April 2008

Louise Rosenblatt once said, “research in reading, no matter what else it has demonstrated, has found the teacher to be a most important — perhaps the most important — factor in the educational process” (1938/1983, p. xi). Every day educators around the world enter classrooms filled with students, some eager and some not so eager, ready and willing to teach. We plan, assess, teach, listen, empathize, encourage, write, think, solve problems, and watch. Ideally, we are aware of our students’ learning, our teaching, and frequently find ourselves reflecting on what is happening in and around our classrooms. It is this awareness that often causes us to question. Why did my students react this way to this writing prompt? Why did they choose this book over that book? What was it about that question that spurred such in-depth discussion?

I distinctly remember the day, many years ago in my sixth grade language arts class when Courtney stood up to present her final project after reading the book *Mick Harte Was Here* (Park, 1996). She had made a model of the scene in which Phoebe was giving the eulogy at her brother Mick’s funeral. It was a simple model of a church with black walls, no windows, and a small Phoebe standing behind a podium. Her verbal presentation was adequate, not particularly interesting, and showed little understanding of the impact of Phoebe’s words. Not overly impressed and thinking that she might not have read the whole book, I later read her accompanying paper explaining why she created the model and how it related to the story. Courtney, who had never written more than a paragraph for any assignment, had written two pages explaining how she could relate to Phoebe as she, too, had spoken at her brother’s funeral when he was killed in a motorcycle accident. The black walls of the church mirrored the dark she felt in her heart as she wept for the loss of her brother. I was stunned. What had brought about this strong reaction that caused her to write so much and with that amount of thought and feeling? Yes, she had a strong personal connection with the text but her writing showed such improvement. She had read other books during the school year and had written countless pieces of many genres but this one was different. I started wondering: did the model help her better form her ideas and therefore affect her writing? It was this question that ultimately led to my dissertation almost ten years later.
Teachers are constantly questioning. In this issue you will meet four authors whose questions led them to research and write. Deanna Day wanted to know what would happen if literature circles were implemented in a middle school classroom of English language learners. Glenna, the classroom teacher, had serious doubts that her students would have in-depth discussions about books but, as you will see, everyone was pleasantly surprised. Margaret Moore-Hart, having an interest in technology and how its use can affect reading and writing, worked with two primary teachers providing support for both the teachers and young students in their language arts classes. This journey of discovery led to some creative writing and interesting insights from all involved. Terrance Stange and Susan Wyant asked if using poetry could not only enhance literacy learning but improve classroom behavior in a second grade classroom. The results are fascinating, as these young children not only became immersed in poetry but learned effective interpersonal skills. Our book reviewers, Barbara A. Ward and Terrell A. Young, ask teachers to think creatively about the resources they provide for their students. Instead of using textbooks, why not use text sets? The authors review multiple books in thematic text sets and encourage teachers to use them to increase student learning and engagement.

As you read these articles, think about your own teaching and learning. Whatever age your students, toddlers, adults, or any age in between, reflect on what happens in your classroom. What is it that makes you wonder? What are you going to do to satisfy your curiosity?

On another note, I would like to thank Dr. Karen Thomas, Director of the Dorothy McGinnis Reading Clinic at Western Michigan University, for her many years editing Reading Horizons. Karen’s expertise has led this fine journal for seven years and she has decided to step down from the position of editor to pursue her own questions about literacy learning. Personally, I appreciate her friendship and mentoring and professionally, we all look forward to seeing what new answers Karen will find to her many questions.

Allison L. Baer, 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 Editor 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 submitted in this manner. Manuscripts should be approximately 25 pages in length, not counting references and figures, double-spaced, and using 1.25” margins and 12 point font. 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.

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There is no more crucial or basic skill in all of education than reading.
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From Skeptic to Believer: One Teacher’s Journey Implementing Literature Circles

Deanna Day
Assistant Professor, Washington State University
with
Glenna Ainley
6th Grade Teacher, Battle Ground School District

Abstract
This is the story of one middle school teacher’s journey of implementing literature circles with English language learners. Theory and research suggest that literature circles are valuable and important for young adolescents yet many teachers are still skeptical about implementing them. During this three-month study 22 sixth graders, 12 of them English learners, were involved in reading and discussing books. Areas that helped this teacher become a believer in literature circles included: students were able to talk about books in the literature circles, students naturally discussed the major themes and literary elements, students made sense of the texts, and students were actively engaged and excited. In conclusion, implications for teachers and teacher educators are addressed.

My former school district didn’t allow us to do literature circles because they weren’t focused, intentional teaching. I took that to mean that literature circles might be good for advanced readers, but weren’t appropriate for students reading below grade level. My current principal contacted me about having someone work with me in my reading classroom using literature circles. I was skeptical, but I agreed to give it a try.
This reflection was written by Glenna, a middle school English teacher who was adept at using reading programs incorporating lessons on grammar, spelling, and vocabulary. She was skeptical about implementing literature circles in her classroom because most of her students were reading below grade level and were considered English language learners. She was afraid that literature circles were too advanced for her students.

Glenna is not alone in her doubts about literature circles. Even with the abundant amount of research on literature circles there are still many middle school teachers who are not implementing them. Some assume children and adolescents, particularly those still acquiring English as a second language, are unable to discuss a piece of text. While others believe that struggling readers cannot have critical dialogue or deep discussions about books because they have difficulty comprehending texts. A number of school districts even discourage conversations with literature because they believe children need to be working on predetermined sets of skills before they are able to engage in talk about books (Martínez-Roldán & López-Robertson, 1999/2000). Unfortunately, as many researchers have found, teachers and society often have low expectations for English language learners with immigrant backgrounds (Nieto, 2002).

I began working in Glenna’s classroom to discover how to implement literature circles with her English language learners. Gradually, the research evolved into understanding how a teacher’s beliefs changed about literature circles. This article shares the story of Glenna, who began as a skeptic and is now a believer in using literature circles in her classroom.

**Literature Circles**

Literature circles or grand conversations are a way for students to practice reading, writing, conversing, listening, and interpreting (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). Within small groups students share their own ideas, opinions, and personal experiences in response to literature. In this community like setting reluctant students or novice speakers of English are given an opportunity to hear a wide range of cultural perspectives, language, and points of views in a non-threatening environment. Together students collaborate, think critically, and negotiate meaning (Short & Klassen, 1993).

The underlying theories that support literature circles include the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1938).
Vygotsky (1978) believes that children learn language and literacy by participating in meaning-centered and culturally valuable literacy activities. In collaborative social atmospheres students, alongside adults or more competent peers, reflect, listen, theorize, and create new knowledge. Similarly, Rosenblatt (1938) maintains that in collaborative discussions about literature, teachers and students take an active role in engaging with a text to create meaning. Each reader brings his or her emotions, concerns, life experiences, and knowledge to a text, often resulting in a new way of thinking and meaning.

Short (1997) asserts that through literature circles, readers have the opportunity to become literate. As students are reading they are actively thinking and learning. In discussions, they engage in ongoing dialogue discussing insights, raising questions, and sharing their interpretations, helping them to become critical thinkers and readers. Hepler (1991) claims that literature circles help teachers create communities of readers, where children discover what they think about literature. Students learn to explain, clarify, and define meaning for themselves. Organizing these types of conversations around literature in our classrooms support Vygotsky’s and Rosenblatt’s theories and are an essential part of making readers.

Since more than half of Glenna’s students were English language learners, we tried to organize a classroom for language acquisition to occur. Collier (1995) emphasizes a highly interactive environment where language is taught through problem solving, negotiation of meaning, and discovery learning as both academic language and cognitive development flourish in this kind of supportive environment. Similarly, Krashen (1993) promotes learning language naturally by using it for real communication and thinking about past experiences. He also emphasizes meaningful interactions with native speakers. Literature circles build on this language and literacy learning, where students think back on their own language, culture, and life experiences to share feelings, thoughts, and opinions in small groups. These social settings can provide students with the means to construct new language and knowledge.

**Background**

Glenna had previously taught in another part of our state, where the philosophy was structured and teachers used a scripted reading program. She explained, “I realize now that in my former district we were oppressed teachers. We were afraid to do anything outside of the program.” Now in a new school district where she was
allowed her to teach with much more freedom, she still felt an enormous obligation to make sure her English language learners and struggling readers improve in reading, so she relied on her past understandings. During the 60-minute reading period at this new school, Glenna supplemented the adopted reading anthology with leveled books that she borrowed from a neighboring elementary school. She set up stations where she and two classroom paraprofessionals taught small groups that rotated daily. These stations included: guided reading, phonics work sheets, English language development worksheets, and fluency instruction.

Beginning in March, I began teaching and observing in Glenna’s classroom during an afternoon reading period for two or three days a week. Glenna taught the same students for language arts earlier in the day. Initially I implemented the literature discussions with the sixth grade students while Glenna observed. We gradually began to collaboratively work together and on the days I wasn’t in her classroom, she continued with her normal reading program.

**Method**

**Setting and Participants**

The setting for this research was in a growing rural school district in the Pacific Northwest. The middle school contained grades five through eight with a population of 679 students and 39 certified teachers. The students came from a largely white, middle-class neighborhood. The school’s mission was described as creating a learning environment that inspires and motivates students, holds students accountable in order to achieve at their highest potential, and equips students to become responsible members of society.

The 22 young adolescents in Glenna’s reading class ranged from eleven to thirteen years old and were reading from second to low fifth grade. She remarked, “These students are some of the lowest readers in the sixth grade and in the entire middle school. Most of them have never finished a chapter book in their lives and readily admit they ‘hate’ reading.” Twelve of her students were English language learners, immigrants from Russia and Ukraine, who were at diverse proficiency levels in their learning of English. They had been in the United States from four months to six years. Additionally she had four other students who qualified for special education services and one who was diagnosed with a behavior disorder.
Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

My original research questions focused on how to implement literature circles with English language learners and how to support them in their reading and discussions. I collected data such as student work including journals and sticky notes, conducted student and teacher free writes, took observational field notes, transcribed 18 audio-recorded literature discussions, and interviewed Glenna. Analysis began with reading each piece of data, focusing on the initial questions. After sharing portions of the transcripts with Glenna and taking notes on her thoughts about the discussions, I added the question: What characteristics can change a teacher’s beliefs about literature circles?

The preliminary analysis answered my original questions but a deeper examination was required when my inquiry focus developed. Erickson (1986) suggests including a systematic review, coding, constructing of categories, and interpretive analysis. Rereading the data a couple of times, plus coding the interview transcripts as well as Glenna’s free writes helped me create tentative categories showing her transformation. I continued to review the data to confirm or question the evidence and met with Glenna a couple of times for her input and suggestions.

Journey to Believing

Talking About Books

As a teacher educator, I have heard many graduate students and teachers share doubts about English language learners participating in literature circles. They worry that English language learners are not proficient enough in English to discuss books, and that there will be a language barrier between the English language learners and the native English speakers. Likewise, teachers are also concerned about struggling readers. How does a teacher motivate these students to read, to continue reading, and to talk about the books? Glenna was bothered by these same issues and was uncertain if literature circles would be successful. We found the following four areas that assisted the sixth graders to feel comfortable and confident to talk, which aided Glenna in noticing her students’ abilities to discuss books.

Use of picture books. Our literature circle experience began by reading aloud quality picture books (See Figure 1 for a list of books used in this study). I chose books that would stimulate discussion and had compelling themes such as racism and poverty. I had multiple copies of each read aloud to better match students
with partners for rereading and discussion. To assist the students in talking about
the books, I gave them two open ended prompts — What do you think about the
book? and How do you feel about the book? Sometimes we came back together
as a whole class, where I invited students to share what they talked about, and
other times I formed small groupings of students to discuss the books. I used these
picture book discussions to model how to talk about a book, to teach reading
and decoding strategies, and to give students opportunities to practice conversing.
These picture book discussions, along with our guidance, helped these struggling
readers grow in their confidence and ability to read, talk, and participate in the
literature circles.

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<th>First Round of Literature Circles—Picture Books:</th>
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<th>Second Round of Literature Circles—Whole Class Novel:</th>
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<th>Third Round of Literature Circles—Identity and Survival Novels:</th>
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**Figure 1.** Books used in the study

*Encouraged native languages.* To facilitate the students’ journeys in literacy, we
encouraged them to speak in their home languages with their partner during the
small group discussions. We worked on creating an environment in which students
supported each other in their first and second languages (Russian, Ukraine, and
English). When students misunderstood something or needed clarification, they
often spoke in their native languages to each other. By supporting the English language learners in this way, they were more willing to take a chance and converse in English in the small and whole groups (Freeman & Freeman, 2000). Our classroom community respected these exchanges of ideas in different languages, which assisted students in verbalizing their thoughts and opinions about the books. One English language learner commented, “I thought I would barely talk. I would just nod my head. But, no, I talk and talk. One boy in the group said later that I did good.”

