November 2007

Dear Reading Horizons Readers,

Welcome to Volume 48 Issue 1 of Reading Horizons, our September/October issue in November with changes and some new staff members.

With the retirement of Yolanda Mihalko, editorial assistant, Reading Horizons has undergone the following staff changes: a new co-editor, Allison L. Baer — a stellar Literacy Studies assistant professor at WMU, Elizabeth Dellinger — production designer, and a host of new editorial board reviewers — Debbie East, Indiana University; Joan Livingstone, Adrian College; Ingrid Eniss, Oakwood College; Susan Piazza, Western Michigan University; and Terri Duncko, South Range High School.

While we miss former colleagues and co-workers on the staff of RH, we look forward eagerly to our new format and the prospect of new, exciting ventures. We will maintain the great articles dedicated to literacy research and practice and welcome and encourage new authors to submit their work for publication in RH.

Although our first issue is a bit behind the deadline, we hope that you agree it was worth waiting for and welcome Reading Horizons back to your shelves and desks for another great academic school year.

Thank you and best regards.

Karen F. Thomas, co-editor
Allison L. Baer, co-editor
Reading Horizons
Kalamazoo, Michigan
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.

Submitting Manuscripts

Manuscripts should be submitted electronically to Co-editors Karen F. Thomas and Allison L. Baer at allison.baer@wmich.edu. Please send one copy with full author(s) information, one clean copy with no identifying information, and an abstract. All bitmap image files used must be submitted as separate hi-resolution (300 dpi) files in jpg or tif format. Embedded images in articles accepted for publication will be deleted from the final publication unless a separate hi-resolution file is also submitted. Manuscripts will be acknowledged within two weeks of receipt. Manuscripts must follow the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA), 5th Edition. Manuscripts not written in this style will be returned without review.

Editorial Policies

After in-house review by the editors, and if accepted for review, manuscripts will be sent to three members of our Editorial Review Board for blind review. Author(s) will be informed of our decision within two to three months of submission. Criteria used for evaluating and reviewing manuscripts are significance of the contribution to literacy/language arts research and instruction, clarity of writing, and sound methodology process used.

Author Copies

Author(s) will receive three copies of the journal in which the article appears.

Reading Horizons (ISSN 0034-0502) is published quarterly by the Dorothy J. McGinnis Reading Center and Clinic in the College of Education at Western Michigan University. Postmaster: Send address changes to Reading Horizons, WMU, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5197.

Subscriptions

Please see back page for subscription information

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

Co-Editors: Karen F. Thomas & Allison L. Baer

Editorial Advisory Board

Jennifer Altieri, School of Education
The Citadel School of Education, Charleston, South Carolina

Mary Alice Barksdale, College of Human Resource and Education
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia

Rita Bean, College of Education
University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

William Bintz, Department of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum
Kent State University, Kent, Ohio

Linda M. Clary, Reading Coordinator
Augusta College, Harbor Island, South Carolina

Martha Combs, College of Education
University of Nevada, Reno, Nevada

Kathleen Crawford, College of Education
Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois

Terri Duncko
South Range High School, Boardman, Ohio

Debbie East
Indiana University, Columbus, Indiana

Ingrid Eniss, Education Department
Oakwood College, Huntsville, Alabama

Pamela J. Farris, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Northern Illinois University, Rochelle, Illinois
Alan Flurkey, Literacy Studies Department  
_Hofstra University, East Northport, New York_

Michael French, Reading Center  
_Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio_

Holly Johnson, College of Education  
_University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio_

Kathryn Kinnucan-Welsch, Department of Teacher Education  
_University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio_

Joan Livingstone, Teacher Education  
_Adrian College, Canton, Michigan_

Dorothy J. McGinnis, Professor Emeritus  
_Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan_

Michael Opitz, Department of Reading  
_University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado_

Susan Piazza, Special Education and Literacy Studies  
_Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan_

Diana Quatroche, Elementary & Early Childhood Education  
_Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana_

Steven Rinehart, Curriculum and Instruction  
_West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia_

Jon Shapiro, Department of Language Education  
_University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia_

Darren J. Smith, Department of Teacher Education  
_Arkansas State University, State University, Arkansas_

Katherine D. Wiesendanger, Graduate Literacy Program  
_Longwood University, Farmville, Virginia_

Terrell Young, Teaching and Learning  
_Washington State University, Richland, Washington_
Reading Horizons
Volume 48, Number 1

The Classroom Library: A Place for Nonfiction, Nonfiction in its Place
Terrell A. Young, Barbara Moss, and Linda Cornwell............................ 1

An Examination of Preservice Literacy Teachers’ Initial Attempts to Provide Instructional Scaffolding
Joyce E. Many, Donna Lester Taylor, Yan Wang, Gertrude Tinker Sachs, and Heidi Schreiber........................................ 19

Writing for Comprehension
Randy Wallace, Cathy Pearman, Cindy Hail, and Beth Hurst .......................................................... 41

Family Literacy: The Missing Link to School-Wide Literacy Efforts
Vicky Zygouris-Coe.......................................................... 57

Engaging Readers through Series Books
Barbara A. Ward, and Terrell A. Young.................................................... 71

COPYRIGHT 2007
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
KALAMAZOO, MI 49008
Abstract

This manuscript provides a rationale for classroom libraries and the need to include nonfiction with them. Guidelines for effective libraries, selecting nonfiction books, and strategies for promoting them are also shared.

Shelley Harwayne, well-known literacy consultant and administrator, notes, “No matter the grade level, when I walk in and out of classrooms, I expect to see classroom libraries brimming with nonfiction texts” (1999, p. 24). All too often, however, classroom libraries contain little nonfiction literature (Duke, 2000; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; Kletzien & Dreher, 2004; Stead, 2002; Young & Moss, 2006). According to Daniels (2004), “language arts teachers have done a great job of hooking kids on all kinds of novels...but
students also need to engage with nonfiction genres that represent 84% of adult, real world text (and a similar percentage of the reading passages of high stakes standardized tests)” (p. 44).

Of late, more and more experts have noted the importance of providing students with access to nonfiction texts. Some reasons for including such books in the classroom include:

- invite browsing, spark curiosity, and promote inquiry;
- create a sense of wonder by building on student interest in the natural world;
- provide students with authentic reading experiences that connect to their lives;
- motivate reluctant readers by engaging them with visual supports and attractive formats;
- expand background knowledge needed to understand the core content area concepts presented in textbooks;
- contribute to student mastery of content area standards;
- build vocabulary by introducing readers to content terms and academic language not often found in narrative texts;
- provide readers with exposure to a variety of text structures and features;
- develop critical reading skills and strategies while extending content area knowledge;
- prepare students for the future by contributing to the development of information literacy;
- combine reading for pleasure with reading for information;
- expose students to text types found on standardize tests, thus contributing to improved achievement.

This article considers the place that nonfiction can and should assume in the classroom library. It attempts to answer the following questions: How can nonfiction in the classroom library help teachers meet student interests? How can teachers build a collection of nonfiction books? What strategies can teachers use to promote reading of nonfiction titles?
A Place for Nonfiction

In a study of the content of elementary classroom libraries across a large school district in Canada, Doiron (2003) found that children were presented predominantly with fictional paperbacks as reading choices. Interestingly, Doiron found that counts from the school library automated circulation records indicated that students were actually choosing twice as many information books as novels from their school library, but that access to such books was limited in their classroom libraries. A study by Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) confirms these findings; they found that while middle grade students identify nonfiction titles as one of their preferred types of reading, they seldom find these books in their classrooms.

This finding points out the critical importance of expanding the “canon” of library books to provide access to nonfiction texts. In this way, teachers can more effectively bridge the gap between students’ in- and out-of-school reading. In addition, nonfiction trade books can deepen student engagement with topics addressed in science, social studies, music, and art. They can provide students with the chance to examine issues related to these content areas in depth, which is seldom possible with the broad range of topics covered by today’s textbooks. In addition, nonfiction trade books related to various content areas introduce students to the academic vocabulary they must master if they are to be successful readers of content area materials. Furthermore, nonfiction trade books can promote student engagement with a variety of text types, a practice that may be associated with improved reading achievement (Campbell, 1995). Access to nonfiction trade books can provide students with essential exposure to the expository text that will comprise most of the reading they will do as they move through the grades and into adulthood (Moss 2005). Finally, student interest in topics addressed in nonfiction trade books can provide the catalyst that turns reluctant readers into ravenous readers.

Reading Interests

Student reading interests must be considered when selecting books for classroom libraries (Routman, 2003). “In most classrooms, the opportunity for student book choice based on interest occurs far too infrequently” (Reutzel & Fawson, 2002, p. 99). Access to interesting books is critical to student reading engagement and reading comprehension (Guthrie, 2002). Routman notes, “A wide variety of captivating choices increases reading motivation. Engagement is
not to be taken lightly: Reading comprehension test scores are more influenced by students’ amount of engaged reading than any other single factor” (2003, p. 69).

Elementary-school children of both genders choose nonfiction over fiction text nearly half the time, provided they are given access to quality trade books of both types (Kletzien & Szabo, 1998). Children in the primary grades and male students were even more likely to prefer informational texts to fiction, which is contrary to what the students’ teachers predicted. They thought, as many of us would have, that the students would overwhelmingly prefer narrative texts (Kletzien & Szabo, 1998). Sebesta and Monson (2003) note that by fourth grade student interests diverge. At this point, boys typically show stronger preferences for nonfiction, but by middle school both genders demonstrate an increased interest in nonfiction among other genres.

Doiron (2003) reported preliminary findings of a three-year study in which teacher-librarians tracked all books students in grades one through six checked out of their school library. Researchers recorded information about each student’s selection, grade level, number of fiction and information books, and subject area of information book choices. Doiron found that while all students borrowed more fiction (60%) than information books (40%) for independent reading, boys checked out more than two-thirds of all information books.

How Many Nonfiction Books in the Classroom Library?

Regardless of the number of books in the classroom library, it is imperative that nonfiction makes a prominent showing. Indeed, Moss (2003) notes, “About half the collection should be devoted to engaging information books and biographies, and this percentage should increase as children move through the grades. Some books should be pertinent to classroom topics of study, while others should have a broader appeal. Students can use these books for voluntary reading, in inquiry study, reference, or browsing” (p. 63).

What Kinds of Information Books Should I Include? Building a Nonfiction Collection

As is true with works of fiction, teachers need to carefully evaluate nonfiction books for inclusion in the classroom library. When evaluating nonfiction trade books, teachers should consider the five A’s: 1) the authority of the
The Classroom Library • 5

author; 2) the accuracy of the text content; 3) the appropriateness of the book for its audience; 4) the literary artistry; and 5) the appearance of the book (Moss, Leone, & DiPillo, 1997; Young & Moss, 2006).

- Authority relates to the author’s qualifications for writing the book. The best authors consult authorities in a variety of fields to ensure credibility.

- Accuracy of content as well as visual features is the lynchpin of good nonfiction.

- The best nonfiction books are appropriate to their intended audiences. They do not talk down to readers but are successful in making complex concepts comprehensible.

- Literary artistry refers to the need for quality writing in nonfiction. The best nonfiction books contain engaging information presented through the use of narrative devices like similes and metaphors, “hooks,” and others.

- A book’s attractiveness matters to today’s students, who are accustomed to an array of visual media. They expect materials with a strong visual impact. Attractive presentation of information can mean the difference between a book students will select rather than reject. (Moss, Leone, & DiPillo, 1997, p. 420)

A quality nonfiction library collection should include a range of titles provided for a range of purposes. Many school libraries contain large sets of “series” nonfiction titles, ranging from the Smithsonian Kids’ Field Guides (2001) to American Indian Biographies (e.g., Wallner, 2003). For teachers who need help in evaluating the quality of these series, The American Library Association website provides reviews of nonfiction series books (http://www.ala.org/ala/booklist/youthseriesroundup/SeriesRoundup.htm) that can help teachers select series books for their classrooms.

A variety of other sources can guide teachers to excellent nonfiction titles. Two awards that specifically honor outstanding nonfiction titles include the NCTE’s Orbis Pictus Award, and the American Library Association’s Robert F. Siebert Award, which recognize the most outstanding information trade books of a given year. Nonfiction titles are regularly included on lists of best books, including the ALA Notable Book list, and are often recipients of other
books awards, including the Coretta Scott King Award, the Pura Belpre Award, and the Newberry and Caldecott Awards.

Small specialized text sets of books should have a special place in the classroom library. These can be books related to a topic of study in the classroom, current events, or an area of great interest to individuals or groups of students. These text sets should include books from a variety of genres including picture books, realistic and/or historical fiction, biography, information titles, poetry, and perhaps traditional literature. For example, a text set related to Mexico and Mexican-American life would be of particular interest to students in classrooms with large Mexican American populations. It might consist of Mexican folktales like Just a Minute: A Trickster Tale and Counting Book (Morales, 2003), contemporary stories of Mexican American life like In My Family (Garza, 1996), nonfiction accounts detailing Mexican-American celebrations of customs such as the Day of the Dead (Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration, Hoyt-Goldsmith, 1994) or books of poetry like Angels Ride Bikes and Other Fall Poems (1999), a bilingual poetry collection in which Francisco X. Alarcon revisits childhood memories of growing up in Los Angeles.

Other specialized collections might include fiction/nonfiction pairs. By combining fiction titles with nonfiction ones, children can deepen their understanding of the styles of both genres (Moss, 2003). By linking a nonfiction text with a historical novel, for example, student appreciation for a particular time period will increase. Popular upper-grade titles like Karen Cushman’s (2003) Rodzina, for example, could be paired with the factual We Rode the Orphan Trains (Warren, 2001). Similarly, Laurie Halse Anderson’s Fever, 1793 (2000) could be paired with Jim Murphy’s (2003) award-winning nonfiction title An American Plague: The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793. Finally, teachers may want to link chapter eight, “Mill Workers: The Last Generation” from Deborah Hopkinson’s (2006) Up Before Daybreak: Cotton and People in America with Katherine Patterson’s Lyddie (1991).

