Biographies tell us stories about people, young and old, famous and infamous, long past and brand new. Many of us are drawn to them for the life lessons shared, the insights gained, or merely for the juicy events of the person’s life. Whatever the reason or story, biographies can be genuinely good reads. We each have our own story to tell. In fact, we have multiple stories that make up who we are on many levels both personally and professionally.

Just recently, my graduate students completed their Literacy Histories. In this assignment, they did an “autobiographical dig” into their literate past finding evidence of how they learned to read, what they liked to read, and, following this journey throughout their life, they then reflected on what all of it means to them today as teachers of literacy. They wove all of this into elegant literacy autobiographies. In essence, they told their stories of becoming not only literate people, but educators who helped others become literate themselves. Having learned much about themselves and their classmates, their comments ranged from the personal, “I had forgotten how much I hated Popcorn reading,” to the more professional, “Reading everyone’s Literacy History reminded me of how each person learns to read differently.” We all agreed that digging into our literate past and telling our own stories was indeed a learning experience.

In this issue of Reading Horizons you will find stories of students from many cultures. While not true biographies in form, the authors nonetheless teach us about students they have worked with and learned from. Jacqueline Lynch and colleagues explore the literacy activities of culturally diverse families and share the stories of multiple families and how they support the literacy of their young children. The authors visited homes to videotape parents reading to their children and analyzed the many different interactions around the reading of a book. Mona W. Matthews and John E. Kesner take us into the lives of young children, birth to age five, as
they explore the place of caregivers and other significant adults, such as teachers, in their early literacy experiences. The authors studied these relationships, discovering how they often lay the foundation for literacy learning and offer suggestions on how educators can enhance the relational aspect of early literacy. Barbara C. Palmer and her colleagues tell the story of Hakan, a fifth grade Turkish student who, as an English Language Learner (ELL) both struggles and delights in the figurative language of English. Hakan’s story shows the importance and power of language and how it can so easily be misconstrued. As he plays with the common phrase, “easy come, easy go,” the reader may begin to understand how vital a reader’s background knowledge is to creating meaning.

Reintroducing us to biographies in their truer form, Terrell A. Young and Barbara A. Ward highlight many biographies that have recently been published. For example, the reader will learn about Alice, the strong-willed daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt and Wangari Maathai who, determined to honor her homeland, led an effort to plant millions of trees in Kenya. As usual, Young and Ward bring us many of the best books in this chosen genre.

And so stories go on. Lives are lived, some are documented and turned into fascinating biographies. The story of Reading Horizons continues to be told and that story is changing. With this issue, Volume 48 is completed and I want to personally thank you for your patience in this time of transition. Two changes will be made with Volume 49 which I highlight below.

- Reading Horizons, while continuing to be a quarterly journal, will change publication dates. The issues will now follow the seasons as we will publish in the fall (September/October), winter (December/January), spring (March/April), and summer (June/July). It is my hope that this will make the publication and delivery of the journal a more timely and consistent process.
• The *Reading Horizons* website will shortly be updated providing information to our readers and potential authors. Included on the website will be a selection of past articles in pdf format. More information on that will follow.

It is our hope that all of us, as a community of literacy learners, will remain supportive of this journal as it continues to grow and change. We hope you spread the word about the journal to your colleagues and they subscribe, expanding our readership. We encourage you to submit manuscripts for possible publication so our knowledge base can grow. The biography of *Reading Horizons* is ever-changing and we look forward to your research and your stories becoming a part of our story.

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 the 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 (300dpi) 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. Those not written in this style will be returned without review.

Editorial Policies

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

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

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Parents and Preschool Children Interacting with Storybooks: Children’s Early Literacy Achievement

Jacqueline Lynch, Assistant Professor
York University

Jim Anderson, Professor
Ann Anderson, Professor
Jon Shapiro, Professor
University of British Columbia

Abstract

This research reports on one area of a larger study in Western Canada examining the literacy activities of families from culturally diverse backgrounds. The research focused on parents’ interactions with preschool children in storybook sharing and children’s emergent reading development as measured by the Test of Early Reading Ability-2 (TERA-2). The sample consisted of 35 parents and children. Parents’ and children’s interactions in storybook sharing were videotaped and coded using a modified scale by Shapiro, Anderson, and Anderson (1997). Relationships were found between parents’ and children’s interactions in storybook reading and children’s early literacy achievement.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between parents’ and children’s interactions in storybook reading and children’s literacy achievement. Storybook reading has been viewed as an important means for supporting young children’s literacy development. Of all the experiences said to contribute to early literacy, shared book reading is often considered to be the most important literacy experience between caregivers and children (Neuman, 1999). To develop accurate models of the home literacy environment, it is necessary to examine how parents
interact with their children when encouraged by educators to read to them (Senechal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998). Overall, storybook exposure in the early years of formal schooling has been shown to contribute to children’s language skills and has also been shown to relate to reading comprehension in the later primary grades (Senechal et al., 1998; Whitehurst, Zevenbergen, Crone, Schultz, Velting, & Fischel, 1999). Other models of literacy acquisition can be developed when findings of research with diverse cultural groups are incorporated into theories and models of early reading development (Hammer & Miccio, 2004). Moreover, insight into both parents’ and children’s interaction with text can challenge or refine theories about the importance of various types of interactions in storybook reading.

Theoretical Frame and Background

This research was based on a Vygotskian or social constructivist perspective that maintains that learning occurs in the context of shared meaningful activities, of which storybook reading is an example. According to Vygotsky (1978), adults deliberately structure shared activities within a child’s zone of proximal development so children can demonstrate more complex behaviors than they might on their own. One way children learn about literacy is by interacting with significant others in their lives. Specifically, in storybook reading, adults may phrase questions and statements in relation to children’s literacy knowledge. Parents can adjust the types of interactions with children to the child’s literacy knowledge, while also supporting a higher-level of learning.

One method of examining parent-child interactions in storybook reading is to examine the levels of cognitive demand associated with each interaction. Sigel (1970, 1993) referred to distancing as behavior or events that involve cognitive separation from the immediate environment. Cognitive distancing is evident in parent-child book sharing when parents ask certain types of questions and make statements that place more cognitive demands on children. Low-level distancing utterances include repeating text or labeling what is seen in the pictures. High-level distancing utterances involve more cognitive distance, such as explaining or extending the text (Leseman & de Jong, 1998). According to Bus and van IJzendoorn (1995), parents who engage children in higher level thinking skills are thought to benefit children’s literacy learning by promoting literacy understandings in terms of developing the skills of hypothesizing, predicting, and understanding the relativity of one’s own perspective to others.
Sonnenschein and Munsterman (2002) and Phillips and McNaughton (1990), found that while parents and older siblings focus on various types of interactions in storybook reading with preschoolers, there was little focus or talk about print. Evans and Saint-Aubin (2005) researched children’s focus on print in storybook sharing by videotaping children’s eye movements when they were being read to by a parent or a preschool teacher. They found that based on the children’s eye fixations on the print, when read a storybook by a teacher or parent, the children pay little attention to print.

In relation to children’s achievement, in a study of Turkish, Surinamese, and Dutch families living in the Netherlands, Leseman and de Jong (1998) found that there were differences in children’s receptive knowledge of Dutch words after parents engaged in storybook sharing with their children. Interactions during book reading revealed differences among each cultural group. According to the researchers, the Turkish group, relative to both of the other groups, pointed far less to the pictures in the book and also uttered fewer picture labels and descriptions. It seemed that Turkish mothers made less use of pictures in the storybook to support their young children’s understanding of the story. Furthermore, the Dutch group engaged in fewer utterances requiring literal repeating and completing of read sentences than the Surinamese and the Turkish group. Higher level utterances (i.e., explaining, evaluating, and extending utterances) were more predominant among the Dutch group than in the other groups, which seemed to relate to children’s vocabulary knowledge. Similarly, DeTemple (2001) found that engaging in non-immediate talk or higher-level utterances, such as drawing inferences and making predictions, while storybook sharing, was positively associated with children’s later literacy skills, including their emergent literacy knowledge and comprehension skills.

In one of the few studies to compare questions with comments, Kertoy (1994) examined the types of interactions between White, middle-class parents and children ages three to six years old. She found that questioning by the adult contributed to a greater percentage of the children’s utterances related to story structure and print than did commenting or general story reading by the adult. However, commenting by the adult contributed to a greater percentage of utterances by the child related to story meaning than did questioning or general story reading by the adult. Kertoy (1994) recommended that parents and teachers combine questioning and commenting during storybook reading to maximize opportunities for lengthier comments by children. Senechal, Thomas, and Monker (1995) found that four-year-olds who were asked what/where questions or who pointed to illustrations depicting the target word acquired significantly more words than peers who only
heard the text read verbatim. Vocabulary knowledge has also been shown to be a strong predictor of reading comprehension and academic achievement (Pressley, 2006). These studies signify the importance of having children actively involved in the shared-reading experience.

To gain a better understanding of the quality of interactions in storybook sharing, this study addressed the need to focus on areas of interactions in storybook reading that may relate to children’s literacy achievement. Because most research on storybook reading has involved White, middle-class families, this study also extends our understanding by providing an exploratory account of the way in which families from diverse backgrounds interact in storybook reading. In particular, the research questions addressed in this study were: Do parents’ and children’s interactions in storybook reading relate to young children’s literacy achievement as measured by the TERA-2? If so, what types of interactions relate to children’s literacy achievement?

Method

Participants

Participants included 35 parents and their preschool-age children living in an urban area of Western Canada. Children were three (n = 12, range = 36–45 months, M = 41.17, SD = 2.72) or four (n = 26, range = 48–59 months, M = 52.92, SD = 3.90) years of age and were attending preschool. There were 13 boys and 22 girls along with 28 mothers and seven fathers in this study. Parents were from diverse cultural backgrounds; the sample included East Asian Canadians, South Asian Canadians, European Canadians, First Nations (Native Canadians), and Mexican Canadian families. Most parents (24) had a post-secondary education.

Procedure and Instruments

Daycare centers and preschools in a number of neighborhoods with diverse populations were contacted. Many areas of the city where this study was conducted were very culturally diverse so the sample would be representative of this area. Preschool administrators were contacted and those who agreed to participate distributed a permission letter and information about the study to the classroom teachers and parents. The information letter, sent to the administrators by the researchers, outlined the purpose of the study (i.e., to examine how parents from diverse cultural groups support their young children’s multiliteracy development) and
the types of tasks in which parents and their children would engage. As the literacy measure used in this study is standardized for age three and above, we asked that only parents of children ages three and four be contacted. The researchers were also particularly interested in working with children before they began formal schooling to examine how storybook interactions may relate to children’s achievement. Furthermore, we asked that because of the diversity of languages spoken, parents who could complete most of the tasks in English be approached.

This study was part of a longitudinal study on multiliteracies. As part of the larger, longitudinal study, parents and children were involved in a number of tasks. These included interviews with parents about their literacy beliefs, videotaping parents and children playing a board game, and experiencing shared reading twice over a two-year period. Children were assessed for language, literacy, and early mathematical knowledge. In particular, the tasks and the analysis presented in this article were from a videotaped parent-child shared reading session and children’s performance on the TERA-2 measure (Reid, Hresko, & Hammill, 1989).

Depending on their preference, parents were videotaped sharing a storybook with their children either at the preschool or in their home. Children were then assessed by using the TERA-2 (Reid et al., 1989). The TERA-2 was selected for this study because of its examination of many aspects of children’s literacy development. Moreover, its uniqueness lies in its assessment of reading behavior that emerges during the preschool years (Reid et al., 1989). It is a norm-referenced test of early literacy achievement based on the work of researchers in emergent literacy from the 1960s to present (Harp, 1996).