**Organized partner reading.** To support the young adolescents in their reading we paired each student with a partner for the length of the first whole class novel *The Music of Dolphins* (Hesse, 1998), a story about a feral girl raised by dolphins and captured by scientists to be studied. Li and Nes (2001) found that paired reading helps English language learners read more accurately and fluently. Glenna matched two students who would work well together, support each other, and who she believed would complete the book. Most of these pairings were students who spoke the same primary language. As these students read the book to each other they dialogued using the strategy “Say Something” where they responded according to what the passage meant to them—a connection, question, prediction, or comment (Short, Harste & Burke, 1996). At the close of each day students did a free write in a journal discussing their opinions and thoughts about the text. At first a few students balked at reading with a partner because they didn’t think it was necessary, but later many admitted that they got more out of the book. Students commented that they gained confidence in articulating their views with a partner first before sharing in a larger group. By organizing partner reading students read the text actively and reflectively, controlled the pace of the reading experience, and were prepared to participate in the discussions.

**Arranged small groups.** When students had completely finished the novels, we formed small group literature circles. Garcia (1991) advocates that small groups work well for English language learners and Krashen (1993) suggests that learning to read occurs effortlessly when students feel they are members of a small group or club. Krashen also proposes that students are more relaxed and willing to take risks in small groups, thus causing their affective filter (the student’s level of anxiety), to lower resulting in more language learning. We carefully formed small heterogeneous groups of five or six students to make sure there were at least two native English speakers and two English language learners in each group. It was noticeable that students felt much more comfortable talking in these groups versus the whole
class. Students commented that the small groups allowed them more opportunity to participate. Two paraprofessionals, Glenna, and I moved from group to group participating and listening to the discussions which supported the students’ efforts to speak out (Pransky & Bailey, 2002/2003).

Ultimately Glenna’s worries were for naught. She noticed that the English language learners felt safe taking risks with their evolving language and received direct responses from others. The struggling readers were also supported by a partner in helping them read and complete the books. Students felt empowered to talk freely and to share in the small groups as this comfortable and familiar structure provided opportunities for both social and academic language development. Glenna realized that these young adolescents were capable of talking about books as in seen in her reflection:

What really impressed me was the growth of my lowest English language learners. These students usually sit back and listen, rarely offering anything more than one or two word answers and appear afraid of trying to contribute to any discussion. But during the literature circle discussions, I saw these same kids bursting to share their ideas and opinions. They became so focused on sharing that they seemed to forget that they even had a language barrier.

Discussing Major Themes and Literary Elements

Peterson and Eeds (1990) believe that a text’s meaning is embedded in the mood of a story, in the ordering of time in the creation of place, in the development of character, in the story structure, in the point of view taken, and in the use of language and symbols. According to Wolf (2004) when teachers demonstrate and give plenty of background knowledge on the elements of literature, students will begin to talk about them in small group discussions. Using her grade level reading program, Glenna discussed the following literary elements: character, setting, plot, point of view, style and tone, much as Wolf advocates.

Our final round of literature circles was based on the theme of identity and survival. After everyone was finished reading their selected texts we began the small group discussions. Glenna was pleasantly surprised to notice that in each discussion students openly conversed about the major themes, literary elements, and vocabulary words in the texts.
One example is from the discussion about *Loser* (Spinelli, 2002) where students discussed the main character in depth. Charity began, “I think a lot of people have the same problem as Donald Zinkoff. Everybody has been made fun of or has made fun of people like Donald.” Students explored different scenes where they empathized with Donald and shared similar personal stories. Relating to Donald helped them make sense of their own lives and the text. Daniel concluded, “Every day is different [in *Loser*]. Sometimes he [Donald] was a loser and sometimes he was a winner. Sometimes we are losers and sometimes we are winners in life.”

When another group discussed *The Music of Dolphins* (Hesse, 1998) they talked about the writing style:

Katerina: Why are the letters big at the beginning and they get smaller in the middle and then big?

Teacher: What do you think?

Matthew: Oh, I think I know. In the beginning they start off, you know, so we’re thinking, ‘Oh, this is easy. This is easy, I can read it. I can read this really fast.’ And in the middle they get littler and littler, so they’re all, ‘I’m halfway through, so I should already read it all the way, you know.’

Katerina: I have an idea. Maybe it’s like how she’s [Mila] just learning the easy words. They’re big and there isn’t that much. And then the more she learns; the more words there are on the page. Then, she knows a lot in the middle. And then she, the less she has to learn, the bigger the words get.

Students immediately picked up on the fact that this text had some brief chapters and the font sizes were different throughout. These textual variations helped the students feel confident in completing the novel as Matthew discussed. In the transcript Katerina also realized that the font size reflected how Mila slowly became more proficient in English. In her journal she wrote, “I think Mila is a fast learner. I’m surprised that Mila learned human language so quickly. I’m not that fast [of a] learner.”

During their discussions, there were numerous instances where students tried to understand vocabulary words or questioned expressions of speech. Examples such as, “On page 45. What does blunt mean?” or “What does ‘dolphins live for
today and humans live for tomorrow mean?” We encouraged students to return to the texts to find clues to help them figure out the meanings. The native English speakers or the more fluent English language learners often helped students figure out questions of vocabulary and expressions of speech. For example, in one discussion Oksana asked, “What’s an orca?” Students in her group exclaimed, “A whale!” while other students shared stories of watching orcas swim at Sea World. Another found a photograph in the classroom that gave Oksana a visual. Sharing connective stories and working together as a group helped this English language learner acquire a new word (Díaz-Rico & Weed, 2006). Giving students opportunities to ask questions also helped them make connections, create meaning, and develop new vocabulary (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005).

Glenna didn’t expect her students to talk about the themes of the novel or to delve into a character’s life as they were still novices at discussing literature, and many were still acquiring English. Students chose to actively talk about these elements of literature even though we did not specify that they discuss them. We believe the students read closely and carefully in order to notice these elements which helped make the discussions more meaningful and dynamic. Glenna mused:

I went from being the teacher to more of a reading guide. They used each other as resources for information and to problem solve. It just amazed me that they remembered so many of the reading strategies and concepts I had taught them through the year and then easily and naturally applied them to the texts they were reading.

Making Sense of Texts

Many teachers seem to be hesitant to initiate literature circles in their literacy programs because they aren’t convinced that student discussions will help them understand texts. They worry that without their continual support students won’t be able to independently gain meaning. In addition, some teachers question if talking about a book is as valuable as answering comprehension questions or retelling a story. Glenna particularly wondered if a discussion would show that her students understood the books and if this was a good use of their time. We found that encouraging students to ask questions and share personal connections assisted them in making sense of the books, which in turn helped Glenna notice that her students were actively comprehending the texts.
Asking questions. During a mini lesson at the beginning of the study when we discussed picture books, I explained that there was not a single standard way to interpret a book (Rosenblatt, 1938). I encouraged them to construct their own meaning(s) by connecting the textual material to their own lives and experiences and to raise questions. This invitation gave students permission to wrestle and discuss topics or questions they wanted to explore more deeply. Students often initiated their own queries within the discussions such as, “How could Mila like those who locked her door?” “Do you really think Papi is her real dad?” and “What will happen to Shay when she leaves the house?” Students hypothesized, looked back at the texts, and related the texts to their own lives to help them think about these inquiries. This discussion from *The Music of Dolphins* (Hesse, 1998) begins with a question:

Jason: On page 20 Dr. Beck says, ‘Soon we’ll all go home, Mila. Soon, we will all move to a home together where we eat, sleep, and play.’ Does he mean that or is he just saying that to make her happy?

Isabell: It’s a her. Dr. Beck is a her.

Michael: Yeah, but in the beginning we didn’t know that, because Dr. Beck sounds like a boy because mostly doctors are boys.

Teacher: Okay, the question is, ‘Soon we’ll all move to a home together where we will eat, sleep, and play.’ Why do you think she is saying that?

Michael: So she would not be worrying, you know, like I’m going to be living here for the rest of my life, you know? So, she’ll know that she’s going to live in a good house without mean people.

Isabell: Well, I think, because it’s sort of like dolphins, they’re going to live, play, have fun, sort of like a dolphin. She might have a life sort of like she had with the dolphins.

Jason’s question caused a couple of students to contemplate Dr. Beck’s reasoning where they shared their interpretations. The group continued to discuss the doctor’s intentions with wonderings such as, “Why would Dr. Beck bring in a punching man?” and “I wonder why Dr. Beck won’t let Mila go back to the ocean? Is she scared of breaking the law?” A few times students put themselves in her place
stating, “If I was Dr. Beck I wouldn’t unlock the door. Mila could do the same thing as last time.” Jason’s final question was, “Do you think Mila felt scared when Dr. Beck was watching her?” This conversation reflected what Martinez-Roldán (2005) characterized as collaborative inquiry. Students collaboratively worked together by eliciting each other’s help, sharing their thinking and wonderings, clarifying their misunderstandings, and interpreting and introducing new perspectives. Students also often referred back to the text to verify their ideas, even reading aloud self-selected passages. Some conversations helped Glenna notice that her students were able to ask thought-provoking questions and could assist each other in understanding the text.

Making connections. Colby and Lyon (2004) stress that students need to be able to connect texts to themselves in order to promote understanding. Sharing connections came easy for the students when they discussed Hesse’s *The Music of Dolphins* (1998). Many of the English language learners connected to Mila who was also learning English. Isabelle commented, “A connection of my life to Mila’s is when I just came to America, I couldn’t understand people when they talked in English.” Another student shared, “I really want to move back to my old house where my friends are. Mila tells Justin that she wants to go back to the sea, to where she does not feel the crushing of her heart. I feel the same way.” These connections helped the students see into and reflect on their own world. They brought their own cultural backgrounds to the text yet also tried to acknowledge the insights and experiences of others in their small groups.

One literature circle wondered how Mila swam in the frigid water with ease, which enabled some students to make the following connections:

Cindy: Wouldn’t she be cold when she went swimming in the rivers or the ocean?

Matthew: It’s probably warm water you know, and there’s things like seaweed for her to lie down on.

Teacher: That’s possible. I bet she did have times when she was cold. But, I think altogether it was a lot warmer.

Matthew: Like the Lewisville River. I went fishing there in the hottest month, June. I was walking through and my feet were freezing. It felt like needles of ice poking me.
Katerina: Or if you go into the ocean here, it’s freezing. Even if you go to where the Columbia River meets the ocean it is freezing.

Cindy: On page 45 it said, ‘Dolphins don’t live in the river.’

Katerina: Of course they don’t.

Matthew: I heard once in California a whale swam into a river and got stuck. And then they helped it out. Sometimes dolphins could swim into them, but then they come back.

This discussion and many others gave students an opportunity to participate in what Cummins (1980) refers to as two dimensions of language proficiency, Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Within the small groups students took responsibility for developing and discussing their own wonderings and sharing their different experiences, assisting in social language growth. Focusing on the texts helped enhance the students’ academic language. This give-and-take transaction between native and non-native speakers helped students attain a more complex understanding of the text, themselves, their peers, and the world.

By listening and participating in the small group discussions, reading portions of the literature circle transcripts, and reading the student journals, Glenna came to realize that her students were negotiating and making meaning. Even though many of her students were still working on the mechanics of learning English, they were able to participate in meaningful conversations (Samway & McKeon, 1999). Glenna spoke to this in the following reflection:

>In the literature circles students went below the surface, and like experts they hit the tougher issues of the books. I was amazed at the level of thinking they did during the discussions and the way they transitioned from one idea to the next. Everyone contributed to the discussions with opinions, questions, analysis and inference that showed a deep understanding of the characters and issues of the story.

**Actively Engaged and Excited**

Teachers who work with English language learners or children with reading difficulties sometimes question if literature circles will motivate and keep students on task. Glenna was concerned that her sixth graders wouldn’t remain focused in
the discussions for more than 15 minutes without getting bored and would require a lot of teacher prompting. Spiegel (1996) talked about these same qualms and encouraged teachers to trust their students.

Glenna’s fears were unwarranted. A high level of enthusiasm and excitement flourished when the literature circles were introduced, maybe because this was the first time the young adolescents had ever been given this opportunity. Students who were normally reticent to participate in class and reluctant to read were motivated to talk in small groups and even requested more time for reading. One third of the students commented that when the literature circles began, they became more interested in reading books. In addition, we found that the sixth graders conversed about the novels for over 45 minutes each day and their discussions were frequently focused and insightful.

Using “real” literature. Some of the excitement transpired because students were invited to read “real” literature versus textbooks or leveled books. Students remarked that they were tired of reading leveled books that they had been reading since elementary school. They were ecstatic to read books they had never seen before and were about issues that they were experiencing. In their journals, ninety percent of the students mentioned that they were much more interested in reading the literature circle books than reading their textbooks. We also witnessed reluctant readers eagerly reading books.