It is extremely important that nonfiction collections span a range of reading levels. Because nonfiction books tend to be more difficult than fiction for children raised on a steady diet of stories (Langer 1985; Duke & Bennett-Armistead 2003), it is essential that teachers meet the range in reading abilities found in the classroom. For this reason, Stead (2002) recommends varying reading levels for books on given topics. For example, a fifth grade class studying
The Lewis and Clark expedition would need books on a variety of different levels on that topic. Titles like *A Picture Book of Lewis and Clark* (Adler, 2003) or *Lewis and Clark* (Stein, 1997) would be ideal for struggling readers or English language learners. More challenging titles like *The Incredible Journey of Lewis and Clark* (Blumberg, 1987) could be available for more accomplished readers. These titles and others related to Lewis and Clark spanning a range of levels can be found in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Erdrich, L.</td>
<td><em>Sacagawea</em></td>
<td>Minneapolis: Carolrhoda.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1.** A Lewis and Clark Sampler
The largest portion of the nonfiction collection, however, should be devoted to books for student voluntary reading. Ideally, these titles should span a wide range of interests and reading abilities and should include books that appeal to students of both sexes. Biographies of contemporary people as well as historical personages should be part of the voluntary reading collection, as should books about perennial topics of interest to students. Obviously, these areas of interest will depend upon the students and their ages, levels of maturity, geographic location, cultural heritage, and much more. Maria Bowden is a fourth grade teacher in an ethnically diverse San Diego neighborhood. Her students, who are primarily Mexican American, often expressed preferences for nonfiction texts. They particularly enjoyed nonfiction titles about volcanoes, animals such as bears, dinosaurs, rhinos, cheetahs, and iguanas, skydiving, black holes, and motocross, titles from the Ripley’s Believe It Or Not series, biographies of baseball players and musicians, and articles from Kids Discover magazines.

It is important to provide students with books in their home language whenever possible. Nonfiction books written in students’ native languages can support English learners as they transition from their first language to their second. Biographies such as Diego (Winter, 1991) and alphabet books like Calavera Abecedario: A Day of the Dead Alphabet Book (Winter, 2004) can support Spanish speaking students who need to read in their first language. Picture dictionaries with illustrations and labels can be helpful tools for both building vocabulary and for writing when students need to find the English label for a concept known in their home language (Jobe & Dayton-Sakari, 1999). “Developing literacy in the primary language is an extremely efficient means of developing literacy in the second language. To become good readers in the primary language, however, children need to read in the primary language” (Krashen, 1997/1998, pp. 20-21). Such reading can certainly include well-chosen nonfiction titles.

In addition, it is important to have multiple copies of some titles so that small groups of students can experience the same text together. Judith Henderson, an Ohio sixth grade teacher and children’s author, regularly engaged her students in large and small group study of nonfiction trade books. Students participated in small group study of particular titles through literature circles (Daniels 2002). Her students particularly enjoyed literature circle experiences with the following titles: Buried in Ice (Beattie, 1992), Secrets of Vesuvius (Basal

**Organizing Nonfiction Books in the Classroom Library**

Simply having great nonfiction books in the classroom is not enough to entice students to read them. Involving students in actually reading the books in the classroom library involves creating effective library areas as well as displaying books in enticing ways (Reutzel & Fawson 2002). Think about a most recent trip to the bookstore. Adults, as well as children, are naturally drawn to comfortable chairs and cozy reading environments. In the same way, we are drawn to books that are enticingly displayed.

It is important to think about the best way to organize books and make them accessible to students. All too often, the few nonfiction trade books found in classroom libraries typically rest on a single shelf labeled "nonfiction," reflecting the misperception that all nonfiction books are alike. Nonfiction represents a broad spectrum of book types and topics, and as a result, as Stead (2002) notes, such organization is inadequate. Students need access to biographies, concept books, life cycle books, photo essays and survey books on topics ranging from animals to zeppelins, and the organization of books should reflect the diversity of nonfiction books available. Teachers can make it easier for students to find nonfiction by involving them in organizing and maintaining the classroom library even when existing systems work well (Routman, 2003; Stead, 2002).

Stead (2002) recommends using separate baskets, shelves, or tubs to hold books grouped by various topics. Students can sort the nonfiction library books by topics to determine the best label for each nonfiction grouping. Through these experiences, students will increase their understanding of the diversity of the nonfiction genre and begin to understand that not all nonfiction books are the same. The tubs, baskets, or shelf space can be labeled and assigned numbers. Corresponding numbers can be placed on stickers for each book to make it easy for students to find and reshelving books. Teachers often note the reading levels of books to insure all students have access to "just right" books that meet the needs and abilities of their students. Indeed, Calkins (2001) recommends color-coding a third of the books according to level to help students choose "just right" books and, at the same time, allows children to make decisions about which books are best for them.
Strategies for Promoting Nonfiction in the Classroom

The Role of the Teacher

For avid readers, access to books is all that is necessary to promote reading. Other students, however, need multiple experiences with books before they will read them (Bruning & Schweiger, 1997; McGill-Franzen, Allington, Yokoi, & Brooks, 1999). Likewise, Morrow (2003) notes that “without the teacher who introduces the materials and features books in their daily routines” classroom libraries will not succeed (p. 864).

Clearly, the role of the teacher is an essential one. When it comes to nonfiction books, teachers may themselves unconsciously promote fiction titles at the expense of nonfiction. It is important for teachers, to ask themselves: “Do we see reading for pleasure as predominantly reading stories and novels? Can we not get pleasure from reading good quality information books? Do we see information books solely as resources we go to when we do research or have an information problem?” (Doiron, 2003, p. 14).

Reading Aloud

Reading aloud is one of the most effective ways of drawing students’ interest to a book (Neuman, 2006). The last book read aloud by the teacher often becomes the most sought after text for independent reading. Teachers generally choose fiction for reading aloud to students and rarely read nonfiction to their students. Students enjoy listening to quality nonfiction. Just hearing the first sentences of Jonathan London’s (2000) Panther: Shadow of the Swamp hooked a class of fifth-graders: “The blinding heat of summer quivers above the swamp. A long, thick tail twitches in the saw grass. A shadow flows. It is a panther” (u.p.). Similarly, after his teacher read aloud Buffalo Hunt (Freedman, 1988), a fourth grade boy responded “I want to read another book by Russell Freedman.”

Many researchers provide rationales, guidelines and many strategies for reading aloud nonfiction to students (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002; Moss, 2003; Vardell, 2003; Young, 2006). The following sections highlight related strategies for promoting nonfiction.
Readers Theatre

Readers theatre is an engaging way of introducing students to books. Nonfiction readers theatre scripts also breathe life into the content areas (Young & Vardell, 1993). Readers theatre can involve students in performing a script based upon a nonfiction title. Requiring no props or memorization of lines, readers theatre simply requires students to use their voices to convey the meaning of the text. Readers theatre is highly motivating to students, develops fluency, and can provide an excellent way to introduce students to a range of excellent nonfiction texts. Figure 2 is a readers theatre script adapted from the blurb found on the inside cover of Mark Kurlansky’s (2001) *The Cod’s Tale*. This can be used to pique the students’ interest in reading the book.

**Reader 3:** What was it that allowed the Vikings to cross the cold Atlantic Ocean to America?

**Reader 5:** And Christopher Columbus, John Cabot, and the Pilgrims after that?

**Reader 2:** What fish became a staple of the medieval diet in Europe, helped spur the American Revolution, and helped the early New Englanders start making money on their own?

**Reader 4:** It was cod, a fish that used to be so plentiful, explorers reported being able simply to simply dip a basket into the ocean to collect them.

**Reader 1:** A fish so common that for many hundreds of years man took it for granted.

**Reader 3:** But now, only a few cod remain in the oceans, a reminder of the once abundant fish that changed the world and of the devastating effect man has had on our earth.

**Reader 5:** *The Cod’s Tale* is full of fascinating facts that seem too strange to be true!

**Figure 2.** Readers Theatre Script for *The Cod’s Tale* (Kurlansky, 2001)
Readers theatre has the potential to motivate students to read the book after experiencing the script. Moreover, many teachers employ readers theatre across the curriculum to increase their students’ content learning while improving their oral reading fluency (Flynn, 2004, 2007; Worthy, 2005).

**Book Talks**

One of the most effective ways of promoting reading is through ‘book talks’ (Akerson & Young, 2004; Allington, 2006). In a book talk, a teacher briefly summarizes or reads aloud a particularly interesting portion of a book to spark student interest in the selection. For example, *Team Moon* (Thimmesh, 2006) is ideal for a book talk for intermediate grade students because the book is a treasure trove of interesting facts and illustrations about the Apollo 11 moon landing. Equally important, it describes the people involved behind the scenes of the historic event. The teacher might share some of the book’s illustrations as well as some of the concerns people had for the astronauts’ safety during the lunar mission.

We recommend that teachers regularly present no more than five brief two-minute book talks at a time. Of the five books, two or three should be nonfiction (Akerson & Young, 2004). In this way, students will be exposed to many nonfiction books over the course of the year. Moreover, book talking books available from the classroom library introduces students to books that are easily accessible to them. Time spent book talking classroom library books increases the likelihood that children will not just look them over, but actually choose to read them.

**Guess the Fib**

A fun way for students to highlight nonfiction is “Guess the Fib” (Kagan, 1994). In this strategy, pairs of students read a nonfiction book and create three statements about the book—two true statements and one untrue. When sharing, the students hold up the book, tell the title and author, and then read their three statements. The classmates attempt to guess which statement is the fib. Student statements frequently focus on the extraordinary aspects of the book, which can help to develop student interest in the book. Three examples for Sy Montgomery’s *Tarantula Scientist* (2004) follow: 1) The tarantula has yellow blood. 2) An Arachnophile is a person who unreasonably fears spiders. 3) Tarantulas use leg hairs to make a hissing sound. The fib is sentence number
two since an Arachnophile is actually a person who appreciates arachnids and an Arachnophobe is someone with an unreasonable fear of spiders.

**Displays**

According to Chambers (1996), “Book displays make books prominent. They stimulate interest. They are decorative. They deeply influence the mental set of people who see them. Displays are, therefore, essential to an effective reading environment”. (p. 20). Frequently, displayed books seem to draw students to them (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; Fractor, Woodruff, Martinez, & Teale, 1993).

Books should always be displayed with the cover facing the reader. Displayed books should be accessible to students and available for checkout. Easels can easily become bookstands, as can benches, packing crates, or plastic rain gutters attached to the classroom walls. The focus for a book display could center on new nonfiction titles, fiction/nonfiction pairs, great nonfiction authors, Orbis Pictus or Seibert Award winners and honor books, books accompanied by student book reviews, book jackets, or other responses, or “Our Favorites” (Chambers, 1996). More topical displays could focus on areas of study like “Weather,” “Current Events,” television tie-ins, and much more.

**Book Pass**

Kim Guyette, a teacher at Marcus Whitman Elementary School in Richland, Washington, found the Book Pass (Allen, 2004) an ideal way for her fourth and fifth grades to sample books in the classroom library. Each child was given one of the books and then three minutes to sample the book, time to write brief comments on the Book Pass, and then the students pass the book to their right and process begins again until each child has sampled four or five different books.

**Conclusion**

Children’s reading engagement plays a key role in their academic success. Both comprehension and achievement improve when students increase their reading volume (Allington, 2006). Classroom libraries have the potential to increase student access to books and to stimulate their desire to read yet often these classroom libraries do not house nonfiction books (Worthy 1998; Duke 2000). The availability of intriguing and engaging nonfiction trade books makes
it easier than ever for teachers to incorporate these books in their classroom library collections and teaching routines. Classroom libraries overflowing with quality nonfiction titles enable students to spend more time reading rather than completing activities related to reading (Routman, 2003), which is critical to the goal of creating successful readers for the Twenty First Century.

References


**Children’s Books Cited**


About the Authors:
Terrell A. Young is a professor of literacy education at Washington State University where he teaches courses in reading and children’s literature. Young was the recipient of the 2006 IRA Outstanding Teacher Educator in Reading Award.

Barbara Moss is a professor of literacy education at San Diego State University where she works with students at the credential, masters and doctoral level. Her research interests focus on classroom uses of information trade books and content area literacy.

Linda Cornwell is a consultant with Literacy Connections Consulting. As an educator for forty-one years, she is a frequent presenter at local, state, national, and international conferences, sharing her enthusiasm for reading, children’s literature, and learning.
An Examination of Preservice Literacy Teachers’ Initial Attempts to Provide Instructional Scaffolding

Joyce E. Many, Donna Lester Taylor, Yan Wang, Gertrude Tinker Sachs, & Heidi Schreiber
Georgia State University

Abstract

In today’s diverse schools, meeting individual literacy needs of students is one of the most challenging aspects of teaching. Instructional scaffolding is a powerful tool that many literacy teachers use to meet the challenge. While the term denotes a wide array of strategies, most teachers use scaffolding in some form or another in their classrooms. Many consider it to be one of the most effective instructional procedures available (Cazden, 1992; Graves, Graves, & Braaten, 1996).

Scaffolding refers to support that a teacher or a more knowledgeable peer supplies to students within their zone of proximal development enabling them to develop understandings that they would not have been capable of understanding independently (Many, 2002; Meyer, 1993). Researchers have examined the use of scaffolding strategies such as modeling, cognitive structuring, providing information, prompting, encouraging self-monitoring, and labeling and affirming as means of assisting students’ performance in the classroom (Many, 2002; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Scaffolding can be shaped by broad frames for instruction which are pre-planned by the teachers as well as by responsive instruction which is dictated by the needs of those participating
To be responsive, teachers must be alert to teachable moments in instruction and choose supportive strategies based on the individual movement of students through their individual zones of proximal development (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Maloch, 2002; Tharp & Gallimore). During such episodes, Maloch (2002) stressed the importance of the layering of back and forth moves by the teacher aimed towards a gradual release of responsibility to students. Similarly, Meyer (1993) argued that educators and researchers must consider the appropriateness of the instructional level at which scaffolding is directed and the ways in which responsibility is transferred to the learner. This process is complicated by teachers’ need to weigh, in a moment’s notice, questions regarding what to teach, what to ignore, how much help to give, and what kind of help to give (Rodgers, 2004).