**Videotaped Shared Reading**

Parents were asked to share a storybook with their child as they normally would, in their home or at the preschool, and were videotaped by one of the researchers. Approximately half of the parents chose to be videotaped at home, while others chose the preschool where a quiet area was chosen to minimize distraction. Parents and children sat side-by-side and were given time to feel comfortable with the video recorder. The researcher would appear distracted or would leave the room while the videotaping was in progress. Because this study was part of a longitudinal study and there was a need to control for book familiarity as tasks would be repeated over time, two different narratives were used, *Swimmy* (Lionni, 1991) and *Mr. McMouse* (Lionni, 1992). The books were counter-balanced in this study and were chosen in consultation with two specialists in children’s literature who
recommended the storybooks because of their popularity and their general accessibility to the public. All verbal and gestural interactions during book sharing on the videotapes were transcribed. Whether the child or parent spoke or gestured while story sharing, and whether the verbal interaction was phrased as a question or statement, were included in the transcriptions. When a parent or child spoke a second language during story sharing, these interactions were transcribed into English and included in the analysis. Second language use was minimal during book sharing. Data from the videotaping were analyzed using a modified category scheme developed by Shapiro, Anderson, and Anderson (1997). This scheme was used because of its focus on different levels of thinking skills associated with particular types of interactions and its level of complexity in the evaluation of storybook interactions. When a word, phrase, or sentence was separated by a pause or the injection of a new speaker, this was then coded as an interaction. In addition, the speaker, whether the parent or child, was recorded. Most obviously, Shapiro et al.’s (1997) scheme was modified by differentiating questions from statements within each category, rather than using questioning as a separate category. The specific coding categories (Lynch, 2004) used in this study as well as examples of the categories are listed in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Coding Categories and Examples from Videotapes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gestures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Gesture 1: Parent points to the illustration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Gesture 2: Child points to the illustration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Gesture 3: Parent points to the print.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Gesture 4: Child points to the print.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Print/graphophonics:** Parent or child makes statements or asks questions about the print.

Child: Those letters are a mouse too.

Parent: There is the word mouse.

**Confirmation:** Parent or child confirms what is written in the text by paraphrasing the text, repeating the text exactly, or confirming what is in the illustrations.

Parent reading text: HE SWAM FASTER THAN HIS BROTHERS AND SISTERS. HIS NAME WAS SWIMMY.

P: His name was Swimmy. Did he swim fast?
Parents and Preschool Children

Nineteen categories of interactions were focused on in this study (see Table 1). Only one child asked a question about print, and because this child also made statements about print, children’s statements and questions have been combined for this category only and labeled children’s statements/questions about print. Furthermore, prediction and association questions and comments were omitted from the analysis of this study because of the low frequency of responses falling into these categories.
Table 1. Total Number and Mean Scores of Parent-child Interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>N = 35</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gesture 1</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>9.14</td>
<td>8.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gesture 2</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>6.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gesture 3</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>3.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gesture 4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print 1</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>3.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print 2</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>4.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print 3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>2.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation 1</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>14.86</td>
<td>13.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation 2</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>11.29</td>
<td>9.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation 3</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>9.40</td>
<td>12.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation 4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarification 1</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>5.51</td>
<td>5.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarification 2</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarification 3</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarification 4</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration 1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration 2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration 3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration 4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1 = parent-statement; 2 = child-statement; 3 = parent-question; 4 = child-question. Exception: Gesture 1 & 2 = point to illustration; Gesture 3 & 4 = point to print.

The sum for each interaction was used in the analysis. The first author coded all of the data. A graduate student who specialized in literacy education independently coded 26% of the randomly selected data by the researcher. An agreement of 81% was obtained before discussion, and 89% after discussion of the disagreements.
Early literacy development was determined using a standardized measure, the TERA-2. This assessment measures three components of reading - the ability to construct meaning, knowledge of the alphabet, and knowledge of the conventions of print (Reid et al., 1989). The following are examples of questions on the TERA-2: “Tell me about this. What can you get there?” (meaning), ”What letter is this? Tell me its name” (alphabet), and ”Which one is the letter? Point to the letter” (conventions). A reliability analysis was performed on the TERA-2 based on the results found in the present study. For this group of children, an alpha reliability of the total test was .76. Based on the age of most of the children in this study, they answered questions that focused on their understanding of meaning, such as being able to label or point to pictures of objects. Other questions focused on their ability to label or point to some of the alphabetic letters.

Data Analysis

In order to answer the research question, Pearson correlations (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006) were used to examine relationships between parents’ and children’s interactions with text and children’s achievement. A t-test was conducted to examine whether differences existed in parent-child interactions based on the two storybooks shared. No significant differences were found.

Results

Parents’ clarification, $r(35) = .40$, $p = .01$, and elaboration statements, $r(35) = .40, p = .01$, related to children’s overall reading achievement. The findings suggest that the more parents made clarification and elaboration statements, the higher the children scored on the TERA-2. Parents may have also made more of these types of statements when children had higher literacy knowledge as assessed by the TERA-2. In addition, children’s confirmation questions related to their overall reading achievement, $r(35) = .34, p = .04$ (see Table 2). That is, the more confirmation questions children asked, the higher the children’s achievement. This finding could also suggest that the higher children’s achievement, the greater number of confirmation questions they asked during storybook reading. There were many interactions around the pictures as well as confirmation statements made by parents and children of what was pictured and written in the text. There were also similarities in the number of oral interactions about the illustrations (i.e., confirmation) and
gestures to the illustrations. Confirmation interactions ranged from two to 182 for each parent-child dyad and the average confirmation interactions for parent-child dyad were nine. Clarification comments by parents were also very popular in shared reading. There was, however, little focus on print in this shared reading activity (see Table 1).

Table 2. Correlations Between Parent-child Interactions and Children’s Literacy Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children’s literacy achievement (TERA-2)</th>
<th>Parent-child interactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P. points to illustration</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. points to illustration</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. points to print</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. points to print</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. print statements</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. print statements/questions</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. print questions</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. confirmation statements</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. confirmation statements</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. confirmation questions</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. confirmation questions</td>
<td>.34*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. clarification statements</td>
<td>.40*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. clarification statements</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. clarification questions</td>
<td>-.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. clarification questions</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. elaboration statements</td>
<td>.40*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. elaboration statements</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. elaboration questions</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. elaboration questions</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. P = parent; C = child, *p < .05.
Discussion

Parents' Interactions with Children in Storybook Sharing

Wells (1985) found that the “ineffective” mother asked questions that focused on names and the “effective” mother asked questions that required much more from the child, such as asking exploratory questions. In this study, the types of questions asked by an “effective” parent would be classified as clarification and elaboration questions. Clarification and elaboration statements made by parents positively related to children’s overall literacy achievement, which may indicate the importance of explaining and extending the text for enhancing children’s early literacy development. It may also have been the case, as Bus and van Ijzendoorn (1995) found in their study, that children were at a more advanced developmental level in literacy and parents were adapting to the children’s current literacy knowledge. Nevertheless, interactions involving high cognitive demands (i.e., parents’ clarification and elaboration statements) were related to children’s literacy achievement as measured by the TERA-2. Parent questioning was not as important for children’s literacy achievement as were statements made by parents in this study. Perhaps parents made statements about the text that they felt children could understand or were in the child’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Questions asked by parents may also have been a way of testing children’s knowledge about the text, and therefore did not relate to children’s current knowledge. As children were three- and four-years-old, confirmation statements could be a first step in helping children understand the text.

This study supports the finding that there is little engagement in talk considered relevant for increasing knowledge about print during book sharing (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002). It is evident in Table 1 that there were few interactions around print among this culturally diverse group. Except for one parent-child dyad who talked about print 37 times in one story sharing event, most parents and children interacted only a few times around print, with two-thirds of the sample talking about print once or not at all. Parent-child talk about print often related to a gesture to the print. As can also be seen in Table 1, the number of print talk interactions was similar to the number of gestures to the print. About one-third of the parents did not follow the print with their finger or they did so only once on one line of the text. Similar to Evans and Saint-Aubin’s (2005) findings, parents also focused more on discussing the story with children rather than using it as an opportunity to teach children about print.
The type of early literacy knowledge examined in this study focused mostly on children’s meaning development and some knowledge of letters. It has been shown that shared reading can support children’s vocabulary and comprehension development (Pressley, 2006; Senechal et al., 1998). Parents who engaged with children in discussions that went beyond labeling or pointing to objects in the text seemed to enhance their child’s literacy knowledge. This finding was similar to the results of DeTemple’s (2001) study. When parents pointed to or labeled objects, this may have been the result of parents’ perceptions that children did not already possess that particular knowledge and required further support in this area.

**Children’s Interactions in Storybook Sharing**

It seemed that children were taking more control over the learning process by contributing their own knowledge to the story, such as by asking questions about the text. Wells (1985) claimed that when children were encouraged to ask questions about events and their causes and significance, children’s awareness of the ways in which language can be used are developed and their inner representations of the world are enriched. Flood (1977) further supports the role of questions asked by children in storybook reading in literacy achievement. He found that the number of questions asked by children in book sharing was one of the best predictors of children’s success on pre-reading tasks. The confirmation questions children asked in this study related to their early literacy knowledge. Very little recent research has focused specifically on the role of children’s questions in the shared reading process. However, Phillips and McNaughton (1990) found that children ask more questions about the text over several readings.

**Conclusion**

This research has identified relationships between parents’ and children’s interactions with text and young children’s literacy achievement. It was found that parents’ statements that were more cognitively advanced related positively to children’s literacy achievement. Sorsby and Martlew (1991) have suggested that there may be a link between difficulties in reading and writing in school and difficulties with developing abstract approaches and strategies. The current findings suggest that storybook reading provides a context for parents to promote more abstract thinking in their children by modeling specific types of interactions with text. Parents may also have been perceptive to children’s current literacy knowledge and interacted with children in ways to extend that knowledge. The child’s role in the
interaction process was also important for their achievement. In the examination of storybook interactions, research has often focused specifically on the parents’ role in relation to children’s achievement. Hayden, Reese, and Fivush (1996) found that most of the comments made by children during storybook reading were not prompted by mothers. The study discussed in this article suggests that children’s interactions may reveal important information about their literacy development.

Many theories about how children become literate have been developed and are mostly based on research with Caucasian families (Bus, Leseman, & Keultjes, 2000). By including diverse groups in the sample of this study, this can contribute to a fuller understanding of children’s early literacy development. This study revealed similar findings to that of previous research with more mainstream groups, in that confirmation-type interactions were most common with preschool children with little focus on print in shared reading. However, in order to make generalizations about storybook reading and children’s literacy achievement, researchers should include diverse cultural groups in further studies. Indeed, “... there are still many unanswered questions concerning families from different cultural backgrounds and those who are from low socio-economic classes” (Cairney, 2003, p. 90). Because young children’s literacy knowledge is often built on in schools, it is important for educators to be aware of the ways in which parents support children’s early literacy knowledge at home. This study highlighted the importance of culturally diverse parents and children story sharing by demonstrating the connections between interactions and achievement.

There were several limitations of this study. First, the use of videotapes may have influenced parents’ behaviors while reading to their child. Nevertheless, in order to capture what happens when parents read to their children, including their gestures to the text and illustrations, this necessitated the use of video recording. There may also be some cultural incongruency with asking parents to read to their children when they do not do this on a regular basis. However, because parents volunteered to participate, it can be assumed they had some experience reading to their children. Furthermore, the results presented here were those of one shared reading experience and the findings may vary among several shared reading activities. Nevertheless, the goal of this analysis was to examine some of the trends in storybook sharing with diverse cultural groups in relation to an early reading measure.

This study provided a detailed account of the types of interactions associated with one particular group of young children’s early literacy knowledge. It is important for parents to continue to support their child’s literacy development
in ways that relate to their achievement. Even when parents are adjusting their
storybook interactions with children in relation to the child’s current knowledge,
one goal of story sharing is to further develop the learning experience for children.
Many classroom teachers extend children’s literacy knowledge by engaging in higher
level interactions, such as by making clarification and elaboration statements, as
engaged in by some parents in this study. Parents need to be aware that specific
types of interactions they engage in with children around storybooks at home may
support children’s early literacy development in schools. It is important for further
research to examine the role of child initiated interactions in this process. This
study provides supporting evidence of the positive association between higher level
storybook interactions and children’s early literacy achievement among families
from diverse cultural groups.

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It’s Time to Foreground the Relational Aspects of Literacy Learning

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Abstract

This article describes how young children’s early relationships with caregivers and other significant adults, such as teachers, do far more than introduce and mediate their literacy experiences. These relationships are the experience, and only with time and development do young children differentiate from these experiences the signs and symbols as objects for exploration in their own right. To understand the literacy development of children, birth to five, one must understand the role children’s relationships play in this development. To support this argument, the authors cross disciplines and include theories within literacy and developmental psychology. First, they describe theories related to the role others play in children’s general development. They then review studies which examined how these relationships influence children’s literacy development; next they examine the prominence of children’s relationships with others in current literacy documents. Finally, this article concludes with suggestions to forefront the relational dimension of literacy learning.