Incorporating social interaction. Young adolescents love to talk and the literature circles promoted purposeful reading and talking in this sixth grade classroom. Allington (2002) and Gambrell and Almasi (1996) agree that student talk is a primary way to motivate students to read. In Glenna’s class students commented that they enjoyed the opportunity to converse with their peers, develop and ask their own questions, and share personal thoughts, feelings, and interpretations. Students conversed more in these discussions than they ever did when Glenna had instructional conversations with them. By being able to discuss the content of the books and hear other students’ perspectives, their comprehension was also deepened. One English language learner shared, “What I like about literature circles is that you get to know ideas from other people and what they feel about the book you read.”

Providing choice. A critical factor in motivating students to read and talk in literature circles is student choice (Short, 1997). Students self selected books from six or more titles and chose how they wanted to respond and interpret the books in journals. They talked about topics that came from them not from the teachers
and were much more engaged in the reading of the books and participating in
the discussions because of this element of choice. Giving the students freedom to
interpret the texts and talk about what they wanted also increased their motivation
and interest in learning.

Closing with a celebration of learning. The final round of literature circles con-
cluded with a celebration of everyone’s learning. Each book group presented their
growth from their respective books. For instance students who read The Great Gilly
Hopkins (Paterson, 1978) painted a mural depicting Trotter’s home showing family
and love as the most important things. The group reading Zach’s Lie (Smith, 2001)
wrote and performed a script about how complex lives can be. This celebration
of literature caused a ripple effect in the classroom, where students requested the
books their peers read (Cox, 1988). In addition, the students realized that reading
was a pleasurable activity and that it might be something they would want to do
on their own.

However, it must be noted not all of the students were enthusiastic and
engaged in the literature circles. Two students did not complete their last novels and
missed some of the discussions. A couple of other students mentioned in a final
free write that they did not like the discussions when, “People talked too much
and didn’t give others a chance to talk” and “It was sometimes hard to work in
the groups with some people.” These concerns need to be worked out for future
literature circle discussions. Despite these students’ lack of involvement and worries,
Glenna was still convinced that literature circles overall helped her students learn
and become better readers:

After a few days, the kids were totally hooked on their books and
were begging me for extra time to read. It was amazing to watch them
read. They were totally absorbed in the process of preparing for their
upcoming literature circles. By the time they finished the books, they
were bursting at the seams to talk about them. During the literature
circles the kids were actively engaged in the discussions—talking, listen-
ing to one another, and learning.

Glenna is a Believer

Glenna’s voyage began by admitting that she was out of her comfort zone
in initiating literature circles in her sixth grade reading class. She thought literature
circles were only for students who were proficient readers, and she wasn’t convinced
that struggling readers and English language learners could participate in such activities. Some of this skepticism was because of her previous teaching experience and lack of confidence in her students’ abilities.

Glenna is now a believer in literature circles because she saw first-hand that her students were capable of discussing books. Talking about books in a community helped her students participate (Vygotsky, 1978). Within these conversations students naturally discussed major themes and literary elements (Wolf, 2004). Together they asked questions and made connections to the texts helping them understand the texts more deeply (Rosenblatt, 1938). Finally, the majority of the students were engaged and excited throughout this experience. Even with the constraints of teaching a required curriculum, Glenna was able to incorporate literature circles and engage her students in thinking about important topics. All children deserve to be challenged, to have opportunities to participate in fun and dynamic reading experiences, and to have chances to critically think in literature circles. Glenna noted:

*The most amazing thing that I discovered from watching my students in literature circles was that they are far more capable of producing higher level thinking on their own than I ever thought possible. I didn’t have to pull it out of them, threaten them, bribe them or even ask the perfect questions. They came up with the synthesis and analysis pieces all on their own, through their own student-led discussions. I might have expected this from gifted students, but certainly not from English language learners and special education students.*

**Conclusion**

Using literature circles is not new, but many teachers, like Glenna, continue to be skeptical about incorporating them in their literacy programs. With the many restrictions often put on curriculum some teachers feel they do not have time for literature circles. We encourage you to think about these ideas and suggestions:

*Capitalize on the social tendencies of students.* All adolescents (especially English language learners) need opportunities for successful social interaction in school. By working cooperatively together in literature circles students often learn to listen and respond to each other, think about divergent opinions, and take ownership of their dialogue.
Connect literature circles with required curriculum. Discussions can fit into required reading curriculum and students can talk about the stories they are reading in anthologies or other programs. In addition, the required stories can be matched with other literature that explores the same themes or issues for small group discussions.

Have rigorous, high expectations for all students. Accept and validate your students’ backgrounds, including languages and cultures, and believe that they are capable, intelligent people. Many studies have shown that English language learners can participate in meaningful discussions about texts, where they can construct meaning about what they are reading (Cox & Boyd-Batstone, 1997; Samway & Whang, 1996; Urzúa, 1992).

Partner with a literacy coach and/or reading specialist. Attempting literature circles on your own can be overwhelming so partner with a literacy coach who will encourage and support your journey and who can model many of the necessary processes in your classroom. Watch how someone else initiates literature circles with your own or their students, and then work along side them.

Read professional books and articles on literature circles. There are numerous articles and books available on implementing literature circles with young adolescents such as Literature Circles in Middle School: One Teacher’s Journey (Hill, Noe, & King, 2003) and Content Area Literature Circles: Using Discussion for Learning Across the Curriculum (Johnson & Freedman, 2005).

Not only did Glenna become a believer, but so did many of her sixth grade students as many became believers in themselves as readers and learners. They found reading meaningful and purposeful and for some this was the first time they had ever finished reading an entire novel while others found reading to be more satisfying as they became absorbed in a book. In addition, when Glenna’s students returned to school in the fall, they were tested and many of their entry-level scores jumped two to three grade levels. Glenna accounts this increase to the literature circle experiences they had the last few months of sixth grade.

Glenna, once a skeptic about the benefits of literature circles, is now a fervent believer in their ability to engage students and foster classroom discussions. She has started to enthusiastically incorporate more literature circles in her classroom and will never be a “doubting Thomas” again. As Glenna reflected on the experience she said:
I am excited about planning for next year as I organize thematic units on World War II, Greek Mythology and the Civil Rights Movement. I am looking for children’s and young adult literature to help me incorporate literature circles into my Social Studies curriculum.

References


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Supporting Teachers in their Integration of Technology with Literacy

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Abstract

This study investigates how two elementary teachers begin to use technology in a private school that had access to technology at many levels. Using a collaborative teacher-research model, the researcher specifically examined how to support teachers’ practice as they integrated technology tools within their literacy curriculum. Due to a supportive context, the teachers refined their writing instruction to include technology tools, and students improved their literacy through challenging learning experiences.

In 1988, the Office of Technology (OTA) asserted, “Most teachers want to use technology, but few have found ways to exploit its full potential. Technology will not be used, and certainly will not be used well, unless teachers are trained in the use of technology, provided goals for new applications, supported in doing so, and rewarded for their successes in meeting these goals” (1988, p. 114). Even though many teachers continue to show an interest in using technology, our educational systems often fail to address the needs of teachers who have limited instruction in technology or know how to integrate it with the curriculum (Pianfetti, 2001).

While authorities (Bork, 1987; IRA & NAEYC, 1998; Labbo, 1996; Labbo & Kuhn, 1998; Leu, 2000; Leu, Leu, & Coiro, 2004; Papert, 1993; Reinking, 1995, 1998), claim that technology offers a revolutionary and important instructional medium for improving the quality of academic learning for all students, the potential
impact of technology on academic learning remains untapped. Equally discouraging is the fact that computers remain isolated from the content of the curriculum. Compounding these issues, technological innovations continuously expand and frequently become more complex. In order to overcome these barriers, educational systems need to closely examine how to help teachers acquire the expertise to use computer technology, integrate technology with the curriculum, and use technology to improve literacy.

This qualitative study is designed to examine how two teachers, both immersed in a technological learning environment, changed their use of technology to enhance and support the literacy learning of their students through a mentor/researcher relationship. Specifically, the major research objectives are to investigate how (1) two elementary teachers change their use of technology to support young students’ reading and writing, (2) elementary students feel about using technology with their reading and writing, and (3) elementary students’ reading and writing is enhanced through the use of technology.

Research Perspectives

Despite possible teacher interest in using technology, efforts to reform teacher use of technology in teaching and learning document only subtle changes in its instructional use (Cuban, Kirkpatrick, & Peck, 2001; Pianfetti, 2001). Other research studies reveal that reform efforts seldom involved teachers in the design of the study nor did the efforts provide sustained support for ongoing professional development (Cohen, 1990; Cuban, 1993; Spencer, 2000).

While reform efforts reveal subtle changes in teachers’ instructional use of technology, research studies do show shifts in reported classroom use of technology. In the 1980s the majority of teachers were nonusers of computers in their classrooms (Cuban, 1986). Since the 1990s, one third of elementary and middle school teachers are occasional users of technology; one out of ten are daily users; and one half are nonusers (Means & Olson, 1995; Schofield, 1995). Although these studies indicate shifts in reported classroom use of technology over the years, there is a need to consider more specifically how teachers use computers.

According to the National Educational Assessment Program (1996), software and hardware use are the prevailing classroom practices in technology, and is frequently used for drill and practice. Other studies suggest that while a larger number of teachers use technology for drill and practice, a smaller number of teachers use it for higher level thinking and problem solving activities (National Educational Assessment Program, 1996; Pianfetti, 2001; Wenglinsky, 1998).
Several recent studies have attempted to address these challenges by examining how teachers become users of technology in their classrooms and what factors shape their thinking (Margerum-Leys, 2002; Vannatta & O’Bannon, 2002; Windschitl & Sahl, 2002). These studies reveal important findings related to teacher use of technology and what factors motivate teachers to change their instructional practice to include it. Studies associated with the Apple Classrooms of Tomorrow (ACOT), for example, suggest that teachers learning to use technology move through five stages of technology integration, ranging from the entry to invention stages, over time (Sandholtz, Ringstaff & Dwyer, 1997). These studies further suggest that teachers need time to incorporate technology into their curriculum.

Other studies indicate that teacher beliefs about learning and student and teacher roles in the learning process influence how they use technology (Sandholtz, Ringstaff, & Dwyer, 1997). Becker (1994) found that teacher use of technology thrived in environments where they experimented with its use. Several studies further claim that support networks stimulate teacher use of technology and its integration within the curriculum (Becker & Ravitz, 1999; Franklin et al., 2002; Jayroe, Ball, & Novinski, 2002; Labbo, Eakle, & Montero, 2001; Margerum-Leys, 2002; Myers & Halpin, 2002; Vannatta & O’Bannon, 2002; Windschitl & Sahl, 2002). The findings from these studies suggest that teachers become willing to integrate technology with the curriculum when they see how it can be used as a tool to accomplish their learning goals and to promote student learning.

As the number of technological innovations continues to increase, the need for support networks, as well as effective in-services and ongoing professional development programs, becomes heightened (Hawisher & Selfe, 1989; Labbo, et al, 2001; Margerum-Leys, 2002; Moore & Karabenick, 1992; Reinking, 1995, 1998). Specifically, teachers need ongoing support to accommodate their understanding of evolving communication and technological tools. They also need ongoing support to determine what possibilities these tools offer for student learning. In-services and ongoing professional development opportunities are ways to increase teachers’ expertise in changing technologies. In addition, teachers need supported practice to consider possibilities for enhancing student learning and for integrating technology with the curriculum (Franklin et al., 2002; Moore, 1988, 1989; Moore-Hart, 1995; Myers & Halpin, 2002; Vannatta & O’Bannon, 2002; Windschitl & Sahl, 2002). Once teachers assume more of the responsibility and begin to function independently, this support may gradually be decreased. However, these studies emphasize that when innovative technology emerges, support should increase once again.

Desiring to determine if supported practice would facilitate teachers’ knowledge and understanding of technology, as well as enhance student literacy learning,
I investigated how supported practice affected two elementary teachers’ use of technology. The two teachers taught in a private school where technology was abundant and advocated by teachers and administrators.

**Methodology**

Using the collaborative teacher-researcher model, I addressed the dual needs of increasing teacher expertise in the use of technology and supporting their practice as they integrated technology tools with the curriculum. By collaboratively posing questions about ways to use technology to improve literacy learning and investigating possible answers to these questions, I hoped to show respect for teacher knowledge. Using this supportive structure might give teachers a voice in how they reshaped their instructional practice to include technology. At the same time, this supportive structure might simultaneously facilitate student literacy. If the potentials of technology are to be realized, there is a need to consider the contexts of the classroom, the school, and the community (Windschitl & Sahl, 2002). Using a collaborative model placed me within these contexts. As a result of using this model, perhaps the evolving instructional changes might become fundamental and realistic to classroom teaching.