Although research regarding how literacy teachers develop expertise with instructional scaffolding is scarce, three approaches to reading instruction are founded on the concepts of instructional scaffolding: (a) Reading Recovery (Rodgers, Fullerton, & Deford, 2001; Pinnell & Rodgers, 2004), (b) reciprocal teaching (Brown & Campione, 1996; Pallinscar & Brown, 1984), and (c) transactional strategies instruction (Brown, Pressley, Van Meter, & Schuder, 2004; Pressley, 2002). These studies reveal teachers can be taught to scaffold students’ development, however, learning to effectively use such approaches may take extended time and requires an in-depth understanding of the domain.

Advances in our understanding of research-based best practices, such as instructional scaffolding, can only have an impact if teachers know how to adopt such practices (Sykes, 1999). Examining research on how these approaches such as Reading Recovery, reciprocal teaching, and transactional strategy instruction have been taught to in-service teachers can help us understand more about how experienced educators have developed skills in using instructional scaffolding. This work tells us little, however, about how preservice teachers develop conceptions and expertise with instructional scaffolding. Smagorinsky, Cook, and Johnson (2003) assert that due to the constraints of time, finances, mandates, and politics of varying perspectives within teacher education programs, preservice teachers are likely to develop incomplete or incorrect understandings regarding concepts of scaffolding. In addition, the challenges of scaffolding can become further complicated when teachers are working with students from diverse language and cultural backgrounds (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Roehler & Cantlon, 1997). Therefore, this study was designed in light of
the growing awareness of the importance of scaffolded instruction and the need to understand preservice teachers’ knowledge and ability to implement specific forms of reading instruction for diverse learners. This study focused on the question: How can we describe preservice literacy teachers’ initial attempts to provide instructional scaffolding to second language learners?

**Methodology**

The context of this inquiry was an alternative master’s program in reading, language, and literacy education that leads to an initial certification as K-12 ESOL teachers with a reading endorsement. We collected data in the first year of program implementation with eight preservice teachers who enrolled in the program. The participants had undergraduate degrees in a variety of fields, experience in having learned a second language, experiences in working with children or adults through either religious programs, missionary or volunteer work, or teaching as a substitute, provisional teacher, or abroad. Most had traveled extensively prior to enrollment.

**Data Collection**

Prior to program entry, individuals completed written reflections. Next, they were interviewed regarding their conceptions of relationships between teachers and students in an ideal teaching environment and ways they had supported students’ learning in previous experiences. During their first summer in the program, participants took courses related to reading methods, reading assessment and instruction, and ESOL methods. These courses were taught in the field and included opportunities for preservice teachers to plan and implement literacy lessons in a K-5 classroom and to tutor a struggling reader in a one-on-one setting. Throughout the summer block of courses, the primary researcher and two research assistants acted as participant-observers in the morning discussion sessions and post-teaching debriefing sessions in the afternoons.

In addition, the research team took extensive observational field notes of the participants’ instructional practices during the classroom literacy lessons and one-on-one sessions and, when asked, provided feedback and suggestions to interns regarding their lesson plans and teaching. The research team met weekly to discuss and scan the data for instances of scaffolding that informed our understandings of each participant’s conception of scaffolding. Those notes were charted and analyzed for patterns that would inform the initial codes.
Field notes and research logs were shared regularly between the research team members collecting data (1st, 2nd, and 5th authors) and the two professors (3rd and 4th authors) teaching the courses.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis began with the first day of data collection following a constant-comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As patterns began to emerge in the data, working hypotheses were used to guide the creation of follow-up questions which were posed to participants in informal discussions. At the end of the summer coursework, each participant was interviewed again regarding his or her conceptions of instructional scaffolding and how to implement instructional activities in ways that scaffolded students’ literacy development.

Following the summer data collection, the primary researcher and one other member of the research team began a recursive generative process of data analysis. Through this process, the team identified individual instances of scaffolding and compared these to initial codes developed in the summer and categories found in previous research examining scaffolding in instructional conversations (Many, 2002; Meyer, 1993; Roehler & Cantlon, 1997). This led to continual refinement of the coding system and elaboration of specific definitions for each category. The categories related to students’ use of strategies and conceptual understandings can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. **Coding of Scaffolding Episodes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scaffolding Students’ Use of Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Reading Strategies</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sounding out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Chunking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Predicting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self Monitoring Strategy Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Writing /Spelling Strategies</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Spelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Understanding Text Format</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Navigating the Classroom Culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scaffolding Students’ Conceptual Understandings

- Through Cognitive Analysis
  - Reflecting on one’s own understanding
  - Building background knowledge
  - Drawing on prior knowledge
- Through Use of Texts
  - Turning to Outside Sources
  - Analyzing Textual Information

Findings

This paper focuses on those episodes of scaffolding evident in preservice teachers’ instruction which were related to two areas: (a) students’ use of strategies, and (b) students’ conceptual understanding. Analysis of the data revealed these eight interns implemented a total of 288 episodes of instructional scaffolding in these areas, with the majority focusing on supporting students’ development of individual strategies (69%). Each of these areas, and the subcategories within each, will be addressed in the sections to follow.

Scaffolding Students’ Use of Strategies

Preservice teachers supported their students’ ability to use a range of independent strategies. The largest categories of independent strategy use on which the interns focused included reading (106 episodes) and composing (67 episodes). In addition, some interns scaffolded students’ understanding of text format (18 episodes) and worked to help their ELL learners navigate the classroom culture (9 episodes).

Reading Strategies

All eight interns included instructional scaffolding to support their students’ development of reading strategies. The scaffolding support that was offered in this area focused on sounding out, chunking, predicting, and self-monitoring.

Sounding out. Episodes related to sounding out accounted for almost 50% of the interns’ scaffolding units coded as reading strategies (51/106). The majority of the preservice teachers’ attempts to help students sound out words focused on letter-sound correspondences. For example, the teaching intern, Kathy, focused one first-grade student’s attention on a word he did not recognize
by writing the word (scale) on his paper and saying, “What is that word?” When the child responded that he did not know Kathy continued, “What sound does the ‘c’ make?” The child hesitated and she supported his attempt by supplying information, “The ‘c’ makes the /k/ sound — like in /can/.” She then wrote “sale” on the boy’s paper and asked, “What is this word?” When the child responded “sale,” Kathy continued, “Now put the “c” sound in it.”

While there was evidence in this category that preservice teachers like Kathy were drawing words from actual texts in which their students were engaged, at times these skills were stressed with no discussion of how to apply the strategy independently while reading. In addition, in some lessons there was not as much emphasis on the sound-letter correspondence as there was on matching beginning letters. For instance, another preservice teacher, Cindy, had students identify words from stories they had read that had the same beginning sounds as the letters “wh”, “ch”, and “th” which were written on a chart at the front of the room. The children were to list the words they found in columns on their paper. As students worked, she circulated around the room monitoring their progress. At one table she stopped and said, “Can you find a ‘ch’ or ‘wh’ word? No?” She examined one of the books on his table briefly and then traded books with another student who was sitting there. “Look, what is this?,” prompted Cindy, holding the page open to him. The child mumbled his response and she continued, “Yes, where does that go? Now try to find another one.” While the purpose of this lesson was to work on words containing particular diagraphs, Cindy didn’t emphasize the sounds themselves, nor did she have the students read their resulting list of words. The nature of the activity, therefore, was one of matching letters rather than matching sounds to the letters that sometimes spell those sounds.

During tutoring sessions where they worked one-on-one with students, preservice teachers often focused on sounding out as the main strategy, even when comprehension had broken down. On one page of a picture book for example, a third grader missed 10 words, but the preservice teacher, Lori, continued to have the child read aloud while she prompted him to sound out the words. When it was finished, Lori picked up a second book and said, “This book is a real challenge, but let’s see if you can get through it.” Although interns participated in debriefing sessions focusing on understanding the link between the students’ stage of reading development and the choice of texts, interns seldom abandoned a story that was too difficult for the student during the tutoring
sessions. In contrast, preservice teachers often labored with students on difficult texts, trying to assist students in sounding out any word that was missed.

Chunking. In addition to assisting students with sounding out words based on letter-sound correspondence, in 39% of the scaffolding related reading, preservice teachers focused on decoding by chunking parts of words together. These episodes took two major forms, (a) looking for little words in big words, and (b) noticing patterns or rimes. Two of the preservice teachers, Holly and Martha, focused on the strategy of looking for little words in big words. Martha chose compound words such as “grandpa” and “upset” to help her first grade students see the value in sometimes using this strategy. For instance, one intern had the following interaction with a student:

One of the things that we said that good readers do — they look at the picture, they look at the letter and they get their mouths ready to say those sounds, and they look for little words in big words that might help them. Let’s try Grandpa. What little words do you see in there? (The student circled “and’). So we look at the first sound /Gr/, /and/, /pa/.

While Martha and Holly used this approach to scaffold their students’ processes while reading, the strategy was not always an ideal choice to recommend. For instance, as Holly tutored her student they came to the word ‘other’. She covered up the ‘ot’ and had him look at ‘her’ in the word. The exchange was as follows:

S: ‘har’
H: “her, let’s use her in a sentence” ( The student made a correct sentence using ‘her’.)
H: “Now let’s look at these other two letters.” (They sound out /o/ then /th/, then /her/.)
H: “So maybe next time you can think about this little word inside of it is her and maybe it’ll help.”

In addition to Holly and Martha’s focus on little words within big words, five of the eight preservice teachers included scaffolding episodes which encouraged students to sort words according to word families, or more often, to think of words that might belong in a word family, or words that rhyme. For example, Kathy played a game with her first-grade student in which he attempted to guess as many words that fit a rime pattern as he could within a
timed period. In one session, she turned the timer on and indicated she wanted words in the “boat” family.

S: “poat”
K: “not a word – but okay we’ll count it”
S: “moat”
K: “okay”
S: “soat”
K: “not a word – words we’ve been talking about”
S: “coat”
K: “good”
S: “how many do I got?”
K: “what is the one with f?”
S: “foat”

Rather than providing a list of words from the same family and having students notice the pattern, Kathy, and others, gave the patterns and had students guess words that might fit that pattern. Scaffolding attempts such as these were problematic because the students were second language learners. As a result, students often didn’t know when their rhyming “words” were real words or nonsense words.

Predicting. Another independent reading strategy that three preservice teachers, Martha, Oliver, and Joseph, addressed involved predicting, although this strategy comprised only 8 episodes. For example, Joseph engaged his kindergarten students in previewing pictures and responding to them. Together they would then come to conclusions about what happened and laugh together. Martha used prediction with her first graders to prompt them to notice the patterns in the text, *A House for Hermit Crab* (Carle, 1991). During oral reading, this preservice teacher prompted the students to say the month that was going to come next by whispering “January, February, March…” The students then yelled “April” which cued the preservice teacher to turn the page and show the word, “April.”

Self monitoring of strategy use. One final category of reading strategies involving two preservice teachers, focused on supporting students’ ability to monitor their own reading processes (6 episodes). Martha’s teaching demonstrated effective scaffolding in this area. For instance, she encouraged this metacognitive strategy by saying “Why don’t we try this again because something you
said didn’t sound quite right. If you read something that doesn’t make sense, we should read it again to make sure.” Similarly, in a different lesson Martha increased the second grader’s awareness of his strategy use by stating, “Good! You could see it in the picture couldn’t you – that’s what good readers do, they use the pictures.” Similarly, Kathy also occasionally encouraged self-monitoring. For instance, she helped a student who was stuck on a word by reminding him of the strategies he had used to read the word earlier and pointing to it on the previous page. The student was then able to read the word.

**Composing Strategies**

Examination of the scaffolding episodes revealed that all interns focused on scaffolding strategies related to composing in their work with students. There were two areas of attention evident while the preservice teachers attempted to involve students in putting their thoughts on paper, writing and spelling.

**Writing strategies.** Thirty-one percent of scaffolding related to composing was coded as focusing on writing strategies (21 of 67 episodes). In writing, the interns primarily concentrated on supporting sentence level composing. This writing was often based on words that were being studied at the time or words from a text that had been read. Scaffolding typically consisted of prompting children to consider using particular words in their sentences, modeling sentences on the board, encouraging children to copy these sentences or their peer’s versions, labeling and affirming children’s construction of sentences. For instance, in the following lesson, Oliver began by offering the 5th grader he was working with a chance to write about anything he wanted.

Putting out a sheet of paper, Oliver told his student, “Write 3 sentences about anything you want to.” The young boy looked into space and hesitated. “You can write about family or school or about maps [which they were studying in class] or about Arthur [a character in the book they had been reading].” Oliver waited 5 seconds and then said, “To start out — I’ll let you copy out of the book — here copy that sentence first.” Oliver held the book up as the boy copied the sentence. He then asked, “What does that sentence say?” The boy read the sentence fairly clearly and then Oliver continued, “The next sentence says, ‘now Arthur reads everywhere.’ Now, write one more sentence about Arthur — something from the book. It does not have to be hard.”
As this lesson excerpt illustrates, the preservice teachers’ attempts to support students’ writing sometimes resulted in changing the nature of the activity from one of having students compose using their own language and vocabulary to one of copying others’ work or copying from the text. This seemed to be particularly apparent when the preservice teachers were attempting to have all students in a class write sentences and some children had difficulty keeping up. In these instances, the activity was typically altered from an authoring task to a copying task. One exception to this approach, is demonstrated below. In this lesson, Lori used a story frame to scaffold third-grade students’ writing of a paragraph on a sea animal.