Emergent literacy, “…includes the skills, knowledge, and attitudes …presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional reading and writing” (Lonigan, 2004, p. 59). What do these precursors look like when referring to our youngest learners, birth to age five? Assumptions guided by socio-cultural perspectives
of learning suggest that these learners begin their literate lives in the laps and by the sides of significant others. Although these early interactions may not initially resemble in form or function later formal literacy learning, socio-cultural theories suggest these earliest interactions are, in fact, the foundation for the infant’s later school-based literacy knowledge (Wells, 1999).

In this article we argue that the relationships formed via these early interactions are more than vehicles for transmitting literacy knowledge. These first relationships are the experience, and only with time and development does the child begin to differentiate from these experiences the signs and symbols as objects for exploration in their own right. What later might be described as precursors of literacy learning, e.g., use of literate language or knowledge of print concepts, are initially embedded within behaviors that, at the time, are not readily recognized as literacy (Sparling, 2004). Therefore, to understand the emergent literacy development of children, birth to age five, one must understand the significant role young children’s relationships with others (first primary caregivers and later important others such as teachers) play in this development. To support this argument, we cross disciplines and extend theoretical boundaries to include those within literacy as well as developmental psychology. First, we briefly describe how socio-cultural theory and attachment theory support the significant role others play in children’s general development. Then, we review studies which examine how the qualities of these relationships influence children’s literacy development. Next, we examine the prominence of children’s relationships with others in current literacy position statements and study group reports. We end with suggestions to assist literacy educators to forefront the relational dimension of literacy learning.

The Primacy of Personal Relationships in Literacy Development: Initially and Thereafter, A Socio-cultural Process

The infants’ window on the world is first opened by others. From birth, children are focused on these others, first their family and later other adults, such as teachers, with whom they consistently interact (Schaeffer, 1996). From their earliest days, the infants’ actions are theorized to be motivated by an innate need to survive. To encourage this first relationship, infants are equipped at birth with a number of social cues, such as crying, staring, and within weeks, smiling. First initiated by caregivers, and then by the infant, interactions between infants and their caregivers
become increasingly complex (Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005). Initially the interactions are dyadic, occurring between the infant and the caregiver. Observing these interactions, one notices the infant and caregiver not only taking turns in these face-to-face exchanges, but also sharing emotional states. Later, the interactions become triadic, and involve the infant, the caregiver, and their mutual and shared attention to an object selected by the caregiver (Adamson, Bakeman, & Deckner, 2005; Tomasello, et al., 2005). At this time, this shared engagement involves the young child and the adult sharing a goal. For example, the infant and the adult may roll a small car back and forth between them, thereby sharing the goal of moving the car back and forth. Triadic engagement is followed by collaborative engagement when the shared goal of the infant and the adult, desiring to move the car back and forth, involves not only shared attention but shared intention. Changes in the adult-infant interactions are now evident. The infant can now be observed directing the adult to perform an act, (pointing to the car or directing the adult to pick it up) and then coordinating actions with the adult to accomplish a shared intention (rolling the car down a wooden incline). From a sociocultural perspective, with the routinized exposure to such objects and actions, the infant comes to appropriate the values of the home culture (Rakoczy, Tomasello, & Striano, 2005).

For some children, early interactions involve books. For others, interactions might involve objects which represent other family interests and values. For example, a photographer may introduce a camera to her son, a mechanic may introduce a miniature car to his daughter, or a baseball fan might introduce her son to a stuffed baseball. The possibilities are infinite and affected by numerous influences, such as cultural views, family history, geography, economics, etc. (Wells, 1999). Rochat and Callaghan (2005) describe the infant’s interest in such objects as stimulated by the basic need of all humans to affiliate with other humans, a need they reference as basic affiliated need (BAN). The infant seeks to maintain interactions with the caregiver and is inherently motivated to participate with attachment figures. Central to maintaining these interactions is the infant’s propensity to reproduce the actions of others. At first the infant’s reproduction is guided by a desire to experience the consequence of the action, whereas later, the infant’s actions become directed toward maintaining an affiliation with the significant others.

For many years, the young child depends on others to introduce him/her to other objects or tools used within the extant community, the procedures for using these objects, and the contexts within which the objects are used (Adamson, et al., 2005; Rakoczy, et al., 2005; Wells, 1999). So, for the young child, the emotional
interlace with caregiver(s) provides the psychological, emotional, and physical support needed by the child to venture into the world to explore other objects and people in the environment. When viewed from a human development perspective, the young child’s later interest in the symbols and acts associated with literacy development are the consequence of and subsequent to the child’s basic need to affiliate with the important others in his or her environment.

**Insights into the Relational Aspects of Learning: One Explanation Proffered by Attachment Theory**

“Attachment theory and research have offered fundamental insights into early sociopersonality development for the past quarter-century” (Thompson & Raikes, 2003, p. 691). When referencing young children, attachment is defined as the emotional bond formed between the child and primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1979). The emotional bonds established within these first relationships, “lie at the intersection of all of the cognitive, emotional, and social development occurring in the first year” (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005, p. 42). Bowlby (1979) investigated children’s responses to their mother and the consequences to children when this relationship is disrupted. It is theorized that attachment has both a protective and an instructive function (Peluso, Peluso, Kern, & White, 2004). The protective function serves to promote the survival of the infant, while the instructive function relies on the attachment figure becoming a secure base from which the child learns about the world. Further, Bowlby (1979) postulated that because of its protective function, attachment needs supersede many others. Thus, a child with unmet attachment needs will seek to achieve the feeling of safety and security, often at the expense of other less critical needs, such as exploring and learning about the world.

Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) extended Bowlby’s work and provided extensive, detailed descriptions of mothers’ sensitivity to their infants’ cues, e.g., crying and smiling, and how distinctions in this sensitivity were consequential to the type of attachment relationship between mothers and infants were identified. These consequences involve behavioral and cognitive responses, as well as affective, with all perceived to function as interlocking processes (Ainsworth et al., 1978). To illustrate the differences in the quality of the mother-child relationship, we provide brief descriptions of three attachment security relationships identified by Ainsworth et al., (1978), secure, insecure-ambivalent, and insecure-avoidant.
Secure attachment is characterized by feelings of physical, emotional, and psychological safety in the young child. The secure attachment relationship is based on a history of interactions between child and attachment figure in which the caregiver accurately understands the wants and needs of the child and responds appropriately. Thus, this relationship is distinguished by a harmonious, synchronous relationship in which the child feels confident in his/her ability to communicate with and receive appropriate responses from the attachment figure. The child expresses a need, for example, to be fed, and the caregiver responds by feeding the child. The child perceives, certainly unconsciously, via the responsiveness of the primary caregivers, that the world is responsive. As a consequence, the child develops a sense that he/she has control over the world. This in turn promotes feelings in the child of increased self-worth which enhances social and emotional development.

Insecure attachment is rooted in an interactional history in which the caregiver has been unable to satisfy the needs of the young child (insecure avoidant attachment) or has done so inconsistently (insecure ambivalent attachment). In the case of insecure avoidant attachment, the caregiver consistently fails to understand and meet the nurturing, safety, and security needs of the young child. This rejecting behavior on the part of the caregiver adversely affects the child’s self-concept and the child’s ability to relate to others. In an unconscious attempt to protect the self from rejection, the child disconnects or avoids intimate relationships in the future. In the case of an insecure ambivalent relationship, the attachment figure inconsistently responds to the wants and needs of the child.

A caveat is set forth when considering these descriptions of the quality of the parent child relationship. Although each, secure, insecure-ambivalent, and insecure-avoidant, is described as though it develops within a context involving only caregiver and child with no external influences, this is far from the case. When viewed from an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), the parent-child relationship is influenced by contexts not immediately evident. These influences could come from microsystems, other than the home, such as the preschool the child attends; exosystems, such as the parents’ work place; and macrosytems, such as national policies. Therefore, multiple factors, not immediately evident, such as challenges and stress brought on by social and economic supports, or lack there of, potentially influence the moment-to-moment and day-to-day interactions between parents and children (Sroufe, et al., 2005). Regardless of the quality, however, whether secure, insecure avoidant, or ambivalent attachment, this first relationship serves as the foundation for the child’s future relationships.
We can also look to the attachment research to provide support for our contention that relational dimensions of literacy development are of primary rather than secondary importance. Adding to this argument, children form attachments to important adults other than their family caregivers. Theoretically, a child’s relationship with non-familial significant others, such as teachers, follows the same path as those between a familial significant other in that they are reciprocal, can range in quality, and can be consequential to the children’s conception of self and others as well as their academic progress (Oppenheim, Sagi, & Lamb, 1988). Perhaps there is no other non-familial adult that is more significant in a child’s life than his/her teacher. In fact, some argue that secure relationships with secondary caregivers (such as teachers) may compensate for insecure attachment relationships with parents (van IJzendoorn & Tavecchio, 1987).

In addition, evidence suggests a correlation between the quality of the child-teacher relationship and children’s social and academic behavior in the classroom. As found in child-parent attachment research, children who have secure relationships with their teachers are found to be more socially competent and do better in school than those who have an insecure relationship (Howes, Matheson & Hamilton, 1994). A secure child-teacher relationship is characterized by generally positive affect and low levels of conflict with the child feeling safe and secure and able to use the teacher as a secure base for exploration and learning (Bowlby, 1988). Pianta and Steinberg (1992) suggest that the child-teacher relationship can even serve as a protective factor for children at risk for academic failure. They report that children predicted to be retained at the beginning of kindergarten, but not retained, had more secure relationships with their teacher compared to those retained. Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) examined elements such as closeness and degree of conflict in the teacher-child relationship of children when they were in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade. Children’s social and academic skills were supported when their relationships with teachers were close and had minimal conflict. Sroufe, et al. (2005), in their landmark three decades long study of children born into poverty, asked their then 19 year old participants, “if they ever had a teacher who was ’special’ to them, who took a particular interest in them, and whom they felt was ‘in their corner’” (p. 211). Most of those who stayed in high school and graduated, responded in the affirmative, while most of those who dropped out, responded in the negative.

The influence of a child’s attachment to significant others, first families then teachers, is wide ranging and includes but is not limited to general mental health
The Relational Aspects of Literacy Learning

(Sroufe, et al., 2005), academic learning (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992), and social development (Sroufe, et al., 2005). According to Bowlby (1979), from these early close relationships, the child develops an “internal-working model of self and significant others” (p. 117). This model “is defined as a dynamic structure containing affectively charged cognitions about one’s loveliness and worthiness” (Cassidy, 1990 cited in Verschueren, Marcoen, & Schoefs, 1996, p. 2493). These mental models provide the lens through which the child interprets the behavior of the important other, predicts the other’s behavior from past experiences, and responds to those predicted behaviors (Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990).

**Personal Relationships and Literacy Development: Evidence of Influence**

As discussed, the importance of the relational aspects of literacy learning garners support from sociocultural theories and the attachment literature. Researchers using a sociocultural lens illustrate how children’s relationships with others influence their literacy work. For example, Matthews and Kesner (2000, 2003), used sociocultural theory as one of several theoretical lenses, to describe the influence children’s relationships with classmates had on their participation in small group literacy work. Children well liked by classmates often assumed leadership of these groups which enhanced their opportunities to use their literacy knowledge. In contrast, children with less positive relationships with classmates often had their literacy expressions ignored or discounted, which restricted their participation. Dyson (1989, 1993, 1999) provides examples of the use of sociocultural theory to examine young children’s writing. Specifically, the author revealed the complex and multidimensional levels of influence that young children’s social resources have on their writing process as well as their written products.

Specific connections between caregivers and young children’s literacy development also find support in research informed by the attachment literature. For example, Beegly and Cicchetti (1987) found correlations between attachment and the language production in three-year-olds. In a longitudinal study, Bus and van IJzendoorn (1988) found no difference in the types of literacy activities within the homes of children identified as securely attached from other less securely attached, but they did find a difference in the children’s interest in writing. Bus & van IJzendoorn (1988, 1995) also found that children who are more securely attached to their mothers are read to more often than children whose attachments are less
secure, an important finding given the prominent presence of storybook reading in research on emergent literacy.

