literacy in her classes would be to apply scientific knowledge to the students’ lives.

Jake (music), observed that literacy as a state of grace would introduce other content areas into his music class. “Exposing [students] to literary and architectural genres of a period would reinforce the musical elements from the same period,”
he observed. He also hinted at literacy as power when he suggested, “The music of rebellion could say a lot about the culture, too.”

As these pre-service teachers discussed valuable literacy activities in their content area, they were most likely to include students and their valued non-school literacies in expanding equations of teaching and learning. Some also became interested in interdisciplinary study. When literacy tools for teaching content area knowledge were introduced into explications of good content teaching, participants were most likely to resist static, reproductive notions of teaching. These pre-service teachers began to observe the necessity for constructivist teaching methods in which students brought prior knowledge and personal interpretation to learning tasks, and the importance of using cross-disciplinary texts to engage and motivate students to learn more about content area knowledge (see Figure 2).

What was glaringly missing in these explications, however, was expansion of the metaphor of literacy as power. Participants did not articulate how literacy can be a tool of democracy and social justice.

**Discussion**

Because the interviews sampled only one person per major, answers rendered may have been highly unrepresentative of typical pre-service teacher views, but the divergent points of view did provide scope for discussion on how knowledge, teaching, and literacy is perceived across content areas.

Disciplinary, reproductive, “hard” knowledge was clearly valued, even by pre-service teachers who espoused “softer,” more interpretive, pedagogy. All respondents felt strongly that they were in possession of specific sets of knowledge that would be valuable to their future students. This knowledge base was generally the primary indicator of good teaching. This is vitally important as currently, some content area literacy theory urges schools of education to transition from teaching content area literacy to adolescent literacy (Stevens, 2002) in an attempt to address the non-school literacies of students and totality of students’ lives. Although the totality of students’ lives and their non-school literacy practices certainly matter, I disagree with such a radical conversion. Content area literacy practices of content area experts represent power in our capitalistic system, which rewards content experts for their specialized literacy expertise and these pre-service secondary teachers know this. It is the teacher’s job to share expert reading, writing, and critical thinking with students and incrementally bring students up to a higher cognitive and critical level.

So how should schools of education train secondary teachers who can more deftly use literacy practices as a tool to purvey content area information? I suggest
this largely has to do with encouraging pre-service secondary teachers to consider outsider perspectives to their discipline. But first, content area literacy instructors must develop a deeper respect for what their students already know. Content area literacy instructors must recognize that the prior disciplinary knowledge of pre-service teachers matter and should be made visible when literacy skills and strategies are modeled and discussed. Pre-service teachers are already inducted into subject specific ways of reading and writing. For math majors, for example, close reading and economy of words when writing a proof is considered “elegant.” In contrast, English majors who read and critique vast novels like *Moby Dick* (Melville, 2008) and *War and Peace* (Tolstoy, 2008) are likely to espouse reader response theories that allow interpretation and insertion of self into reading and writing events. When content area literacy instructors present reading and writing strategies such as anticipation guides and questioning strategies, students should have time to reflect if such literacy practices are transportable or adaptable to their disciplines. Such practices situate content area literacy instructors as co-learners with their students, offering pre-service teachers respect for what they already know.

Second, secondary pre-service teachers must have critical encounters with adolescents who may struggle in the content areas. Good teaching is, after all, not just knowing hard and pure knowledge but also conveying that knowledge to less knowledgeable or motivated others. Pre-service teachers need to know that good content area instruction rests on what students already know, what they need to know, and the literacy tools that enable students to close knowledge gaps. For example, when pre-service teachers from comparatively privileged suburban contexts developed tutor/tutee relationships with adolescents in urban schools, the pre-service teachers were more likely to reflect on best (or better) content area literacy practices (Conley, Kerner, & Reynolds, 2005). In my experience teaching content area literacy courses with tutoring components in urban secondary schools with high percentages of struggling readers, I have seen pre-service teachers develop more complex understandings of adolescent learners and their learning contexts who begin to articulate understandings of literacy as power.

Third, cross-disciplinary relationships that evaluate disciplinary texts and tasks can help content area pre-service teachers recognize that their chosen subject matter is not intrinsically interesting even to highly educated peers. Donahue (2003) describes a content area reading course in which reading apprenticeships were formed between humanities and math and science teachers. As pre-service teachers read the texts of their own and other disciplines, and later completed reading logs on the texts, they discovered that reading strategies are determined by the text and that
one reading strategy most emphatically does not fit all. Donahue’s students also learned that, even in subjects purported to be as rigid as math, different perspectives could be derived from common themes. Modeling this activity after the transactional view of reading (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1994), Donahue’s (2003) students realized that meaning of text stems from transactions between readers and reading across texts. Ultimately, he noted that, “When teachers wrote across the disciplinary divide separating the humanities from math and science, they were much more likely to reflect on why and how they were reading in addition to what” (Donahue, 2003, p. 4). As teachers read the texts of other disciplines, they were forced into the role of a student in the content area classroom again, a student who was required to deal with content with which they had not yet achieved expertise.

Fourth, content area literacy courses are conducive to reexamination of what counts as a text. As Jake (music) noted, architecture can serve as multimodal texts that offer students valuable insight into music emerging from the same cultural era. Modi (biology) also observed, science fiction or historical novels can relay a great deal about science. Magazines, movies, and Manga can all function as content area texts when carefully aligned with learning targets.

Recently, I have come across the Young Adult novels of John Green, a burgeoning young writer. In Green’s (2006) novel, An Abundance of Katherines, protagonist Colin Singleton devises a theorem describing why he has fallen in love with 19 girls named Katherine. The appendix breaking down young Colin’s theorem is written by Daniel Biss, a math professor at the University of Chicago. Not only was I interested in Colin’s romantic adventures, I was also interested in the mathematical explanations of Colin’s love life. This text may offer scope for interdisciplinary teaching in English and mathematics subjects.

In Green’s (2008) Paper Towns, protagonist Quentin Jacobson finds personal relevance to Walt Whitman’s poetry and the history of cartography through his cross-country search to find his unrequited love, his next door neighbor. In still another of his novels, Looking for Alaska, Green (2005) makes religious and philosophical thought come alive as Miles “Pudge” Halter reflects on the famous last words of the world’s great leaders — and on the final days of Alaska Young, the girl down the hall. All three of these novels insert hard and pure content area knowledge into the life of an adolescent male looking for answers to life and love. In every novel, the protagonist’s life was enhanced by content area knowledge, and, in at least two of the novels, by excellent content area high school teachers. All three novels are likely to entice many adolescents into content area conversations and have a place as possible supplemental texts in high school classrooms.
Content area literacy courses can be a place for pre-service secondary teachers to grapple with what adolescents should know in their content areas, how that information can be engagingly introduced and taught to adolescents, and to become better prepared to become more student-centered teachers. They should also provide a context for pre-service secondary teachers to think about how the knowledge and teaching practices of their content area promotes or prevents social justice, particularly how content area literacy tasks can positively change society. But gaining student interest in content area knowledge and going beyond the metaphor of literacy as adaptation to literacy as a state of grace for students is important progress in showing students how literacy practices can make them more powerful human beings.

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**About the Author**

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The Effect of Props on Story Retells in the Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to determine the effect of props on children’s narrative retells. Forty-two children in two comparable K/1 classrooms heard and practiced the same stories over eight weeks. This study found that the props had a positive effect on the children’s use of descriptive language, but there was no effect on the number of story grammar elements or cohesive devices used, nor for the length and complexity of the stories. Results support a balanced literacy program where children practice retelling stories with and without props.

Introduction

The power of narrative is derived from its ability to mirror our life space and in so doing to create meaningful connections. Our stories celebrate our uniqueness and link us to diverse cultures within the global community (Bruner, 1990; , 1984). Researchers studying children as young as 4 have found that narrative provides a purposeful and engaging context for supporting the development of oral language, literacy, and concept formation as well as cultural understanding (Applebee, 1978; Heath, 1982; Hedberg & Westby, 1993; Morrow, 1985; Vygotsky, 1962).

Narratives can take different forms, ranging from recounting one’s personal experiences to retelling stories written by others. When studying a child’s abilities to retell a story, one must first choose a way to present the story to the child. While this could be done orally and/or visually using pictures or objects, no one presentation method has been found to produce the best retell. The purpose of this
study was to determine the effect of one presentation method, the use of props, on children’s story retells.

**Literature Review**

Narrative language is different from conversational oral language as it requires the story teller to use explicit vocabulary and more complex sentence structures. Listening to and telling narratives provide an authentic context for the development of these constructions — both contextual and decontextual. Children exposed to re-readings of favorite stories will often incorporate some of the story language in their retells or story adaptations. Working with preschoolers in a previous study (Stadler & Ward, 2005), the authors were treated to retells incorporating such story language as “once upon a time” and “happily ever after,” and also to new vocabulary expressed by the children after hearing the stories, such as “perched,” “charming,” and “kingdom.” Stories allow learners to hear and practice the rhythms and patterns of language, including the imagery expressed through similes and metaphors (Jalongo, 2003; Malo & Bullard, 2000; Palmer, Harshbarger, & Koch, 2001). The syntactic conventions of present, past and future tenses (Fox, 1993) and a variety of temporal connectives such as “when,” “so,” and “while” have also been noted in the retells of children indicating that retelling is a strategy for language exploration and application (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004).

Researchers in education have found that narratives are often bridges to literacy by helping students develop skills for reading (Catts, Hogan, & Fey, 2003; Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004; Hedberg & Westby, 1993; Malo and Bullard, 2000). Stories also actively engage learners in the literacy process. Roney (1996) notes that story telling builds on oral language learning by linking language to the structure, vocabulary, and comprehension required for literacy. Based on research with at-risk 4-year-olds, Paul and Smith (1993) found that narrative skill is one of the best predictors of later school success and Abbott and McCarthey (2001) correlated well-formed oral narratives with literary achievement in the first grade.

Oral narratives also provide a meaningful context for concept development. Using the structure of narrative, we perform the cognitive process of sequencing in the temporal order of beginning, middle, and end to show connectiveness while at the same time prioritizing significant events (Applebee, 1978; Gergen & Gergen, 1986; Jalongo, 2003; Malo & Bullard, 2000; Westby, 1999). In addition, narrative retells are a forum for exploring cause and effect. A well-formed story is not a recounted list of activities, but a reflection of actions and reactions implying that planning and implementation leads to results and that these results can be predicted. Also, retelling a narrative provides an avenue for learners to understand characterization by
developing theory of mind, the awareness that there are other perspectives besides our own (Hutto, as cited in Herman, 2008; Premack & Woodruff, 1978). Exposure to story can support the concept that changes occur in characters and that they will handle situations in different ways depending on their personalities and motives (Malo & Bullard, 2000; Palmer et al., 2001).

Moreover, narrative offers an authentic context for learners to explore their own culture by introducing possible characters and their interweaving roles as they experience conflicts and find appropriate ways to problem solve. Cultural morals and values are introduced as characters cope with human dilemmas (McIntyre, 1984). Oral narratives also open windows to other cultures and support cross-cultural understanding as stories are shared (Palmer et al., 2001).