**Participants and Setting**

The teachers and young learners (ages five through eight) who participated in this study attend a private school located in southeast Michigan. The multi-age classrooms in this school were created so that children might advance to new levels of learning at their own rate. Following a balanced approach to learning, teachers organize the curriculum around thematic learning. Throughout the day, children participate in a variety of learning experiences, including oral and written language using a variety of literacy tools, such as technology and literature. Under the direction of a media specialist, all children visit the computer lab twice a week to learn about keyboarding, word processing tools, email, publishing tools, and digital cameras. The computer lab is also open for classroom use during the day on a sign-up basis. All classrooms further had two computers and a printer.

The two teachers, both European Americans, were beginning level teachers. Both teachers had taken two courses in technology during their undergraduate work at a nearby university. These courses specifically familiarized them with the use of word processing tools, email, hypermedia, and the Internet. The second course further included educational uses of technology.
The first teacher, Michelle, was a beginning level teacher who had been teaching for three years. Her multi-age classroom included emergent learners, ages five and six. The second teacher, Lynne, had just completed her student teaching the previous spring; this was her first year of teaching. Her multi-age classroom included young learners, ages six through eight. Even though both teachers shared that they felt comfortable using computers, they did not integrate technology within their literacy program. They did say, however, that they were interested in learning new ways to use technology.

The young learners in Michelle’s class included European American students (82%) and culturally diverse students (18%) primarily from middle class income families. The class contained diversified students with respect to ability levels and age levels (five first graders and eight kindergartners). Similarly, the young learners in Lynne’s class included European American students (71%) and culturally diverse students (29%) also from primarily middle class income families. Again, the class contained diversified students with respect to ability levels and age levels (one first grader, three second graders, and ten third graders).

Materials/Equipment

The computer lab included fifteen MacIntosh computers, two laser printers, one color laser printer, and two digital cameras. Computer software included several software programs such as Claris Works™, Pagemaker™, and Adobe Photo Shop™. In addition, keyboarding software, a variety of computer games, and Internet connections were available. All students also had their own email address.

Procedures

Using a teacher/researcher collaborative approach, I met with Michelle and Lynne prior to the beginning of the study in order to formulate specific questions they wanted to explore regarding technology. During this meeting, I wanted to learn how they currently used it in their classrooms and how they felt about integrating technology with their curriculum. I also visited their classrooms to gain a fuller picture of how literacy evolved. During the meeting, I explained that I would observe and record the impact of computer technology on their students’ literacy learning on a weekly basis. I further shared that I would serve as an enactment facilitator (Singer, Karjick, & Marx, 1999), giving support by working with students and sharing responsibility for teaching and technology use. During subsequent reflective planning sessions, we discussed what they discovered about their students as they used technology and what new questions they wanted to explore as we continued our inquiry.
After meeting with the teachers in early January, my graduate assistant and I collected all pretest data. Following the collection of pretest data, the collaborative research study began as I visited the two classrooms weekly in order to provide assistance, guidance, and dialogue opportunities. During these class visitations, I observed students using technology and participated in the literacy learning of the students by co-teaching literacy lessons that often included technology.

Data Sources and Data Analyses

The data collection period extended from January to June. During this period, my graduate assistant and I gathered information related to process outcome measures. These measures included informal observations, structured and semi-structured interviews with students, and student writing samples. Specifically, I recorded the informal observations immediately after the classroom visitations and gathered writing samples from students throughout the data collection period. At the conclusion of the study, my graduate assistant interviewed the students to discover their feelings about writing with computers and how they used computers in their daily lives and in school. Throughout data collection, I generated working hypotheses through ongoing constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of the data.

Since data analysis was ongoing and occurred throughout the research study, I informally discussed the field notes and interviews with all participants. Together, we then used feedback from these dialogues to develop working themes and patterns about the data. We first examined, compared, and categorized the data to create these themes independently. We then met to discuss both similar and additional reoccurring themes. As the study continued, we confirmed or disconfirmed these hypotheses through new emerging themes. Once we reached consensus about the themes and patterns, we applied them to the data analysis. To enhance the analysis, we used both triangulation of sources (i.e., teachers, students, my own observations) and triangulation of methods (e.g., observations, interviews, writing samples) to interpret the evolving data. Through this ongoing inductive analysis of the data, we attempted to assimilate the emerging patterns into a grounded theory (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Patton, 1990).

Results

To investigate how supported practice affected two elementary teachers use of technology, inductive analysis of the observational data was performed through constant comparative analysis. This analysis yielded three themes related to the
teachers: (1) teachers’ interests guided the direction of how technology became integrated with their literacy curriculum; (2) teachers gradually began to incorporate technology into their literacy curriculum, as well as their professional needs; (3) teachers’ levels of comfort using technology gradually changed.

To investigate the effects of technology on literacy learning of the emergent learners, analysis of the observational and interview data was also performed through the use of constant comparative analysis. This analysis revealed the following themes related to the students:

- Students were highly motivated while using technology with their writing.
- Students became more comfortable using technology and acquired the skills needed to use the technology, often helping their peers learn new skills.
- Students naturally explored and experimented with word processing tools while writing.
- Students learned strategies to improve their writing while using word processing tools.

Combining holistic analysis (Tompkins, 2008) and inductive analysis to the writing samples, we discovered the following themes related to the students’ writing samples:

- Students’ writing became longer as they became more comfortable with writing and using computer tools, especially when encouraged to use their temporary spelling without spell check while drafting.
- Students’ writing improved as they specifically learned how to use word processing tools (i.e., tools to delete, insert, or rearrange text) during the revising and editing stages of writing.
- Students’ writing improved through teacher guidance and conferencing, facilitated by the computer screen, which displayed the writing in a readable format, and by the printed copies, which were more easily read by teachers and students during the revising and editing stages.

**Findings from Observations of Michelle**

Prior to the study, Michelle sent her students to the computer lab to receive instruction in keyboarding and simple word processing skills under the direction of the computer specialist. Students also went to the computer lab during the
week to play computer games or use keyboarding software to increase keyboard familiarization.

Michelle’s interests guide her use of technology. During our early reflective planning sessions, Michelle expressed an interest in learning ways to integrate technology with journal writing. Similar to many classrooms, Michelle’s students wrote in their journals daily. Students typically wrote one or two sentences about topics of their choice or an assigned topic in their journals.

Picking up on this interest, I showed her how students could do their journal writing on the computers. I circulated among the students, modeling how to ask students questions as they wrote, helping them extend their writing. The importance of having students use their “temporary spelling” as they wrote was emphasized. I further suggested that spell check be turned off while students wrote in their journals as the young learners became frustrated when their temporary spelling turned red.

Once we turned off spell check and re-encouraged them to use their temporary spelling, the students gradually became more comfortable writing. They were able to concentrate on the message rather than the spelling of the words. Asking them questions as they wrote, helped the young writers think of additional things to write in their journals. As they concentrated on their messages, adding sentences, the drafts gradually became longer. Specifically, students’ journal entries extended from one or two sentences to five and six sentences.

Seeing her students’ enthusiasm and interest while using the computer, Michelle became more interested in using computers with journal writing. As we discussed this during our reflective sessions, Michelle shared that she would like to use the computer more, but she could not go the computer lab every day. I suggested that she allow one student to use the computer in her classroom during journal time. Following this suggestion, a rotating schedule was designed so all students would have access to the computer at least once a week. She also began to take her class to the computer lab once or twice a week.

Michelle’s interests guide her integration of technology with her literacy curriculum. As we continued our sessions, Michelle expressed an interest in using the computer to publish children’s narrative stories. Since her students were studying fairy tales during reading, we decided to have students compose fairy tales about their favorite stuffed animal. We collaboratively modeled the process for the students during a mini-lesson, showing them how to create a web about a stuffed animal and how to use this web to create a fairy tale. Observing our bunny, the children came up with describing words for the bunny, and things to do with it. We webbed their ideas on chart paper.
Following this prewriting activity, children used their knowledge of fairy tales to create one about the bunny, using the language experience approach. First, we quickly reviewed the story elements in fairy tales. Next, we began talking about our fairy tale, discussing the characters and setting. Using the children’s words, we then recorded the first few sentences on chart paper, having the children assist us with the beginning and ending sounds of some words. After composing these sentences, we stopped to talk about what the problem in our story would be and how the characters would solve it. After voting on our favorite idea, we continued to record the students’ ideas on the chart paper.

In order that students might have their own copy of their fairy tale (Figure 1), we published the class fairy tale using Michelle’s computer so that she could print out a copy for students to take home and share with their parents.

> Once upon a time there was a fuzzy, white bear who lived with Mrs. Moore-Hart. The cute, loveable bear loved the pink bear with the white heart and the gray and white sea otter. The pink bear, the white bear, and the sea otter played with each other all day. One day they had a sleep over. When they woke up, the white bear was missing. The sea otter and the pink bear went to find the gorgeous white bear. They looked and looked and found her wandering in the black forest. The white bear was lost. They called to her, and she came back. They were so happy, they had a party.

**Figure 1.** Class Created Fairy Tale

During our reflection session, we discussed how Michelle could link the computer to an LCD projector or the TV monitor when writing language experience stories in the future as the LCD would display the story in large print for everyone to see. I explained that this would help her record the story faster.

Students, using pencil and paper, then created their own fairy tales using our model. Interestingly, all the children included a problem in their fairy tale, illustrating the importance of modeling the process before students compose. Once the young learners finished their drafts, they word processed their fairy tales on the computer. Having them draft their fairy tales with pencil and paper first gave the children more time to use the computers for revising and editing. For example, some children made simple revisions by changing a word or adding a new sentence. To help all the students learn how to make simple revisions with the insertion and deletion keys, we decided to show them how to insert a title for their fairy tale. As the students independently inserted their titles, we reminded them about the importance of capitalizing its name, just as they capitalized their own names.
Some children also discovered how to use spell check with some of their words. Interestingly, they shared this discovery with their friends, and before long, a few others also tried using spell check. Even though some children left their stories with the temporary spelling, all the young learners wanted to change the print font, and others wanted to change the color of the font as well. Once again, those who knew how to change the print font showed their friends how to make this change causing a ripple effect. The fairy tales were then compiled into a book for all to take home (See Figure 2 for Doug’s story).

**The Kitten**

*By Doug*

Once there was a kitten who didn’t know her name the cat was cute. One day a little boy named David founed her, he named it Tom Kitten

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Michelle’s changing perspectives about technology. During our reflective sessions, Michelle remarked that she was amazed to see the children word process their hand-written drafts so quickly. She was also intrigued with how the children taught one another how to change the print font or color. Emerging themes suggest Michelle was beginning to see ways to integrate technology with literacy. Rather than use the computer for games or skill and drill activities, Michelle began to see ways that computers might extend her emergent learners’ writing. Through our reflective sessions, she also discovered that students’ knowledge of word processing tools expanded through experimentation (changing the print font), as well as guided instruction (inserting titles). She also noticed how students taught one another.

Thus, the supportive context helped Michelle modify her instruction. In addition, Michelle began to use the computer to create instructional activities, send letters to her parents, and prepare a narration of her students’ performance for report cards. Knowing that she could easily receive support seemed to encourage her to take more risks with technology. She was not yet ready, however, to use technology independently or modify her instructional practice independently.

**Findings from Observations of Lynne**

Similar to Michelle, prior to the study, Lynne merely sent her students to the computer lab to receive instruction in keyboarding, word processing skills, email, or desktop publishing. Her students also played computer games or used keyboarding
software during computer lab. During class, some students used their classroom computer for writing or playing computer games. Students who used the computer, however, were those already comfortable with it.

*Lynne's interests guide her use of technology.* During our early reflective planning sessions, Lynne wanted to see how to integrate computers within her writing curriculum. An important part of her writing curriculum also included the use of journal writing, so, similar to Michelle, I showed her how to set up a schedule so that all students might rotate to the computer once a week during journaling. When we reflected about this during our reflective planning session, Lynne pointed out that all her students were motivated to use the computer for journaling.

As we continued our reflective planning sessions, Lynne also expressed an interest in using the computer with the writing process. She wanted to extend her understanding of the writing process and how word processing tools might be integrated within it. Since her students were studying African American people and culture during reading class, we decided to have students follow the writing process to compose an informational piece about Elijah McCoy, a local African American who invented the easy oil can. To help her students first learn about Elijah McCoy, we read the story, *The Real McCoy* by Wendy Towle (1993). As students listened to the story, we showed them how to take notes, explaining that this would help them remember the information about McCoy. We further pointed out that they could use their notes to write about him later. After completing this prewriting activity, students used their notes to write a pencil and paper rough draft about his life, beliefs, or accomplishments. As students composed their pieces, Lynne noticed that her students completed the rough drafts quicker and easier due to the note taking activity. Once students finished the drafts, they typed them up in the computer lab.

Continuing with the writing process, we modeled how to make revisions on triple spaced, word processed drafts. We demonstrated the process using the overhead and one student’s writing. We then encouraged the class to give the author praise for his ideas which helped him become comfortable with his writing. Next, we had the class ask him questions about his piece—additional information readers might want to know. As the class asked questions and he responded to their questions, we showed him how to insert this information into his writing, using carets or arrows. We further reminded him that he was the author, so he could decide whether or not to make the changes.