**A Glaring Omission**

Given the decades of support young children’s relationships with significant others has garnered in child development and to a lesser extent from literacy research, we wondered if this importance was reflected in literacy study group reports and literacy position statements. To that end, we examined three reports and four position statements related to preschool and primary-grade literacy development. We focused on these levels because: (a) most of the attachment research has focused on this age child, (b) there is general agreement that reading and writing development begins at birth, and (c) currently there is increased interest in literacy development in children from birth to age five. Interest in these very young learners follows years, really decades, of interest in reading acquisition as reflected in numerous study groups, such as the National Early Literacy Panel (Connor, & Tiedemann, 2005) and National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) and federal programs such as Reading First and Early Reading First and legislation such as the Reading Excellence Act and No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

We examined these reports and position statements to determine the prominence given to the relational aspects of literacy learning. We ascribed an explicit focus when the report or position statement specifically identified that the relationships between teacher and or family are central to children’s literacy learning. For example, “Children need positive, nurturing relationships with adults” was considered an explicit statement (International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998, p. 16). An implicit focus was ascribed when this relationship was implied, for example, “children have a right to instruction that involves parents and communities in students’ academic lives” (International Reading Association, 2000, p. 9).

Table 1 summarizes our determinations. Generally, of the three reports and four position statements examined, only one, Learning to Read and Write Developmentally Appropriate Practice Position Statement, (IRA & NAECY, 1998) explicitly mentioned the importance of a positive relationship with important adults and one, Family Partnership Position Statement (International Reading Association, 2002), explicitly identified the importance of recognizing connections between families and children. Of the five remaining documents, four, National
Table 1.Explicit, Implicit, or Nonexistent Focus of the Importance of Children’s Personal Relationship with Families and Teachers

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<tr>
<td>Making A Difference Position Statement (PS)</td>
<td>All children have a right to instruction that involves parents and communities in students’ academic lives</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of Teacher–Child Relationship</td>
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<td>IRA, 2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning to Read Write DAP PS (IRA &amp; NAEYC, 1998)</td>
<td>Young children need positive, nurturing relationships with adults who engage in responsive conversations with individual children, model reading and writing behavior, and foster children’s interest in and enjoyment of reading and writing.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Importance of Teacher–Child Relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Literacy Development Preschool PS (IRA, 2005)</td>
<td>Connect physical, emotional, and social goals in the language and literacy curriculum when appropriate.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of Teacher–Child Relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family-School Partnership PS (IRA, 2002)</td>
<td>Be aware of importance of family-child connections and be committed to the concept of partnerships with the families of all children</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of Teacher–Child Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Reading Panel Report (NRP, 2000)</td>
<td>NONE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of Family, Teacher, Teacher-Child</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Early Literacy Panel Summary (Connor &amp; Tiedemann, 2005)</td>
<td>Future reports will examine environmental and child characteristics that influence young children’s literacy development</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>Teacher Education Task Force Report (TETF, 2007)</td>
<td>Commit to producing teachers who are deeply aware of diversity but also teachers who know how to teach reading to diverse populations</td>
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<td>Importance of Teacher–Child Relationship</td>
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Early Literacy Panel, Making a Difference Position Statement, Literacy Development Preschool Position Statement, and Teacher Education Task Force Report implied the importance of family-child relationship and three implied the importance of the teacher-child relationship. Those which imply that the teacher-student relationship is important embeds this importance within language which references teacher competence, such as the teacher provides instruction which respects diversity or the teacher provides instruction within a risk free environment. One document, the National Reading Panel Report, (NRP, 2000), included no reference to the importance of the child’s relationship with family or with teachers.

To illustrate this absence, we include a summary of one document examined, Teaching Reading Well: A Synthesis of the International Reading Association’s Research on Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction (Teacher Education Task Force, 2007). The TETF was charged to identify characteristics of teacher education programs which develop effective reading teachers. The members of the TETF examined the available research and from their synthesis identified six essential qualities of effective teacher preparation programs. Such programs:

- Teach content related to what makes effective readers and what instruction supports that learning.
- Include faculty who model instructional strategies and commit to providing their students an extensive knowledge base.
- Offer multiple, high quality apprenticeships, field experiences, and practica.
- Commit to producing teachers who are not only deeply aware of diversity but also know how to teach reading to diverse populations.
- Commit to ongoing assessment of student performance and program development.
- Are guided by a vision, provided with the necessary resources, and allow faculty control of the program. (TETF, 2007)

The report characterizes the teachers produced from these programs as reflective, valuing mentoring, able to adapt instruction to student needs, respecting diversity, etc. These are certainly necessary qualities and many imply the need for a positive student-teacher relationship. Teachers produced by these programs are, no doubt, competent and graduate with a firm base from which to make their instructional decisions.
What is less certain is how well graduates who exit these programs, understand the central role children’s relationships with family members and teachers play in literacy development. To that end, understanding the dynamics which underpin these relationships and the substantive effect they have on literacy development should elevate knowledge of children’s relationships with others beyond an implication to an explicit core feature. Furthermore, programs and documents which seek to inform the literacy development of young children, yet fail to foreground the adult-child relationship involved in such development omit the means by which such improvement is delivered.

**Implications for Early Childhood Literacy Educators**

Programs, study groups, and position statements directed toward the enhancement of young children’s literacy development are far reaching in their influence. Unfortunately, these programs and documents rarely identify the relational aspects of literacy development as a primary contributor to that development. Failure to recognize the significant emotional and psychological influence children’s early relationships, first families then teachers, have on literacy development omits a foundational source of this development. To make the relational aspect of literacy learning an explicit and central aspect of literacy program, we offer the following suggestions.

*Recommit to involving families in their children’s education.* The oft heard statement, “parents are their children’s first teachers” is more than a bow to parents’ being the first adults in a child’s life. Recognizing the substantive and foundational relationship between child and family requires that schools give more than lip service to family involvement. Often teachers and school administrators indicate in their words and actions a belief that parents either do not care about their children’s education or have the ability to assist their children in school (Compton-Lilly, 2003). This view has been challenged by literacy researchers who have examined the literacy prowess of non-mainstream, inner city, and working-class families. These include Heath’s (1983) seminal study of Appalachian families, Compton-Lilly’s (2003) interviews of the families of her first grade students, and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines’ (1988) examination of the literacy lives of inner city families. These are just a few studies that chronicle families typically considered by many mainstream schools as either illiterate, alliterate, or uncaring about their children’s school lives that suggest otherwise.
Too often, as Compton-Lilly (2003) asserts, we view literacy teaching as a neutral set of skills. Her interviews with her students’ families revealed otherwise and reinforced her commitment to involve parents in her classroom in ways that enhanced, not just reinforced, her own agenda. She surveyed the families about their reading habits and brought them into her classroom to offer their experiences and perspectives about historical events, such as the civil rights movement. During a study of occupations, family members were also provided cameras to photograph their experiences at work. Involving family means more than inviting them to attend an occasional program, and the initiation of that involvement is the responsibility of school administrator’s and teachers.

Examine the words you use to mediate literacy instruction. Children who have a secure relationship with a significant other use this security as a base from which they venture forth to explore their world. When this relationship is between a teacher and her students, those children feel secure to explore the instructional opportunities provided for them. And, like adventurous toddlers who use their family members as a secure base from which to venture to explore a new object, these students use their teacher as a secure base from which to explore the world of print. The words teachers use are a primary conductor of the relationship and certainly the one most frequently used to deliver instruction to children. Peter Johnston (2004) takes on the primary medium of literacy instruction - teacher-talk. The premise of his work is that the words teachers use or do not use change the literate lives of their students. A teacher’s words are central to creating an, “emotionally and relationally healthy learning communities—intellectual environments that produce not mere technical competence, but caring, secure, actively literate human beings” (Johnston, 2004, p. 2). Johnston asserts that simple questions such as, How are you planning to go about this? imply a belief in their students’ ability to accomplish the task ahead of them, and instills in them a sense of agency. Literacy instruction is not presented in a neutral environment and frequently such instruction is ensconced in the words of the teacher which often carry their own message to the recipients.

Revise the standards which guide your literacy development to forefront the significance of the relationship between teacher and student. Creating and sustaining a close relationship between young children and their teachers must be at the top of any list of standards designed to guide literacy instruction in the early childhood classroom. Carol Santa (2006), past president of the International Reading Association and current co-owner of Montana Academy, a private boarding school
for troubled adolescents, identifies classroom community and relationships as the first of four key principles for improving adolescent literacy. In her experiences with teens she has seen students who for years were disconnected from learning and school. Working with these teens has strengthened her belief that, “the content and the teaching techniques play second fiddle to human relationships” (Santa, 2006, p. 467). IRA and the NAEYC’s (1998) document entitled Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children identifies a positive nurturing relationship with adults as a standard for preschool literacy programs. However, position statements and literacy reports which actually frame literacy instruction often fail to instantiate this principle in practice.

Concluding Thoughts

“In a sense, early experiences (especially with the primary caregiver) help to create a ‘grammar of emotion’ that may be enduring, even though the language of emotion continues to unfold for years to come” (Thompson, 2003 as cited in Sroufe, et al., 2005, p. 219). This statement implies that children’s early relationships not only provide their initial representations of the world, but in fact, these early relationships constitute that world. We maintain that the need to enhance attention to the importance of young children’s relationships with others, in particular families and teachers, is greater today than at any other time. For many young children and their teachers, the stakes are raised for learning to read, a key goal of early literacy learning. High stakes testing creates stress on teachers, parents, and consequently young children. School administrators are threatened with losing their jobs if their schools do not meet Annual Yearly Progress and many of these concerns are passed on to classroom teachers.

We further need to emphasize the teacher-student relationship in literacy development as children are transitioning to school environments earlier. Forty-eight percent of children less than 48 months old and 57% of children 48 to 53 months old are in center-based childcare programs so young children are exposed to other adults in a prime time of their development of sense of self and others (Planty, et al., 2008). A warm, consistent, and responsive relationship with primary caregivers and other significant adults such as teachers provides the young child not only food and physical protection but something just as essential and enduring - a buffer of psychological support. Children who trust their caregivers and teachers feel safe to explore their environment, and through these explorations gain important
knowledge about their world. Moreover, the beginning stage of learning to read has its own unique set of stresses. Alexander (2005) asserts that children in the early stages of learning to read are at the precipice in that development. In her lifespan model of reading development, Alexander maintains children must progress through the Acclimation Stage, the first of three stages in her model, before they can move through subsequent phases. The Acclimation Stage is central to further reading development because it is during this stage that young children must learn how to decode graphic symbols which have no inherent relationship to their oral counterparts.

Many assert the importance of creating an environment of care to envelop the learning that occurs in a classroom. We add our voices to others who call for a need to bring to the foreground the relationships which introduce literacy learning to children. Children’s first learning is at the laps and by the sides of their families. Families introduce their offspring to objects, procedures, and activities from which their young gain insights about the world. Teachers are often the next to assume the teaching mantel and often it is via their objects, procedures, and activities young children gain access to another world, the world of print.

References


The Relational Aspects of Literacy Learning


**About the Authors:**

**Dr. Mona W. Matthews** is Professor of Early Childhood Education at Georgia State University. Her research interests are the social dimensions of literacy learning and meaning construction in very young children. Mona takes an interdisciplinary stance in her research by drawing from two domains—child development and literacy. She co-directs the early childhood master’s program, a program guided by constructivist learning.

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According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the Turkish-speaking population in the United States increased significantly in the 1990s and has risen steadily over time. Today, the highest concentration is located in the states of New York, California, New Jersey, and Florida. Kaya (2003) reported a geographical dispersion across the U.S., from New York to Alaska, with the wealthiest living in Florida. Turkish students make up the ninth largest student population in the U.S. and the largest percentage of students compared to their homeland population. This article identifies and explores many of these challenges by observing the transition of Hakan, a Turkish-speaking fifth grade student, as he encounters a new culture and learns a new language. In particular, we focus on the acquisition of figurative language in a Turkish-speaking English Language Learner (ELL). Some issues and questions addressed in the article include effective methodologies for the assessment of
figurative language acquisition in the Turkish and English languages, effective instructional strategies to scaffold Turkish-speaking English Language Learners’ (ELLs) acquisition of figurative language, and linguistic factors that might affect Turkish-speaking students’ transition to English. The article sets forth theoretical underpinnings for the chosen assessment and instructional strategies, as well as a summary of supporting research in the area of Turkish-speaking ELLs.