Different forms of narrative can be used to support the development of oral language, literacy, concept formation, and cultural understanding. Narratives range from the earliest recounts children co-construct with communication partners about shared experiences (Hughes, McGillivray, & Schmidek, 1997) to elaborate stories told by professional storytellers. Some stories, such as personal narratives, are based on one’s own experiences and occur frequently in the everyday conversations of young children (McCabe, Bliss, Barra, & Bennett, 2008; Preece, 1987). These personal narratives are thought to be easiest for younger children to tell because they are integral to their social interactions while stories in the fictional narrative form are more challenging and encourage the use of decontextualized language. Some fictional narratives are original, meaning that one creates a story from one’s imagination, whereas other fictional narratives are retells. Retells require hearing or reading someone else’s story and then telling it. Fictional retells require memory skills and knowledge of story schema, most typically story grammar components. Fictional story retells are frequently used in the study of children’s narrative skills as they allow the researcher to standardize the task by using the same story — something not possible with either personal narratives or original fictional narratives.

Retells also allow one to standardize the analysis by using story grammar components. Research has found that retells result in longer stories that contain more story grammar elements than original stories (Merritt & Lyles, 1989). Retells are also useful as they are predictive of oral language development (Liles, 1993) and literacy success (Paul & Smith, 1993). This may be due to the presence of literate language features (Greenhalgh & Strong, 2001; Snow, Scarborough, & Burns, 1999) and the same episodic structure as found in fictional literature (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

In evaluating retells, many researchers first determine their length in terms of number of words and sentences and complexity in terms of dependent clauses. Analyses then often focus on the story grammar elements including setting, theme or problem, plot episodes, character plans, attempts and consequences, and resolution
and ending (Irwin & Mitchell, 1983; Morrow, 2005; Stein & Glenn, 1979). Some of these elements are considered optional, with problem, attempts, consequences and resolutions obligatory (Glenn & Stein, 1980). Researchers also use holistic scoring procedures to judge the quality of stories. Moss (1997) adapted Irwin and Mitchell’s (1983) retell scale to a spectrum of 1-5 with the richest retells being ones in which the “student includes all main ideas and supporting details; sequences properly; infers beyond the text; relates text to own life; understands text organization; summarizes; gives opinion and justifies it; may ask additional questions; very cohesive and complete retelling” (p. 4). In other words, the reteller has identified with the character showing a grasp of theory of mind, can explain cause and effect, and goes beyond the text to draw on life experiences. The use of the term “cohesive” implies that the storyteller uses devices to hold the text together, although this is not detailed on either Moss’s (1997) or Morrow’s (2005) retell assessment or in the work of Isbell et al. (2004) who value retells for the story conventions and comprehension they reveal. Goodman (1982) used retells to both promote and assess comprehension; she suggests that through retells, the reader “can try out ideas, suggest events, regroup, self-correct, and keep presenting” (p. 306).

Hughes et al. (1997) suggest that once one has analyzed an oral narrative globally or on a macro level to determine the narrative level and story grammar knowledge, it is useful to examine the organization of the narrative on a micro level to assess how the narrator uses language to present his/her story. They also suggest that the microstructure can be viewed in terms of cohesion analysis, grammatical unit analysis, and lexical diversity. A specific type of lexical diversity has been documented in the narratives of children, the use of literate language features such as conjunctions, elaborated noun phrases, mental and linguistic verbs, and adverbs (Greenhalgh & Strong, 2001; Westby, 1999). Thus, one can conclude that well-told fictional narratives are syntactically complex, include obligatory story grammar elements, are cohesive, and contain literate language.

The method by which a story is presented to the child can affect how the story is retold and which of the above components will be included. Researchers have presented stories orally or orally paired with visual stimuli such as pictures, movies, videotapes, or with tangible props such as puppets, costumes, or dolls. Soundy (1993) recommends toy props as an effective tool for actively involving preschool and kindergarten students in retelling story events. Her findings lend support to the work of Cavaletti (1983) and Berryman (1991) who pioneered Sunday school curricula for preschool and kindergarten ages where children used play with objects to find meaning in Biblical narratives. Stories were introduced with miniature items and then children were invited to play with the items, draw memorable
parts of the story, and retell the story to each other. This technique has become widely adopted by many religious educators (Hyde, 2004).

Research has not consistently supported any one narrative presentation modality as resulting in better retells. Some studies described better results with audio and videotaped story presentation (Hayes, Kelly, & Mandel, 1986), whereas other studies have supported an auditory-only condition (Pratt & Mackenzie-Keating, 1985; Schneider & Dube, 2005) and still others found no differences (Gazella & Stockman, 2003; Goldman, Varma, & Sharp, 1999; Schneider, 1996) or mixed results by age. For example Schneider and Dube (1997) found that kindergarteners recalled more content with an oral-only presentation, but second graders did equally well when oral story telling was accompanied by pictures. Crowe, Haar, and Agne (2003), in a limited sample of preschoolers, found that costume props resulted in several students telling longer stories with more detail and greater vocabulary diversity, but acknowledged that other children did not show any apparent benefit from having the props. All children in the sample, however, showed improved results in length of story and comprehension when they were allowed to practice retelling.

These varied results may be due, in part, to the fact that these researchers chose different methods of analysis (e.g., length of story, amount of content recalled, number of story grammar units, sequencing and/or reference errors, lexical diversity or semantic roles, syntactic complexity). It is likely that some presentations result in the children’s incorporation of certain narrative components and other presentations lend themselves to others. For example, one might expect that children would recall more story content when provided with pictures as prompts. Schneider and Dube (2005) supported that supposition, however only for kindergarteners; second graders recalled the same amount of content in the oral-only condition. One might also expect that if children are given numerous scaffolded practice opportunities that incorporate playing with realistic toys they might include more content, specifically story grammar elements, and descriptive language in their retells.

Two studies made use of toy props with story retells, but neither analyzed the results for story grammar elements, cohesion, and literate language. Newton (1994) engaged 4-to-6-year-olds in retells with half of them hearing a taped story and the other half hearing the tape accompanied by a single picture. This second group of children was also given four objects after hearing the story and asked to arrange them to depict the final situation of the story. He interpreted his results to suggest that the designated picture assisted the children in including a specific story grammar element, character goal, in their retells. Newton (1994) did not, however, speculate on the advantage of the objects. Kim (1999) found that 4- and 5-year-olds told more elaborate stories when they retold a story with dolls compared to pictures,
both immediately after the story had been read to them and again a week later. However, a three-day follow up retell revealed no significant differences between the conditions. It should be noted that the stories were rated on a scale of 1 to 4 based on sequencing and were not analyzed for the presence of story grammar elements, cohesion, nor literate language.

This study was primarily interested in determining whether or not the use of props affected children’s story retells. Specific research questions were:

1. Will children who practice retells with miniature props tell longer and more complex stories?
2. Will children who practice retells with miniature props tell stories that include more different story grammar elements?
3. Will children who practice retells with miniature props tell more cohesive stories?
4. Will children who practice retells with miniature props tell stories that include more literate language features?

**Method**

**Participants**

Forty-two children in two comparable K/1 classrooms in Wisconsin, in the United States, participated in this study. Children were from middle to low socio-economic homes, all were Caucasian, and all spoke English as their first language. No child was identified with a disability. The teachers for these classrooms also co-taught a kindergarten methods course at the university. In their K/1 classes, they used the same curriculum and support materials and shared a similar teaching pedagogy as noted in frequent in-class observations over a 7-year period by one of the authors.

One classroom was used as the experimental and the other as the control. Each classroom consisted of 12 kindergarteners and 9 first graders. The ratio of males to females in the experimental class was 14 to 7, with a ratio of 12 to 9 in the control class. Children ranged in age from 65 to 88 months in the experimental class and 64 to 90 months in the control class.

**Procedures**

**Pre-testing**

All children were tested with two vocabulary tests to establish language baselines. The Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test (EOWPVT-3) (Brownell,
required students to label single line drawn pictures. The *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-III)* (Dunn & Dunn, 1997) presented four pictures and children were asked to point to the one named by the examiner. Standard scores for each class are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Mean Vocabulary Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>PPVT-III</th>
<th>EOWPVT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>108.62 (12.9)</td>
<td>107.14 (14.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>109.52 (11.0)</td>
<td>109.38 (14.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: PPVT-III = *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-III* (Dunn & Dunn, 1997); EOWPVT = *Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test, 3rd edition* (Brownell, 2000).

All children scored within the normal range (within one standard deviation of the mean) on the *EOWPVT* (Brownell, 2000). However, two experimental children and one control child scored in the range of one standard deviation below the mean on the *PPVT*. Analysis of variance revealed no significant differences between groups for the *PPVT* (F=.015) or the *EOWPVT* (F=.175).

**Intervention**

For each of 8 weeks, the same procedures were used in both classrooms with the exception of the use of props. Every Monday both teachers presented the same story to her students. The stories were determined to include all of the targeted features and were developmentally appropriate according to both teachers. The experimental teacher used miniature toy props while reading the story, whereas the control teacher did not. The props were chosen to represent key elements of each story (e.g., main character, problem, events). Several times the children in the experimental classroom created more props to add to the ones collected by the authors. A list of the props used for each book is included in Appendix A. Children in both classrooms drew a simple story map that included characters, setting, problem, and resolution for each story, which was an established practice in both classrooms.

Every Tuesday, a university undergraduate student and one of the authors visited each classroom and invited the children to do a practice retell of Monday’s story. The ten or eleven children who were randomly chosen to be videotaped on the proceeding Friday all practiced in two separate groups according to their classroom. Other children in the classes were also invited to practice retelling the story, but were not required to do so. The props were used in the experimental
classroom practice sessions, but not in the control classroom practice sessions. The university student and one of the authors used an established protocol (Appendix B) which included re-reading the story, modeling a retelling using the structures desired and facilitating the child’s retells with recasting, questions, and probes for missing elements. Story grammar cue cards were also used to provide visual clues for the story grammar elements of characters, setting, goals, conflicts, and resolution. These procedures were used as they are considered best practice by many who provide narrative intervention to young children (Hoggan & Strong, 1994; Kaderavek & Justice, 2004). The same protocol was used for both classrooms, except for the use of the miniature props. The university student and the second author alternated facilitating practice with students from the experimental and control groups during these Tuesday sessions. Procedural reliability checks were performed by the second author, an experienced early childhood professor. During the rest of the week, story retells were an option during free choice time in both classrooms. Props were available with the book and story grammar cue cards in the experimental classroom; the control classroom had the book in a featured location with the story grammar cue cards.

Fridays were spent videotaping randomly chosen individual children retelling Monday’s story. A classmate who did not tell a story that day was present as a listener, along with one author and an undergraduate university student video recorder. All retells were video and audio taped at a table just outside the classroom door. Children in the experimental group could see the props, but not handle them during their retells. This procedure of only viewing the props was adopted because in a pilot study, it was found that several students engaged in labeling and describing props rather than retelling the story. The props were not present when the control group was being videotaped. Kindergarteners (both groups) were videotaped on weeks 1, 3, 5, and 7. First graders (both groups) were videotaped on weeks 2, 4, 6, and 8. Each child told two stories and was videotaped once for each story, except for three students who were each absent one day. A total of 81 stories were collected using eight different texts.