Lori begins by walking to the board where the words “If I could become a sea animal” are written. She told the class, “My animal is a starfish. If I could become a sea animal I would be…” She added the word “starfish” on the board as she talked. Then she reread the entire sentence and added, “a starfish because a starfish looks like a star.” She then explained, “I want everybody to write, ‘I would be…’” and write the animal you chose. Don’t use a starfish. And then write ‘because’ and maybe you like it because it is pretty, because it swims, because it is big, because it is fast.”

This preservice teacher monitored the students’ progress and after a time returned to the board to continue adding to the story frame. In this way Lori supported the students’ ability to create a paragraph on a sea animal which highlighted various aspects of that creature’s appearance, food preferences, and way of movement. However, she maintained the integrity of the composing activity by having students’ incorporate their own language, knowledge, and preferences.

*Spelling strategies.* Preservice teachers’ impetus for scaffolding spelling came from both students and teachers and accounted for 69% of the episodes in the composing category. Student initiated episodes occurred when students asked for assistance in spelling words. In these situations, the preservice teachers prompted the students to use invented spelling or to look in resources such as a dictionary or a book. Often these general comments to student-initiated requests happened in the middle of lessons. In some of these instances, children reacted to the scaffolding by going to other individuals for help or losing interest in the activity. In contrast, the teacher-initiated instances contained more
specific instructions which were then adjusted when students continued to have difficulty. In these situations, preservice teachers prompted students to sound out words; they assisted students by stretching out pronunciations and prompting students to listen to the sounds attending to the beginning and ending sounds. For example, in the following episode, Joseph worked with an emergent writer to scaffold his spelling.

Sitting side by side at a small table, Joseph asked the young boy he was tutoring what he wanted to write. The boy responded, “Lions eat zebras.” Joseph noted, “then we need an ‘s’ on the end so it says more than one lion. Then get started.” The child wrote “l.” Joseph asked, “What do you hear next? L iii ooo n,” he said stretching out the sounds. “P?” asks the child. “Yep. Then li ooo n. What letter?” continued Joseph providing assistance for the student to hear the sound of the ‘o’ in the word. “O?” asks the student. “Yep and what does it end with?” “N?” asked the boy and he wrote “m”. Joseph pointed to the letter saying, “that is a ‘m’ — remember an ‘n’?” Then Joseph continued, “how do you spell eat?” The child replied, “t.” Joseph prompted him to reconsider saying, “have to have some other letters first, ‘EEEEat’.” The child responded “e?” “Yes” affirmed Joseph as the child wrote “ette.”

As shown in this illustration, when focusing on spelling the majority of the preservice teachers provided scaffolding by introducing strategies which would help them attend to sound-letter correspondences in words without over-emphasizing accuracy in students’ spelling attempts. Kathy, the exception, had scaffolding typically focused on obtaining the correct spelling rather than developing spelling strategies. As students wrote sentences with words from their lessons, or completed worksheet activities, Kathy scaffolded by calling attention to inaccuracies and how to correct these misspelled words. For instance, as students reviewed their answers to one cloze activity she noted, “Does anyone want to read the second sentence? I will read it. How do we spell ‘there’? T. h. e. r. e.” The children chimed in as she spelled the word and she continued, “if you don’t have that, fix it now. Everybody have ‘there’ in the first blank?” In contrast to the other preservice teachers who focused primarily on strategies for hearing and identifying sounds in words, Kathy emphasized the use of a variety
of resources for copying correct spelling including the word wall, word cards, and peers’ work.

**Understanding Text Format**

Of the 200 units of data related to scaffolding strategy use, 18 of these episodes were focused on the efforts of four preservice teachers who attempted to scaffold children’s ability to understand text format. Episodes of scaffolding related to text format focused on identifying story structure, parts of speech, capitalization, and periods. For the most part, these scaffolding instances occurred without the preservice teacher clarifying for the students the benefit of recognizing such formats.

The majority of the scaffolding episodes coded as understanding text format focused on the instruction of two interns as they worked to call students’ attention to the beginning, middle, and end of stories. Throughout these scaffolding episodes, the preservice teachers clarified the structure of stories, modeled identification of story parts, and prompted students’ recall of events occurring at varying times. No attention was given, however, to why recognition of story parts might aid students’ in understanding text.

In contrast to these instances of text format focusing on story structure, a small set of scaffolding episodes called attention to sentence structure in a way that helped students realize that identifying particular cues in text is a strategy which can assist them in understanding as they read. Martha, the intern who included such background information, clarified this metacognitive strategy in the following except when she came across the word “but” as she was reading aloud. She noted, “But…. uh-oh, there’s a ‘but’. When there’s a ‘but’ you know something is going to happen don’t you?” Later, she came across the same word again and she stressed the word in a louder voice, prompting students to anticipate that something would occur.

**Navigating the Classroom Culture**

A small number of episodes (9) focused on interns’ efforts to help their English language learners understand the culture of classrooms and adjust their behavior accordingly. Three interns, Cindy, Joseph, and Holly, alerted their students to rules and policies in the environment as an attempt to remind students to follow these rules. Such comments typically took the form of prompts such as, “[child’s name] stay in your seat — it is a class rule, OK?” or “When
your table is ready, come and sit on the floor” which was then repeated with hand motions to demonstrate what needed to be done.

**Scaffolding Conceptual Understandings**

In addition to scaffolding students’ independent strategy use, all eight preservice teachers also scaffolded students’ conceptual understandings (88 of the 200 episodes). This form of scaffolding drew students’ attention to cognitive analysis or to textual information as ways of increasing their knowledge or grasp of certain ideas. The preservice teachers’ attempts to scaffold through use of these areas are described below.

**Scaffolding Students’ Understanding Through Cognitive Analysis**

Of those instances where preservice teachers worked to support students’ understanding of concepts, 80% of the episodes involved encouraging or supporting cognitive analysis. In these sessions, the interns provided students with background knowledge at the beginning of lessons, helped students to draw on prior knowledge, and prompted students to reflect on their developing perceptions of stories or of ideas.

*Providing background knowledge.* Five of the preservice teachers supported students’ understanding of stories or text by providing background information at the beginning of lessons. For instance, Martha introduced characters and their pictures prior to reading a story and reviewed the names so that “we don’t get stuck on the names.” On another occasion, she introduced the terms “sea anemone, sea urchin, starfish, snail, coral” using picture word cards noting, ”these are some words we need to know to understand the story.” Providing background information occurred not only at the beginning of lessons, but also at the word level during reading when clarification was needed, confusion was evident, or the difficulty of terms was assumed. This was the case in one of Lori’s lessons. When the child she was tutoring questioned why the fish in the book couldn’t get out of the ocean, she supported his understanding by words and gestures to help the child understand that fish breathe water the way we breathe air. The two of them then went back to reading the text together.

*Drawing on prior knowledge.* In addition to building background knowledge, preservice teachers also encouraged students to turn to their own prior knowledge to increase their understanding. A focus on prior knowledge was evident in 18 of the 70 episodes (26%) related to scaffolding understanding
through cognitive analysis. These episodes often happened at the beginning of class as preservice teachers drew on students’ memory of previous lessons on a topic prior to starting their instruction. Preservice teachers also drew on prior knowledge to scaffold words or ideas encountered during lessons. By prompting children to consider what they already knew in relation to a word or event, these teachers were able to support their students’ understanding of the new concept. In addition, five interns drew directly on students’ personal life experiences to help them understand concepts. For instance, Holly read a story focusing on a character who was feeling mad and grouchy. As shown in the following lesson excerpt, she asked questions to prompt the children to consider these emotions from their own prior experiences.

\(H:\) What’s another emotion that you feel?
\(S:\) Scared. (A child yells out.)
\(H:\) What is that? What you just did – there’s a word for that.
\(S:\) (thinking…) Screaming.
\(H:\) Let’s hear from somebody at this table. If you have a pet – what might your pet do if it was scared?
\(S:\) (child gives a detailed explanation that ends with ‘woof’)
\(H:\) They might whine.
\(H:\) I’ll bet we all feel mad and grouchy sometimes.
\(S:\) No
\(H:\) What if someone takes your toys?

In this way, Holly worked to tap into the children’s personal lives as she helped them to understand the concepts of mad and grouchy.

*Reflecting on one’s own understanding.* One final way preservice teachers’ supported students’ conceptual understanding through cognitive analysis involved students reflecting on their own developing understanding. This approach was evident in 56% of the data focusing on scaffolding understanding through cognitive analysis (39 of 70 episodes). This was evident when preservice teachers used prompts for students to rehearse their literal understanding of both directions and texts. For instance, after giving the directions for an assignment, Cindy circulated the room encouraging students to articulate their plans for completing a drawing from the story and then focusing attention on what they could write in relation to their drawing as needed. Similarly, after finishing a story or a section of a story, all eight preservice teachers would ask questions
designed to focus students’ attention on the literal events of the story. These re-
hearsals would scaffold students’ conceptual understanding by prompting them
to reflect on their ongoing perception of the story world.

In some instances, preservice teachers asked students’ to reflect on their understanding in ways that went beyond considering students’ literal under-
standing. In these episodes, concepts or ideas were addressed in a way to sup-
port a variety of personal perspectives on story events. For instance, in one
lesson Oliver provided support before, during, and after reading a story to en-
able students to develop their opinion of horrible things that a character did in
a story. Working in groups, students read a chapter together, shared and debated
what to write down as ‘horrible things,’ and then shared their ideas with the
class. Students were continually supported in reading the text and determining
their own ideas of what qualified as “horrible things” and multiple responses
were accepted.

**Scaffolding Understanding From Texts**

A second way the preservice teachers worked to support their students’ understanding was to draw their pupils’ attention to specific textual informa-
tion. This form of scaffolding occurred in 19 episodes (22% of the 88 episodes
focusing on understanding concepts). In these instances, the interns focused
on (a) the analysis of information in the text itself or (b) the use of outside
sources, to scaffold students’ abilities to use text as a source for clarification or
elaboration of meaning.

*Analyzing textual information.* In the majority of these episodes, preser-
vice teachers were again involved in asking questions to assess whether students understood story events. When students had difficulty responding, the preservice
teachers scaffolded their knowledge of the story by prompting the students to
look at pictures or to focus on particular areas of text to find the answers. For in-
estance, in the following lesson, Kathy flipped back and forth to various pictures
in the text to support her students’ understanding:

“There were two times when there was peace. In the begin-
ning there was peace — what did they do here?” Kathy asked,
turning to the front of the book. “Look at this picture — and then
compare it to ...” She showed them another picture, “here where
there is peace.” She then repeated the process, flipping back and
forth to show the pictures. “Here there is peace — there is not
peace… The question we are asking is ‘what happens when there is peace?’” One child responded, “People [are] being nice.” Kathy affirms, “people being nice.”

**Turning to outside sources.** In addition to drawing children’s attention to a particular text that had been read, Martha and Lori also scaffolded students’ understanding by encouraging them to turn to outside sources for information. Such scaffolding was not frequent but when it did occur it involved calling attention to related television shows or to other books by the same author.

**Discussion**

In summary, these findings illustrate that preservice language and literacy teachers attempt to provide scaffolding as their students develop literacy strategies and concepts. The majority of scaffolding occurred as individual, spontaneous instances where the focus and nature of scaffolding were situation specific and responsive to the needs of individuals (Bauman & Ivy, 1997). Thus, interns were involved in addressing issues and trying to provide support as teachable moments arose (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Many, 2002). In debriefing sessions after teaching, the interns noted their ability to pick up on students’ needs, but they expressed concerns over feeling overwhelmed with the number of areas that needed attention. However, as a group, the interns and faculty agreed that the objectives of a lesson should help keep them focused on what to scaffold and what to ignore. Throughout the semester, the interns felt tension over what needed to be addressed and what should be overlooked. Often, literacy lessons were designed to integrate reading and writing processes and the interns’ scaffolding took on a scattergun approach to hit the widespread areas they felt needed attention. While such scaffolding instances indicated preservice teachers’ attempts to assist students with particular difficulties during the lessons, there was, however, little evidence of attention to the ongoing development of specific strategies or content across time. Previous research stresses the importance of systematic attention to areas such as phonics (National Institute of Child Health and Development, 2000) and notes that focusing on single areas of phonemic awareness can also be more effective than a multi-skilled approach (NICHD, 2000; O’Connor, Jenkins, & Slocum, 1995). With the content of scaffolding episodes spread across so many different domains, the overall effectiveness of the interns’ scaffolded instruction may have been diluted.
The scaffolding episodes of these interns did encompass many reading strategies associated with effective reading comprehension instruction. Having students analyze text format, draw on prior knowledge, make predictions, and reflect on their own understanding of content through rehearsing information were categories of scaffolded instruction observed in this study that are consistent with the comprehension strategies found to be effective in previous research (Duffy, 1993; NICHD, 2000; Pressley, Johnson, Symons, McGoldrick, & Kurita, 1989). However, Pressley (1998) noted in his observations of classroom reading instruction that although interns asked students to respond to questions or participate in conversations which focused their attention on the cognitive processes involved in skilled reading, there was little evidence of preservice teachers supporting students’ ability to self-regulate comprehension or understand how or when to apply strategies.

Finally, while the analysis of the focus of the preservice teachers’ scaffolding attempts did reveal an abundance of scaffolding episodes, there was little evidence of scaffolding embedded within overall instructional frameworks. Many (2002), describes scaffolding within broad frames for instruction as providing teacher-initiated opportunities for scaffolding of particular strategies. Such an approach often reflects a gradual release of responsibility over the course so that the lesson movement is apparent from high levels of teacher support to more and more student involvement (Roehler & Duffy, 1984). Research indicates this type of scaffolded instruction has a positive impact on student learning (Collins, 1991; Palinscar & Brown, 1984). Although this model was consistent with one of the lesson designs discussed with the interns, only a small fraction of the interns’ scaffolding episodes focused on concepts or strategies that were supported by input, modeling, checks for understanding, guided practice, and independent practice.