“Don’t give me a crowd of words,” declared Hakan as a book of idioms was placed on the desk.

“What does that mean?” his teacher inquired.

“Well, you need to tell me why you are here…it is not just to see my mother…come on, tell me what lies under your tongue?”

This ten-year-old had acquired a new skill of translating all his thoughts word-for-word into English. He was enjoying the “fun” in learning about figurative language, and he recognized how incredibly funny it really sounded to translate an idiom literally.

“Don’t give me a crowd of words” is an idiomatic phrase (laf kalabalığı yapma) in Turkish that has the same meaning as “Don’t beat around the bush.” As an English Language Learner (ELL), Hakan struggled to comprehend passages that contained challenging forms of figures of speech in the classroom and in everyday life.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the Turkish-speaking population increased significantly in the 1990s and has risen steadily over time. Kaya (2003) reports that an increasing number of Turkish families are settling in various geographical locations across the United States, with the largest numbers choosing to live in New York, New Jersey, California, and Florida. As this population growth trend continues, so too does the number of Turkish speaking children entering the American public school system. In this article, we explore educational challenges unique to this population by observing the transition of Hakan, a Turkish-speaking fifth grade student, as he encounters a new culture and learns a new language. The assessment and instructional strategies used with Hakan focus specifically on figurative language interpretation and reading comprehension, an area that challenges many ELLs. As work with Hakan began, several questions became paramount:
1. Why is it important to incorporate direct, or explicit, instruction in figurative language for English Language Learners?

2. What is the nature of Hakan’s first language (L1) (Turkish) and the figures of speech in that language?

3. What instructional model will best scaffold Hakan’s proficiency in understanding English figurative language?

We address each question in the following sections.

**Question #1: Why is it important to incorporate direct, or explicit, instruction in figurative language for English Language Learners?**

Many words and phrases have both literal and figurative meanings. Tompkins (2002) explained that, “literal meanings are the explicit, dictionary meanings, and figurative meanings are metaphorical or use figures of speech” (p. 233). Among researchers, there is an increasing interest in the use of figurative language partly because of the growing awareness of such phenomena as metaphor and figurative idioms in everyday language (Charteris-Black, 2002). Those students who are not able to interpret figurative language will most probably fail to comprehend oral or written messages containing such language.

As texts become more challenging across grades and the frequency of figurative language usage increases, the problem of comprehension potentially becomes more serious; therefore, children in the early grades must learn how to identify and interpret less complex figures of speech so that they can interpret more complex forms effectively as adolescents (Nippold & Taylor, 2002). As Ortony (1984) and Vosniadou and Ortony (1983) pointed out, very young children can understand some forms of figurative language. Given that students encounter figurative language in both oral and written expression every day, the introduction of figurative language instruction must start as early as possible. According to Boers (2000), “language learners are bound to be confronted with figurative discourse at various stages of the learning process” (p. 553). Language learners must develop the ability to understand and use figurative language through years of practice as they mature (Palmer, Zirps, & Martin 1992). Research addressing several forms of figurative language revealed that children could better understand texts, including figurative language phrases, when related instruction was provided (Cacciari & Levorato, 1998; Ezell, 1996; Tompkins, 2002). For example, Cacciari and Levorato (1998) found that young children may successfully sort out figurative elements as they develop figura-
tive competence, but they may give inexact explanations due to their developing knowledge of semantic analysis.

Developing the ability to comprehend and use figurative language has significant importance because “researchers see figurative language not just as special rhetorical devices for communication, but as reflecting pervasive figurative schemes of thought” (Gibbs, 2001, p. 318). Gibbs (1994) explains, “people may not need to analyze the literal interpretation of the metaphorical utterances before deriving their intended metaphorical meanings” (p. 100). Gibbs (2001) also points out the following:

Numerous reading-time and phrase-classification studies demonstrate that listeners and readers can often understand the figurative interpretations of metaphors, irony and sarcasm, idioms, proverbs, and indirect speech acts without necessarily having to first analyze and reject their literal meanings when these expressions are seen in realistic social contexts. (p. 318)

Since the literal meaning of a word or an expression requires only the knowledge of facts and the dictionary meanings of the words, “literal language can be understood via normal cognitive mechanisms” (Gibbs, 1999, p. 467). However, the readers or the “listeners must recognize the deviant nature of a figurative utterance before determining its nonliteral meaning” when they encounter figurative language in oral and written expression (Gibbs, 1999, p. 468).

Gibbs (2001) stresses that “understanding whether figurative language is processed directly or indirectly may best be explained in terms of very flexible models that specify the exact dynamics of how different linguistic and nonlinguistic sources of information interact to create figurative meanings” (p. 325). In order for students to use figurative language effectively, it is often necessary to design instruction that models how to think at an abstract level and how to make use of words and expressions with meanings other than the ones in dictionaries. If a teacher of a second language makes students aware that “metaphor involves treating (or describing) one entity in terms of another, apparently different entity” by providing them with sample texts that have metaphors and then analyzing them together, students will become more aware of figurative language and how to use a process for interpretation (Littlemore & Low, 2006, p. 9). As Palmer and Brooks (2004) explain, “if they [students] are thinking metaphorically, then they not only can understand experiences that have been depicted metaphorically but can also construct metaphors that reflect their own schematic experiences” (p. 373).
Figurative language interpretation instruction is imperative for the reading comprehension curriculum of today’s elementary school students in the U.S. (Palmer & Brooks, 2004). When students encounter figurative language in their daily lives through conversations and texts that increasingly become more advanced, they may also function within a community of learners that is culturally and linguistically diverse. Therefore, students, especially ELLs, must learn how to deal with idioms that do not translate easily across languages.

While ELLs arrive at school with language knowledge of their first language, that knowledge reflects a different culture than texts they are asked to read and comprehend. According to Graves, Juel, and Graves (2007), it is not that they “come to school with a language deficit” it is that “they come with a lack of knowledge of the particular language that is used in the schools they will be attending—English” (p. 400). When asked to interpret figurative language, which is based on schematic experiences completely different from their cultural backgrounds, the students may be unsuccessful. The challenges are evident and the focus for instructional design, by necessity, requires attention to building background experience as part of the learning process. According to Palmer and Brooks (2004),

To begin the process of comprehending a figurative phrase, the student must be familiar with the cultural values and beliefs that form the context of the phrase. Next, having knowledge of the different forms of figurative language enables the student to recognize more readily nonliteral text. Finally, knowing the context in which the figurative phrase is being used increases the student’s ability to interpret it accurately. (p. 373)

**Question #2: What is the nature of Hakan’s first language (L1) (Turkish) and figures of speech in his language?**

Turkish belongs to the Ural Altaic language family (Republic of Turkey, 2002) while English is an Indo-European language. These two languages share some commonalities, termed positive transfers. The most significant positive transfer from Turkish to English is the fact that both are built on the Latin alphabetic system of phoneme-grapheme correspondences. However, there are some major differences (negative transfers) between these two languages, which restrain, and in some cases, block the Turkish learners from mastering English. Table 1 illustrates some of these negative transfers.
### Table 1: A Contrastive Analysis of English and Turkish (Negative Transfers)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Turkish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pronunciation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pronunciation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A stress-timed language (i.e., the stressed syllables are not only emphasized but also take more time to pronounce). For example, in the sentence “I was sick yesterday”, the stressed words are pronounced longer. If the person is stressed, “I” will be emphasized. If time is not stressed, for example, “was” will be very weak and will almost not be heard by the listener.</td>
<td>A syllable-timed language. Each syllable has almost the same emphasis and takes equal time to pronounce. For example, in the sentence “Ben dün hastaydım,” (I was sick yesterday) each syllable has equal importance including the stressed ones. Syllables with equal length will take equal time to pronounce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The stressed word is usually pronounced more loudly with emphasis. For example, in the sentence “I am going to Istanbul tomorrow,” the emphasized word will be stressed without changing the word order.</td>
<td>The stressed word usually comes just before the verb. For example, in the following sentences, the word just before the verb is emphasized and stressed. “Ben yarýn Ýstanbul’a gidiyorum.” (I will be going to Istanbul tomorrow) (“Ýstanbul’a is emphasized and stressed.) “Yarýn ýstanbul’a ben gidiyorum.” (Tomorrow, I will be going to Istanbul) (“ben” not “someone else”). “Ben Ýstanbul’a yarýn gidiyorum.” (Tomorrow, I will be going to Istanbul) (“Yarýn”, not some other day.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“T” and “th” are pronounced differently.</td>
<td>There is no “th” sound. Turkish learners of English usually use only “t” for “t” and “th”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An irregularly spelled phonetic language (deep orthography). In other words, pronunciations and spellings of words are often different. Extreme examples: “colonel” is pronounced in the same way as the word “kernel” although their spellings are different. Also, the words “wright,” “write,” and “right” are pronounced in the same way though their spellings are different.</td>
<td>A regularly spelled phonetic language (shallow orthography). The words are pronounced in the same way they are spelled. Therefore, Turkish learners of English tend to pronounce English words as they are written.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grammar (Syntax)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Grammar (Syntax)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order is important and changing the order usually causes a change in meaning. For example, “The tiger ate the man” is not the same as “The man ate the tiger.” Especially if the places of the subject and the object are changed, the meaning changes.</td>
<td>An agglutinating language. In other words, new words are made by adding suffixes. Therefore, changing the place of a word does not change the meaning but the emphasis only. For example, “Kaplan adamý yedi” (The tiger ate the man) has the same meaning as the sentence “Adamý Kaplan yedi” (The tiger ate the man); only the emphasis is different. Changing the places of the object and the subject does not change the meaning of the sentence. In both sentences, the “doer” of the action is the same: the tiger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronouns are written as separate words like “I, you, he, she”, etc.</td>
<td>Pronouns as separate words are usually omitted especially in informal speech, but they still exist as suffixes added to verbs. For example, “Ben çalýþýyor-um” (I am working) has the same meaning as “Çalýþýyorum.” (I am working) The “-um” suffix at the end of both sentences means “I.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentences are usually longer, not agglutinating.</td>
<td>Sentences may be as short as a word. For example, the English sentence, “They say that I will pass,” can simply be translated as only one word “Geçecekmiyim.” Geç- = to pass; -cek- = will; -miy- = they say that, -im = I. To give another example, the English sentence, “They said that I had passed out” can be translated as “Bayýlmýþým”, Bayýl-= (to) pass out; -yþ-=they say that (here –yþ- also shows time, which is past); -ým=I.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The typical word order is subject + verb + object.</td>
<td>The typical word order is subject + object + verb. Due to this word order difference, learners often miscue. A Turkish ELL might say, “I the man speak with” to mean “I spoke with the man” or “I will speak with the man.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Grammar (Tenses)**

| There are different tenses to express things that happened in the past and that still continue. For example, “I have seen Paris” and “I saw Paris” do not have the same meaning. The first one implies that the person still remembers the place; the second one does not imply anything, it is just simple past. | There is no exact equivalent of the present perfect tense: “I have seen Paris” and “I saw Paris” have only one translation as “Paris’I gördüm.” |

**Morphology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The verb “to be” is important. It shows the person and time. For example, “am” implies that the subject is “I” and the time is present.</th>
<th>There is no such thing as “to be”; it is replaced by the suffix “-I-mek.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There are prefixes. For example, there are such words as “important” and “unimportant.”</td>
<td>There are no prefixes; there are only suffixes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sociolinguistic Aspects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>American people do not expect a verbal response when they say “thank you.”</th>
<th>When someone says “Teşekkür ederim” (thank you), a response must come. Not responding with “Bir þey deðil,” (not at all), is considered rude.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moving head from left to right and from right to left means “no.”</td>
<td>Moving head in the upward direction means “no” in Turkish. Usually a “cik!” sound accompanies the head movement. The head movement is very similar to nodding, which means ‘yes’ in English.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the second person singular and second person plural, there is only one pronoun, "you."

Words that express people’s relatives are limited. For example, “aunt” is used for both father’s and mother’s sisters.

In informal Turkish, “sen” is second person singular and “siz” is second person plural. In formal Turkish, “siz” is used for both.