Analysis

A communication disorders graduate student who was blind to the research questions and the group assignments transcribed each story from video and audio tapes. The first author also listened to the tapes and checked every transcription for accuracy. Errors were corrected and stories were parsed into C-units using Loban’s (1963, 1976) rules. Each story was analyzed for number of words and clauses and story grammar elements (Stein & Glenn, 1979). In addition, correct and incorrect
pronoun references and conjunctions (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) and literate language features (elaborated noun phrases, mental and linguistic verbs, and adverbs) were counted. The authors each first analyzed half of the stories then exchanged transcripts for reliability. All conflicting analyses were discussed until agreement was reached. The authors then chose the four stories that represented all 42 children having told a story. Stories in which a child was absent for the retelling were not included. Appendix A lists all of the stories with the four chosen stories indicated with asterisks.

**Results**

The authors were primarily interested in whether or not the use of props affected children's story retells across a variety of measures; thus, data was analyzed for differences between the experimental and control groups. However, the data was also analyzed for potential differences for gender and grade. Analyses included length of retell and complexity, story grammar, cohesion, and literate language features.

**Length of Retell and Complexity**

An analysis of length of story retell was accomplished by counting words (see Table 2). Stories averaged 201 words, but ranged from 76 to 326. Differences between the experimental and control groups were not significant (F=.08). In contrast, differences between genders (F=4.99*) and grades (F=12.18***) were significant with girls and first graders telling longer stories. One measure of syntactic complexity, number of clauses, revealed the same outcomes. Differences between groups were not significant (F=.14), but differences between genders (F=4.27*) and grades (F=12.83***) were, with girls and first graders using more clauses per story.

Table 2. *Mean Total Number of Words and Clauses Per Story*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words</td>
<td>202.9 (118.9)</td>
<td>199.1 (134.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clauses</td>
<td>31.5 (18.5)</td>
<td>30.9 (20.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard deviations are noted with parentheses. *p<.05. ***p<.001.
Story Grammar Elements

The number of different story grammar elements was calculated for each retell. Eight common elements, setting, initiating event or problem, internal response, internal plan, attempt, consequence, resolution, and ending were used based on Stein and Glenn’s (1979) definitions (see Appendix C). Data revealed an average of five different elements used in each story with a range of three to seven (see Table 3). No significant differences were found for group (F=.755) or gender (F=1.726), but the difference for grade reached significance (F=6.504*), with the inclusion of one additional element in the stories of first graders. Most stories told by young children do not include all of the eight elements, but they are still considered to be good stories if the elements combine to form a complete episode. Therefore, the stories were then inspected for the presence of complete episodes that included an initiating event or problem, attempt, and consequence. This analysis revealed no significant differences for group (F=1.36), gender (F=.865), or grade (F=.027). The number of complete episodes ranged from zero to six with a mean of 1.35.

Table 3. Mean Number of Different Story Grammar Elements and Episodes Per Story

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Experiment</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.8 (1.9)</td>
<td>5.4 (1.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episodes</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.1 (1.4)</td>
<td>1.6 (1.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard deviations are noted with parentheses. *p<.05.

Cohesion

Cohesion was measured by counting the number of correct pronoun references, the total number of conjunctions, and the number of different conjunctions (excluding “and” and “then”) (see Table 4). It is interesting to note that the control group used more correct pronoun references than the experimental group, although the difference was not significant (F=.852). The control group used more conjunctions and more different conjunctions with the former not being significant (F=3.836) and latter being significant (F=4.129*). It should be noted, however, that there were very large standard deviations for each of these measures. This amount of variability makes accurate interpretation of these findings difficult. The first graders used a larger number of correct pronoun references (F=10.738**) as did the girls, with that difference not reaching statistical significance (F=3.854). Differences for gender and grade were not significant for use of conjunctions.
Table 4. Mean Number of Cohesive Devices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correct number of</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pronoun references</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(13.9)</td>
<td>(12.6)</td>
<td>(12.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conjunctions</td>
<td>(2.4)</td>
<td>(4.7)</td>
<td>(2.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of different</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.7*</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conjunctions</td>
<td>(1.1)</td>
<td>(1.6)</td>
<td>(1.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard deviations are noted with parentheses.
*p<.05. **p<.01.

Literate Language Features

The literate language features were coded using the conventions of Greenhalgh and Strong (2001) which included elaborated noun phrases (ENP) and mental/linguistic (ML) verbs and adverbs. One of these categories, ENPs, revealed significant differences between the experimental and control groups (see Table 5). ENPs were defined as any noun phrase that had more than two modifiers preceding a noun or prepositional phrases and relative clauses following the noun. The children in the experimental group used significantly more ENPs than those in the control group (F=4.282*). Grade and gender differences were not significant.

Mental/linguistic (ML) verbs were those that denoted cognitive and linguistic processes. Examples included “said,” “thought,” and “asked.” The authors counted the total number of different ML verbs used in each story. Differences between groups and genders were not significant, whereas, there was a significant effect for grade for total ML verbs (F=5.022*) as the first graders used an average of three more ML verbs per story than the younger children.

Two adverb analyses were completed; number of different adverbs and number of different “ly” adverbs. The only significant finding was for grade and only for the number of different adverbs (F=4.294*). There were no significant differences found between groups and genders for either number of different adverbs or “ly” adverbs. In fact, the number of “ly” adverbs was very low for all children, averaging fewer than one per story. Variability was high as evidenced by standard deviations larger than means.
Table 5. Mean number of literate language features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Experimental</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>First grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of ENPs</td>
<td>2.6 (2.5)*</td>
<td>1.5 (1.2)</td>
<td>1.8 (2.2)</td>
<td>2.5 (1.8)</td>
<td>1.6 (1.3)</td>
<td>2.6 (2.6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of MLVs</td>
<td>4.6 (3.9)</td>
<td>5.1 (4.5)</td>
<td>3.8 (3.3)</td>
<td>6.5 (5.0)</td>
<td>3.5 (3.7)</td>
<td>6.5 (4.3)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of different adverbs</td>
<td>10.0 (6.4)</td>
<td>9.7 (5.4)</td>
<td>8.8 (5.1)</td>
<td>11.5 (6.7)</td>
<td>8.1 (4.5)</td>
<td>11.9 (6.6)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of different “ly” adverbs</td>
<td>.33 (.65)</td>
<td>.38 (.50)</td>
<td>.27 (.53)</td>
<td>.50 (.73)</td>
<td>.22 (.52)</td>
<td>.53 (.70)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ENPs = Elaborated noun phrases; MLVs = Mental/linguistic verbs
Standard deviations are noted with parentheses.
*p<.05.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the usefulness of props in the narrative retells of 42 kindergarten and first grade students in two comparable classrooms. The findings can be discussed within four categories; length and complexity of story, story grammar elements used, cohesion employed, and types of literate language features found in the narratives of the two groups of students, those who practiced story retells with props and those who did not.

Length and complexity

The presence of props had no effect, either positive or negative, on the length or complexity of the stories. For example, a retell of the story, John Patrick Norman McHennessy (Burningham, 1987) by an experimental group child (practiced with props) included the sentence: “And then I had climb up into a tree and wait until he was gone.” A child from the control group (no props) used the sentence: “And so he had to climb up to the tree until the lion went away.” The sentences are equally complex in that both contain two clauses.

Gummersal & Strong (1999) have suggested that the amount of exposure to the stimulus has a critical effect on the length and complexity of retells. Perhaps if the children had experienced a greater number of practice opportunities to become more familiar with the props, we might have acquired different results.
The constraints of using the natural context of classrooms and working within the schedules of all participants prevented us from providing more exposure before the stories were video taped each Friday. On the other hand, similar to other studies, we did find that older students and girls told longer stories and ones that included more clauses (Fey, Catts, Proctor-Williams, Tomblin, & Zhang, 2004; Johnson, 1995; Moyano & McGillivry (1988) as cited in Hughes et al., 1997). When retelling, *Jennie’s Hat* (Keats, 1966), a first-grade boy commented, “She wanted a real fancy hat.” In contrast, a female classmate noted that “When she was going back home, she said out loud, ‘I wish my hat were just a little bit fancier.’” The children expressed a similar understanding in their retells, but the boy did so in one clause and the girl elaborated with three.

**Story Grammar Elements**

Our study revealed no effect on the number of different story grammar elements expressed with the use of props. This may be because both groups used story grammar cue cards during practice sessions to remind them to include each element. Perhaps the cue cards were a more powerful variable that positively affected the addition of story grammar elements in the stories of both groups of children, and thus diluted the effect of the presence of props. In addition, the props may have been stronger reminders of concrete components of each story (characters, important items characters used) rather than representations of discrete story grammar elements. Our findings did, however, mirror that of others who found an effect for age, with older students using more story grammar elements than younger students (Hudson & Shapiro, 1991; Scott, Wetherby, Ouimette, & Spears, 2005). Regardless of whether they used props in practice or not, students used very few internal responses (how a character feels) or internal plans (character’s idea(s) that might fix the problem). Then again we did find that first graders used more internal responses such as the experimental group boy who remarked, “Jennie forgot about her new hat for awhile.” First graders also included more of the character’s internal plans as is seen in a first-grade control group boy’s retelling of *Stellaluna* (Cannon, 1993), “Then, Stellaluna said, ‘I’ll fly all day tomorrow.’”

**Cohesion**

A visual inspection of the data revealed a larger number of correct pronoun references and conjunctions used by the control group students who practiced narratives without the use of props. For example, when retelling *Stellaluna* (Cannon, 1993), an experimental group child noted, “And she has to eat one” (referring to the incident where the mother bird makes the baby bat eat a grasshopper). The referent for the pronoun “she” is absent. In contrast, a child in the control group
said, “And Stellaluna didn’t want to eat the bugs, but then she was so starving that she just had to.” The referent for the pronoun, “she,” is clear and the child employs the conjunction, “but” to tie her ideas together. Although this difference was not significant, it does merit further exploration. Children who practice with props may be so focused on including all characters and events that they put less priority on tying the story together. Older students also used more correct pronoun referents, matching the findings of Pratt and MacKenzie-Keating (1985) with 4- and 6-year-olds, but at odds with those of Ukrainetz, Justice, Kaderavek, Eisenberg, Gillam, and Harm (2005) with 4- and 5-year-olds, perhaps due to the younger ages of the children used by the latter researchers.

**Literate Language Features**

The presence of props had a significant effect on the use of elaborated noun phrases (ENPs), with the experimental group using an average of more than 2.5 compared to an average of 1.5 for the control group. Some of the elaborated noun phrases used by the experimental group were: “a giant hairy gorilla,” “a big tidal wave,” and “a little flower pot.” This finding suggests that the manipulation of physical props assisted the children in including more descriptors in their narrative retells. The added sensory experiences of touching and seeing the items may have built a more enhanced cognitive schema that allowed these children to recall more specific details with which to enrich their stories. This study provides evidence that, in addition to being engaging, the use of props supports the use of descriptors in students’ language and could thus be used by teachers to enhance the skill of labeling (nouns) and describing (adjectives).