During the coursework, interns were also taught to plan lessons which allowed for immersion in reading and writing through literature discussions or workshop approaches. Previous research indicates scaffolding embedded in conversations in social constructivist classrooms can be quite complex and yet not necessarily indicative of a gradual release of responsibility model. Instead, through conversations and experiences students and teachers weave understanding about strategies and concepts by drawing on the participation of all class participants (Bauman & Ivy, 1997; Hogan & Pressley, 1997; Many, 2002; Pressley et al., 1994; Roehler & Cantlon, 1997). Examination of scaffolding
episodes evident in these preservice teachers’ initial classroom experiences does indicate that support in some preservice teachers’ lessons did integrate scaffolding. Therefore, specific strategy development was intertwined with scaffolding episodes related to children’s conceptual development. However, for the most part, the scaffolding episodes operated as distinct unrelated instances of support that lacked the coherence or repetition to be fully effective.

This exploration of preservice teachers’ conceptions of scaffolding and their initial efforts to provide support to their students across these areas provides important information for the consideration of teacher educators involved in the preparation of literacy teachers. These interns developed a clear sense of and ability to use scaffolding processes such as modeling, providing information, focusing attention, prompting, and affirming, which have been observed in previous research (Many, 2004; Meyer, 1993). The preservice teachers also understood the importance of recognizing teachable moments and providing support for not only strategy development but also conceptual development. However, the preservice teachers were overwhelmed by the range of literacy processes and concepts for which scaffolding was needed and seldom focused attention to specific areas or developed students’ abilities or understandings over time. The fact that their efforts were at times scattered across many diverse areas is understandable given that the complexity of scaffolding requires teachers to make immediate decisions regarding what they should teach or ignore and the nature and amount of assistance to provide (Rodgers, 2004). Such decision making processes may be particularly difficult for novice teachers who are in the first semester of teacher preparation.

Finally, these preservice teachers were involved in a block of courses focusing on reading methods, reading assessment, and ESOL methods. As is common in field-based literacy coursework (Cooner & Wiseman, 2001), as the interns developed their overall understanding of literacy development and pedagogy, they were simultaneously connecting theory and practice through their lessons in K-5 classrooms. Examining this context and these individuals’ experiences in light of the research on teaching teachers to provide scaffolded instruction provides an interesting contrast. Previous research focusing on teaching teachers how to scaffold instruction has focused on preparing educators to concentrate on a clearly identified set of strategies. For instance in Reading Recovery, teachers scaffold children by focusing on strategies related to meaning, structure or visual information, self monitoring, and cross checking using
multiple strategies (Rodgers, 2004). In reciprocal teaching, approaches that have been found to impact comprehension performance, teachers learn to scaffold two or more combinations of four strategies: summarizing, question generation, clarification, and prediction (NICHD, 2002). Transactional strategy instruction may include prediction, questioning, clarifying, visualizing, seeking clarifications, responding based on prior knowledge, summarizing, and interpreting but only one or two strategies are introduced gradually and the modeling of multiple strategies may take a great deal of time and ongoing monitoring of success to ensure students are able to use them effectively (Duffy, 1993; NICHD, 2000; Pressley, 1998). This study suggests a need to carefully consider the scope addressed in literacy teacher education programs in light of the tightly focused areas addressed in effective scaffolding research. Effective scaffolding requires extensive, specialized knowledge of the domain so that teachers are able to make decisions about what kinds of help to provide at a given time (Rodgers, 2004). Narrowing the focus of initial preservice courses and providing additional structure for practicum teaching in terms of lesson content may be crucial for novice teachers’ success. By making such adjustments, teacher educators can scaffold preservice teachers’ beginning experiences so that not only do interns provide more beneficial instruction, but teacher educators can ensure that interns are able to explore specific approaches with the depth necessary to implement scaffolded instruction effectively.

References


**About the Authors:**

**Dr. Joyce Many** is a Professor of Language and Literacy Education at Georgia State University. Her recent research describes the scaffolding processes teachers and peers use to support student learning.

**Dr. Donna Lester Taylor** is currently teaching Early Intervention Reading in the Cobb County School System. She recently defended her dissertation exploring the use of Cognitive Flexibility Theory to advance a novice ESOL teacher’s conceptions of scaffolding.

**Dr. Gertrude Tinker Sachs** is teaching in the MSIT Department at Georgia State University. Her research interests are in the areas of ESL/EFL literacy and teacher professional development. One of her most recently published works includes the book, ESL/EFL Cases, Contexts for Teacher Professional Discussions (City University of Hong Kong Press, July 2007).

**Dr. Yan Wang** was formerly an assistant professor at Georgia State University and now works for the Faculty of Education at University of Macau, Macau, China. Her research areas are cross-cultural issues in education and second language teaching and teacher education.

**Ms. Heidi Schreiber** is currently completing her Doctorate in Language and Literacy from Georgia State University while teaching Reading and English to Speakers of Other Languages in an Atlanta area middle school. Her research interests involve reading comprehension and the middle school English Language Learner.
Writing for Comprehension

Randy Wallace, Assistant Professor of Reading  
School of Teacher Education  
Missouri State University

Cathy Pearman, Assistant Professor of Reading  
School of Teacher Education  
Missouri State University

Cindy Hail, Professor and Director of the  
Graduate Elementary Education Program  
School of Teacher Education  
Missouri State University

Beth Hurst, Professor of Reading  
School of Teacher Education  
Missouri State University

Abstract

Many educators continue to treat reading and writing as separate subjects. In response to this observation, the authors offer four research-based writing strategies that teachers can use to improve student reading comprehension through writing. The writing strategies—About/Point, Cubing, Four Square Graphic Organizer, and Read, Respond, Revisit, Discuss—reinforce reading comprehension by helping students strengthen their skills at summarizing, thinking in-depth from multiple perspectives, activating and organizing numerous thoughts, and creating interest through meaningful social interactions.
Reading and writing have been considered interrelated for many years. Tierney and Pearson (1983) considered both reading and writing as analogous processes of composing. Although reading and writing are strongly interconnected, they are frequently treated as discrete subjects. This separation may be due to an overemphasis in many classrooms on process writing, or learning to write, rather than writing to learn (Frey & Fisher, 2007). Learning to write encompasses the learning the skills of letter formation, encoding, sentence and paragraph construction, as well as, knowledge of the stages of writing that culminates in a finished product that may or may not be linked to literature or content knowledge. Writing to learn is writing for comprehension and provides students with an opportunity to recall, clarify, and question what they have read, and it provides them with a venue to voice questions or curiosities that still remain (Knipper & Duggan, 2006). In a meta-analysis conducted by Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, and Wilkinson (2004), it was found that writing to learn increased both content learning and overall student achievement in elementary classrooms and increased students’ metacognition. These findings are consistent with the National Research Council’s (2005) recommendations that teachers need to activate prior knowledge, teach both factual and conceptual knowledge, and teach for metacognition.

It has been well established that using writing in conjunction with reading strengthens student comprehension. Fordham, Wellman, and Sandmann (2002) state “Combining writing with reading enhances comprehension, because the two are reciprocal processes. Considering a topic under study and then writing about it requires deeper processing than reading alone entails” (p. 151). Brandenburg (2002) noted that when she began requiring her math students to complete a variety of writing activities in her math class, the strength of their writing about a topic and deeply processing its information improved. She found “by forcing them to demonstrate their comprehension through writing, they learned to pinpoint any confusion, compare and contrast mathematical methods, and ultimately deepened their understanding and retention” (p. 68). In addition, she gained insight into the process of how students learn mathematics that she never would have gotten without the writing assignments. Additionally, Edens and Potter (2003) found that elementary students who were allowed to draw explanatory illustrations and then write about them reached a better understanding of the law of conservation of energy than students who were not given the writing component.
Aukerman (2006) advised that “students can find their way to text-based critical thinking when an astute teacher” provides time for exploring texts through supporting interpretations (p. 37). “Interpreting a text should involve making decisions about how different aspects of the text fit (or fail to fit) with the hypotheses a reader has begun to generate” (p. 37). Writing about texts or in conjunction with reading can help readers “unpack” meaning and solidify their interpretations or comprehension. Gammill (2006) also contends that writing is “an excellent tool for building reading comprehension” (p. 754).

The following four instructional strategies—About/Point, Cubing, Four Square Graphic Organizer, and Read, Respond, Revisit, Discuss—use writing as part of the reading process to help students connect with text and strengthen their comprehension whether they are working with fiction, nonfiction, or content area textbooks. About/Point is a summarizing strategy that helps students distinguish between main ideas and supporting details while Cubing is a strategy that encourages readers to view information from different perspectives to aid in increasing comprehension. The use of the Four Square Graphic Organizer assists students in organizing information and making connections across the curriculum, and the strategy Read, Respond, Revisit, Discuss integrates reading, writing, and social interaction to foster comprehension. Each strategy discussed begins with a comprehension connection and then offers steps and examples for implementing the strategy. Comprehension strategies such as these encourage student interaction and engage students in deeper reading to create more connected learners (Fordham et al., 2002).

**About/Point: A Summarizing Strategy**

Writing summaries improves students’ reading comprehension (Olson & Gee, 1991; Rinehart, Stahl, & Erickson, 1986). Summarizing is often defined as a writing process whereby readers condense a larger section of text into a smaller one without using any personal elaborations (Winograd, 1984). Summarizing needs to be emphasized in the curriculum for several reasons. First, summarizing involves thinking and writing processes that have utilitarian value across grade levels and content areas. Learning to write summaries also encourages readers to consider the interactive nature of reading by requiring readers to separate important from unimportant information (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991). Likewise, Rinehart et al. (1986) found that teaching students to
write summaries helps them remember important text information, attend more closely to the material being read, and improves study skills.

Second, learning to summarize helps readers paraphrase written material from the viewpoint of the author yet using their own language. Winograd (1984) found both strategic and struggling readers understood the idea that summarization is based on condensing text. While struggling readers chose information based on what was of personal interest, strategic readers chose information based on what they perceived the author thought was important. Strategic readers are also better able to judge the importance of the material being read as they learn to identify and organize important information. Summarization training may lead to significant improvements in students’ comprehension because it requires them to pay more attention to the text (Rinehart et al., 1986). Summarizing can be taught, practiced, and improved upon when a school makes it an important curricular concern (Dole et al. 1991; Olson & Gee, 1991).

In the following activity, students work in pairs to paraphrase the given material. An About/Point chart (Morgan, Meeks, Schollaert, & Paul, 1986) is used to help students condense and organize information from the text. Students write on sticky notes what the selection is about and what the main points are for each section. These are used as prompts to write a cohesive summary. Instructions for the activity are included in Table One.

**Table 1. About/Point Writing Strategy (Morgan, Meeks, Schollaert, & Paul, 1986)**

1. Choose a selection that is at the independent reading level of the students.

2. Break the passage into sections that reflect a logical summary of events or ideas.

3. Ask students to read the first designated section, then turn to a partner and discuss it. After the discussion, students write a main idea sentence on a sticky note and place it on that section. Follow this process for each additional designated section.

4. After the passage is complete, students use the sticky note information to write a summary of the whole selection on an About/Point chart.
5. Ask students to read their summary to their partners. Students should discuss what they have written by answering these questions: Does this summary express what the passage is about? Were the main ideas of the author stated?

Figure 1 is a sample of the summary activity just described. The following sample was part of the work of a fifth-grade Title 1 student summarizing the basal story, *The First Oceanographers* (Kraske, 1981).

![Sample Summary and About/Chart](image)

**Figure 1.** Sample Summary and About/Chart

### Cubing: A Strategy for Asking Questions from Multiple Perspectives

Comprehending information from narrative or expository text requires students to become aware of and practice looking at ideas from multiple perspectives; they must become involved in “active questioning, practice trying out ideas, and rethinking what they thought they knew” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 21). For example, the authors suggest a six-sided view of understanding that includes explaining, interpreting, applying, having perspective, empathizing, and developing self-knowledge. Additional models and taxonomies list other categories of thinking, all moving students beyond recalling facts to critically
thinking about topics and information. Students can be taught how to examine different topics using strategies such as cubing, to practice and develop such higher order-thinking skills.

Cubing (Cowan & Cowan, 1980) is a strategy that helps students approach reading and writing from different perspectives. Rather than giving the typical, perfunctory recount of a book or content area chapter, students can learn with the simple roll of a cube from perspectives such as compare, associate, analyze, apply, evaluate, and satirize. Just as a cube has six sides, students are asked to explore topics using up to six different points of view.

In order to create cubes, select a topic or book that has enough depth to support multiple perspectives. Generate six questions per cube with each question corresponding to a higher-level thinking skill. It is a good idea to keep at least one question, possibly more, opinion-based with no right or wrong answer. Teachers can differentiate an assignment by creating different cubes with questions of varying degrees of difficulty. Cubes leveled by difficulty can be color-coded with the color of the question sheet matching the color of the cube.

Once the questions are crafted, write the name of the perspective and/or the questions directly on the cube. However, if the cube is too small and the questions are difficult to read, it may work better to label the cube with the titles of the perspectives being addressed, and on a separate sheet of paper, coordinate the titles to their corresponding questions. This procedure allows the same cubes to be used several times. Wooden or plastic photo cubes can be purchased at most hobby stores and necessitate making or buying the cubes only once.