Once students practiced the revising process as a class, they worked in groups of four, helping their peers revise. Using peer feedback, students used colored pens to insert additional information or delete incorrect facts on their drafts. All students made at least three revisions on their drafts. Following this process,
students completed the revisions on the computer. Their resistance to revising softened since there was no need to recopy their writing. Christine shared, “With a pencil you’d have to start all over again. With a computer, I can rewrite it the correct way and everything will be fine.”

The following week, students learned how to edit their drafts. Using the overhead and the same student’s writing, we again modeled how to find words we wanted to spell correctly and how to look for missing punctuation or capitals. After seeing the process modeled, students self- and peer-edited their writing with colored pens. As they worked in pairs, Lynne and I circulated, becoming the “top editors.” If they overlooked misspelled words or errors in punctuation or capitals, we placed dots next to the lines. The two students then reviewed the line, finding the errors. Once they completed these edits, students returned to the computer lab to correct their drafts. They also used spell check to further check their spelling.

Finally, students changed the print font for their writing pieces and published their final drafts (See Figure 3 for Nathan’s story). Thus, students’ knowledge and understanding of the writing process, as well as word processing tools, expanded through guided instruction and experimentation. Seeing their enthusiasm inspired Lynne to further integrate computers with her writing curriculum.

**Elijah McCoy**

Elijah was born in Canada on May 2nd, 1844. His mother’s name was Emillia his dad’s name was George. His parents were slaves that escaped to Canada where Elijah was born. His dad got 160 acres as a soldier. When he was 16 he went to school in Scotland for a mechanic degree. He came back to Ypsilanti Michigan. When he got there people thought that it was unusual he was educated. He also became a fire and oil man for the train. It was hard being a oil man to stop every mile, so he built the oil cup. He built other things like: The ironing board, the sprinkler, the thick tire, and the rubber heal. He got married twice his second wife died in a car accident. After that he got lonely. He made a company to make oil cups. He died on 1929.

**Figure 3.** Nathan’s Paragraph About Elijah McCoy.

Lynne’s changing perspectives about technology. During our reflective planning sessions, Lynne pointed out that her students were more willing to revise and edit their writing as previously, students omitted these stages of writing. Through
our ongoing discussions, she realized that young writers had gone back and forth between word processing and writing with pencil and paper during revising and editing. Most important, Lynne noticed computers eliminated the recopying penalty. Given this supportive context, she independently explored the use of technology with a writing lesson. Following the same steps we applied, she had her students compose, revise, edit, and publish a thank you letter for a guest who came to the school. Knowing that she could easily receive help as she tried these activities, Lynne felt more comfortable taking risks. Interestingly, she also decided to take a graduate class on writing to extend her knowledge of the writing process. Different from Michelle, Lynne already used computers to design lessons or send letters to parents. As the study progressed, she also began using the computer to prepare student narratives for report cards.

Findings from Reflective Sessions

The reflective sessions appeared to help both Michelle and Lynne begin to discover how technology might be used to guide and extend young learners’ writing. Throughout, their interests and needs determined how we integrated technology with their literacy program. As a result, technology was better correlated within their curriculum. Having the support of a facilitator to explore their interests and needs helped them gain more technological expertise. Sharing the responsibility for teaching and using technology gave them a model of how to efficiently manage instruction in computer rich environments. Having a mentor also seemed to help them become comfortable taking risks. Each teacher, however, moved through stages of technology integration at differing rates. Becoming more comfortable with how to use technology with her instruction empowered Lynne as she began to take new risks independently. In order for her to move to higher levels of technology integration—using the Internet, email, or PowerPoint™, for example, she might need ongoing support systems. Michelle, in contrast, still needed additional support and guidance at her current level.

Findings from Observations of Young Learners

Using Technology with their Writing

Data analysis consistently suggested that all the young learners were highly motivated while using technology. As observers watched the children work at their computers, they consistently noticed the children seemed to stay on task. Nathan’s words illustrate this engagement, “Well, it’s sort of like a really good activity. It’s something you could do for an hour...It’s really fun.”
Specific Behavioral Patterns. Specific behavioral patterns of the multi-age learners suggested that they were comfortable using technology. Observations revealed that students, especially boys, experimented and explored with the word processing tools, continuously learning new ways to use the computer. Even though some of the girls were more conservative in their use of word processing tools, they continued to learn new ways to use the computer, especially from their peers. Whenever students learned new computer strategies, they spontaneously shared these “tricks” with their friends. For example, some girls showed their friends how to use spell check, save files, or print their work.

Observations further indicated that students who initially had difficulty using word processing tools often became more proficient through practice. Their peers frequently helped them whenever they forgot how to use the tools. Examples of ways students supported their peers included finding letter keys on the keyboard (especially the five and six year old children), changing the print font in their writing, changing the color of the print, using deletion or insertion keys, and using spell check.

Observations also showed that in the computer lab, students had opportunities to talk about their ideas for writing with their teacher and neighbors, share their writing with others, and help one another gather ideas for their writing. The computer screen, which was easily visible to their neighbors, seemed to facilitate these social interactions. The arrangement of the computer lab in a “U” shape further supported teacher guidance as students wrote. This shape helped teachers circulate easily and quickly among the learners. With a quick glance, teachers could move and help students wherever needed. As a result of these social interactions and guided instruction, many students learned how to extend and improve their writing. As Hannah shared, “I’m writing more this year on the computer. It’s fun.”

Data further indicated that the word processing tools, for example, the print fonts and styles, fascinated students when publishing their writing. Interestingly, boys especially enjoyed trying different ways to display their writing, using different font styles, backgrounds, or pictures. Some even learned how to use Pagemaker™ on their own. Even though many of the girls were more hesitant to experiment with the computer, they would willingly apply these strategies once someone showed them how to use the tools. However, data suggested a need to have students first complete their drafts in pencil and paper, including the revision and editing, otherwise, they often lost focus on their writing and their message as they tended to keep playing with the features of the tools instead of writing.
Observations of Emergent Learners While Using Technology. Observations revealed some distinct differences in how the younger writers, ages five and six, used technology with their writing. For example, emergent learners, still learning about the alphabet and the sounds and symbols of letters, gradually acquired keyboarding skills and simple uses of word processing due to their interest in using technology. Many of the emergent writers, in fact, seemed to be able to write easier and faster with the computer as the year continued. Pressing a key, rather than thinking about the formation of the letters, seemed easier for some students.

Nevertheless, observations revealed some tensions for a few of the emergent learners. For example, some students initially had trouble finding the letters. As Gabrielle explained, “Usually it is hard to find the right keys.” However, she added, “The more I look at the keyboard the faster I can type.” Other students experienced difficulty with deleting letters or words. If they pressed the delete key too hard or too fast, they lost all, or most of their writing. Consequently, it must be remembered that whenever young learners first begin typing on the computers, teachers may need to consistently monitor them, helping them carefully press keys. Once students learned to press the delete key one letter at a time, losing text became less problematic.

Social interactions also appeared to play an important role. For example, David shared, “I can get help from my teacher, my friends, and other people.” Having students work close to one another while writing on the computer also encouraged them to help one another use the delete key, find a specific letter, change font sizes or the color of the font, use spell check, or insert/delete information. Even though these social interactions were important, observational data indicated a need to encourage emergent writers to begin their writing independently with minimal social interactions when first arriving in the lab giving them time to concentrate on their message.

Additional observations revealed that the computer addressed different learning styles and abilities of the emergent students. For example, using the keyboard seemed to help many learn the symbol-sound system due to its kinesthetic-tactile approach. Data also suggested that students learned how to space between words more easily with the computer. Once they learned how to space, Michelle noticed that they applied this skill when writing with pencil and paper. Other children learned the correct spellings of words by using spell check. Elizabeth explained, “It helps me with my spelling...It teaches me from my mistakes that I make.” In fact, seeing a word spelled correctly helped some students remember how to spell
the word. Thus, technology tools seemed to help the emergent writers learn more about print and writing. They gradually improved their writing as shown by Tyler who announced, “I can write better with a computer. It is faster.” The computer screen also provided a way for the children to easily read their own writing, as well as the writing of their peers. As children read and reread their own writing or the writing of their peers, they seemed to increase their word recognition skills and reading fluency.

*Observations of Developing Learners, Ages Seven to Eight.* Technology tools also helped the developing learners gain more knowledge about writing — how to express their ideas or how to apply word processing tools in their writing. Already familiar with keyboarding and word processing, students began to use word processing tools to improve their writing by inserting, changing, or deleting information. Specifically, word processing tools seemed to make it easier to make changes. Students appeared to be less resistant to revising their texts because the recopying penalty was eliminated. In Nick’s words, “You can’t mess up. If you do mess up, just use your clicker and press delete and fix your mistakes. It doesn’t mess up your paper, but it would if you erased with a pencil.”

Teachers were also able to help the children refine their writing by showing them how to change the order of sentences or how to add an ending to their piece with word processing tools. Guiding and assisting students through questioning seemed easier due to the reader friendly print font and computer screen. The computer screen also helped authors do peer editing as they could point to words or sentences and talk about why they made certain changes.

The computer lab, which included tables and chairs, as well as computers and printers, also made it easier to manage literacy learning when students were at different stages of writing. They could work on drafts at tables, work in revising groups, peer edit in twos on the computer, or work independently on the computer. The interactive arrangement of the computer lab also supported other social interactions. For example, the computer environment facilitated cross-age writing activities as older students taught younger students how to send emails to their parents or friends. As younger students practiced the skills, the older students guided them while others helped the emergent writers read the emails.

**Findings from Interviews with Students**

To investigate how students felt about computers and writing with computers, inductive analysis of the student interview data was performed through
constant comparative analysis. Consistent with the data from the observations, the evolving data suggested that children enjoyed using computers with their writing. For example, one student explained, “Well, it’s sort of like a really good activity. It’s something you could do for an hour and type a story and do all those fun things. It’s really fun.” Aaron added, “I’d stay in from recess to use the computer.”

Interestingly, most children responded that they liked playing games on or writing with the computers. They further shared that they had a computer at home, which they used for playing games, writing, or homework. This indicated that students might have also practiced the skills they were learning at home. Students consistently explained that the computer helped them with their writing because they could type faster than they could write; many added that it was easier to write with the computer. For example, Nathan shared, “The computer is faster than writing with a pencil.” Christine added, “It’s easier and funner. The computer is a great invention.” A few students also reported that they could more easily revise and edit with computers.

Most children expressed that their writing was neater with the computer and that typing/writing on the computer made writing fun for them. Annika shared, “I use it to help me write because it’s neater and it doesn’t make my letters wiggly.” The young learners especially remarked that they enjoyed using the different fonts, colors, spell check, or printer. Elizabeth, for example, commented, “You can type whatever you want and type lots of pages. You can type it in a color and print it in a different color. You can only change the story on paper if you write it in colored pencil.”