Words concerning one’s relatives are rich in Turkish. Mother’s sister is “teyze”; father’s sister is “hala”; husband’s sister is “görümce”; wife’s sister is “baldız.” A woman’s brother’s wife’s sister is “elî”; younger brother or sister is “kardeş”; elder sister is “abla” and elder brother is “abi” (or aðabey).

Hakan (pseudonym) and his bilingual (Turkish/English) reading teacher, Mrs. Bilgili, developed a second table (Table 2) in order to compare many English figures of speech with comparable figures of speech in Turkish.

Table 2: Turkish Expressions and their English Counterparts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turkish Expressions</th>
<th>English Expressions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haydan gelen huya gider</td>
<td>Easy come, easy go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ateş ile oynamak</td>
<td>Play with fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gülüs seven dişine katlanır</td>
<td>Take the bitter with the sweet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ýki cambaz bir ipte oynamaz</td>
<td>Too many cooks spoil the broth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ateþ olmayan yerden duman çýkmaz</td>
<td>Where there is smoke, there is fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taþýma suyuyla deðirmen dönmez</td>
<td>You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dilini yutmak</td>
<td>Cat got your tongue?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabrýný taþýrmak</td>
<td>At the end of your rope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yangýna körükle gitmek</td>
<td>Add fuel to the fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gözünün nuru</td>
<td>Apple of your eye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birisini deli etmek</td>
<td>Drive someone crazy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tükürdüðünü yalamak</td>
<td>Eat his words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her işte bir hayýr vardýr</td>
<td>Every cloud has a silver lining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinirden köpürmek</td>
<td>Foam at the mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anladýýsam arap olayým</td>
<td>Greek to me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bir taþla iki kuþ vurmak</td>
<td>Kill two birds with one stone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayný kalýptan çýkmak</td>
<td>Like two peas in a pod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ýncir çekirdeðini dolduramamak</td>
<td>Nickel and dime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diken üstünde olmak</td>
<td>On pins and needles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gözden ýrak olan, gönülden de ýrak olur</td>
<td>Out of sight, out of mind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question #3: What instructional model will best scaffold Hakan’s proficiency in understanding English figurative language?

It is important that students become metacognitively aware that some of the phrases they are encountering in their new language require a figurative, rather than a literal, interpretation. When students become aware of their thought processes, they are engaging in metacognition, or “the monitoring and control of thought” (Martinez, 2006, p. 694). This is a powerful tool for learners. Cultivating this level of perception in students may seem like a daunting task, but it can be explicitly taught (James, 2002; Martinez, 2006). Metacognitive awareness must be introduced to students and be embedded within assignments. These types of assignments allow students to “find rich metaphoric correspondences in ordinary experiences and elements” (James, 2002, p. 32).

Metacognition also helps students achieve self-regulation. Martinez (2006) states that “metacognitive awareness is central to conceptions of what it means to be educated” and advocates modeling metacognitive awareness using “think-alouds” (p. 699). In a think-aloud, teachers verbalize their thoughts as they read selections orally to their students, thereby explicitly illustrating effective reading strategies (Block & Israel, 2004). Teacher modeling of a variety of strategies, from decoding to thinking through the interpretation of figurative expressions, is especially relevant for ELLs and students struggling with comprehension.

Recognizing that “figurative language interpretation...should be taught as a reading skill necessary for text comprehension” (Palmer and Brooks, 2004, p. 375), a plan was carefully designed for Hakan. This plan was designed to enhance Hakan’s ability to interpret figurative language accurately, and incorporated several effective instructional strategies: (1) planning a successful reading experience; (2) activating the reader’s background knowledge; (3) providing explicit instruction; (4) engaging in reading-in-context; and (5) making real-world connections.

Planning a Successful Reading Experience

Graves, et al. (2007) maintain that “to comprehend text, three factors are always involved: the purpose or purposes for reading (why reading is being done), the selection (what is being read), and the reader (who is doing the reading)—the why, the what, and the who” (p. 236). They also assert that teachers can use these three factors effectively to ensure the improvement of readers’ literacy skills. Good planning includes having a defined purpose for each lesson; ideally, students would
participate as much as possible in this process of setting the purpose for reading. Teachers who are scaffolding students to focus on the purpose of the reading assignment can also supply readers with carefully selected texts and related reading material that allow them to accomplish the task at hand. According to Hammerberg (2004), teachers empower ELLs when they build “an atmosphere of respect, support, and academic achievement, coupled with the use of texts and reading for culturally relevant purposes” (p. 655). Moreover, Graves et al. (2007) emphasized the need to reflect on the backgrounds of the learners as lesson plans are finalized; aspects for consideration include “the readers’ needs and concerns, interests, strengths and weaknesses as learners, and background knowledge” (p. 240).

Additionally, Delpit (2006) encourages teachers to honor the home culture of their students by acknowledging that individual identity and cultural contexts are a part of students’ abilities to comprehend and interpret the text. Similarly, Cummins, et al. (2005) argue that the cultural knowledge and the competency students have in their home languages are essential to engaging students in the learning process; they emphasize that, “English language learners will engage academically to the extent that instruction affirms their identities and enables them to invest their identities in learning” (p. 40).

Activating Background Knowledge

Advocating a sociocultural approach, Hammerberg (2004) recommends that teachers help students identify what resources or knowledge they already possess to understand text. Graves et al. (2007) add that, “selections should not require specific knowledge that is not part of their [ELLs’] schemata” (p. 240). By engaging readers with text using activities that activate their existing schemata, students are able to use their background knowledge to acquire understanding at a deeper level. To activate students’ existing schemata, Delpit (2006) supports using familiar metaphors, analogies, and experiences from the students’ own worlds to connect what they already know to the text at hand. Hammerberg (2004) bolsters this idea as it applies to ELLs by recommending that teachers apply a sociocultural approach to reading comprehension instruction. Being cognizant of the strengths students have in their native languages greatly enhances the confidence of students who are engaging in the learning process. Cummins et al. (2005) note that when students are prompted to activate their background knowledge, they are more likely to transfer understanding from one context to the other.
Direct, or Explicit, Instruction

Palmer and Brooks (2004) affirm that “figurative language interpretation is based on students’ schemata; therefore, direct, or explicit, instruction is often needed to provide the knowledge necessary to understand not only the figurative expressions but the context surrounding them as well” (p. 375). Hammerberg (2004) further contends that readers benefit when instructors take the time to clearly explain how to use reading strategies to determine meaning in text. Simmons and Palmer (1994) present a three-step process for finding meaning in figurative language that focuses the reader on a problem-solving approach:

1. Locate the figurative language (word or phrase) within the passage being read.
2. Decipher the literal meaning and determine if that is the message the author is actually trying to convey to the reader.
3. Use background knowledge about the word or phrase to decide what meaning the author intended. (p. 157)

Engaging in Reading-in-Context

Cappellini (2005) proposes using fables to work with upper-grade elementary students because they are usually short and they teach higher-order thinking skills. Although students may not have heard the particular fable being presented, it is likely that ELLs will recognize or remember a fable of similar content from their home cultures. Palmer, Hafner, & Sharp (1994) also encourage the use of fables, such as Aesop’s from the sixth century B.C. as well as more recent fables from around the globe, to develop reading comprehension and thinking as writers. Cruz and Duff (1996) point out that this recognition creates a bridge between cultures for students who gradually begin to see similarities in the sayings, expressions, and stories told to them by grandparents or other relatives and those in their newly learned culture. Such was the case with Hakan as he remembered fondly the stories told to him by his great-grandmother in Turkey, and he responded well to the instructor’s use of a traditional tale from his homeland. Furthermore, when presented with several proverbs, Hakan indicated that he felt comfortable discussing them with his instructor because he recognized similar expressions in Turkish such as those in Table 2. A next step for Hakan was to identify idioms and other types of figurative language in context using specifically selected texts. Based on Hakan’s
stated interest, the instructor introduced figurative language expressions to him in the form of proverbs found in traditional stories, such as fables and folktales.

**Making Real-World Connections**

According to Qualls, Treaster, Blood, and Hammer (2003), children’s ability to recognize and decipher idioms is directly related to the “amount of meaningful exposure” (p. 247). The findings of Qualls et al. (2003) demonstrate that children who received repeated exposure were better able to quickly differentiate idioms from non-idioms as well as process them for comprehension. Additionally, Qualls and Harris’ (1999) findings indicate that culturally based idioms tend to be more easily recognized and comprehended by the children accessing them and that the comprehension of older children is bolstered by the context in which idioms are found. Conversations with Hakan support these findings.

**Description of the Study**

Hakan was a fifth-grade ELL student attending an international school in his district that utilizes a sheltered English approach. This approach integrates content area instruction with the learning of English at a more rapid rate than traditional models. Thus, students are learning English while developing their academic and cognitive abilities. Hakan was initially identified as a student whose presenting problem was the reading-writing connection. Based on conversations with Hakan’s parents and his classroom teacher as well a series of informal observations of him in his classroom environment, Mrs. Ebru Bilgili—a bilingual (Turkish/English) reading teacher—designed a twelve-week instructional intervention plan to scaffold Hakan’s comprehension beyond literal interpretation. Mrs. Bilgili met with Hakan one to two times weekly, dependent upon the family’s schedule, for a total of 18 meetings lasting approximately one hour each.

An integral part of this instructional plan included the use of student journaling. Within his personal journal, Hakan was encouraged to use a three-step problem solving process (Simmons & Palmer, 1994) as he encountered figurative language at school and in everyday situations. To this three-step process, Mrs. Bilgili included a fourth step, asking Hakan to consider the significance of the figurative language he encountered as it related to his life (Palmer, Shackelford, Miller, & Leclere, 2007). Additionally, direct, or explicit, instruction was provided in the different types
of figurative language. To gauge Hakan’s progress, Mrs. Bilgili administered The Figurative Language Interpretation Test, Form A and Form B, respectively, at the onset and at the end of the intervention (Palmer, 1991; Palmer, et al., 1992).

Hakan

Hakan’s family is from Ankara, Turkey. Having earned a bachelor’s degree in physics and a master’s degree in astronomy in Turkey, Hakan’s father decided to pursue a doctoral degree in molecular physics at Oxford University in England, where he was offered a full scholarship. While in England, Hakan’s father’s fluency in English greatly improved; however, his mother did not have the opportunity to strengthen her fluency in this, her second, language. Choosing to leave behind their families and their heritage was a bold step for Hakan’s parents; they made this decision because of educational and economic opportunities that were available to them outside of their home culture.

Hakan’s parents had a strong desire to instill native language, culture, and values in their young son, so his elementary school years took place in Kayseri, the family’s hometown in Turkey. Kayseri, a very traditional rural Turkish town, is the birthplace of Hakan’s parents. In this small town, families stay together, practice their faith, and uphold their time-honored traditions. He described his first school in Kayseri, Turkey, as being small like a “hen’s den.” After completing first and second grades in his hometown, Hakan was sent to live with his uncle in Istanbul, where he attended a private school for third grade and had access to education in a more urban, yet still traditional, environment. Hakan described this experience with a sad face. When asked why, he explained that he was homesick and the other children were “just different.” Comparing himself to other students, Hakan portrayed his academic performance as “poor,” especially in a new subject called “English.” Hakan’s most prominent memory of his struggle in the English class was vocabulary. Understanding that one word could have many meanings was a difficult concept for him. Because idioms do not translate well from language to language, ELL students such as Hakan often have difficulty decoding social and academic phrases that include figurative language. For instance, the following expression made no sense to Hakan: “It’s a strange world of language in which skating on thin ice can get you into hot water.”

Upon completion of his father’s degree, the family returned to Ankara, Turkey. While there, Hakan’s father took a position with a major university as a
full-time professor. Although he was involved in scientific work, he desired to expand his research interests at a university in the United States. This decision greatly disturbed their families as Hakan’s father was the eldest son and, as such, was expected to set an example for his younger siblings. Hakan’s grandparents strongly objected to their leaving by reminding the young family of the Turkish expression, “On teker nereye giderse, arka teker de oraya gider” (Where the front wheels go, the back wheels will follow). They believed that this step would forever affect the entire extended family. Hakan’s parents agreed, but recognized the benefits that other educational opportunities outside of Turkey could bring to them and their children. With this in mind, Hakan’s father accepted a position in the United States as a scientist.