Cubing can be used in different ways. It can be used to initiate free writing where students are given three to five minutes to explore each of the six given perspectives. This prewriting activity helps students initially probe a topic, determine what they know, and query what needs to be given further thought and study (Duckart, 2006). Another prewriting use for cubing is, by exploring multiple perspectives, students determine the most interesting slant for an essay or thesis. Cubing can also be used as an assessment tool for teachers to evaluate the degree to which students understand a topic or book. Perspectives contained on the cubes that prove problematic for students can then be developed and discussed as a class. Teachers can also use this as they reflect on what perspectives they are ignoring in the classroom or what stances they, themselves, are not exploring.
Students do not have to respond to all six sides of the cube. Options include rolling the cube and completing the first four sides rolled. Another option is to have three cubes with different questions so students roll each cube and respond to two perspectives from each. For students who are not accustomed to looking at topics from multiple viewpoints, it may be useful for them to work in small groups and roll a cube for one perspective. Each group can then share their thoughts with the entire class. This will expose students to different ways of looking at a topic without the pressure of viewing a topic from multiple perspectives. As mentioned earlier, cubing can be easily manipulated and adapted for differentiating instruction. Some students may respond to all six perspectives, others may be required to look at the topic from four perspectives, and still others from two perspectives.

In Figure 2, an example of a cube and the questions exploring the book *Pink and Say* (1994) by Patricia Polacco is provided. This cube used the perspectives of describing, analyzing, pretending, comparing, listing, and justifying, but other levels could have been used depending on points or perspectives to be emphasized from the book. The questions attached to each perspective were:

DESCRIBE: Describe Moe Bandy’s life when she was alone during the war using at least three sentences with two describing words in each sentence.

ANALYZE: Analyze the reasons Pink wanted to rejoin the war. If someone asked you why it was important to Pink to return to his unit, what would you say?

PRETEND: Pretend you are in the Forty-eighth Colored Unit (Pink’s army unit.) What would your day be like? What chores would you do? What would you eat? How would you travel? What would the fighting be like?

COMPARE: Pink wanted to heal and return to the war. Say was wounded trying to escape from the war and did not want to go back. Compare the two boys’ feelings about the war. How would you react?

LIST: List words that describe your feelings as you look at each picture in the story.

JUSTIFY: Pink did not survive being held prisoner at Andersonville. Justify why the author beseeches readers to remember him always.
Figure 2. Example Cube

Four Square Graphic Organizer: A Thought Organizing Strategy

Graphic organizers are valuable instructional tools. Simple variations of graphic organizers can expand into rich comprehension aids for all students. However, teachers need to be selective, choosing the graphic organizer to be used based on the objectives for the lesson and needs of their students. Unlike many tools that have just one purpose, graphic organizers are flexible and have endless applications. Because they can be used in various contexts, for differing purposes and at multiple levels, graphic organizers can meet the needs of a wide range of students.

Graphic organizers can be used to get readers and writers to activate and organize their schema by: 1) displaying ideas generated by brainstorming, making connections, taking notes, and targeting specific information; 2) comparing
characters, identifying the setting, or mapping out the plot; 3) helping students organize their thoughts during various stages of writing; and 4) providing a shell for the rough draft of a writing assignment (Gunning, 2003; Roe, Stoodt-Hill, & Burns, 2007; Vacca & Vacca, 2004). Thus, graphic organizers can be used to facilitate learners’ comprehension process before, during, and after reading and writing. An example of a graphic organizer that aids in reading comprehension is *Four Square* writing (McMackin & Witherell, 2005).

McMackin and Witherell (2005) encourage teachers to use the four square approach when teaching writing. The four square approach begins with a basic graphic organizer and a central topic (see Figure 3). Teachers or students next select specific criteria for each square. Prompts for each square may change according to ability, task, learning style, or goal. Examples of a modification is given in Figure 4.

![Four Square Writing Graphic Organizer](image)

*Figure 3. Four Square Writing Graphic Organizer*

*Four Square* writing is a strategy that improves comprehension by using writing to organize and connect thoughts; by helping the writer to generalize thoughts across the curriculum to make meaningful connections between self, world, and other texts; by preparing the student for demand/prompt writing and varied comprehension tasks; and by encouraging meta-cognitive writing with confidence (Tompkins, 2006). Students often find graphic organizers easy to use and supportive in their overall writing and comprehension.
A fifth grade class used the four square approach in reviewing the book *Artemis Fowl* by Eoin Colfer (2001). In this example, students used the graphic organizer to develop a character analysis and then convert the graphic into a summary paragraph. This replaced a traditional book report and clearly demonstrated students’ comprehension of the character (see Figure 5).

1. **Introduce the character:** Holly Short — half elf, half leprechaun; hut-brown skin, cropped auburn hair, and hazel eyes; slim with a fiery temper; pointed ears and 3 feet tall; works for LEPrecon under Commander Root; gets into trouble; is the first female officer.

2. **Describe event:** Holly saves Juliet’s life; her Sonix did not work; hit the troll in the head with her heels, troll grabbed her by helmet; tried to butt heads with troll “Valliant undoubtedly, but about as effective as trying to cut down a tree with a feather” (p. 230); hit caused two wires to connect; light blasted and made troll drop Holly; she landed on Butler and said “heal” and then went unconscious. Butler was healed and defeated the troll. Holly was OK.

3. **Relate to your life:** Holly was brave and saved the human. My sister and I were playing outside and the boy across the street came over and took her soccer ball and wouldn’t give it back; I told him to give it back; he said “make me” so I looked him in the eye and said “fine”; I stared him down and he just threw the ball down and left.

4. **Draw conclusions:** Holly had to stand up to the troll to save the humans. I had to stand up to the boy across the street. People have to stand up for what is right sometimes to keep the world OK. It is important to decide when to fight for what is right. Having the courage to do something brave to save someone is not easy, but you make a difference when you do.
From this example and the subsequent written summary paragraph, the teacher was able to discern that this student comprehended the essence of story conflict and resolution and was able to make a connection to real life. Although the teacher changed the criteria for each of the four writing blocks to meet her specific learning goals, she made use of the strategy to enhance comprehension.

Using graphic organizers may assist students’ writing by giving them a preliminary structure for organizing their thoughts. Teachers should be encouraged to vary their graphic organizers and the ways they use them to make sure all students have the strategies they need to be successful. Just as this teacher modified the *Four Square* strategy, most graphic organizers can also be adapted or converted to support ongoing writing objectives in the classrooms.

**Read, Respond, Revisit, Discuss Strategy: An Interactive Journaling Strategy**

Another way to increase reading comprehension is by incorporating writing and social interaction. Vacca and Vacca (2004) contend that asking students to write about what they have read improves their comprehension. They state “writing facilitates learning by helping students explore, clarify, and think deeply about the ideas and concepts they encounter in reading” (p. 353).

The *Read, Respond, Revisit, Discuss* strategy (Hurst, Fisk, & Wilson, 2006) helps students increase comprehension by integrating reading, writing, and social interaction. For this strategy, students are assigned a text to read and are instructed to read for what personally interests them rather than read for what might be on a test or to answer questions at the end of the chapter. As students read, they are to look for ideational or informational sentences that are of particular interest to them. Using paper divided in two vertical columns when they read something that draws their interest, they write it along with the page number on the left side of the page. On the right side, they write why or what drew their interest to this particular idea or bit of information. Teachers can set the number of entries each student must find from the text. Three is a common number, but for younger students, one entry may be adequate. Figure 6 is an example of a sixth grade student’s learning log over a social studies text.
Learning Log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From the text</th>
<th>My Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>p. 34</td>
<td>Representative democracy is used when the population is too large for a meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This is like how schools have a school board to make decisions instead of trying to get every single person together for a vote. The elected school board member votes instead of each person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p. 35</td>
<td>In colonial America, if you did not belong to the right church, you could not vote.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m really glad this is not still the way it is in America because where you go to church should not matter about whether or not you get to vote.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6. Sample Student Learning Log

This type of T-chart learning log is fairly common; yet, having students share the information from their logs adds an important social interaction piece. After all students have completed reading and responding to the text, each student in the class shares one item from his or her learning log. Each student tells the page number of the sentence from the text he or she found interesting, reads that sentence aloud while the rest of the class reads along silently, and then tells what he or she found interesting about it. Students continue to share until each person in the class has had a turn. Because the point of the text reading is to learn the material in the text, the teacher watches for opportunities to add to the discussion to make sure all of the important points in the text are covered. Based on the students’ responses to the text, teachers have an idea of how well their students comprehended the text. Harvey and Goudvis (2000) state “The only way we can confidently assess our students’ comprehension is when they share their thinking with us” (p. 189).

Lapp, Flood, Ranck-Buhr, Van Dyke, and Spacek (1997) contend “children’s reading and writing processes develop through interactions with adults and peers” (p. 9). With this in mind, Hurst (2005) conducted a study of 547 middle and high school students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the Read,
Respond, Revisit, and Discuss strategy. Ninety-eight percent of the students reported reading part of the text; 54% read the entire text; 44% read enough to complete the log; and 2% did not read any of the text. Additionally, 72% reported they both understood and remembered the text better when reading for interest rather than for what would be on a test, while 65% reported they gained new perspectives from the class discussions they had not thought of previously.

Classroom teachers administering the strategy for the study offered comments that provided an interesting sidelight to the student responses. One teacher wrote:

I think the strategy makes the students more accountable for their reading. Even when I don’t have them do any note taking while reading, I do often have class discussions, and I have noticed that the students are MUCH more likely to participate in class discussions when they’ve done some writing beforehand. I think having a paper with a prewritten comment adds to the students’ comfort levels, while giving them a list of ideas to talk about during the class discussion.

The Read, Respond, Revisit, Discuss strategy encourages students to learn from text and from each other by combining the communication modes of reading, writing, talking, and listening.

Conclusion

The connection between reading and writing is strong and well accepted by many educators (Routman, 2003; Tierney & Pearson, 1983). Reading and writing need to be integrated to improve the quality of each. Writing summaries, examining texts from multiple perspectives, utilizing graphic organizers, and making use of discussion journals are valuable tools for linking reading and writing to strengthen student comprehension. Gammill (2006) states “Writing to learn, to build comprehension and understanding, is a method any teacher in any area can implement and use successfully with students” (p. 755). The four writing strategies discussed in this article are ones teachers can use in any subject area to help their students gain more from texts and help them build their comprehension skills.
References


About the Authors:
All four authors are faculty members at Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri. Drs. Wallace, Pearman, and Hurst teach graduate and undergraduate reading classes, and Dr. Wilson is the Director of the Graduate Elementary Education Program.
Family Literacy: The Missing Link to School-Wide Literacy Efforts

Vicky Zygouris-Coe, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Education
Dept. of Teaching & Learning Principles
University of Central Florida

Abstract

Everyone has a literacy component to their lives. Family literacy refers to the ways people learn and use literacy in their home and everyday lives. Many times there is a disconnect between family and school literacies. Schools do not have systematic ways of tapping into the wealth of knowledge families possess and linking that knowledge to school literacy efforts. This article provides a brief review of family literacy issues and perspectives. Sample family literacy programs are summarized and suggestions are given for strengthening the link between family and school through food, photos, family publications, journals, literacy events, and using parents as resources in the classroom.

Literacy begins at home. Literacy is everywhere and is shaped and reshaped by the spaces we enter and exit (Roswell, 2006) and by the interactions we have with people in those spaces. For some children there is a cultural divide between home and school that has particular implications for the development of literacy for those whose home practices are not sanctioned in school. There is a need to create a permanent space for family literacy in the school.
The story of family literacy is a story of people and how they use literacy to achieve their goals in their family, life, work, and community. It is my story who, although I had an illiterate grandmother, developed a passion for learning and literacy. One of the family literacy experiences I had while growing up in Greece involved monthly afternoons at the movies with my grandmother and her best friend.

Once a month, on a Thursday afternoon, I would find myself riding the public bus into the city along with two illiterate older ladies who enjoyed watching Turkish soap operas (I don’t think I was ever given a choice in the matter). My grandmother would wait for me to come home from school, get a snack, walk to her best friend’s house to pick her up, and then the three of us would walk to the local bus stop. Those two ladies would chat about life, their families, the neighborhood, medications they were taking, and any upcoming events or religious celebrations.

What was my role in this whole scenario? I was the involuntary reader. I would sit in between my grandmother and her friend at the movie theatre and for two hours or so I would read the subtitles out loud for them. I vividly remember people in the movie theatre reminding me to be quiet but my grandmother would encourage me to ignore them and keep on reading. After two hours of watching Houlia (one of the famous actresses in that genre of entertainment), reading subtitles non-stop, and having to deal with people yelling at me, we would finally catch the bus and return home. Of course, I was never rewarded for my services. “No amount of money can buy one’s ability to read!” my grandmother would often remind me. I dreaded those Thursday afternoons but I loved my grandmother! At the time, I disliked the whole humiliating movie experience but treasure the memories now. I guess practicing reading in a public theatre did not scar me for life; I could even say that it helped my reading fluency.

In short, my tale presents a snapshot one of the diverse ways in which literacy happens at home. How could my unconventional experiences with an illiterate grandmother have been relevant to my literacy development? I believe that the interactions I had with my grandmother while she, her best friend, and I were constructing meaning from the movie were invaluable. Literacy development is not just about scoring well on a literacy test; it is also about the relationships that take place inside and outside school. It is not the availability of books, the frequency of book reading, or the rich discussions that might
follow reading alone that are related to children’s literacy and language development, but the broader pattern of parent-child activities and interactions inside and outside the home that supports children’s literacy achievement (Strickland, as cited in Roswell, 2006). My illiterate grandmother took time to talk with me, sing to me, go shopping with me, teach me how to cook and crochet, and tell me tales about her homeland. She was a great storyteller, was very involved in her grandchildren’s education, was an advocate for reading and learning, a volunteer, and a social activist. When my mother could not attend a parent-teacher conference, my grandmother would take her place. I vividly remember her discussing my brothers’ progress as well as mine, with teachers. Although she was illiterate, she still wanted the best for her grandchildren. She encouraged us to learn and succeed and did whatever she could to support our learning. I have come to appreciate the invaluable (and somewhat unconventional) literacy experiences she offered to me.

What is Family Literacy?