Even though it was difficult for them to learn keyboarding at first, the children explained that they could find which keys to type by looking down and practicing. For example, Mitch explained, “I’ve practiced so much that I know where they all are. I sometimes have problems with some of these (points to special keys...like escape, delete, etc.).” Many shared that it was easier to push the keys than write with a pencil. In fact, keyboarding did not seem to hinder or frustrate most students. Most students, nevertheless, shared that they preferred writing their first draft with paper and pencil. Several children further commented that they preferred to work independently at the computer because they could think better and write easier with the computer. Many also reported that the computer helped them write better and helped them with their spelling (See Figure 4 for additional responses from all students in the study).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>How do you feel about using computers?</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “Good. Because it’s fun. You get to type on it and play games.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “Good. I feel good because it gives me time to type things I don’t normally get to write in my journal.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “I really like using a computer. Meaning if I had the opportunity to I would type on it some of the time of the day at least from D.O.L. to after snack. And I’d stay in from recess to use the computer. On a scale from 1-10, I like using the computer at 9.”</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>How does the computer help you?</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “It helps me with my spelling with spell check. It teaches me from my mistakes that I make.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “I use it to help me write because it’s neater and it doesn’t make my letters wiggly.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “The computer is faster than writing with a pencil.”</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>How does the computer help you with your writing?</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “I delete mistakes on the computers, with a pencil you have to erase. It’s easier to fix mistakes on a computer.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “It helps me because if I have a word wrong, I can rewrite it the correct way and everything will be fine.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Well, it’s because there are a lot of fonts and it is much easier than actually writing because your pencil might break and you might mess up your writing and with a pencil you’d have to start all over again. With a computer you can’t mess up.”</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Why do you like computers?</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>• “Thinking of the stories is usually fun for me. I like making the titles. I don’t like it when the computer makes me angry — When spell checker isn’t right sometimes, it makes me angry.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “You can like email people these messages.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “You can type whatever you want and type lots of pages. You can type it in a color and print it in a different color. You can only change the story on paper if you write it in colored pencil.”</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>What are some ways you use the computer to help you?</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>• “When I do emails the word turns red when it’s wrong. It helps me to know it’s wrong so I need to change something. I’ll try to see and add something and take away something to see if the red goes away. I sometimes ask somebody for help with spelling.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “I can learn how to spell a word from spell check, but sometimes it’s wrong, so you have to be careful. Like I put N.P. for north pole and the computer didn’t recognize it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “I like type and type and type and redo stories and stuff. Making stories and stuff makes me better at it.”</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>How do you feel about using the keyboard?</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>• “To find the right keys is hard. It sometimes takes longer if I have to look for the right key.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “Probably now that I’m 7, I can memorize the keyboard so I’ll get faster.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “It’s not hard to find the right keys to type. Because you like memorize where the keys are.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “It’s easy. Because I know what letters they are and what sound they make. I know where they are on the keyboard. I’ve learned where the letters are because of my teachers.”</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>How does the computer helped you write?</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “Because it really helps me read. More people come up to me and say, ‘Oh that’s wrong,’ and they help me spell it right.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “I know how to spell better and the computer helps me with this.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “I’ve learned how to spell other words that I didn’t know before because of the computer.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “It has corrected more things. I learn from those corrections.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Of course! Because I’m older and I’m getting better as I get older.”</td>
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*Figure 4. Additional Student Responses from Interviews.*
Findings from Writing Samples of Emergent Learners

Analysis of the writing samples revealed that emergent students’ writing increased in length over time. Prior to the study, students’ concerns with spelling limited how much they wrote with pencil and paper. While writing on the computer, students became less concerned about their spelling once they realized it could be changed with spell check. Making spell check initially invisible, however, was important. Consistent with the observations, writing samples revealed that the younger writers learned how to make simple revisions with their writing. For example, they learned how to insert additional sentences or a title through teacher conferencing and modeling. Many also learned to edit their spelling with spell check. A few children even practiced punctuation and capitalization strategies through teacher conferencing. Observational data also showed that some of the younger children began to do additional writing. Some children, for example, enjoyed going back to a previous journal entry or story. Sometimes they spontaneously added to the writing or they used spell check to correct their spelling; still other times, they changed the writing font.

Findings from Writing Samples of Developing Learners

Similarly, analysis of the writing samples revealed that developing learners’ writing increased in length and quality. For example, students’ writing became clearer as they inserted more details or descriptive words and as they changed the sequence of information or added an ending to their writing. Gabrielle shows how she thought carefully about her message when writing: “When writing I read the words and if it doesn’t make sense, I try to correct it. If I can’t, I ask a teacher to help me.” Through teacher guidance and peer feedback, students learned strategies for expressing information clearly, adding details to explain their message, or inserting descriptive words to paint pictures of scenes for their readers. The writing samples further demonstrated that they learned how to edit their own writing, as well as that of their peers. According to Lynne, students did not revise or edit their writing prior to the study.

Observational data similarly indicates that some children began to do additional writing. For example, one student wanted to type up his list of questions for an interview to take place the following day. Others requested to type journal entries or drafts on the computer. Cory remarked, “I write more this year. I feel happier about my writing this year.” Hannah added, “I know I have improved because I’ve practiced more.”
Implications

The findings of this study must be viewed with caution. Similar to other qualitative studies, the study is highly contextualized including multi-age classrooms within a private school that had access to technology at many levels. In addition, the two teachers received ongoing support. Given these contexts, the teachers refined their writing instruction and changed how they used technology. Consistent with earlier studies (Labbo, et al, 2001; Margerum-Ley, 2002; Moore & Karabenick, 1992; Myers & Halpin, 2002; Vannatta & O'Bannon, 2002; Windschitl & Sahl, 2002), supported practice seemed to help these teachers determine how to integrate technology with their curriculum and how to use technology to improve student learning.

When helping teachers learn new ways to use technology, there is a need to consider the context of the specific school, the classroom, and their concerns. Teachers seem more willing to think about innovative ideas when they perceive that these contexts are taken into account. As technology continues to advance, school districts need to consider providing additional funding to support teachers in the implementation of technology. For example, they may consider using Technology Specialists to model how to implement technology within the classroom, guiding and assisting teachers along the way. Using Technology Specialists who are familiar with the curriculum and the reading and writing processes might facilitate more successful implementation of technology. As shown in this study, teachers need opportunities to clarify their questions and thoughts about technology through reflection. As a result of these reflections, new opportunities for integrating technology within their curriculum may evolve while giving teachers ownership in the process.

Given the context of this study, the findings further suggest that children extended their literacy learning through challenging experiences. The multimodal tools of technology and the technological environment seemed to stimulate literacy learning. Specifically, with teacher guidance, children learned how to revise and edit their writing with word processing tools, how to expand and develop their writing through questioning, and how to publish their writing using word processing tools. In addition, opportunities for problem solving, language development, and higher-level thinking evolved naturally.

In order for changes in students’ writing to occur, we encourage teachers to follow the writing process. Using technology tools will not necessarily improve all students’ writing. As teachers begin to consider more advanced forms of technology—the Internet, email or PowerPoint™—they will also need to implement them while following the principles of effective writing instruction.
Importantly, these findings provide hypotheses to be generated and tested in future studies. Studies will need to investigate how differentiated support helps teachers consider alternative ways to integrate technology with the curriculum. Other studies could investigate how ongoing professional development and mentoring supports teachers’ use of more advanced technology tools. Additional studies will need to focus specifically on how young learners improve reading/writing performance while using these advanced forms of technology. Still other studies could examine alternative ways for schools to provide teachers with supported practice as technology continues to dominate how we function in society.

**References**


**About the Author:**

**Dr. Margaret A. Moore-Hart**, who is a Reading Program Coordinator, teaches classes in early literacy, literacy, writing, language arts, and reading and writing across the curriculum at Eastern Michigan University. Her research interests include multicultural literacy, struggling readers, writing, technology, and staff development. She is also the author of *Teaching Writing in Diverse Classrooms, K-8: Shaping Writers’ Development Through Literature, Real-Life Experiences, and Technology* to be published by Merrill Publishers in January, 2009.
Poetry Proves to be Positive in the Primary Grades

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Susan L. Wyant
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Abstract

Learning to read and write and achieve good conduct are crucial in the primary grades. One teacher from a state in the Midwest implemented poetry with her second grade students to guide classroom conduct and improve literacy. This article discusses poetry as a literature genre, the benefits of poetry, and poetry curriculum where children read and write poems, enhancing critical thinking skills. In addition, student feedback, classroom orientation, classroom management, poetry as bibliotherapy, and the teacher’s evaluation of poetry and student progress are discussed.

Many teachers commit some time in their busy professional schedules to search for additional strategies and meaningful methods to improve student learning. One second grade teacher contemplated a number of resources, while searching specifically for opportunities to improve literacy and, at the same time, encourage good conduct. Her self-contained second grade classroom is in a school located in a Midwestern state and includes eighteen students with eight boys and ten girls.
Approximately 98% of the children in the classroom were Caucasian. Based on her experience in the classroom, this teacher realized the connection between student enjoyment and student learning. She realized the many uses of poetry may have potential for enhancing literacy while simultaneously improving conduct because the children in her classroom readily enjoyed poetry. Selecting poetry as a genre allowed her to create a curriculum that would help students improve performance in classroom subjects, address the learning capacity of all students, and establish early guidance in good conduct.

It is important to recognize the significant role teachers play in literacy learning and addressing student needs (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). Rasinski and Padak (2004) maintain that teachers do more than teach reading and their roles as educators may change as student needs arise. In an article in The Washington Post, Epstein (2005) noted that teachers today may have roles beyond educating involving child rearing, with discipline as a prominent school concern. Epstein also stated that building character has been vital since the beginning of American schools. The expanded role and influence of teachers is further highlighted with the teacher being more important than any theory, method, or material because of their personal involvement with children in the implementation of strategies and curriculum (Leu & Kinzer, 2003; Rasinski & Padak, 2004). In particular, in the early grades, teachers implement many strategies that build skills in reading.

Learning to read is a significant cognitive process and an essential tool for learning and appreciating all subject matter. According to Antonacci and O’Callaghan (2004), reading is a crucial tool of young learners for academic success. These authors referred to reading as a prime, expansive, and interactive education topic. Likewise, Leu & Kinzer (2003) depicted a number of significant comprehension components for effective reading: word recognition, syntax, semantics, discourse, affect, and socialization. Effective readers use these components as needed to form meaning from text and teachers need to support children in terms of these components. In the second grade classroom discussed in this article, the teacher believed learning poetry could be an effective interactive strategy for literacy and a useful way to address misbehavior through making personal connections with the content of the poems. Charles (2005) reported that student misbehavior is one of the most troublesome challenges teachers face. Problematic behavior often stifles student learning and instruction, increases stress levels, and lowers teacher and student morale. Creating a positive classroom atmosphere was an important part of this teacher’s plan to encourage good conduct and to improve literacy learning.
The purpose of this article is to describe how a second grade teacher implemented poetry to improve literacy and behavior in her classroom. We discuss literature genre and the benefits of poetry, selecting poems and poetry curriculum, children’s feedback to the poems, classroom orientation, classroom management and literacy, poetry as bibliotherapy, and the teacher’s evaluation of poetry, respectively.

**Literature Genre and Benefits of Poetry**

Early in the school year, the teacher recognized the children’s love for poetry when she read Maurice Sendak’s (1990) book *Chicken Soup With Rice: A Book of Months*. Sendak’s book embodies a poem for each month of the year and is useful for discovering the calendar and poetry concepts including rhyme, rhythm, repetition, alliteration, and phonemic awareness. “Awareness of rhyme, rhythm and alliteration together with phonemic awareness distinguish effective readers from readers at risk” (Parr & Campbell, 2006, p. 38). Although poetry is a less frequently utilized literature genre for educating young children and may even be neglected by some (Parr & Campbell, 2006), poetry can be very influential. From the associated rhyme, rhythm, sounds, and words poetry serves to inspire an interest in reading and writing (Stange & Wyatt, 1999). According to Morrow (2001), poetry is one of many useful mediums for improving literacy. Poetry also inspires thought and supports early success with literacy (Parr & Campbell, 2006; Routman, 2000). Tompkins (2005) revealed that poetry not only supports reading, but also enhances enjoyment of language and learning. Language learning is an integrative process comprising reading, writing, speaking, and listening in meaningful contexts. Improvement of a particular language process also facilitates improvements in other language processes (Templeton, 1997). More inclusively, Graves (1992) asserts that poetry should not be limited to writing time, English, or language arts, but should be used throughout the curriculum. Poetry is not a genre “on a hill” (Graves, 1992, p. 171), but a form of communication to be meaningfully integrated during instruction.

“Poetry is the first genre that most children hear” (Manning, 2003, p. 86), and is an oral tradition (Cramer, 2001) for families of young children and for early readers. Children “are natural poets” (Tompkins, Bright, Pollard & Winsor, 1998, p. 414) as they jump rope, clap their hands or dance to a song. In addition, “if children can sing or recite poetry, they will soon be able to read it, and if they can read it, they will soon be able to write it” (Parr & Campbell, 2006, p. 38). Poetry is motivating and builds phonemic awareness, while enhancing the alphabetic prin-
principle, vocabulary, fluency, expression, and writing skills and the genre also has the potential to make reading a positive learning experience (Parr & Campbell, 2006).

**Selection of Poems for this Classroom**

In this second grade classroom, the teacher utilized a number of poems for enhancing literacy learning and improving her children’s conduct. Several poems are mentioned in this article and a selected list of authors is provided at the end. Additional resources can be found by searching the Internet (see Figure 1). The teacher was especially interested in authors like Ruth Heller and Judy Lalli as their poetry afforded a variety of opportunities for children in her classroom to learn peer group solutions to problems. The poems also contain varied language for learning an array of words.

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**Use Search Engines to Locate Poetry Resources on the Web**

- [www.poetry4kids.com](http://www.poetry4kids.com) includes rhyming dictionary, poetry games, poetry contests, news and surveys, discussion forums (and more) or search for poetry resources for teachers.
- [www.colegiobolivar.edu.co/library/primary_poetry.htm](http://www.colegiobolivar.edu.co/library/primary_poetry.htm) includes various forms of poems (limericks, free verse and more), thousands of poems and poets (indexed), collections of rhyming poems and stories and links, lesson plans and assistance for teachers.
- [www.ebscohost.com](http://www.ebscohost.com) includes a search tool which allows selection of poems by title and authors, available in PDF and HTML full text downloads.
- [www.perfectpoems.com](http://www.perfectpoems.com) is a poetry collection site for beginning reading and writing of words.