The props did not have an effect on the use of mental/linguistic (ML) verbs or adverbs, although the older children used more of each. Both control and experimental group children used ML verbs such as “thought,” “wonder,” “said,” “decided,” “knew,” “forgot,” and “promised.” Although adverbial prepositional phrases were frequently used such as “all around the park,” “on the hat,” and “by her feet,” individual adverbs, particularly those ending in “ly,” were infrequent. Some of the individual adverbs employed were “finally,” “together,” “already,” “suddenly,” “forever,” and “softly.” It is likely that verbs and adverbs, being less concrete than adjectives, are not as easily incorporated into one’s cognitive schema of narrative content. Another explanation for the infrequent use of adverbs is the finding that adverbs are acquired as children gain experience with literate language (Larsen & Nippold, 2007) and that these young children may not yet be at this point of development.

Our results suggest that the addition of props in the presentation of stories and practice opportunities of story retells with 5-, 6-, and 7-year-olds results in more descriptive stories than when props are not used. However, props did not result in
longer or more semantically complex narratives. They also did not result in narratives that contained more story grammar elements, cohesive devices, mental/linguistic verbs, or adverbs. This could, in part, be explained by Crystal’s (1987) “bucket theory,” which proposes that as the demands of the linguistic task increases, decreases are typically seen in other co-occurring linguistic parameters. Given the short period of time of one week in which the children were first exposed to each story, practiced it, and were then expected to retell it, it is likely that the children were not yet familiar enough with each story to expect that they could demonstrate all of the components of story we were measuring at equally high levels of competence.

Our results also suggest that there are advantages in practicing story retells without props. Retells of our control group students included more correct pronoun referents and more conjunctions which contribute to more cohesive stories that are clearer for the listener. When watching the children practice, the researchers observed that the children practicing with props were intent upon describing and including each prop in the retell with less focus on the cohesion of the story as they attended more closely to the objects than to the listener. The researchers found that the control group students were more focused on connecting the events, identifying the central conflict and resolution, portraying the emotions of the main character, and performing for the listener. These results and observations have important implications for classroom teachers.

Implications

Oral narratives have an important place in classrooms, given their connection to literacy acquisition (Abbot & McCarthey, 2001) and language development (Morrow, 1985). Unfortunately, it is not clear how narratives should be used to achieve the best learning outcomes. One implication of this study is that a balanced literacy program would include different formats for retelling, including some with props and some without.

This research suggests that props can support the use of descriptors in students’ language and thus could be used by teachers to enhance the skills of labeling and describing. Knowing that adverbs are, in part, dependent on literacy experiences, suggests that the use of adverbs may require additional focused strategies in reading and writing instruction.

Another implication suggests that teachers wishing to support the development of cohesion of stories could employ strategies other than the use of props. These could include multiple opportunities to listen to stories told by a variety of storytellers and opportunities for students to tell stories to varied audiences. Enacting the stories with the students playing the roles of characters could extend
the use of props in a way that might help children be more aware of the audience. When observing practice sessions of children not using props, we noted that participants paid more attention to the listener suggesting that being aware of the audience contributes to students’ ability to more clearly communicate a story. It is likely that the use of story grammar cue cards, the story question prompts (see Appendix B), and the rereading of the book before practice facilitated recall for both groups of students. It thus seems appropriate to use oral and visual stimuli other than props to help students tell more cohesive stories.

The study also supported our understanding that narrative is an indicator of cognitive development and gender differences with older children and females telling longer, more grammatically complex stories (Fey et al. 2004). Classroom teachers can support boys in telling longer and more complex stories by choosing topics that are more interesting to them, providing more opportunity for physical presentation of the stories through drama, encouraging artistic presentation through storyboards, and ensuring that literacy activities are purposeful with real life connections (King & Gurian, 2006; Taylor, 2004/5). We also believe that we can help boys to expand their experience with multiple female and male roles and describing feelings through careful selection of literature and use of analytic questions. For example, we encourage teachers not to make the assumption that boys will only be engaged in stories with male protagonists. The boys in our study found Jennie’s Hat (Keats, 1966) to be a favorite which may have been because they were particularly engaged in the creative building of her hat by the birds. This explanation would support the view of Coles and Hall described by Taylor (2004/5) that boys give greater emphasis to taking information from the text in contrast to girls’ preference for analyzing and making connections to characters. Selecting texts that invite both efferent and aesthetic responses within the same text or through providing multiple genres on a topic will help to ensure engaged learning by both boys and girls (Gebhard, 2006; Rosenblatt, 1978).

**Conclusion**

In further studies, we would like to observe the narrative development of boys and girls to determine if differences in length and complexity continue. We would also like to explore what types of props facilitate and support different aspects of retells. It would also seem important to separate story mapping from prop practice, which was difficult to do when story mapping was part of the normal classroom routine for both groups. We would also like to further explore the indication that students who do not use props might tell more cohesive stories by having students practice fewer stories over a longer period of time. Finally, we would like
to explore retelling with different genres including nonfiction (e.g. informational texts, biographies).

Narrative is an effective teaching tool because it readily engages students in both language structure and content. Retells of presented narratives reveal both a child’s understanding of the elements and sequence of the story, but also his/her ability to use language purposefully for description and cohesion. We believe our research supports the idea that children’s literacy and language development can be supported by presenting narratives and practicing retells in different formats both with and without props.

References


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**Appendix A**

List of Stories and Props Used for Each Book
(Stories used in the analyses for this study are indicated with an asterisk)

**Kindergarten Stories**

*Burningham, J. (1987).* *John Patrick Norman McHennessy, the boy who was always late.* NY: Random House.

Pair of gloves, stick puppet figure of boy, stick puppet figure of teacher, crocodile, lion, tree, wave, satchel, blackboard with sums, pencil and card with “I must not tell lies about crocodiles and I must not lose my gloves,” and a pair of torn trousers.

- Mrs. Wishy-Washy doll, toy barn, tractor, bucket, cow, pig, duck, city postcard, restaurant postcard, chef stick puppet, four sealed paint containers in red, green, yellow and blue, and truck.


- Two yellow, two green, two polka-dotted, two purple, one striped, one black, and one red chameleon, lemon, purple heather flower, lion, polka dotted mushroom, and green, yellow, and red leaves.


- Mouse, whole strawberry, strawberry in halves, chained strawberry, ladder, scarf, spoon, and knife.

**First grade stories**


- Two bats, owl, nest with birds in it, branch, and pear.


- A small typewriter, seven typed signs on foam core, two cows, two blankets, a hen, a duck, and a horse.


- Hat, basket, lampshade, flower pot, a TV antenna, a shiny pan, and assorted birds and flowers.


- Beige front runner strip (Velcro sticks to this) and commercial kit by Lakeshore that includes the following items with Velcro sewn on back – sleeping bear, awake bear, male rabbit, female rabbit, rabbit children, carrot, radish, beet, lettuce, broccoli, celery, and corn.

**Appendix B**

Protocol for Retell Practice

Re-read the story using gestures, vocal inflection, and enthusiasm.

2. Model retelling the story and include:

- At least one of each different type of conjunction (see below)
Description of characters & settings with adjectives

Description of character feelings with adverbs

Use of mental verbs (describing how characters think or talk, e.g., told, shout, thought, knew, remember)

Each story grammar element (see below)

Correct sequencing of story events (see Appendix C)

3. Invite each child to retell story and facilitate it by occasionally doing some of these things (examples):
   - Recasting simple sentences to complex ones
     Child says: “They went home. They ate dinner.”
     You say: “So, they ate dinner after they went home.”
   - Asking questions to clarify referents
     Child says: “She went to the store” before giving “she” a name.
     You say: “Who went to the store?”
   - Probing to add missing story grammar elements
     Child misses including character goals
     You say: “Why did he go to the store?”
   - Asking open questions more often than closed
     (Closed questions limit child talk to short responses.)
     You say “Tell me about the party.” Rather than “Who was at the party?” or “Did they have fun?”

4. It’s MOST important for storytelling to be enjoyable. Let the child lead and use his/her own style. Your most important role is to be an excellent listener, so keep them going with “wow, really?” or “tell me more,” rather than asking too many questions.
## Appendix C

### Story Grammar Components and Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story grammar components</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Reference to time, place, and characters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiating event/problem</td>
<td>Something that sets the events of the story in motion. It functions to make the main character want to achieve a goal or change of state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal response</td>
<td>How the character feels in response to the initiating event; usually contains an emotion word and includes the goals of the protagonist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal plan</td>
<td>Statement of an idea that might fix the problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempt</td>
<td>Action taken by the main character that is meant to solve the problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequence</td>
<td>Events following the attempt and causally linked to it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>Final state or situation triggered by the initiating event.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ending</td>
<td>Sentence or phrase that clearly states that the story is over.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stein and Glenn (1979)

### About the Authors

Dr. Marie Stadler is Associate Professor of Communication Sciences and Disorders at the University of Wisconsin — Eau Claire. She teaches in the areas of child language development and disorders, working with families of infants and toddlers, and emergent literacy. Her current research interests relate to emergent literacy, specifically narratives and phonological awareness.

Dr. Gay Ward is Professor of Literacy and Early Childhood at the University of Wisconsin — River Falls. Her current research is focused on the developmental continuum of literacy and the development of narrative. She has also worked as a teacher educator in Australia, Korea, and Taiwan.
This article reports on a study that explored the relationship between reading proficiency and cultural relevance of text for third-grade English Language Learners (ELLs). The author presents the Cultural Relevance Rubric that helps define and determine cultural relevance of texts. Participants used the rubric to rate the cultural relevance of two stories from a standardized assessment. While the two stories were identified as being the same reading level, the participants differed in their reading of each story. Reading accuracy scores for both stories suggest that the participants were within their instructional or independent reading levels. However, miscue analysis and retelling data suggest that readers’ comprehension was greater when reading the story they identified as being more culturally relevant. Implications for text selection, especially of texts used for assessment purposes with ELLs, are discussed.

While working as a bilingual elementary school teacher I often assessed my students’ reading proficiency by having them read stories out loud to me. When using stories from an assessment kit, I found that there were certain ones that all of my students struggled to read. For example, it was difficult for my students, who had recently arrived from the flat deserts of northern Mexico, to read a story in the assessment kit about children climbing mountains and finding caves with waterfalls.

Later, as a reading specialist in Hong Kong I found that throughout the elementary school, many of the students struggled to read certain stories used for assessment. When students had difficulty connecting with the text, they also seemed to be less proficient with their reading. The second graders, for example, tended to have difficulty with a story about early pioneers in the United States. Nate (all names are pseudonyms), one of the second grade teachers, shared his concerns about this with me:
All of my students seem to get stuck on level 29! Their reading accuracy rates are fine until we get to the story about pioneers fording a river in the 1800s. When I ask the kids to read that story for our assessment, they make tons of miscues, and I can’t go on to the next level. It just doesn’t seem fair. We don’t study westward migration with the kids here in Hong Kong so they really struggle with the story.