At the time of this study, Hakan, now a fifth grader in a public school in Florida, had completed two school terms in the United States. Despite his obvious frustration with figurative language, he liked to read as he expressed to Mrs. Bilgili his pride in the number of books he read during the previous summer. Mrs. Bilgili’s weekly observations and subsequent intervention with Hakan over a three-month period showed him to be a very enthusiastic and highly motivated student who seemed to show great interest in science fiction. He was also a fluent English speaker with only a slight Turkish accent. However, Hakan reported that he disliked writing. His comments on writing included, “I just don’t think my writing expresses what I really feel,” and “It is difficult to respond to short response questions because I have to find the right words to write.” Hakan also commented on his previous writing experiences in Turkey saying, “We did not do as much writing in Turkey as we do here...that’s one thing I liked about my Turkish schools. In Turkey, we just answered questions and wrote stories...but not as frequently and not as structured. I liked free writing” (Hakan, personal communication, November 16, 2006).

Prior to finalizing her instructional plan for Hakan, Mrs. Bilgili contacted his current teacher for her observations of Hakan’s progress as an English language learner. His fifth grade teacher stated that Hakan was hesitant when asked to write for testing purposes; however, she noted that he was a very creative student who appeared to enjoy writing poems and stories, especially folk tales. Apparently, his creativity had been fostered by family members during his early school years in his homeland; for example, growing up, Hakan remembered listening to his great-grandmother’s folk tales that retold events in history. Hakan indicated that his great-grandmother instilled many values in him. Based on those tales, he imagined going back in time to live through the events that took place in Turkish history,
especially the Ottoman Empire. Hakan even imagined himself to be a ruler of a small kingdom.

Because Hakan reported that he enjoyed reading and showed a recently gained confidence in his ability to appreciate what he was reading, one might conclude that he was experiencing success as a reader and learner. However, his classroom teacher observed that Hakan’s comprehension was inadequate beyond the literal level. Knowing that ELLs often struggle with interpreting figurative language, it was hypothesized that Hakan’s comprehension deficit might be related to his inability to recognize and interpret English figurative language. To assess Hakan’s understanding of figurative language, the instructor administered The Figurative Language Interpretation Test, or FLIT (Palmer, 1991; Palmer, et al., 1992). The FLIT is a multiple-choice, standardized test that can be administered either individually or to a group. The FLIT consists of two equivalent 50-item forms (Form A and Form B) and, while it is untimed, can usually be completed within an hour. Questions ask students to read a figure of speech in context and then choose the meaning of that figure of speech as it is used in the sentence. For example, *Mary was loved by all for she had a heart of gold.* Mary was a) honest; b) rich; c) kind; d) dependable. *Joe asked them to give it to him straight.* Joe wanted a) some help; b) the truth, c) a good price; d) something fixed. Provisional norms are provided for grades four to ten and ages 9 to 16+ (Palmer, 1991; Palmer, et al., 1992).

Although not normed for ELLs, it was felt that the FLIT could nevertheless provide valuable information concerning Hakan’s acquisition of English figures of speech. Data from the FLIT revealed that, while Hakan did not demonstrate a significant deficit in all types of figurative language, he did show a particular weakness with the interpretation of idioms. Hakan commented that on some of the test items he did not quite know what the phrases meant, but he had guessed based on his knowledge of figurative language in Turkish.

Following the administration of the FLIT, Form A, a careful analysis of the data, and consultation with his classroom teacher, an instructional plan focusing on figurative language interpretation was designed for Hakan and implemented. To activate Hakan’s background knowledge and to build on his perceived strengths, Mrs. Bilgili discussed Turkish expressions and proverbs with which he was familiar prior to exposing him to more examples of figurative language used in English. He noted astutely that some of the phrases could be translated to an almost identical metaphor in Turkish.
During instructional sessions, it became apparent that Hakan was a fluent reader in both Turkish and English. It was also evident that he was interested in making comparisons between what he was reading in English and what he had read in Turkish. Hakan continued to use his knowledge of Turkish figurative language as a steppingstone to familiarize himself with English figurative language. Direct, or explicit, instruction began with an introduction to various types of figurative language through reading a familiar Turkish folktale. Hakan read this folktale in Turkish (L1) as well as an English (L2) translation of the same folktale. Later, when asked to read the Turkish fable aloud in Turkish, he did so enthusiastically. Afterwards, Mrs. Bilgili and Hakan together identified the figurative language found within the text. Next, Mrs. Bilgili, utilizing a think-aloud (Block & Israel 2004; Martinez, 2006), modeled how she understood the meaning of those phrases and how they added to understanding the story. The think-aloud was followed by a discussion with Hakan that focused attention on several key words and their meanings. Hakan wrote these words and phrases and referred to them when answering Mrs. Bilgili’s higher-order questions about the story. This questioning led him to discover the intended meaning of the figurative expression. While Hakan’s understanding of Turkish is strong, and he continued to retell and discuss what he read in his native tongue, he did have difficulty answering some of the comprehension questions that required figurative language interpretation, even when asked to explain the meanings in Turkish. Hakan was then asked to read a folk tale aloud in English and was asked to identify examples of figurative language, particularly idioms, found within the text without assistance. Once he identified the figurative language expressions, Mrs. Bilgili and Hakan discussed the meanings of each, focusing on how their meanings added to his understanding of the story. Mrs. Bilgili conducted a discussion on several key words and their meanings, and Hakan wrote these words on a list.

To help Hakan make connections between the figurative language used in the text and the real world, Mrs. Bilgili asked him to think of situations in his own life where particular proverbs had application. For example, the proverb, “Easy come, easy go,” allowed him to combine story content and humor. Hakan expressed understanding of this proverb by telling Mrs. Bilgili that he had recently experienced this feeling when he found some money that he had unknowingly left in a coat pocket. Unfortunately, when he removed the money from the coat pocket, he realized that he once again misplaced those coins. Hakan grinned and said, “Easy come, easy go!”
For homework, Hakan was asked to create a list of figurative expressions that he encountered in his daily life and write them in his journal. Following this assignment, Mrs. Bilgili and Hakan discussed the many uses of figurative language that occurred on a regular basis outside of school. He noted that before this new awareness he simply translated such expressions literally; now, he seemed to understand why previously these words had made no sense to him. They discussed other figurative phrases, including idioms, that Hakan found and together they created a list of corresponding Turkish-English expressions; almost all of them had English counterparts (see Table 2). Hakan was then presented with more fables, as well as additional native folk tales, and he worked with his instructor to identify the idioms contained within these stories. His familiarity with the stories appeared to make him feel comfortable identifying the idioms and explaining their meanings.

After this explicit instruction, Hakan was administered the FLIT, Form B. He participated with enthusiasm. His demeanor was relaxed during the 20 minutes it took him to finish the test, and he did not ask any questions during the session. An item analysis of the FLIT, Form B, revealed a need for continued practice with idioms, proverbs, and allusions. Mrs. Bilgili and Hakan’s classroom teacher, however, observed that he now consistently used a systematic process for tackling and successfully processing figurative language in reading and in his interactions with others. Hakan’s comments following the FLIT reflected solid self-confidence, referring to this activity as a “piece of cake.”

Implications

Metaphoric expression is present in all languages, and children of all cultures develop metaphorical awareness. Explicit instruction, however, is often needed for ELLs to transfer specific metaphorical expression from a first language to a second. This point became evident following the administration of the Figurative Language Interpretation Test (FLIT) (Palmer, 1991; Palmer, et al., 1992) when Hakan noted that he recognized figurative language in his native tongue. Mrs. Bilgili then began discussing Turkish expressions and idioms with which Hakan was familiar prior to exposing him to more examples of figurative language used in English. Conversations of this type served to activate Hakan’s background knowledge and to build on his perceived strengths.

Another method used to enhance Hakan’s metaphoric awareness during the pre-reading phase of instruction was to illustrate that “metaphor is a very common
ingredient of everyday language” (Boers, 2000, p. 566). For example, engaging Hakan in a discussion about lost coins revealed his understanding of the practical application of the expression “easy come, easy go.” According to Boers (2000), this type of discussion may lead the student to recognize that figurative language is very much a part of his own conversational definition. Boers (2000) advocates that by interacting with students in this manner, “they will realize that metaphor is not just an ornamental device confined to poetry, but rather a typical aspect of language (and thought) in general” (p. 566).

A discussion of metaphor must also include a discussion of metaphoric themes that can help ELLs make connections. Often the development of background knowledge reflective of the culture of the new language must occur in order for the learner to develop complete understanding of the metaphor. Though many metaphoric themes are culturally specific, Boers and Demecheleer (2001) point out that some figurative expressions share metaphoric themes across languages and cultures. Conversations with Hakan, as well as subsequent observations of him, support these findings. Being able to recognize that figurative expressions are not arbitrary can help ELLs transfer knowledge from their native tongue to the new language. To accomplish this task, ELLs should be encouraged to explore the metaphoric themes, such as love, anger, beauty, etc. If the student does not recognize the theme, this could be an opportunity to teach or remind the student of this concept, i.e. to share a cultural lesson.

Illustrative of these findings, Hakan recounted to Mrs. Bilgili his inability to describe appropriately his emotions in English to a classmate following a lesson on the American National Anthem. When a classmate asked him about the content of the Turkish National Anthem, Hakan tried to express his pride, but realized that the metaphors embedded in this song were too difficult for him to translate and to express. The English translation of the Turkish National Anthem states that the flag is “my nation’s star” and “it is the last hearth burning for my nation.” Hakan indicated that he understood the meaning that these words implied; however, he was frustrated by his inability to express those feelings literally to a classmate and then later to Mrs. Bilgili, both in English and in Turkish.

Boers and Demecheleer (2001) warn that while recognizing that the metaphoric theme may enhance the positive transfer, it can also increase the risk of “negative L1 interference” (p. 258). This situation occurs when the ELL incorrectly associates the idiom with a similarly phrased expression in the native language that has a different meaning (see Table 1). Conversation between the teacher and student
can help remedy this situation as once the student has an idea of the concept being expressed, he or she can then approach the idiom as a problem-solving task (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001; Simmons & Palmer, 1994).

Finally, in the United States, a nation that is more culturally and linguistically diverse than ever before, the use of effective strategies for assessing and scaffolding language and literacy development is paramount. According to Palmer, Shackelford, Miller, and Leclere (2007), “to scaffold these students [ELLs], it is imperative that teachers design and implement instruction for figurative-language interpretation to increase student comprehension” (p. 259). Furthermore, communication across cultures will be clarified and enhanced as ELLs and their peers gain a better understanding of the depth and richness of each other’s language. As Mrs. Bilgili’s time with Hakan concluded, she remembered when he first commented that certain phrases in English sounded “silly” if interpreted literally. Hakan was now able to apply a name to these expressions: figurative language. Once he recognized that figurative language was not intended to be interpreted literally, Hakan was more confident in his ability to use this awareness to strengthen his comprehension, both orally and visually.

**Conclusion**

The rapid growth of students who are learning English as a new language (ELLs) impacts both the public school system and teacher training institutions, particularly when consideration is given to the extent of cultural and linguistic diversity represented in the ELL school-age population. While research in the Turkish-speaking student population appears to be increasing, many important questions remain. Predominant among these questions are those issues related to the ease and methodology of transfer, both culturally and linguistically, from Turkish to English. Finally, there is a need for increased teacher training aimed at translating these research findings into classroom practice. Perhaps Hakan, and many bilingual students like him, can continue to provide some of the much needed, action-oriented answers as educators across the United States strive to scaffold ELLs to literacy success.
References


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Biography for Children Has Never Been Better

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After reading Russell Freedman’s *Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (1990), one student remarked enthusiastically, “When I read this book I felt like I was reading about a close friend or relative. He came to life right on the page!” Such a response is not uncommon in classrooms where students read and study biography. Breathing life into subjects is the goal of biographers.

In the past few years, many literacy experts and readers have noted the improved quality of children’s literature, notably in nonfiction in general, and biography in particular. There are many reasons for the improvement in biographies for children and teens. Authors of biographies in earlier periods were part of a trend that glorified their subjects to present individuals worthy of emulation without sharing their foibles and shortcomings. Such writing is a form of stereotyping that alienates young readers from the subjects of biographies rather than helping them to know those subjects as real people (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008). In addition, earlier nonfiction “was of mediocre quality. It was often characterized by inaccuracy, pedestrian writing, and minimal visual appeal” (Moss, 1995, p. 122). This certainly is not true about the best biography available for today’s children and teens.