*Figure 1.* Internet Poetry Resources

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**Poetry as Socialization and a Self-Acceptance Resource**

Judy Lalli’s (1997) book *I Like Being Me* was ideal for modeling socialization and self-acceptance. The book includes useful poems categorically organized for learning about compassion, fairness, citizenship, honesty, self-discipline, respect, and integrity. For this classroom, such poems inspired a heightened awareness of treating others in a positive manner as encouraged by Charles (2005). These poems reinforced “poetitude” (Parr & Campbell, p. 36), the value and power of poetry as
a teaching tool. The following explains how particular poems by Lalli and Heller addressed the positive issues of cooperation, risk-taking, and trustworthiness.

**Cooperation**

*Many Luscious Lollipops* by Ruth Heller (1998) proved to be an exemplary poetic book to involve the children in cooperative learning. Using a big book, the children read the patterned story together, while the teacher emphasized adjectives, rhymes, and pointed out the colorful illustrations associated with lollipops. The poem presented a way for the children to identify with one another, discover a positive perspective for problem solving, and develop a sense of community.

**Risk-Taking**

Judy Lalli (1997) wrote a useful poem to encourage risk-taking, a favorable condition for learning (Cambourne, 2000/2001). In all efforts to encourage literacy and behavior, it is important to treat children with dignity (Charles, 2005). Reading Lalli’s poem that follows, offered guidance to the children on how to react to mistakes and treat others with respect:

*Mistakes can be good, they can help you grow,*
*And they can show you what you need to know.*
*So whenever you make a mistake, just say,*
*Now I'll try it another way.*

Excerpted from *I Like Being Me* by Judy Lalli © 1997. Used with permission of Free Spirit Publishing, Inc., Minneapolis, MN; 800-735-7323; www.freespirit.com. All rights reserved.

During poetry writing lessons, the teacher purposely inserted mistakes such as spelling, capitalization, and punctuation errors for the children to detect. Acknowledging the mistakes engaged the students in discussion ultimately leading the teacher to discover that the children were more comfortable discussing mistakes thereby resulting in fewer mistakes.

**Trustworthiness Poem**

The teacher was very partial to Judy Lalli’s (1997) poem about trustworthiness. She thought it would serve to increase self-concept, self-confidence, and self-awareness as children engaged in learning activities. Parr and Campbell (2006) stated that thinking positively about poetry is necessary for writing and reading poetry.
which can transfer to other areas of learning and responsibilities. The following Lalli poem was beneficial for setting personal expectations:

I didn’t believe I could do it,
I was afraid to try,
My teacher believed I could do it,
And next time, so will I.

Excerpted from *I Like Being Me* by Judy Lalli © 1997. Used with permission of Free Spirit Publishing, Inc., Minneapolis, MN; 800-735-7323; www.freespirit.com. All rights reserved.

The teacher described this particular text as the signature poem to improve behavior and literacy and actively engage children as it informed children of expectations in the classroom, a crucial factor for good discipline (Charles, 2005). Poetry is a very useful tool for extending children’s concepts and developing relevant meanings. According to Swartz (2003), “poetry is a way to see and express life” (p. 54). Poetry helps teachers enter the children’s zone of proximal development, the highest level of independent learner function and provides the necessary scaffolding to extend language and reading in a social cultural context (Vygotsky, 1986). When children connect the texts read to their lives, they recognize that what is read relates to the larger world beyond their universe of home, school, and neighborhood (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000).

**Poetry as Curriculum**

**Children Read Poems**

The teacher’s poetry curriculum incorporated a number of strategic elements to encourage reading. To begin, she used colorful markers and recorded the poems on flip chart paper. The children also received copies of the poems to read and enjoy in school and at home with their parents. The teacher initially read them aloud and the children then read, reread and discussed each poem. Often, one or two students lead the class in a shared reading of a poem. During choral readings, children used a pointer to model left to right reading and speech to print matching. Students and the teacher discussed and interpreted each poem relative to themes. For example, some poems conveyed the importance of telling the truth or believing in one’s ability. The children used their dictionaries to search for words they did
not understand or recognize and they also helped each other form compositions. They often recorded their interpretations of poems through simple word processing and paint programs.

Throughout the process, the children assumed active roles by sharing insights. Routman (2000) reported that shared readings of rhyming poetry increased reading confidence and competence of developing and struggling readers. Campbell (2001) stated that as children read and listen to poetry, it increases their desire to read additional poems.

**Children Wrote Poems**

The teacher also supported her students learning by having them compose their own poetry. According to Campbell (2001), one positive consequence of reading poetry aloud is that it inspires children to write poems. Children began by constructing poems related to conduct, activities, and places at school. They created a simple anagram poem by first thinking of a word and then using the sequential letters to form additional words, phrases, and expressions pertaining to behavior.

Children’s anagrams suggested their knowledge and thinking patterns. One child chose the word LIBRARY and wrote “Look In Books Read and Read Yawn.” This poem shows an awareness of the functional aspects of reading. The teacher inferred that the writer was thinking about the purpose of reading acknowledging that while reading is relaxing, it can also be tiring and require short breaks. Selecting RECESS as a word, another child wrote “Respect Each Child, Everyone’s Sweet Success.” This expression signified awareness of the value of treating others well, along with the belief that success was likely when children are encouraged to take risks.

The poetic anagrams reinforced appropriate conduct and reminded the children of a shared purpose for learning. The writing activity supported spelling improvement as poetry reinforces letter and sound relationships in meaningful and manageable contexts for emergent second and third grade learners (Campbell, 2001). Poetry writing also extends preschool and kindergarten literacy knowledge such as sounding out the syllables of their names or tapping to rhythms and rhyming patterns. Campbell (2001) stated that a love of writing can result from composing poetry. In this classroom, poetry was engaging for all children as they applied their creative understandings.
Poetry Enhanced Critical Thinking Skills

As children proceeded through the steps of the writing process, they worked beyond the basics of knowledge and comprehension, because poetry is a synthetic and an interactive process that naturally encourages critical, creative, and higher ordered thinking (Fehl, 1983). Scriven and Paul (2007) defined critical thinking as “that mode of thinking about any subject, content or problem in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking” (p. 2). After reading these poems, the children gleaned certain truths and drew a group consensus of trust and right and wrong. In addition, they acquired personal insights about family, friends, and acquaintances from reading and discussing poetry, and gained a higher level of learning, demonstrating their awareness of good behavior and positive thinking.

Classroom Organization

In a typical school day, these second grade students moved from one part of the classroom to another to complete their class assignments, from room to room for some subjects, and from one area of the school to another during recess and lunch. Such movement presented a distraction for some children, so the teacher implemented an activity using poetry. During transitions, the teacher invited the children to recite poems. One teacher-created rhyme encouraged good conduct through the language of the poem:

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ am going back to my seat}, \\
You \text{ won’t hear a peep} \\
When I \text{ am moving around}, \\
I \text{ don’t make a sound.}
\end{align*}
\]

The teacher discovered that performing poetry often helped the children focus their attention during transitions. With attention focused on reciting poems, the teacher expanded instruction beyond the classroom to further enhance student learning. She also integrated activities for arrival and departure from school and to and from lunch. She included a wide variety of poems to promote fairness, citizenship, trustworthiness, honesty, integrity, compassion, and responsibility. A major goal was for the children to realize healthy social, emotional and cognitive development, and expand language and literacy. If students lack the focus needed during instruction or if they do not have self-discipline, it may be difficult for them to progress. Poetry provided a focus for the teacher to encourage improvement of reading and writing as well as student self-discipline.


Children’s Feedback

Before children can develop a sense of right or wrong, they must first acquire sensitivity for the emotions of other people (Goleman, 1997). One activity the teacher used to gain information about these children’s thoughts was to invite them to think and write about their behavior. She noticed that reading and writing poetry increased self-awareness and self-esteem in each of the young students in her classroom. Comments noted in Table 1 suggest insight and engagement as the children offered feedback about their conduct.

Table 1. Student Comments about Poetry

- When we use poetry for behavior, I feel proud of myself.
- I feel good. It made me feel like such a good child.
- I like to say poetry. I could say them all day.
- When we use poems, I feel good. This is because they make us be good. They help us be nice and good at recess.
- They help us behave in the hallway at school.
- When we use poetry for our behavior, I feel happy. This is because I like doing poetry. It helps us do good behavior.
- Poetry is nice. And the best thing of all, it stops our talking.
- When we use poetry for our behavior, I feel nice.
- This is because I make people happy and feel great.
- Poetry is good for you. And it helps you. And I like it.
- There is one poem I sing everyday called, I didn’t believe I could do it.

Classroom Management and Literacy

Most teachers want to spend time helping children learn, rather than focusing on problematic behavior. While reasons for student misbehavior vary, students often misbehave wanting more attention, firmer limits, or for greater motivation. Charles (2005) referred to William Glasser’s Model, noting behaviors are purposeful, fulfilling one or more of the five basic and genetically determined needs of survival, belonging, freedom, fun, and power.
Describing the Teacher’s Role

Teachers are “agents of behavioral change” and very significant to students’ behavioral progress (Brodkin, 2001, p. 4) and literacy achievement (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). The significance of determining children’s personal interests and back-grounds in order to modify behavior is helpful to inform and improve children’s reading (Brodkin, 2001; Rasinski & Padak, 2004). Teachers can utilize a number of strategies to monitor student progress including surveys, informal discussions, and observations of behavior and reading. In this classroom, when the teacher imple-mented activities such as writing poetry, she asked the students to define their feel-ings. According to Graves (1992) “poetry is for thinking and feeling” (p. 171). Poetic self-expressions encourage learning, deeper thinking, and awareness of behavior.

Defining Conduct

Brodkin (2001) described two categorizations of problematic student behav-iors: (1) disruptions to a learning environment and (2) subtle disappearing behavior. Such basic categorical representations are useful to teachers when determining whether or not intervention is necessary. Teachers can quickly recognize the more salient category of disrupting learning environment through classroom behavior such as “calling out, clowning around, making silly noises, getting up/down and acting intrusive or distracting (thereby interfering with others’ ability to work), rowdiness in the halls and/or playground, bullying, disrespectfulness, overall poor self-control, verbal or physical aggression, and various disguised pleas for attention” (Brodkin, p. 4). In contrast, the more restrained category of disappearing student behavior personifies subtleties like tuning-out, withdrawing, daydreaming, not lis-tening, avoiding participation, or showing little or no pride in their work and/or interest in their social surroundings. Subtle disappearing behavior, while seemingly not as urgent as disruptive behavior, is likely very disturbing to a classroom teacher inhibiting student achievement. Teachers should address such behavior in order to avoid negative effects on learning.

No matter how a teacher decides to address behavior, children must have and know clear classroom expectations. Many schools define rules of conduct, and certainly, many teachers help create rules. If a teacher decides to invent personal rules of conduct, Charles (2005) suggests using the golden rule as a starting point, adding one or two other rules as needed. As a literacy enhancing strategy in this classroom, poetry lent itself well for the development of rules and had a captivating record improving student behavior.
Poetry as Bibliotherapy

Abdullah (2002) posited that poetry is a natural means of improving behavior, a tool of “biblioguidance” (p. 3). Poetry bibliotherapy is sometimes termed poetry therapy (Longo 1996-2006). While poetry therapy is relatively new in the expressive arts, the concept of bibliotherapy is as old as the first chants sung by the tribal fires of primitive people. A term popular in the 1960s and 1970s, bibliotherapy is the concept of healing and molding minds through books and particular texts and dates back to the first libraries of ancient Greece (Bibliotherapy, 1982).

Sigmund Freud related the values of poetry for learning and counsel (Meisel, 1981). Freud maintained that poetry develops one’s unconscious creative mental powers and imagination, is an ideal medium for counseling, often providing useful analog and metaphor for understanding, and is a natural function of the human mind (Meisel, 1981). In fact, Freud referred to the mind as “a poetry-making organ” (Meisel, 1981, p. 107). Historically, poetry serves therapeutic purposes as a form of self-expression and as a form of art as children learn to understand nature and the world (Lerner, 1994). Personal, self-expression poems or “I” poetry, can be therapeutic by promoting greater self-esteem and motivation.

Conclusion

According to this teacher, using poems of well-known authors and allowing children to invent poems provided every child with creative choices to support alphabetic principle, spelling, and literacy. Selected poems ultimately provided a strong foundation for improving conduct and enhanced literacy learning. The variety of poems and related activities helped the children understand words and vocabulary associated with character education. The children internalized the principles in their daily actions and as they read and recited poetry, a group consciousness for best conduct developed. In addition, positive peer pressure inspired many children to implement better behavior. Poetry also noticeably increased student engagement as well as improved decision-making for good conduct.