Nate’s concern is certainly not unique. In my work now as a professor of reading, graduate students come to me with similar concerns about finding accurate ways to assess the reading of their English Language Learners (ELLs). Their students often struggle with reading not only because they are not proficient in English, but also because they lack the background knowledge to understand what they are asked to read.

The Problem: Text Selection

Often, texts that are used to assess the reading proficiency of ELLs are not culturally relevant for the students who read them (Goodman, 1982). Culturally relevant texts are those that readers can connect to (Freeman, Freeman, & Freeman, 2003) and can draw on their background knowledge and experiences to make meaning (Goodman, 1996; Perez, 2004; Smith, 2006). By reflecting on my experiences with reading assessments and the experiences of teachers with whom I have worked, I find that students tend to do poorly on reading assessments when they cannot relate to or bring background knowledge to the text they are asked to read. I have come to realize that perhaps it is not that these students are struggling readers but rather the texts used for assessment need further analyses.

Research has shown that our background and understanding of the world affects our reading (Goodman, 1996; Perez, 2004; Smith, 2006). While research has explored cultural relevance and its relation to reading (Goodman, 1982; Herrero, 2006; Jimenez, 1997; Keis, 2006), few studies have specifically defined cultural relevance to help educators understand how to identify these texts. This article presents a rubric I developed to help specify the components of cultural relevance and is designed to help teachers and students determine the cultural relevance of a text.

I begin with a look at background knowledge and its importance in the reading process. I then explain how the Cultural Relevance Rubric was developed for text selection and present a study in which I used the rubric to explore the relationship between cultural relevance and reading proficiency for third grade ELLs. The article concludes with a discussion of how educators might take cultural relevance of text into account when working with students, and especially when assessing reading proficiency.
Starting with Students’ Backgrounds

Smith (2006), who has studied reading from a psycholinguistic perspective, explains that reading starts with the background the readers bring to text. Readers come from diverse backgrounds with different ideas about the world so previous experiences and knowledge, also known as schema, affect how a reader comprehends text (Weaver, 2002). As Kucer and Silva (2006) explain, “Schemata are complex structures of information that represent the individual’s past encounters with the world” (p. 32). These interconnected clusters of knowledge play an important role in reading. In order to comprehend texts, readers weave new information into pre-existing schema (García, 2009). Schema theory, when applied to reading, suggests that readers draw on culturally acquired knowledge to guide their comprehension of text (Gibbons, 2009). Clarke and Silberstein (1977) help explain the essence of schema theory:

Research has shown that reading is only incidentally visual. More information is contributed by the reader than by the print on the page. That is, readers understand what they read because they are able to take the stimulus beyond its graphic representation and assign it membership to an appropriate group of concepts already stored in their memories. (p. 136-137)

Research also suggests that it is helpful when readers can make connections between text and their pre-existing schema because “the sense you make of a text depends on the sense you bring to it” (Goodman, 1996, p. 2). Perez (2004), in reporting on a study by Salinger (1993), concludes that “the background knowledge and experiences that students bring to literacy tasks are perhaps the most important elements that influence children’s ability to read with high levels of comprehension and write coherent and cohesive texts” (p. 321). This research suggests that when readers can connect what they read to their own lives and backgrounds, they will have better comprehension.

Additional research with English Language Learners supports the importance of engaging ELLs with texts that connect with their lives. In reporting on their extensive work with ELLs, Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) highlight the important role readers’ schemas plays in text comprehension. They explain that, “According to schema theory, reading comprehension is an interactive process between the text and reader’s prior background knowledge” (p. 553). Consequently, students with better developed schemas for a text can comprehend that text more fully.
ELLs Build on Background with Culturally Relevant Texts

Culturally relevant texts draw on the schema that ELLs bring to reading. Keis (2006) writes about *Libros y Familias* (*Books and Families*), a family literacy program that uses culturally relevant books for Spanish-speaking families. In his study of the program, Keis (2006) found that the use of these books validated the culture and life experiences of the participant readers. Validating and celebrating students’ backgrounds and cultural experiences can often lead to reading engagement and increased reading proficiency. Herrero (2006) conducted a study of students from the Dominican Republic that focused on how teachers could organize literacy instruction using cultural literature to raise the skill levels of low-achieving, language-minority students. The teachers involved in the study found that for the students, the “use of cultural literature and practices fostered pride, participation, commitment and success” (p. 222).

These studies show that the use of culturally relevant texts can also encourage greater reader engagement which is particularly important because of the relationship between reading engagement and reading achievement. According to Guthrie, Schafer, and Huang (2001), engagement is a stronger predictor of reading achievement than any other factor, including socio-economic status. A study by Feger (2006) found that reading engagement for ELLs increased with the use of culturally relevant books. Likewise, a teacher who participated in a study on ELLs conducted by Stuart and Volk (2002) reported, “The more I had incorporated culturally relevant literature... into the curriculum, the more my students’ engagement in reading had increased” (p. 18).

Goodman (1982) summarized extensive reading assessment research she and her colleagues conducted with different populations of students, including ELLs. Their research showed that readers had higher levels of comprehension when texts were culturally relevant. “The more familiar the language of the text, the actions of the characters, the description of the setting, the sequence of the events - the closer the readers’ predictions will match the author’s expression and the easier that text will be for the reader to comprehend” (Goodman, 1982, p. 302). In his study of struggling Latino and Latina readers, Jimenez (1997) reported similar findings as he concluded that students’ literacy needs were best met when teachers used culturally familiar texts. Students were able to make inferences and ask questions because of the links they made to their own backgrounds. Through these types of strategic activities, the students were able to strengthen their metacognitive awareness during reading, which led to increased reading comprehension (Jimenez, 1997).
What Makes a Text Culturally Relevant?

While research supports the importance of providing students with culturally relevant text, the question many teachers face is: What makes a text culturally relevant? As Freeman, Freeman, & Freeman (2003) point out, “Not all books about Spanish speakers, for example, are relevant to all Hispanic students. Some books merely perpetuate stereotypes. Others, especially those published in Spain, contain settings and events that are unfamiliar to most Latino students in the United States” (p. 7).

Goodman (1982) also addressed the complex issue of cultural relevance. Through her research, Goodman found that there were factors to consider beyond the ethnicity of the characters in a story. Consequently, she developed a list of topics for educators to consider in the selection of culturally relevant texts that include:

- Socio-cultural-economic institutions including such relations as: occupations, housing patterns, family relationships, schooling, religious, etc.
- Setting
- Chronological time
- Age and sex of characters
- Language variations represented in the text
- Theme, moral, world view
- Readers’ experience with certain kinds of texts. (p. 303)

Building on Goodman’s (1982) work, I developed a rubric that can be used as a text selection tool to help identify culturally relevant texts. Through my work with teachers and bilingual students, the rubric was refined to include a set of questions around the factors Goodman (1982) identified (see Figure 1). Teachers and students can consider eight factors as they choose texts using this rubric: 1) the ethnicity of the characters, 2) the setting, 3) the year the story takes place, 4) age of the characters, 5) gender of the characters, 6) the language or dialect used in the story, 7) the genre and exposure to this type of text, 8) the reader’s background experiences. Using a four point Likert scale, teachers or readers can rate each question on the rubric with possible responses ranging from a “1” indicating no connection to a “4” showing a very close connection to the particular aspect of culture.
Cultural Relevance Rubric

Are the characters in the story like you and your family?
Just like us .................................................................Not at all like us
4  3  2  1

Have you ever lived in or visited places like those in the story?
Yes.................................................................No
4  3  2  1

Could this story take place this year?
Yes.................................................................No
4  3  2  1

How close do you think the main characters are to you in age?
Very close.................................................................Not close at all
4  3  2  1

Does the story have main characters who are boys (for boy readers)?
Yes.................................................................No
4  3  2  1

Do the characters talk like you and your family?
Yes.................................................................No
4  3  2  1

How often do you read stories like this one?
Often .................................................................Never
4  3  2  1

Have you ever had an experience like one described in this story?
Yes ................................................................. No
4  3  2  1

Figure 1. Cultural Relevance Rubric

The Study

Based on my informal observations of how students read culturally relevant texts with greater proficiency than texts that did not relate to their background, and having developed a rubric that could be used to determine how culturally relevant a text is, I conducted research on the effects of using culturally relevant text with a group of ELL readers. The nine third-grade ELLs who participated in this study came from an urban elementary school located in a large Northeastern city in the United States that had a total of 45 third grade ELL students. All of the ELL
students were invited to participate in the study, and nine children and their parents responded. The nine participants included ELLs who came from the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America. Each participant was asked to read and retell two third grade stories from a commercial assessment kit which identified them as being at the same reading assessment level. While the stories have approximately the same number of words, despite their similarities, they appear to differ in their degree of cultural relevance.

A limitation of this study is that data from the reading of only two stories were collected and compared but, because of the large volume of data generated in the oral reading miscue analysis, this kind of research methodology does not typically necessitate nor involve large numbers of readers or multiple texts (Brown, Goodman, & Marek, 1996). The 18 readings, retellings, and cultural relevance responses produced by the nine participants provide sufficient qualitative and quantitative data to inform this baseline study. Future studies exploring cultural relevance with multiple assessment texts would provide an even greater number of results to compare, which could further inform this line of research.

The first story used in this study, *Kwan the Artist* (Giles, 2007a), is about a young boy who is new to the United States. Kwan has a hard time understanding his teacher and wishes he could do something well in his new school. During art, Kwan paints the plane that brought him to this country, and the children and teacher recognize his artistic abilities. The second story is the retelling of Aesop’s fable *The Wind and the Sun* (Giles, 2007b). In this traditional story, the wind and the sun argue about who is stronger. When the two see a man walking along a path wearing a cloak they decide to determine strength by seeing who can get the man’s cloak off. The wind tries unsuccessfully to show strength by blowing off his cloak. The sun then shows superior strength by shining brightly and warming the man so much that he removes his cloak.

After they read and retold each story, the participants rated the story using the Cultural Relevance Rubric (see Figure 1). Rather than simply handing the students the rubric to read and complete on their own, I read through the rubric items with each student, and we discussed where they felt they connected with each item along the continuum of possible responses. As the children explained why they marked particular scores, I took additional notes about the connections they were making to the texts.

**Analyzing Reading Proficiency**

The participants read and retold each story orally, and a digital recording was made of each. The audio recordings were analyzed using the In-depth Miscue Analysis Procedure (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 2005), which is described in more
detail below. In addition to providing an accuracy rate for the reading, this analysis provides a comprehensive, qualitative look at the types of miscues the readers made. Researchers and teachers may analyze miscues to gain insights into how well readers are using the different language cueing systems: semantics (meaning cues), syntax (grammar cues), and graphophonics (visual and auditory cues), along with the reader’s background knowledge to construct meaning from texts. Retells are also analyzed to help understand the overall meaning readers have constructed from the text. This method of analysis has proven to be effective as for the past 40 years, miscue analysis has been conducted with monolingual and bilingual children and adults in a variety of languages (Brown, Goodman, & Marek, 1996).