Biography is often defined as “the life story of a person.” Yet authors present these life stories through a variety of approaches. Table 1 illustrates the types of biographies and some notable examples. For this issue of *Reading Horizons*, we share some of the best biographies that have recently passed our way. Please note that the grade level designations are “loose” suggestions. For example, Claire Nivola’s (2008) *Planting the Trees of Kenya* can be read aloud to emergent readers or form the centerpiece of a unit on social action for upper elementary students. Likewise, a teacher might lead upper elementary students to see different points of view about the Lincolns’ sons when reading Candace Fleming’s (2008) *The Lincolns: A Scrapbook Look at Abraham and Mary* while middle school students might enjoy reading the book independently. Some might also enjoy comparing and contrasting Fleming’s take on the Lincolns with Nikki Giovanni’s (2008) *Lincoln and Douglass: An American Friendship*. 
Grades K-2


Freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, over the course of her life, Mississippi-born Ida B. Wells went from powerless slave to crusading opinion-maker, often signing her published pieces “Yours for justice.” This picture book follows Ida as she embraces education as a means to success, faces the challenges of keeping her family together after her parents’ death, and postpones marriage for her career. A teacher and a writer, she harnesses the power of the printed word to reveal the truth about the lynchings used to terrorize blacks and their sympathizers during the late nineteenth century. The book’s back matter offers additional insights into Ida’s involvement in the fight for women’s suffrage, and a timeline of important events in her life will prompt readers to seek out more information on this woman who constantly put her life on the line for the cause of justice. Some may even find their own causes worth defending after reading about this historic crusader for justice.


President Theodore Roosevelt had all sorts of challenging adventures during his lifetime, but the toughest problem he ever faced may have been reining in his spirited daughter, Alice. Independent-minded, Alice lived life on her own terms, savoring every opportunity that came her way. This delicious book celebrates the unique personality and winsome ways of the girl who became the woman who captivated the press with her lively actions. The illustrations portray a charming Alice who will sprint her way into the hearts of today’s admiring readers and remind them to be a little less
concerned about what others think of them. There really was something about Alice, and this picture book manages to capture the essence of the woman who enraptured generations of admirers.


Wangari Maathai left her beautiful Kenya to attend college in the United States. Upon her return home she discovered a very different place from what she left. Her homeland had suffered under the toll of unwise land management practices on the ecosystem. Still, Wangari, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts, refused to give up as she knew that individuals could make a big change. “Think of what we ourselves are doing,” she urged the women of Kenya. “We are cutting down the trees of Kenya. When we see that we are part of the problem, we can become part of the solution.” Her solution was to plant trees, many started from the seeds of the remaining trees in the country. Eventually the efforts of Wangari and her dedicated followers led to the Green Belt Movement, and the millions of trees they planted changed Kenya’s countryside forever. Nivola’s rich writing complements her glorious watercolors, capturing both the devastation of deforestation and the effects of the newly planted trees on Kenya’s landscape.


While today’s children today may not be familiar with the pressure of gender expectations, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was. Rather than sitting by silently while being told her voice didn’t matter, this nineteenth century feminist
fought back and spoke out for women’s suffrage, realizing that with the vote came the voice. Although the Nineteenth Amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote wasn’t passed until eighteen years after her death, Stanton inspired others to fight “the thorns of bigotry and prejudice” on many levels. The colored pencil and gouache cartoonish illustrations in this picture book depict an outspoken Elizabeth, breaking free of society’s restraints.


Carole Boston Weatherford’s words dance alongside Sean Quall’s evocative acrylic, collage, and pencil illustrations to demonstrate how the sounds and experiences of his childhood led John Coltrane to become one of the greatest jazz musicians of all time. The repeated line, “Before John was a jazz giant” makes the text easy for young children to read. The rhythm and style of the text infuse readers with enthusiasm. For example, “he heard big bands on the radio/ and a saxophone’s soulful solo,/ blues notes crooning his name.”

Grades 3-5


Filled with archival photographs and thoroughly researched, this account of the life, times, and challenges of Laura Bridgman, who became famous at the age of twelve, will intrigue readers who enjoyed George Sullivan’s Helen Keller: Her Life in Pictures (2007). Scarlet fever left five-year-old Laura blind, deaf, and unable to communicate. Although, over time, she and her parents managed to develop a rudimentary communication system, Laura craved more stimulation than her parents could provide.
When Samuel Gridley Howe brought her to the Perkins Institution in Boston in 1837, she found the words that opened the world to her. As Howe tried to raise awareness about the capacities of the blind individuals in his charge, Laura became famous for her reading of relief maps and a huge globe. Much more than just a stage performer, Laura was curious, interested in spiritual matters and deeply attached to Dr. Howe. The author’s afterword explores the advances in technology, medicine, and attitudes toward the blind, and encourages readers to ponder Laura’s life had she been born today.


Tonya Bolden’s lively writing traces the life of George Washington Carver from slave, to orphan, to college student, and to the distinguished educator and scientist he later became. A teacher of better ways of farming, Carver’s profound reverence for the earth influenced many people in the South as he invented sensible and life-saving products that could be made from peanuts and sweet potatoes. Photographs and historical artifacts, including Carver’s own drawings and paintings, add a great deal to this portrayal of his life and many accomplishments. Readers will draw inspiration from Carver’s multifaceted life as a dedicated student, pioneering conservationist, innovative scientist, and impassioned educator.


This wonderful biography about one of the architects of the 1963 March on Washington is an example of the power of one individual to make a difference in the world. Born in West Chester, Pennsylvania in 1912, young Rustin grew up hearing stories about racism and intolerance, and he never forgot the lessons about nonviolence that he learned from his family. Living a purpose-filled life meant
that Rustin would become deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement, often being arrested for civil disobedience and for following his convictions. Photographs, songs, and the music of the period fill the pages of this inspiring account of the man behind the headlines. Rustin’s example will encourage young readers to take a stand on issues that matter to them.


Keeping a watch for one guest in particular, President Abraham Lincoln celebrates his second inauguration in 1865. Staunch abolitionists, he and his friend Frederick Douglass reflect on their parallel journeys to this point in time as the festivities move around them. Giovanni’s elegant prose celebrates a unique friendship, forged during the nation’s darkest days. Coupled with Collier’s intriguing cut-paper collages, this picture book is certain to enliven any pedantic treatment of Lincoln, Douglass, and John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, which provoked the war between the North and the South.


Abraham Lincoln was born and raised in the harsh backwoods country of Kentucky and Indiana. His mother lovingly shared the Bible stories she had learned from her own mother with her children. While her death made darkness seem to fill their cabin and their lives, his father’s subsequent marriage to Sally Johnston brought order and books to the Lincoln home. Her confidence in young Abraham Lincoln helped him to grow, learn to read, and stand tall. Readers will enjoy this friendly look at Lincoln’s childhood and how far his promise and abilities “would take him...or what it would mean to both him and his country.”

In determined statements, the author tells the story of Matthew Henson who went from cabin boy to trusted advisor of Admiral Peary in his assault on the North Pole. The text and illustrations show the pivotal role this brave man played in the expedition, even carrying Peary back to base when his toes froze, learning the Inuit language, sticking by Peary for twenty years, and refusing to give up on his dream. The author’s note poignantly reminds readers that Peary neglected to credit Henson for his role in helping Peary reach the North Pole. It took almost a century before Henson’s essential contributions to the expedition were widely recognized.

**Grades 6-8**


Using short pieces of text chockfull of quotes and visual images such as photographs, engravings, and cartoons, Candace Fleming’s scrapbook approach effectively brings Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln and their sons to life. Moreover, the author weaves facts and traditions of the time period in which they lived to provide readers with a context for their lives. Readers learn many details of others whose lives intersected with the Lincolns. This collective biography provides details of Abraham and Mary’s childhoods, their courtship, political lives, the presidency, the war years, their sons’ wild behavior, the heartrending deaths of three of their children, and finally their own tragic deaths. Fleming even provides Lincoln’s favorite cake recipe for readers to bake and experience for themselves.

In 1940, an unassuming American journalist set out on a mission that changed his life forever and led to the rescue of over 2,000 people. Many Jewish artists and intellectuals had fled their homelands for France, a country that generously welcomed and protected the refugees. With the German occupation, many of these refugees headed for Marseilles in hopes of escaping “certain death at the hands of the Nazis.” Repeatedly putting his own life in danger, Varian Fry defied Hitler, the Nazis, and the Vichy Government. Fry’s efforts brought high adventure and profound hope to a time of grim history. As the author notes, “Varian Fry knew it was impossible to rescue every Jew in Europe. But he knew it was possible to rescue some. And he did” (p. 167).

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**Grades 9-12**


Never content to endure inequities quietly or shun controversy, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, the first black man to receive a doctorate from Harvard University and the writer who coined the idea of the “Talented Tenth” for those black men and women with special attributes, was a charming, articulate man who fought for the rights of others until his death at 95, on the eve of the March on Washington. Bolden provides intriguing historical details that revive the years during which this American intellectual wrote, spoke, and influenced others. Snippets about his personal life prompt readers to wonder about the generosity of spirit of a man who spent so much time working for others but so little time caring for his own family. A founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, whose 100th anniversary occurs in 2009, and the founding editor of *The*
Crisis magazine, Du Bois traveled the globe, intrigued by the world around him, and intent on improving the lot of blacks worldwide. Tidbits such as Du Bois and his wife’s first Christmas pact to spend only five dollars each on the holiday in order to stick to their budget humanize a man whose influence stretches across the decades. Bolden’s deft handling of a complicated individual leaves readers fascinated but puzzled by Du Bois.


While the classic book To Kill a Mockingbird is often assigned summer reading for many junior high and high school students, readers will be interested in learning more about the woman behind this classic. This adaptation of Shield’s best-selling adult biography of author Harper Lee, offers insight into the writer as a girl growing up in Monroeville, Alabama, from where she drew literary inspiration, her friendship with Truman Capote, and her struggles as a budding writer in New York City. The author interviewed Lee’s friends, neighbors, and classmates to craft an intriguing account of an independent, fascinating woman who never wrote another book after Mockingbird.
Table 1. Types of Biographies

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<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Notable Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Picture Book Biography</td>
<td>• Pictures may carry a substantial part of the story</td>
<td>• Martin’s Big Words by Doreen Rappaport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• May be authentic or fictionalized</td>
<td>• A Picture Book of John Hancock by David &amp; Michael Adler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• May be complete or partial</td>
<td>• Michelangelo by Diane Stanley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Gregor Mendel by Cheryl Bardoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplified Biography</td>
<td>• Written in simple language</td>
<td>• Jessie Owens by Carole Boston Weatherford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Usually short</td>
<td>• The Secret World of Hildegard by Jonah Winter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Has many illustrations</td>
<td>• The Boy on Fairfield Street by Kathleen Krull</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Maybe written in brief chapters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial Biography</td>
<td>• Only part of the subject’s life</td>
<td>• Phillis’s Big Test by Catherine Clinton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• May be only an episode or a day of selected events from the whole life</td>
<td>• Rosa by Nikki Giovanni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• The Snow Baby by Katherine Kirkpatrick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete Biography</td>
<td>• Spans lifetime</td>
<td>• Up Close: Johnny Cash by Anne E. Neimark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Most common type of biography</td>
<td>• MLK: Journey of a King by Tonya Bolden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Something Out of Nothing: Marie Curie and Radium by Carla Killough McClafferty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective Biography</td>
<td>• Contains brief selections about several subjects</td>
<td>• Hitler Youth by Susan Campbell Bartoletti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• May range from one-paragraph sketches to long essays</td>
<td>• Wildly Romantic by Catherine M. Andronik.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Often selected by theme</td>
<td>• On My Block: Stories and Paintings by 15 Artists by Dana Goldberg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiography and Memoir</td>
<td>• Written by subjects themselves</td>
<td>• Before It Wriggles Away by Janet Wong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Subjective</td>
<td>• Miss American Pie by Margaret Sartor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• May also fit into other categories</td>
<td>• Tasting the Sky by Ibtisam Barakat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Kiefer, Hepler, & Hickman, 2007
References


**About the Authors:**

Terrell A. Young and Barbara A. Ward are on the faculty at Washington State University. Young is currently on the NCTE Orbis Pictus Committee, and Ward serves as chair of the IRA Notable Books for a Global Society Committees.
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