All students in this classroom improved in reading and writing fluency by reading and composing poetry. This was evident as scores for spelling and word recognition increased. Poetry fostered a supportive learning environment with less lying, cheating, tattling, making fun of others, bullying, and other behavioral problems. It was also evident that when the children understood how to connect what they read to their daily lives, they realized the impact of their actions. Effectively utilizing poetry inspired what Brodkin (2001) referred to as a mutual respect and
understanding in the classroom. Throughout the school year, poetry helped the children make personal connections to each other and learn about appropriate behavior in part because they enjoyed it. Reading and writing poetry strengthened literacy skills and facilitated the development of critical thinking. Using poetry offered opportunities to influence student performance, enhanced each student’s literacy capacity, and created early guidance for good conduct. All of this is proof for this teacher that poetry was positive for students in this second grade classroom.

Selected Authors and Poetry


References


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Dr. Terrence Stange is a faculty member in the Literacy Education Program at Marshall University, Graduate College, S Charleston, West Virginia. His current research interests include teacher education, comprehension, reading and writing attitudes, and early learning. Dr. Stange likes to involve graduate students in scholarly activities and action research.
Text Sets: Making Connections Between and Across Books

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Linking books together has become a popular trend in many classrooms. More and more teachers are creating text sets—collections of books grouped around a similar topic, theme, genre, or author. Text sets allow readers to organize responses in a way that helps them notice patterns, make literary connections, and develop insights across books (Lehman, 2007).

Teachers find that there are many benefits to using text sets with their students. Including a range of levels in a book collection allows more students to experience the topics and themes of study. As students read multiple related texts, their achievement often increases (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997), and they often engage in evaluating the importance, credibility, and relevance of the individual texts read (Kucan, Lapp, Flood, & Fisher, 2007). The reading of similar texts reinforces vocabulary and concept development for struggling readers and English language learners (Young & Hadaway, 2006). Possible text sets are limited only by the teacher’s imagination, and those we have collected provide a starting place for creative-minded teachers. We share a few text set possibilities below, beginning with one that focuses on the works of one author and then concluding with a text set of fairy tales.

Author Studies

Author studies allow students to experience multiple books by a single author while they learn about the author’s craft. Gail Gibbons, a popular nonfiction author, skillfully combines simple, informative text and vivid illustrations to make a variety of topics accessible to children in the early grades. Her book Dinosaur (2008) includes the most up-to-date information about these creatures that many children and adults find so intriguing. Coral Reef (2007) informs young
readers about how the reefs are formed and grow, how the different types vary from one another, and how many different plants and animals live in these fascinating habitats.


Gibbons takes the reader on a journey light-years away in Galaxies, Galaxies! (2007) teaching them that the Milky Way Galaxy is not the only galaxy in the universe. Her updated edition of The Planets (2008) includes Pluto’s new status as a Dwarf Planet. Snakes (2007) another book on a topic of great interest to children, identifies the characteristics and habitats of these cold-blooded creatures. Students learn fascinating facts of how they live, give birth, and eat. Her latest book, Corn (2008), provides details about corn’s role in history from the American Indians and the pilgrims, to the current interest in using corn to produce ethanol. Teachers and children alike are on the lookout to see what Gail Gibbons’ next book will address.

**Farming and Ranching**

If you are interested in reading about life on America’s farms and ranches and learning about these jobs, you will enjoy this text set. Students often think of farming in terms of 19th century life. Today’s non-fiction books enable children who have never stepped on a farm or ranch to gain insight into farming today. Clarabelle: Making Milk and So Much More (2007) by Cris Peterson highlights Peterson’s large dairy operation while explaining the latest technology used
by today’s dairy farmers, including how the manure is used to generate electricity, fertilizer, and bedding for the cows. Students are fascinated by such facts as the comparison between the amount of time it takes for a child to eat a bowl of cereal and the fact that one cow provides enough milk to fill another 160 bowls during that same amount of time. This book is ideal for reading aloud.

Teachers will also want to check out the following other farm and ranch books. Peterson’s (2006) Fantastic Farm Machines presents the giant-sized machinery used on today’s farms. Cat Urbigkit’s A Young Shepherd (2006), Cattle Kids (2007), and The Shepherd’s Trail (2008) take young readers into ranching country where contemporary life sometimes resembles life in the Old West.

Parent’s Livelihoods

The Shepherd’s Trail (Urbigkit, 2008) would work equally well in a text set on around parents’ livelihoods. Amazing rural settings filled with photographs of enormous herds of sheep follow the route taken by today’s shepherds who must bring their sheep to good grazing lands and protect them from intruders. Readers even watch sheep being sheared in an assembly line. The simple but colorful Drive (Clement, 2008) fills children’s need to know more about the world of work. Drenched in rich primary colors, Drive depicts a day in the life of a truck driver who must rise early in the morning while the rest of the world is slumbering, and head off to his job in a big rig. Readers will enjoy following his route and then seeing him return home to spend time with his son.

The Shepherd’s Trail. Text copyright © 2008 by Cat Urbigkit. Used by permission of the publisher Boyds Mills Press, Honesdale, PA.
Negro Baseball League

Baseball is a topic that has long fascinated young readers, and there are several wonderful titles about the sport that has been dubbed America’s favorite pastime. Perhaps the most glorious and gorgeous one is Kadir Nelson’s stunning *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball* (2008). In this retrospective, Nelson takes readers to a time when catcher Raleigh “Biz” Mackey had to strap on wood pieces to protect his limbs from players sliding into home plate. Just about anything was acceptable during those early days of baseball, and players had to be ready to deal with cheating and violence from the opposing team. Through a series of chapters organized as innings and one headed “Extra Innings,” Nelson describes the birth of the Negro League under the tutelage of Andrew “Rube” Foster as well as tells of the demise of the league. Readers also learn the stories behind Bud Fowler, the first Negro to play professional ball. While Nelson describes the rise of baseballers Jackie Robinson and Satchel Paige, whose acceptance into the white world of baseball foretold the demise of the Negro league, there is abundant new material here. A nostalgic but bittersweet quality lingers around the stories Nelson shares, and the reader is aware that while something was gained through the integration of baseball, something was also lost.
Nelson’s use of first person plural draws the reader into the text, serving notice that “we” were all a part of the very human story of baseball and its heroes. The paintings that cover the book’s pages simply pulse with life and strength, and the reader wouldn’t be surprised to find a player stepping from the page and hitting one out of the ballpark. Muscles ripple across the men’s arms, and steely eyes glare out at the reader in reminiscence of how batters stepped up to the plate and faced off against tough pitchers.


**Sports**

Sports of a different sort are at the heart of several delightful narratives, three for young adults and two for middle grade readers. There’s not a reluctant reader out there who won’t love the appealing and aptly named *Dairy Queen* (Murdock, 2006) and its sequel *The Off-Season* (Murdock, 2007). They follow the adventures of Wisconsin farmer’s daughter DJ Schwenk whose family is so football-oriented that even their dairy cattle are named after famous gridiron heroes. After a romance blossoms between DJ and Brian, the rival high school’s quarterback, and DJ finds acceptance on her own high school football team, the sequel shows a maturing DJ, beginning to wonder why Brian seems inclined to keep their relationship such a secret. Injuries, her own and a life-changing one for her older brother, come to the forefront of the storyline, and force DJ to mature even more than in the first book. Readers will fall in love with the engaging, individualist DJ and root for her to find contentment.

Older readers will also relish the struggles of poor little rich girl Syrah Cheng in *Girl Overboard* (Headley, 2008). The daughter of a privileged upbringing, Syrah dreams of a lucrative contract with a snowboard company and tries to live up to her parents’ expectations. A knee injury and broken heart have her sidelined and unable to compete at the level she had before the injury. Lonely and confused, Syrah begins looking for ways to make a difference in the world around her. Touched by the plight of a new friend’s sister’s need for a donor, she cobbles together a snowboarding fundraiser, proving herself to both herself and her parents.
In *The Aurora County All-Stars* (Wiles, 2007), baseball, literacy, and a pageant all tangle up during one impossibly complicated summer. House Jackson is determined to play baseball this year. Unfortunately, his arm was injured by Frances Shotz, who is in charge of a pageant that threatens to derail the baseball game. The book provides insight into the South and is filled with literary references.

L. D. Harkrader’s (2005) *Airball: My Life in Briefs* is a fast-paced and funny book about an unlikely and untalented group of eighth graders who rally together to become a great basketball team. The book is almost a parody of “The Emperor’s New Clothes” as their coach uses an unlikely strategy that leads to their success—practicing in their underwear. Beyond the basketball story, the book has a more serious thread as the protagonist, Kirby Nickel, seeks to determine who is father is.

**War**

The seemingly ever-present threat of war is at the heart of several books sure to provoke lively classroom discussions. Readers will identify with India Moody, the heroine of *Red Moon at Sharpsburg* (Wells, 2007), as she prepares for a college education, something almost unheard of for females during the Civil War era, and studies under the tutelage of neighbor Emory Trimble. India watches as the war inexorably makes its way toward her family’s Shenandoah home, and she sees her world completely changed by its violence. Wells carefully shows many perspectives on the war and paints vivid, moving portraits of the medical practices of the day as well as the battle scenes.

*The Brothers’ War: Civil War Voices in Verse* (Lewis, 2007) provides additional perspectives on the Civil War through poetry and stunning photographs of the toll taken on the nation by that war. Also of interest will be *Why War Is Never a Good Idea* (Walker, 2007), a powerful poem that describes the destruction of war. Accompanied by illustrations by Stefano Vitale, the poem relates war’s impact on the environment and reminds the reader that war has been with us for a very long time.

Filled with more than 50 poems and powerful illustrations by Stephen Alcorn, *America at War: Poems* (Hopkins, 2008) traces war, starting from the Revolutionary War all the way through the war in Iraq. The collection strikes a balance between paying tribute to those who have lost their lives and revealing the raw emotions war inspires in all of us. Hopkins has gathered poems by Carl Sandburg, Langston Hughes, and e. e. cummings as well as lines penned by soldiers in the line of conflict. Readers are sure to ponder both the costs and the benefits of our nation’s conflicts.
Young readers love the natural world, and a treasure trove of books designed to take them on flights of fancy await their eager eyes. Especially appealing for younger readers is *Ookpik: The Travels of a Snowy Owl* (Hiscock, 2008). Nurtured by his parents in the Arctic, Ookpik must leave home and travel south in search of food as the days grow short, and food is scarce. When he lands in the United States, onlookers leave him alone, respectfully watching from a distance. Hiscock’s lovely drawings and engaging text will have readers sighing in pleasure and searching the sky for a snowy owl. Readers intrigued by this story may also enjoy *City Hawk: The Story of Pale Male* (McCarthy, 2007), *The Tale of Pale Male: A True Story* (Winter, 2007), and *Pale Male: Citizen Hawk of New York City* (Schulman, 2008). *Pale Male: Citizen Hawk of New York City* contains gorgeous endpapers and exciting cityscapes that vividly show the unlikely sojourn of a red-tailed hawk in America’s largest city. Readers of all ages will be intrigued by this magical account of a bird, soaring high above the city, who chooses to make its nest above Central Park.
Fairy Tales

Magic of a very different sort awaits readers in several modern versions of the archetypal fairy tales. Young readers will adore the rhyming story *Waking Beauty* (Wilcox, 2008), the story of a prince who, while charming and well-meaning, doesn’t listen to advice very well, and ends up pouring water on his sleeping princess and shooting her from a cannon. They’ll also want to read *Falling for Rapunzel* (Wilcox, 2007) and the lovely *The Princess and the Pea* (Cech, 2007), which are retellings of the familiar fairy tales.

Oldest readers will fall in love with lady’s maid Dashti in *Book of a Thousand Days* (Hale, 2007), an adaptation of the little-known Grimm’s tale “Maid Maleen.” Lady Saran refuses to marry the man chosen by her father and is consequently shut in a tower for seven years with her maid, Dashti. The maid must rise to the occasion as her mistress secretly gobbles the food stores and risks their lives. Through Dashti’s eyes, readers experience the horrors of Lord Khasar and the growing love between commoner Dashti and Tegus as described in the maid’s thought book. Hale’s lyrical language sweeps her readers off their feet and forcing them to spend sleepless nights reading this memorable book.

Into the Woods (Gardner, 2006) offers middle grade readers appealing sisters in the forms of Any, who speaks before she can walk, Aurora, who is in charge of the household, and Storm, the tempestuous heroine who takes responsibility when the children are left on their own, and the wolves begin to surround their doors. A delightful hodgepodge featuring many favorite fairy tales including “Red Riding Hood,” “The Pied Piper,” “Rapunzel,” “Jack and the Bean Stalk,” “Sleeping Beauty,” and “The Twelve Brothers,” will prompt readers to read the original stories in order to find similarities and differences between Gardner’s rendition and the Grimms’. Readers are sure to begin creating their own fairy tale text sets to share with friends.

Books Included in Our Text Sets

**Fairy Tales**


**Farming & Ranching**


Gail Gibbons

The Natural World

Negro Baseball League
Sports

War

Working Parents

References

About the Authors:
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