Miscue analysis was developed by Kenneth Goodman (1967) as a way to measure how readers comprehend text as they read. This procedure involves having students read and retell a complete text. Researchers then analyze the reader’s miscues, or places where the reader’s observed response (what the reader says) does not match what the person listening to the reading expects to hear (what the text says). This analysis of miscues helps show how the reader comprehends the text during reading. When readers omit, insert, substitute, or otherwise change text elements their strengths and weakness in their use of the three cueing systems is revealed. As Goodman (1967) explains, a reader’s “expected responses mask the process of their attainment, but his unexpected responses have been achieved through the same process, albeit less successfully applied. The ways that they deviate from the expected reveal this process” (p. 127). In other words, when readers produce what a listener expects to hear as they read, it is not possible to say how or why they did it. However, when readers produce unexpected responses, listeners get important insights into what they are doing as they read. For example, in his reading of The Wind and the Sun, Adam substituted clock for cloak in the following sentence:

*clock*

He was wearing a warm cloak.

This miscue provides a number of insights into Adam’s reading process. For one, Adam used graphophonics, which includes visual and auditory cues. Clock looks and sounds like the expected response, cloak. He also used syntactic information as he substituted a noun for a noun. However, he did not use semantic information; this miscue does not make sense. It is odd to refer to a clock as warm and people do not wear clocks. While the sentence alone is syntactically acceptable (it sounds like a sentence that could be produced in English), it does not make sense, and he did not correct the miscue which ultimately changes the meaning of the story. It could be that Adam was not familiar with the term cloak. In fact, three of the nine readers made this very same miscue.
Of course, each participant’s reading cannot be evaluated on the analysis of miscues from just one sentence. It is the pattern of miscues across a whole story that provides insights into the reader’s comprehension process during reading. Therefore, the nine participants read two complete texts. I then analyzed the miscues they produced to find general patterns of comprehending for each story and evaluated the readers’ retellings of each story to determine their overall comprehension. Participants were invited to retell the stories in either English or Spanish. Each retelling included an unaided portion at the beginning during which the readers were asked to retell everything they remembered about the text they read. Next, an aided retelling using open-ended questions prompted students to elaborate on their unaided retelling. Each retelling was transcribed and scored holistically on a scale of 1 to 5 where a score of 5 indicated the most complete retelling (Goodman et al., 2005). To help establish reliability, two scorers rated each retelling.

**Analyzing Cultural Relevance**

The reading assessment data were then examined in relation to student’s scores on the Cultural Relevance Rubric for each story. On each rubric, the scores for all eight items were added together to provide an overall cultural relevance score. The higher the score, the more culturally relevant the story was for that particular reader. As shown in Table 1, an analysis of the cultural relevance rubric scores shows that all nine participants identified the story *Kwan the Artist* as being more culturally relevant than *The Wind and the Sun*.

**Table 1. Cultural Relevance Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th><em>The Wind and the Sun</em></th>
<th><em>Kwan the Artist</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ricardo</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniela</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoraida</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andres</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean Score</strong></td>
<td><strong>14.2</strong></td>
<td><strong>26.9</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As students filled in the cultural relevance rubric for *Kwan the Artist*, many commented on connections they made to the text. As we talked through the rubric question “Have you ever had an experience like one described in this story?” Sandra shared that she was also new at her school. “I’m not as new as Kwan, but I only came to this school in first grade.” When reflecting on the question, “Do the characters talk like you and your family?” Lucas shared, “When I lived in New York, I only knew Spanish and my cousin taught me English.” Christian’s comment on the same question was similar, “In kindergarten I only spoke Spanish.” These students related to Kwan, the main character in the story and marked their rubrics accordingly. On the other hand, cultural relevance scores for the story *The Wind and the Sun* showed that the readers did not find as many connections with the story. For this story, Adam stated, “No, the characters don’t talk like me. The wind blows and the sun just used its rays” as he circled a “1” to indicate no cultural relevance for that question.

**Reading Proficiency**

Once the cultural relevance scores were analyzed, I turned to the reading assessment data. A look at the reading accuracy scores shown in Table 2 reveals that all readers made very few miscues during the reading of both stories. This indicates that the stories were within the participant’s independent (95%-100%) or instructional (90%- 94%) reading levels (Clay, 2002).

**Table 2. Reading Accuracy Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th><em>The Wind and the Sun</em></th>
<th><em>Kwan the Artist</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ricardo</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniela</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoraida</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andres</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean Scores</strong></td>
<td><strong>96.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>95.6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Miscue Analysis Reader Profiles

These accuracy scores alone, however, do not provide a complete picture of the students’ reading as the process of reading is much more than simply getting the words right. While accuracy scores give useful quantitative data, an examination of the qualitative information provided by miscue analysis shows valuable information about the participant’s comprehension during reading. In the In-depth Miscue Analysis Procedure (Goodman et al., 2005), the miscues are coded and the retelling is scored. Next, a reader profile is created by adding the results from the coding of each miscue for Meaning Construction, Grammatical Relationships, Graphic Similarity, Sound Similarity, and determining reading percentages for each score for the entire passage. Retelling scores are also included on reader profiles. Tables 3a (Kwan the Artist) and 3b (The Wind and the Sun) summarize the data from the reading profiles for each of the nine participants’ reading of the two stories.

The first section shown summarizes the data on Meaning Construction which are determined by combining information that deals with semantic acceptability of miscues, meaning change caused by miscues, and correction of miscues. These patterns indicate how closely the meaning the reader makes of the text matches the expected meaning. When analyzing Tables 3a and 3b, the score in this first column represents the percentage of miscues that made sense with little or no meaning change. The second columns show the data on the Grammatical Relationships of miscues which indicate the degree to which readers produce sentences that are syntactically acceptable and/or corrected. The third columns show the percentage of miscues that show high or some graphic similarity to the expected response. The fourth columns show the percentage of miscues that show high or some sound similarity to the expected response. The last columns show the holistic retelling scores. Again, while the miscues provide information about how the readers comprehend during the reading, the retelling provides information about what readers have comprehended at the end of each reading. Each retelling was scored holistically on a scale of 1 to 5.
Table 3a. Miscue Analysis Reader Profile Summary for Kwan the Artist (Giles, 2007a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Meaning Construction Percentages</th>
<th>Grammatical Relationship Percentages</th>
<th>Graphic Similarity Percentages</th>
<th>Sound Similarity Percentages</th>
<th>Holistic Retelling Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ricardo</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniela</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoraida</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andres</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td><strong>86</strong></td>
<td><strong>85</strong></td>
<td><strong>78</strong></td>
<td><strong>75</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3b. Miscue Analysis Reader Profile Summary for The Wind and the Sun (Giles, 2007b).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Meaning Construction Percentages</th>
<th>Grammatical Relationship</th>
<th>Graphic Similarity Percentages</th>
<th>Sound Similarity Percentages</th>
<th>Holistic Retelling Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ricardo</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniela</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoraida</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andres</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td><strong>75</strong></td>
<td><strong>57</strong></td>
<td><strong>96</strong></td>
<td><strong>96</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Miscue Analysis: Kwan the Artist

The miscue analysis data show that all nine participants were more proficient in their comprehending during their reading of Kwan the Artist, the story they identified as being more culturally relevant. A higher percentage of the miscues
made as they read this story showed strength of meaning construction and grammatical relationship. Such miscues are considered high quality miscues but a simple count of accuracy does not show this difference. For example, four readers - Adam, Anna, Daniela, and Ricardo - all made the same miscue substituting his for this in the following sentence:

\[ \text{his} \]

He wished that he could be good at something at this school.

The sentence that these readers created makes sense and is grammatically correct meaning that while they made this miscue, there was no loss of meaning. Two other participants, Sandra and Christian, made a similar high quality miscue, omitting the circled word, as they read the same sentence. They read:

He wished that he could be good at something at this school.

Both participants omitted the word this in their reading of the sentence. In coding miscues, circling a word indicates that it was omitted. A final example of this type of high quality miscue comes from Anna in her reading of Kwan the Artist. Anna inserted the word all in her reading of the following sentence:

But Kwan couldn’t understand all the words that she was saying, and so he couldn’t

\[ \text{all} \]

do ^ his work very well.

Perhaps Anna inserted all to make the second clause parallel to the first clause. This extra stress makes sense and also works grammatically.

**Miscue Analysis: The Wind and the Sun**

The examples above show the types of high quality miscues that were produced during the reading of Kwan the Artist. When comparing the percentages of high quality miscues as indicated by strength of meaning construction and grammatical relationships between the two stories, the Reader Profiles show that for all nine participants, the reading of The Wind and the Sun was not as strong as the reading of the more culturally relevant story. Many of the miscues the participants made during the reading of The Wind and the Sun did not make sense. For example, Daniela substituted the word sun for snow in the following sentence:

\[ \text{sun} \]

But I can melt the snow on the mountains and turn it into water.
While grammatically this miscue fit into the sentence (she substituted a noun for a noun), the idea of the sun melting and turning into water does not make sense.

In the analysis of all of the miscues for all of the readers, the meaning construction scores were higher in *Kwan the Artist*, the story that the readers identified as being more culturally relevant.

An analysis of the participants’ use of graphic and sound information as they read (see Tables 3a and 3b), reveals that the mean use of graphophonic cues was higher for the readings of *The Wind and the Sun* than the readings of *Kwan the Artist*. The readers’ over-reliance on the graphophonic system during their reading of the story that was not as culturally relevant is revealed in part through their production of more non-word miscues. These are miscues produced when readers attempt to “sound out” words which can result in a loss of meaning. In miscue coding, non-words are indicated with a $ at the beginning of the word. Zoraida, for example, made the following two non-word miscues in her reading of *The Wind and the Sun*:

$indead
After a while, the man became very hot indeed.

$clouk
He stopped walking and took off his cloak.

Overall, the nine readers produced 13 non-word miscues during their reading of *The Wind and the Sun* but only 3 non-word miscues during the reading of *Kwan the Artist*.

The analysis of the Grammatical Relationships shown in Tables 3a and 3b reveals that a higher percentage of the miscues made during the reading of *The Wind and the Sun* showed weakness in grammar than miscues produced while reading *Kwan the Artist*. During his reading of *The Wind and the Sun*, Christian made the following miscue:

tighter
But the man only pulled his cloak more tightly around him.

Christian substituted the word *tighter* for *tightly* which does not work grammatically in the sentence. Anna made two similar miscues in her reading of the same story when, in the first sentence she substituted *turned* for *turn* and in the second sentence substituted *warm* for *warmer*.

turned
“But I can melt the snow on the mountains and turn it into water.”
As he walked along, the man became warmer and warmer.

In the analysis of all of the miscues for all of the readers, the grammatical relationships scores were higher with the story that the readers identified as being more culturally relevant. ELLs often make miscues involving word endings, such as those discussed above. However, the participants made more of these types of miscues when they were reading *The Wind and the Sun*.