Throughout history, the family has been the beginning point for the development of human resources within a culture and the primary source for learning. Families help children construct meaning about life, culture, language, learning, and literacy. Families provide an intergenerational transfer of language, culture, thought, values, and attitudes throughout the formative years of their children’s lives.

The term, “family literacy,” was coined by Denny Taylor (1993) to describe how literacy was used in families. Family is defined as two or more people (i.e., parents, grandparents, caregivers, siblings, and extended family) who share a common lineage (or create a new one), share common goals and values, have commitments to one another and reside, usually, in the same dwelling. Family literacy refers to the members’ ability to read, write, communicate, view, and take the perspective of another. As part of family literacy, family members learn together how to become literate, increase literacy and use the power of literacy and family communication to change their lives and to meet their goals.

Family literacy describes a wide range of activities from a parent reading a book to a child to a formal program with many services for adults and children. Historically, family literacy is an “umbrella term” often used to describe a wide range of programs involving family members and literacy activities. The programs vary in intensity, activities, and duration (Come & Fredericks, 1995; National
Family literacy is a proven intergenerational approach that improves the literacy, language and life skills of both parents and children. There are numerous local family programs throughout the country that provide parents with education and skills that increase children’s literacy and educational development (e.g., NCFL, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Family literacy requires that parents are viewed and supported as the first teachers of their children. The Family Literacy Commission views family literacy as the ways parents, caregivers, children, and extended family members use literacy at home in their community. Parents are critical partners in the education of all children.

The National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL, 1994; 2007) has compiled many statistics that highlight the importance of family literacy in the United States. For example:

- Every 40 seconds a child is born into poverty and every 37 seconds a child is born to a mother who did not graduate from high school.
- 71% of children whose mothers completed college attended early childhood centers in 1996, compared to 37% whose mothers had less than a high school education.
- The more types of reading materials there are in the home, the higher the level of student proficiency.
- Parental literacy is one of the single most important indicators of a child’s success.
- By age four, children who live in poor families will have heard 32 million fewer words than children living in professional families.
- One in five, or 20%, of America’s children five years old and under live in poverty.
- More schools with poverty populations and minority enrollments of 50% or more perceived the following issues to be barriers than schools low in these characteristics:
  - Lack of parent education to help with homework;
  - Cultural or socioeconomic differences;
• Language differences between parents and staff;
• Parent attitudes about the school;
• Staff attitudes about the parents; and
• Concerns about safety in the area after school hours.

• Parents in family literacy programs reported more educationally supportive home environments.

There is much research to support the importance of parental involvement in children’s education (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Johnson, & Van Voorhis (2002); Henderson & Berla, 1994). Researchers in adult literacy and literacy within K-12 schools recognize the role of the family as central to children’s attitudes toward school and learning. The National Parent Teacher Association (NPTA) (2007), reported that 30 years of research has documented the positive connection between parent involvement and student success and the potential of parent involvement to be the most transformational type of educational reform. Children whose parents are involved in their schools by attending school events, back-to-school nights, or volunteering are more likely to do well in school, and to exhibit fewer problems than children whose parents are not involved. Children of adults who participate in literacy programs have improved grades, test scores, reading skills, and are less likely to drop out of school. Parent involvement in their children’s schooling influences student achievement, attendance, self-concept, motivation, and behavior. Poor parents, despite poor education or bad school experiences, are still capable of supporting their children’s development through innate literacy activities. However, many parents may be unable to assist their children in ways that support the school’s program and expectations (Taylor, 1993).

Research supports a strong link between the home environment and children’s acquisition of school-based literacy. Baker, Sonnenschein, Serpell, Scher, Fernandez-Fein, Munsterman, Hill, Goddard-Truitt, and Danseco (1996) found that parents’ perspectives on literacy related to the experiences they made available to their children at home and to the way children responded to literacy experiences at school. Brody, Stoneman, and McCoy (1996) found that children whose parents demonstrated responsive behavior during literacy interactions enjoyed and were more actively involved in literacy activities in the classroom.

Since family literacy plays such a focal role in children’s literacy development, what types of family literacy efforts should we be having in our schools?
In what ways can we systematically get to know parents and families and involve them in the learning of their children? Parents need to feel empowered by becoming active participants in the development of their child’s literacy (Rasinski, 1989). Parents, teachers, schools, and communities together can provide the cultural, linguistic, and academic support children need to succeed. Parents can be instrumental in helping educators understand the complexity of family and cultural diversity of their children. Helping families engage in literacy activities strengthens and improves the literacy skills of all family members.

**Family Literacy and School-Wide Literacy Efforts**

The concept of family literacy is as simple as schools and families working together for the best education of children. Schools need to develop and implement a welcoming and supportive climate for all families and children. Families need to be viewed as the primary stakeholders in school improvement and quality and should be involved in the process. The difficulty lies in finding what those notions of literacy are and how they are embedded in families’ and educators’ contexts (Gadsden, 2000).

Parents need to feel wanted in their children’s school (Flood, Lapp, Tinajero, & Nagel, 1995). Many parents feel that they do not have the skills needed to help their children with homework or school-related matters. Some parents do not know the language, others have had negative experiences with schools, and many do not understand the school culture and structure. Schools and teachers need to re-evaluate how they work with families to foster student learning. Family literacy needs to be viewed as a central focus of any school improvement and school-wide literacy plan. As educators, we must make room for family involvement in our classrooms and schools a priority. How can our school-wide literacy plans, investment of resources, time, and funds succeed if we continue to neglect family literacy? Literacy providers need to listen critically to families’ concerns, and schools need to establish strong and effective networks with community agencies and make that information available to families.

There are many ways for schools to promote partnerships with parents and the community to encourage family literacy. For example:

- Introduce quality storybooks to parents at kindergarten orientation and parent conferences and explain to parents the benefits of regular reading to a child’s literacy development.
• Make school libraries and classroom libraries accessible to children, parents, and caregivers and give parents instruction on how to use the libraries and the basics of reading aloud.

• Integrate family literacy into the curriculum and invite parents to share information, ideas, and backgrounds about classroom topics or projects. Also invite parents to become resources in the classroom to support instruction.

• Communicate regularly with parents using weekly newsletters and phone calls to introduce yourself, report student progress, or discuss problems. Personal notes to invite all parents to school for class events will go a long way to involve parents.

• Hold parent conferences during day and evening hours to accommodate parent schedules. Parent conferences may also be moved to a place closer to the homes of parents and students to encourage participation.

• Recruit high school, college, and community volunteers to read to children during parent meetings to increase parent attendance.

• Conduct ongoing evaluations to assess the value of family literacy efforts.

It is imperative that schools utilize similar programs to forge relationships between families and school in order to support children’s literacy development.

**Programs for Tapping into Family Literacies**

For school-wide literacy efforts to succeed, teachers must tap into families’ literacy and cultural knowledge. Students learn best when the learning is meaningful and relevant to them. Teachers need to understand the numerous literacy environments their students come from and use this knowledge to foster strong family-school connections. Creating positive and culturally-sensitive family literacy programs can help increase parental involvement and children’s and families’ literacy skills, improve relationships between home and school, and contribute to children’s success in school. As educators, we need to acknowledge the wealth of knowledge families offer in terms of language, multiple
approaches to literacy, and ability to deal with life events. Effective family literacy programs reflect and respect cultural diversity and do not operate from a deficit model for disadvantaged parents (Taylor, 1993); such programs value and appreciate parents’ knowledge and instincts as a foundation for further skills development. Using food, pictures, family publications, journals, literacy nights, and parents as resources are some possible ways for tapping into families’ knowledge and literacy practices.

**Food, Families, and Literacy:** Many educators have developed programs that involve food to bridge parents, cultures, and school and in turn help develop better cultural understanding and increased communication between parents and teachers and also among families (Griswold and Ullman, 1997). Many parents are more adept at cooking than reading and would rather share this skill with the classroom. Cooking provides students with opportunities to learn reading skills and math and science concepts such as measurement and temperature, as well as helps students become culturally aware and provides teachers with an opportunity to learn about a student’s background.

**Family Photographs:** Spielman (2000) developed the Family Photography Project in her efforts to collect evidence about family learning, experiences, and practices. She collected numerous photographs from nine multicultural families. The photos pictured the following: parents and their children learning together at home, household routines, children’s learning moments, learning environments at home and outside the home, and photographs reflecting parental values. Spielman categorized the photographs into the following categories: family, friendship, and love; growing up to become courageous and independent; culture: religion, ritual, and play; literacy; technology; responsibility and daily routine; and, the science of learning outside the community. The photos became a resource for teachers. This project provided teachers with the support they needed to better understand their students’ family history and life and to become students of their students (Nieto, as cited in Spielman, 2000).

**Creating a Print-Rich Environment through School-Family Publications:** Teachers can develop a print-rich classroom environment by asking parents to create publications that would help others learn more about their culture. Families can include books, photos, recipe collections, autobiographies, and family histories. These publications could be turned into “news of the week.” Barillas (2001) brought parents’ voices into her classroom through interactive written homework assignments. This approach created a positive, collaborative
environment for parents and teachers, and it invited parents to share, in their native language, how they supported their child’s learning development. Parents and children were involved in meaningful literacy activities using topics such as giving helpful advice to each other about life and responses to the 1990 Nobel Prize acceptance speech of the Dalai Lama, as part of a multicultural unit. She gave parents and students directions about different ways to complete the assignments and requested their permission to publish their writings in a classroom publication. An author’s reception at the end of each quarter allowed parents, family members, students, teachers, and administrators to enjoy the writings, appreciate one another’s culture and language, and celebrate literacy together. Janes and Kermani (2001) conducted a three-year Family Literacy Tutorial Program that helped parents learn how to read storybooks. Parents wrote and illustrated the stories collaboratively, and both parents and children enjoyed reading. Programs like these tap into how families with rich cultural backgrounds and knowledge constructed and shared literacy in different ways.

Home-School Journals: Morningstar (1999) created home response journals as a way to include parents as true partners in their kindergarten children’s education. Through the home response journals, parents, teachers, and children experienced positive literacy practices, parents gained a better understanding of their child’s literacy development, and strong, genuine partnerships were established between the teacher and parents. She exchanged journal entries with 13 families about their child’s literacy activities. The journals allowed parents to raise questions about their child’s literacy development, the school curricula and classroom activities, and provided a vehicle for teachers and parents to inform each other about their personal literacy beliefs. The journals allowed parents to write about their own literacy practices at home, observations, and activities. Both parents and teachers focused on understanding the whole child through his/her literacy activities and experiences at home and school. Parents and teachers also worked together to assess the child’s literacy development. Such efforts allowed the teacher to use the parental feedback for curriculum planning, provided the teacher with valuable information about parents’ beliefs about their child’s literacy development, and helped create a shared accountability between family and school.

Family Literacy Night: Having a family literacy night is a great way for schools and teachers to promote family literacy and family involvement. Begin the night by having a storyteller share folktales and fairytales with families which
starts the event on a great note. In some schools students from each grade can participate by presenting to parents different literacy and reading techniques (e.g., games like vocabulary bingo, musical chairs with phonics, computer games, and comprehension games). Other schools concentrate their focus on parents spending time learning new strategies for teaching reading, then spend time reading a book or playing a motivational literacy game with their child.

Come and Fredericks (1995) developed The Parents That Read Succeed program to increase students’ reading achievement, improve both parents’ and students’ attitudes toward reading, increase parental involvement in school, increase the amount of quality time parents spend with their children, foster home-school connections, and help create lifelong readers. This program encouraged parental involvement, created a forum for parents to express their ideas and questions, and offered realistic activities that contributed to the literacy experiences of children and parents. Come and Fredericks (1995) attributed the program’s success to the involvement of parents in the planning. Parents and teachers advertised this program to the community and were committed to the project’s success. Parents received information on the benefits of reading aloud, how to select a book, how to have fun conversations about a book with their child, how to make books with their children at home, and how to read with expression and inflection to attract and maintain a child’s attention to a book. At the end of the program, parents received certificates for their participation and were given information about summer reading programs.

Parents in the Classroom: Teachers need to provide more reading opportunities for children from low-literacy homes by enlisting an aide or parent volunteer to read to children. Teachers can invite parents to support instruction by becoming teaching partners in the classroom. With appropriate training, parents can tutor individual students, stimulate oral language about different topics, read aloud to children, provide writing support, or provide after-school support. Parents can also be invited to become resources in the classroom; for example, parents can share personal experiences and events that relate to curricula objectives (i.e., cultural information, celebrations, etc.). Teachers need to clearly explain to parents what their children are studying and what the teacher expects the parents to do in support of their children’s learning and success (For a list of sample parent resources, see Figure 1).
Concluding Thoughts

Investing in family literacy can help bring about positive results in school-wide literacy efforts. Educators need to develop their knowledge of cultures and schools need to develop specific plans for family and community involvement in school. We need to not only learn about families but also create family
literacy programs that involve parents in communicating, volunteering, supporting children’s learning at home, decision making, and also collaborating with the community (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Johnson, & Van Voorhis, 2002). Let us embrace family literacy and view it as a mediator for children’s literacy development instead of an obstacle. We need to better understand the richness and diversity of knowledge of the family unit and channel them in our school-wide literacy efforts and learn how to interact with diverse families (Cadzden, 1999). It is very important that we begin to acknowledge “multiple literacies” (Morrow & Neuman, 1995, p. 550) found in the social practices of culturally diverse families. Shockley, Michalove, and Allen (1995) reminded us that to effectively bring families and schools together we must not try “to impose our vision of literacy but to develop relationships with families where we can learn about what really existed in their families and connect that with the literacy classroom environment” (p. 94).

I am not a grandmother yet, but when I become one, I might just take my grandchildren to a foreign movie and ask them to read the subtitles for me...Who knows? They might even enjoy it and appreciate it later on.

References


Speilman, J. (2000). The family photography project; “We will just read what the pictures tell us.” The Reading Teacher, 54, 762-770.