**Retelling Analysis**

While the miscue analysis data provides details about the process of comprehending during reading, the retelling data provides information about overall comprehension after reading. The analysis of the retelling scores reveals that all but one of the participants had higher levels of overall comprehension for *Kwan the Artist*, the story the participants identified as being more culturally relevant. One student, Zoraida, scored a three for both retellings. The mean retelling score for *Kwan the Artist* was 3.6 while the mean for *The Wind and the Sun* was 2.6. Overall, unaided retellings produced by the readers were more complete for *Kwan the Artist*. For example, during his unaided retelling of this story, Lucas provided a rather lengthy, detailed summary. Below are excerpts from his unaided retelling:

That one was about a boy named Kwan that came from another country to this country, and he was in a new school, and in his other country, he might have talked another language; so he didn’t know this language very good...But when the teacher told the children to take out the brushes and the paint, he knew that he loved painting...and he remembered about the plane that took him from his country to this country...so he wanted to draw it, and everybody in the class thought he was the best artist there and liked his drawing, and so they went and crowded him and liked his drawing.

In contrast, the participants tended to remember less or were not as accurate when retelling the story of *The Wind and the Sun*. They also provided fewer details and paused more often and for longer periods of time. Because of this, I asked more questions in order to prompt the participants to elaborate. Lucas, for example, provided far fewer details when retelling *The Wind and the Sun*.

A: Ok. Please retell that story for me. What do you remember?

Lucas: The wind and the sun were arguing about who’s stronger. They saw a man and they tried to compete with each other. (*6 second pause*)
A: And?
Lucas: The sun won.
A: How did he win?
Lucas: Because he warmed the man up.
A: And what about the wind? What did he try to do?
Lucas: He tried to blew, blow the man’s cloak. He said he could beat the man.
A: Tell me more.
Lucas: The sun beat the man in the competition.

Unlike his retelling of *Kwan the Artist*, Lucas required more prompting to retell the main ideas in the story. During the beginning of his retelling, it appeared that he understood that the story was about a competition between the wind and the sun. Later, however, he mistakenly thought the man was also competing. Lucas, like many of the participants, was not as proficient in his retelling of *The Wind and the Sun*.

**Supporting Reading with Culturally Relevant Texts**

While the reading accuracy scores for these nine readers suggested that both stories were within either their instructional or independent reading levels, the miscue analysis data provided further insights into the participant’s comprehension of each story. When analyzing the retellings and the types of miscues participants made during the reading of the two stories, they were more proficient in their reading of the story they identified as being more culturally relevant. For example, the readers made more high quality miscues that made sense and were grammatically correct when reading the story to which they related. The retellings also revealed a better understanding of *Kwan the Artist* as the participants remembered more and were more accurate and needed less prompting when retelling this story, which they found to be more culturally relevant. In contrast, the readers were less proficient when reading *The Wind and the Sun* where the miscue analysis revealed that students spent more time attempting to sound out unknown words as they read. In doing so, they produced more non-word miscues that did not make sense.

The connections seen in this study between cultural relevance of text and reading proficiency indicate that teachers can help support the reading development of their ELLs by considering cultural relevance when selecting texts. This is especially important when selecting texts used for assessment purposes. The Cultural
Relevance Rubric provides teachers and students with a practical tool that can be used in the text selection process. As described, it is helpful to talk through the rubric items with students as they fill it out. In cases where commercial assessment kits are used with pre-selected texts, teachers might consider having students complete a Cultural Relevance Rubric as part of their assessment. Adding a cultural relevance score to the reading assessment data would provide a more complete picture of their students’ reading.

**Conclusion**

It is important to note that different books are culturally relevant for different readers. While it may be difficult to identify books that are relevant for a reader for all eight areas on the rubric, finding books with some cultural relevance for the reader is helpful, especially for ELLs who are not only learning to read but are also learning English. In order to support their reading development, at least some of the texts ELLs are provided should be culturally relevant. The more engaged students are with culturally relevant texts, the more developed their reading skills may become. Building reading proficiency is essential because ELL students will need to be able to read all types of texts, including those that may not be culturally relevant. Using the Cultural Relevance Rubric as a tool for text selection helps match students with engaging texts that can build reading proficiency.

**References**


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**About the Author**

Ann Ebe is a former bilingual elementary school teacher, reading specialist and administrator. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Literacy Education at Hunter College in New York City. Her primary research interests include exploring the reading process of bilingual students and the selection of culturally relevant texts.
“Poetry should be like fireworks, packed carefully and artfully, ready to explode with unpredictable effects.”

Lillian Moore (cited in Cullinan & Wooten, 2010)

Most poetry is meant to be read aloud, celebrating the word play created by its authors, and bringing smiles to our faces. Children often develop oral language by reciting nursery rhymes, repeating favorite words, and learning song lyrics. If the adults in their lives can refrain from overanalyzing the poetry they encounter in later years, those children who come to love the words they are learning may develop into young adults with a flair for language and the taste for poetry.

Similar to fiction and nonfiction, poetry books are published in many different formats including some that typically are not classified as poetry (Hadaway & Young, 2010). In this article, we highlight some of our favorite books of poetry in the following formats: Anthologies, Single Topic Collections, Single Author Collections, Single Topic Collections with the Work of One Poet (a combination of Single Author & Single Topic Collections), Poetry Picture Books, and Verse Novels—all “ready to explode with unpredictable effects” in your classrooms.

**Anthologies**

Once extremely popular, poetry anthologies are becoming less common. The following anthologies contain poems with multiple themes or topics by multiple poets.


**Grades 2-6.** For this anthology, the well-known singer and her daughter Emma Walton Hamilton selected 150 poems, some playful, some serious. Readers are certain to find more than a few familiar lines in the pair’s choices as well
as encounter new poems that they may add to their favorites list. A treat for the eye and the ear with its treasury of memorable lines and lovely watercolor illustrations, the collection contains poems, songs, or lullabies by as diverse a group as stalwarts Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson alongside songwriters Rodgers and Hammerstein. Each of the nine themed sections is introduced by text by Andrews who describes her lifelong love for words and tells revealing anecdotes about her youth. As a bonus, Andrews and Hamilton have also included original poems they wrote. Adding to the auditory delight is an accompanying CD which features mother and daughter reading 21 of the poems.

*Another jar of tiny stars: Poems by more NCTE award-winning poets.*

**Grades 3-6.** Over 4,000 students heard, read, and ranked poems written by the 15 winners of the National Council of Teachers of English Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. The anthology contains five poems each from David McCord, Aileen Fisher, Karla Kuskin, Myra Cohn Livingston, Eve Merriam, John Ciardi, Lilian Moore, Arnold Adolph, Valerie Worth, Barbara Juster Esbensen, Eloise Greenfield, X. J. Kennedy, Mary Ann Hoberman, Nikki Grimes, and Lee Bennett Hopkins. Teachers looking for poems sure to please their students will consider this anthology a must-have.

**Grades K-3.** Anyone who appreciates words and word play even the tiniest bit will want to add this essential anthology to their collection. Containing almost 200 poems of all types, this massive tome is grouped according to themes, and is especially appealing to young children who may recognize some of the lines from books read aloud to them by parents, friends, or teachers. Most of the poems have been collected in earlier anthologies, but it is nice to have them collected here, all within finger’s reach. In a take-off on the famous potato chip commercial that once taunted viewers, we dare you to read just one of these memorable poems.


**Grades 6-10.** This dynamic anthology contains over 100 poems guaranteed to appeal to teens because of their formats and themes. Topics range from the ubiquitous baseball to the first kiss, changing bodies to fickle friends, and from anger to love. The poems reflect the ever-changing volatility of youth as the poets share their anger, fears, hopes, and loves as well as recollections of jubilant and poignant experiences as they navigate their way through life. An added bonus to the book is the CD that includes 44 poems read by 33 poets, many reading their own work and sometimes providing background behind the lines.


**Grades PK-2.** Readers are certain to find some familiar lines as well as encounter new poems in this fun-filled anthology of over 60 child-centered poems for the younger set. The poems are arranged in four child-friendly categories: “Me, Myself, and I,” “Who Lives in My House?,” “I Go Outside,” and “Time for Bed.” Caregivers looking for an interesting way to introduce the joys of poetry to children will find this a volume they will turn to again and again. Using a wide range of mediums and techniques in creating the delightful illustrations to accompany the poems, Dunbar celebrates the joys of oral expression.
Collections

If poetry anthologies have waned in popularity, poetry collections, on the other hand, have had a surge. There are several excellent ones that have been published recently.

Single Author Collection


**Grades 2-5.** Teachers will find this collection perfect for read aloud time as students will delight in the quirky word choice and humor found in over 120 poems about fairytales, family, friends, and school. Who can go wrong with poems about bad hair days, onomatopoeia, picking your nose, yellow snow, and magic homework wands? “Alligator Purse” shows Wilson’s quirky sense of humor. “Oh, dahling, don’t you love my purse? / It’s genuine alligator.” / She said that just this morning, / but then a little later / she reached inside for something / and it ate her.” Blitt’s energetic line drawings enhance this volume.

Single Topic Collections


**Grades 3-6.** Proving that almost any topic can be inspiration for poetry, this collection of 32 list poems from 24 poets explores frogs, pencils, the seasons, and school. Aware that almost everyone makes lists, Heard introduces list poems and then encourages readers to create their own. Choosing a favorite from this collection is difficult since each one has its own appeal. The poems range from saying hello in Avis Harley’s “Ways to Greet a Friend,” with its greetings in 12 different languages to saying farewell in Eileen Spinelli’s “Good-byes,” a list of things that are difficult to leave behind. All sorts of list poems are featured here, some with unexpected endings.

**Grades 2-5.** With classic quotations and 48 poems, 12 for each of the four seasons, readers can celebrate the wonders and activities each season brings. In addition to the poems by great masters such as Karla Kuskin and Carl Sandburg, twenty-nine new poems were commissioned by contemporary poets such as Rebecca Kai Dotlich, Joan Bransfield Graham, J. Patrick Lewis, and Marilyn Singer. Without overwhelming the poets’ words, David Diaz’s stunning mixed media illustrations add to the meaning and feeling of each poem. Teachers will find this collection an ideal source for seasonal read-alouds and choral readings. Hopkins’ own introductory poems for each section describe the ubiquitous spring showers, sugary snow cones, mounds of leaves needing to be raked, and lost mittens, harbingers of a particular time of year.


**Grades 2-9.** Another essential must-have for any library, this anthology is particularly appealing to the eyes and ears. As he did in *A Kick in the Head: An Everyday Guide to Poetic Forms* (Candlewick, 2005), Janeczko teams with artist Chris Raschka to celebrate poetry and introduce poems, some classic, some hilarious. Intended to be performed with vigor, the 37 titles in this collection will have readers on their feet. Divided into poems for one voice, two voices, three voices, and a group, this collection contains lines guaranteed to tangle the tongue. List poems that might serve as patterns for budding poets are served up alongside poems by William Shakespeare and Lewis Carroll. Raschka’s distinctive ink and torn paper illustrations are eye-catching and entice the reader onto the pages of poetry.
Single Topic Collections with the Work of One Poet


Grades 6-9. The poet assumes the identities of three important women, all born in 1867, and their daughters. The poignancy of the relationships between these famous women and their equally talented daughters fills the pages as Atkins explores the lives of author Laura Ingalls Wilder, businesswoman Madame C.J. Walker, and scientist Marie Curie. Not only will readers learn a history lesson, but they will discover something important about relationships and self-identity as well.