About the Author:
Vicky I. Zygouris-Coe is associate professor of education at the University of Central Florida, College of Education. Her interests lie in literacy, content area reading, family literacy, teachers’ knowledge, and online professional development.
What’s New in Children’s Literature? Engaging Readers through Series Books

Barbara A. Ward & Terrell A. Young

Abstract

Although experts may debate the literary value of series books and bemoan readers’ reluctance to move away from familiar characters and settings, the fact remains that they often draw reluctant readers to the printed word. There is no evidence that reading series books ruins the literary health or moral fiber of readers (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008). In fact, the opposite may happen since series books often promote reading in reluctant readers. Time spent searching for something to read can be shortened, and long hours can be filled profitably with series reading since readers already know the types of books for which they’re searching. If readers find the character at the heart of a series book to be interesting enough, they’ll stick with that character as he/she grows or experiences all sorts of adventures, some likely, some not so likely. Some readers find themselves maturing alongside the characters who have become their friends on the printed pages, and use their behavior as models for their own.

Series books provide a sense of normality and security to readers since they are familiar and predictable, and the characters rarely surprise them. They take comfort from the clear storyline and the assurance that any problems that arise will be resolved in a satisfactory way. Readers know that any loose ends will be tied up in the next book in the series, and so they read on and on, intrigued by the literary family they’ve discovered. If our purpose is to promote engagement with books, then series books clearly provide one avenue to engagement.
For this issue’s column on books, we thought it would be informative to take a look at some of the popular series books whose most recent volumes were published in 2006 or 2007. After all, July marked the arrival of the final installment of one of the most popular series ever published when J. K. Rowling took us Muggles back into the magical world of Hogwarts with its delightful cast of witches and wizards in the immensely satisfying *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007). The seventh title in the fantasy series that began a decade ago with *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (1997) is filled with literary delights and lessons about the choices that humans make, and the constant reminder that even evil individuals are capable of acts of kindness.

Nonfiction also gets on the series bandwagon with three excellent series: *Insiders*, a terrific new science series; the *Outside and Inside* science series filled with intriguing science and suppositions about topics of interest to young readers; and *Up Close*, a collection of fascinating biographies featuring compelling stories and intriguing individuals, some of whom seem to have written the soundtrack of our lives.

### Younger Readers

**K-3**

The Zelda and Ivy series offers beginning chapter books to young readers. In the latest installment, *Zelda and Ivy: The Runaways* (Kvasnosky, 2007), readers have three short chapter/stories. The first is about how the spirited fox sisters “run away” from home in their backyard to avoid another lunch of cucumber sandwiches. In the second, they decide to create a time capsule and bury some of their most prized possessions only to discover they are not ready to part with their treasures. Finally, the third story involves Ivy’s creation of a magic potion to enable Zelda to overcome her writers’ block to create a poem. Children relate to the foxes’ sibling rivalry, the clever text, and humorous illustrations. The American Library Association awarded this book with the Theodore Seuss Geisel Beginning Reader Medal.

Kate DiCamillo’s Mercy Watson chapter book series provides first through third grade readers with rollicking reading adventures. Mercy, the “porcine wonder,” is the Watsons’ beloved pet pig who loves hot buttered toast. The most recent book, *Mercy Watson: Princess in Disguise* (2007), a delightful Halloween story in which Mercy is dressed as a princess complete with a tiara,

Second grader Goonie Bird Greene takes Watertower Elementary School by storm, and things will never be the same for her classmates. What’s not to love with a heroine who is a natural storyteller, has an enormous vocabulary and enjoys dressing her own way? She tells “absolutely true” stories in the first book in this series, *Goonie Bird Greene* (Lowry, 2004), and her classmates and even her teacher Mrs. Pidgeon, fall in love. In the most recent installment of the series, *Goonie the Fabulous* (2007), Goonie and her classmates are inspired to write their own fables. As usual, Goonie is the star, and Mrs. Pidgeon and the other children play supporting roles.

Third grader Clementine is almost always in trouble. She spends more time in the principal’s office than in her classroom, and even at home, she finds trouble with her neighbor Margaret, whose house is far too neat and orderly for the shenanigans of free-spirited Clementine. Introduced in *Clementine* (Pennypacker, 2006), this unusual girl finds herself looking for a talent to display at the school talent show in *Clementine the Talented* (2007), an experience common to many readers. The newest book shows that even the self-confident Clementine can feel insecure in some respects, especially when faced with the multi-talented Margaret, who simply can’t decide which of her many talents to display. Readers will side with Clementine as she tries to find a way out of public humiliation.

The inimitable Judy Moody is one of a kind, but in the latest saga *Judy Moody Around the World in 8½ Days* (McDonald, 2006), her equilibrium is threatened when she meets Amy Namey, another third grader with a rhyming name. When Amy and Judy become friends, her other friends are threatened and decide to boycott doing their part of the class Around the World project. The book has much to offer concerning teamwork.

Many children have grown up listening to the more than 20 books in the Max and Ruby series by Rosemary Wells. These books feature Max, a rambunctious, toddler bunny, and his seven-year-old big sister, Ruby. In *Max Counts His Chickens* (2007), the Easter Bunny hides ten pink marshmallow chicks for the two bunnies. Grandma must act quickly when Ruby finds them all. Children enjoy both the humor in Max’s search and the counting opportunities this clever and wonderfully illustrated book provides.
Expected in early 2008, *Inkdeath*, Cornelia Funke’s eagerly anticipated third title in the Inkheart series should answer readers’ questions about its characters’ fates in their fictional world. In the first book in this trilogy, *Inkheart* (2003), an evil character named Capricorn escapes from a book when Meggie’s father, Silvertongue, reads aloud from it. In *Inkspell* (2005), Meggie and Farid, first introduced to readers in *Inkheart*, end up caught inside *Inkheart*, the book whose characters have come to life. Inside the book’s world, they meet Fenoglio, the book’s author, but the book he has written has been changed, and continues to change—in ways that threaten them and those they love. Things are looking grim at the end of *Inkspell*, and Dustfinger’s fate hangs in the balance.

A delightful series that has its roots in familiar fairy tales and puts a new spin on familiar fairy tale characters, the four books in the Sisters Grimm collection follow the misadventures of siblings Sabrina and Daphne Grimm. In the first book *Fairy-tale Detectives* (Buckley, 2005), the bitter and decidedly unkind Ms. Smirt has brought the girls to the home of their grandmother Relda after their parents’ disappearance and their stay in an orphanage. The girls are, by turns, shocked and intrigued by this unusual household and its denizens, one of whom, Mr. Canis, seems to have more in common with wolves than humans. Their adventures continue in *The Unusual Suspects* (2005), *The Problem Child* (2006), and in *Once Upon a Crime* (2007). In the most recent publication the sisters venture to New York to solve a murder. While there, they learn a secret about their mother. The combination of fairy tale elements and the modern world leaves plenty of room for laughter and surprise in this quirky, compelling series.

Readers learn about art while having a high-flying adventure in *Chasing Vermeer* (Balliet, 2004). Chicago sixth graders Petra and Calder discover that they share a love for art, and when a painting by Vermeer is stolen, their bond grows stronger as they decide to recover the painting and reveal the thief. Using pentominos, a mysterious book, and their careful observations, they take the readers on a wild chase as they try to solve the mystery before it’s too late and the thief destroys the painting. The second book, *The Wright 3* (2006), follows
Petra, Calder, and their friend Tommy as they work to save Chicago’s famous Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Robie House from being destroyed. There are twists and turns that keep readers reading, and mysteries to solve. Not only do readers find challenging puzzles, but they also get an insider’s view of Chicago and its incredible architecture. Balliet’s many fans are hoping for more puzzles for Petra, Calder, and Tommy.

Many children enjoy reading about the child-criminal mastermind, Artemis Fowl, in the fantasy series by the Irish author Eoin Colfer. In book five, *The Lost Colony* (2006), an ancient spell begins to unravel and has the potential to unleash hordes of demons onto the earth with the potential to destroy humankind. Artemis once again enlists the help of Captain Holly Short to prevent this demon colony from returning to the earth. We are also introduced to another juvenile genius whose efforts to capture a demon complicates Artemis’s plans to keep the demons from the earth.

Sandra Markle’s incredible *Outside and Inside Wooly Mammoths* (2007) is filled with amazing photographs and scientific suppositions about the demise of the wooly mammoth. Markle’s text adds new luster to an already intriguing subject. Other books in the Outside/Inside series, *Mummies, Killer Bees*, and *Giant Squid* (2003), are equally engaging and sure to inspire “Oooh!”s and “Ahhhh!”s from fascinated readers.

A stunning new nonfiction series, *Insiders*, offers both a visual and textual feast for readers in grades three through six. Each book addresses a spellbinding topic such as *Dinosaurs* (Long, 2007), *Egypt* (Tyldesley, 2007), *Oceans* (McMillan & Musick, 2007), and *Space* (Dyer, 2007) in engaging text that is both fascinating and current. The accompanying illustrations are dynamic computer-generated and 3-D images. The book, *Egypt* (2007), invites
readers to view many facets of ancient Egyptian civilization such as the inner-
workings of pyramid building, the making of a mummy, and an inside look at
King Tutankhamen’s tomb.

**Older Readers**
**Grades 6 and Up**

What if the great Sherlock Holmes had a younger sister who was every bit
as clever as he was? That’s the idea behind the delightful Enola Holmes series,
which is set in Victorian London. Fourteen-year-old Enola Holmes is on the run
from her older brothers Sherlock and Mycroft. Enola, introduced to readers in
*The Case of the Missing Marquess* (Springer, 2006), is feisty, determined, and
crafty. Detective work must run in the family since she displays her sibling’s own
adventures will continue in *The Case of the Bizarre Bouquets* (2008),
and her fans simply cannot wait.

His name is Bond, James Bond, and we meet him in *Silver Fin* (Higson,
2005) at the age of 14 before he becomes a lady-killing spy. Living with his aunt
and attending a private school, the young Bond endures the typical teasing
from an arrogant, privileged classmate and discovers a bizarre genetic experi-
ment in Scotland. The young Bond is better developed and more interesting in
*Blood Fever* (2006), the second installment of the series. On a school trip with
classmates, James finds villainy and piracy on the island of Sardinia as well as
treachery among his teachers, one of whom belongs to a secret Italian society.
The makings of the future 007 can be seen is James’s determination and hero-
ism, and the characters and the plot hold the readers’ interest and bode well for
the 2008 release of the next Young Bond adventure *Double or Die*.

In the most recent entry in the Alice series, *Dangerously Alice* (2007),
author Phyllis Reynolds Naylor’s beloved character is 16, and suffers the ig-
nominy of being labeled a “Goody-Two Shoes” by her classmates as she faces
several challenges familiar to teens, including whether to become sexually active.
Readers who have grown up with Alice since the first titles when she was a sixth grader on the edge of becoming a teen and the prequel *Starting with Alice* (2004) will relate strongly to Alice’s dilemmas and care about the decisions she makes as she becomes involved with a much more experienced boyfriend. *Alice in Agony* (1985) was the first title in this series, and the twenty-third title, *Alice in the Know* (2007), is set to be released this fall. It’s hard for readers not to love Alice because her adventures and struggles mirror those of many preteen and teen girls. Her very ordinariness guarantees that they’ll crave more books about Alice and the choices she makes.

Readers met Darren Shan, an average boy with a taste for the macabre, and who sneaks into a magic show one night and subsequently has his life changed in the first book in *Cirque du Freak: A Living Nightmare* (2001) in this gory series gobbled up primarily by boys. By the time Darren struggles into book eleven of the series, he is part-vampire and has suffered unaccountable losses. The twelfth title in the series, to be released in the fall, pits Daren in a fight for the fate of his world. Although the most recent titles lack the intrigue and originality of the first few entries in this series, they continue to attract and keep their audience reading.

In one of the titles in the new Up Close biography series, *Up Close: Rachel Carson* (Levine, 2007), readers learn about the power of the written word and of a determined individual. A woman ahead of her time, Carson studied the earth’s ecosystems and became concerned over the influence of pesticides on the environment. Burdened with many financial and family responsibilities, she was still able to write beautifully about the ocean and the physical world in a way that forced others to take notice and to care about their own actions. The author draws from Carson’s journals and other writings to keep the reader’s interest. Other Up Close titles worth reading include biographies of Johnny Cash, Robert Francis Kennedy, Elvis Presley, and Oprah Winfrey. All contain gritty, realistic accounts of the struggles and successes of these public figures. The publisher plans to release volumes featuring Ella Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, and Frank Lloyd Wright as well.
References


BACK ISSUES: While available, back issues may be purchased from Reading Horizons at $5.00 per copy. Microfilm copies are available from University Microfilm International, 300 Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor MI 48108.

SUBSCRIPTIONS: Reading Horizons is a quarterly journal of the College of Education at Western Michigan University. The journal depends on subscriptions for its operation, and has maintained a moderately priced individual rate over many years. The individual yearly rate is $20, with reductions for multi-year subscriptions. The institutional rate is $25 per year. To cover shipping and handling costs, Canadian subscriptions are an additional $5 per year, while other international subscriptions are an additional $10 per year. We invite your subscription and your support. Please subscribe – and encourage your colleagues and library to subscribe — by copying this page and sending it to Circulation Manager, WMU-Reading Horizons, 1903 W. Michigan Ave., Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5255. Please make your check payable to Reading Horizons.

TYPE OF SUBSCRIPTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Individual:</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$20 (1 yr)</td>
<td>$38 (2 yrs)</td>
<td>$55 (3 yrs)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Institutional:</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$25 (1 yr)</td>
<td>$50 (2 yrs)</td>
<td>$75 (3 yrs)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shipping & Handling:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Canadian:</th>
<th>International</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$5.00</td>
<td>$10.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total ________

Name: __________________________________________________________

Address: _______________________________________________________

City/State/Province: ___________________________________________

Country/Postal Code: ___________________________________________