Grades K-3. Creatures with distinctive markings such as stripes, rings, and especially spots, are celebrated in this eye-popping collection of four-line poems. Some of the poems are amusing while others seek to inform as Ehlert pays homage to 50 unique living things that are not typically the subject of poetry: eels, iguanas, and pheasants. Her beautiful artwork consists of collage layered over handmade and painted papers using inks and crayons.


Grades 2-5. Drawing on the interest young readers have in dinosaurs, this themed collection is built around these ever-intriguing creatures. Florian manages to blend interesting facts about dinosaurs inside his clever poems and creative artwork. A pronunciation guide accompanies each dinosaur, providing information about the meaning of its name. Interested readers will find a Glossarysaurus with additional information on dinosaurs in the back of the book as well as a bibliography and a listing of fossil sites and museums dedicated to dinosaurs.

**Grades 3-6.** This witty and whimsical collection celebrates the wonder of trees and promises that readers will love it “tree-mendously!” as Florian plays tribute to trees through clever word play and the color-drenched paintings splashed across the pages. In addition to the 18 poems, Florian also includes a “glossatree,” which provides information about subjects of the poems. “The Monkey Puzzle Tree” is just one of the book’s delights. “It’s said that/ a monkey could climb/ Up this tree in the/ Quickest of time. / But climbing back down / Without cracking / Its crown / Is a puzzle so hard, /It’s a crime”(p. 24). Florian’s trademark zany mixed-media artwork in gouache, watercolor, colored pencil, rubber stamps, oil pastels, and collage on brown paper bags accompany each poem on a two-page vertical spread.


**Grades 3-6.** Just like the felines they celebrate, these poems move across the pages in cat-like fashion. The brilliant, quirky illustrations feature felines that perform acrobatics, curling, leaping, twisting, prancing, and bristling to poems that look precisely like the cats they celebrate. The 32 poems feature cats at their best, yes, purring and snuggling on laps, but mostly at their irrepressible worst, pouncing, bouncing, clawing, snarling, and even curling up on newly folded laundry. The poet’s years of experience living alongside felines are evident in her imaginative poems and their titles. For instance, “Pascal’s Tongue” describes the rough feline tongue needed to smooth a cat’s fur. Few friends of felines have failed to note the “catty” editing of an article or poem left on the computer screen. Cat lovers will agree that this one is sheer purrfection.

**Grades 5-9.** School provides the inspiration for these poems that focus on the zany doings of everyday school life. From the universal experience of begging for a few minutes more to sleep to risking their lives riding on the yellow school bus that rollicks through city streets in roller coaster-fashion, the poems will prompt smiles from readers. The mini lessons on poetry writing will surely inspire poets to try their hands at a rhyme or two. And the zombies from the title? They are the fixation of one teacher who is sure she can detect their signals through her hair.


**Grades 1-3.** With 18 poems celebrating the urban life, *City I Love* vividly describes the sights, sounds, people, places, and life typical of metropolitan areas. Brimming with all sorts of activities, the poems describe subways filled with people who are always on the move, going, coming, never stopping. The watercolor and ink illustrations help readers travel to cities all over the world.


**Grades 3-6.** J. Patrick Lewis presents readers with 48 clever, uproarious poems about adult occupations. Kids will enjoy both the quirky humor of the text and the digital collages as in one poem, the exterminator explains, “I come to de-bug / What’s under de rug.” Meanwhile, a bibliophile shares the joys of reading and good books in the first stanza of “Librarian,” “No one has more fun than I! / I’ve met Harriet the Spy, / Ferdinand the Bull, and Pooh. / (Eyeore says, “How do you do?”) Finally, the title poem explains, “You wear them briefly / And in short, / I sell them chiefly / For support.” This book will fly off the shelves as kids chortle with joy while learning about a variety of jobs.

**Grades 2-4.** *Volcano Wakes Up!* follows the day in the life of a young, Hawaiian volcano through a series of poems told in five voices and points of view: the young volcano, ferns, lava flow crickets, small black road, and the sun. The volcano’s voice is always in concrete poems while the sun’s messages to the moon are in acrostic poems, the hip-hop lava flow crickets utilize texting language and abbreviations, the too-cool ferns, always ready to party, share their voices through curling, vertical poems, and the small black road’s cautionary poems are written on road warning signs. Here’s a sampling from this exquisite book.

**VOLCANO**

*Hey! It’s a little quiet around here.*

*It’s time to kick up a lot of dust and ash, time to shake the ground and make a big stink. Watch this, everybody!*

Steve Jenkins creates the perfect scene and backdrop for each opening with his gorgeous cut-paper collages—some of them literally erupt off the pages. The book’s back matter provides factual information that adds to the science facts presented through poetry.


**Grades 2-6.** In an author’s note, Sidman explains that 99% of all species are now extinct. She then begins with Earth’s formation 4.6 billion years ago, paying poetic tribute to some 14 unlikely survivors ranging from bacteria to Homo sapiens. The book is a visual and intellectual feast, a reminder of humankind’s short time on this planet. Sidman’s *The Dark Emperor and Other Poems of the Night* (Houghton Mifflin, 2010) is another must have for nature and poetry fans as it features lyrical poems about nocturnal creatures in the forest.

**Grades 2-6.** This book is a unique handling of fairy tales as the poems are written in pairs, one of which is to be read up, and one to be read down. These poems, which the author calls reversos, utilize the exact same words and only change in capitalization and punctuation to create a second poem written from a different point of view. The Hansel and Gretel Reverso begins “Fatten up, boy! / Don’t you / like prime rib? / Then your hostess, she will roast you / goose.” The accompanying poem ends with, “Goose! / Then your hostess, she will roast you / like prime rib. / Don’t you / fatten up, boy!” Masse’s clever acrylic artwork has split images hinting at the subject of each reverso.


**Grades 3-6.** Jane Yolen and her son Jason Stemple pay tribute to the magnificent, majestic Great Egret in poetry and striking color photographs. Most of the 15 poems are accompanied by nonfiction information that enhances the readers understanding of the verse. The poem “Measure Me” reads in part, “I am a tower / of strength, / a bird of great length. / I am tall, of much height, / a long arrow / in flight. / My wings / almost span / the full length / of man.” Stunning color design features showcase both the poetry and the dazzling accompanying photographs.
Poetry also comes in the form of poetry picture books in which an often previously published poem is arranged as the text for a picture book.


**Grades Preschool-4.** This book garnered the 2010 Coretta Scott King Award for its stunning photograph illustrations as Hughes’ classic poem beautifully pays tribute to his people in a mere 33 words. Smith’s stunning sepia images of African Americans capture Langston Hughes’ intent to celebrate the beauty, curiosity, intelligence, joy, and wisdom of those whose skin colors are represented in so many different tints and tones.


**Gr. K-2.** A father and son reminisce on how much each looks and acts just like the other one in this delightful romp through the family features they share. “I looked in the mirror and what did I see? / A real handsome dude just looking at me.”

Verse Novels

Teachers looking for a bridge between poetry and novels may want to choose novels in verse as this increasingly popular format allows readers to feel as though they are eavesdropping on the central character or reading portions of his/her diary. Middle grade readers first took notice of the form in Karen Hesse’s *The Music of Dolphins* (Scholastic, 1996) and *Out of the Dust* (Scholastic, 1997) while teen readers turned to just about anything written by Mel Glenn, starting with his *Class Dismissed: High School Poems* (1982, Clarion) through *Split Image* (HarperCollins, 2000). Today’s readers may find a plethora of topics explored through novels in verse.
Grades 9-12. This book follows 15-year-old Molly Biden’s decision to drastically change her image. When her change in clothing and behavior attract the attentions of the mysterious Grady Dillon, she finds herself no longer the Good Girl her classmates consider her. It is easy to become involved in Molly’s dilemma about her unborn child through the evocative poetry written by Brisson. Relying on Molly’s voice, the author uses haiku, sonnets, and free verse to trace the consequences of one teen’s actions.

Grades 6-10. Difficult choices also lie at the heart of *Crossing Stones*. The story of four teens whose daily lives on the farm are shattered by the onslaught of WWI is threaded with descriptions of rural living, the bloody conflict abroad, and the growing movement toward women’s suffrage. Readers will quickly fall in love with the Jorgenson siblings and the Norman siblings and ache at their losses. They will also respond to the romance between Emma and Ollie, damaged by the war but determined to do his part. Although all the voices are distinctive throughout the narrative, Muriel’s voice is most memorable. Questioning her teacher and pondering the wisdom of going to war to save peace, she steps bravely into a new world where women somehow manage to balance career and family responsibilities.

Grades 6-12. Another wonderful novel in verse that manages to inspire as well as inform the reader is *The Firefly Letters: A Suffragette’s Journey to Cuba*. This elegant book features the story of Cuba told through four voices: Fredrika, an early Swedish advocate for equal rights for women; Elena, the daughter of a wealthy planter with many slaves; Cecilia, a pregnant young slave who longs for freedom for her child; and Beni, Cecilia’s husband. The real life Fredrika’s letters
and diaries describe the beauties of Cuba are juxtaposed against the horrors of slavery, and her visit to the country inspires hope and change in Elena and Cecilia. The way in which Elena thwarts her mother’s own intentions through the use of her Hope chest will delight teen readers. Poets will appreciate Engle’s sure-handed use of fireflies as a metaphor throughout the book’s pages.


**Grades 7-12.** Hubris and carelessness lead to the failure of an earthen dam in the Allegheny Mountains, and lives are lost. In May 1889 after days of hard rain, the three rivers leading to the dam are overflowing, causing enormous pressure on the dam itself causing the dam to break and sending 20 million tons of water on the helpless citizens living below the lake. The forbidden romance between Celestia, the daughter of a wealthy man who visits the area only for vacations, and Peter, who lives and works in the area, is played out against the historical backdrop of a tragic event that occurred because of neglect. This novel in verse features multiple narrators and showcases the compassion of the townspeople for one another. Readers will draw inspiration by recognizing that ordinary individuals rise to greatness during extraordinary times and that humans are capable of change.

**References**


**About the Authors**

Terry Young and Barbara Ward are on the faculty at Washington State University, and both serve on the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children Committee.
History and Mission of Reading Horizons

Reading Horizons began in 1960 as a local newsletter and has developed into an international journal serving major colleges, universities, and individual subscribers across the United States and Canada as well as a host of other countries. The journal serves as a forum for ideas from many schools of thought dedicated to building upon the knowledge base of literacy through research, theoretical essays, opinion pieces, policy studies, and syntheses of best practices. Reading Horizons seeks to bring together school professionals, literacy researchers, teacher educators, parents, and community leaders as they work collaboratively to widen the horizons of literacy and the language arts.

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