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Starting with volume 53, Reading Horizons welcomes a new staff and new additions. The same great literacy articles will be published as new and promising authors share their literacy research and work with literacy educators and researchers.

Please read and enjoy this fall’s issue from promising authors of some interesting and cutting edge articles.

Karen F. Thomas
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EXAMINING THE FORCES THAT GUIDE TEACHING DECISIONS

Dr. Robin Griffith, Dr. Dixie Massey, Dr. Terry S. Atkinson

Abstract

This study of two successful first grade teachers examines the forces that guide their instructional decisions. Findings reveal the complexities of forces that influence the moment-to-moment decisions made by these teachers. Teachers repeatedly attempted to balance their desires to be student-centered while addressing state standards and implementing their schools’ adopted curricula, with varying levels of success. The teachers’ professional knowledge was the determining factor in that success. Levels of professional development and the professional learning communities of these two teachers and the contexts in which they were operating influenced their attention to certain forces. Findings from this study indicate that building teachers’ professional knowledge through coaching and long-term professional development can improve teacher decision making.
Teachers, not programs make the difference in student learning (see Allington, 2002; Hattie, 2003), and in an age of increased accountability and scripted instructional programs, mandated curricula often profoundly influence teachers’ instructional decisions (Garan, 2002; Griffith, 2008; Yatvin, 2005). At any given moment and on any given day, a classroom teacher makes hundreds, if not thousands, of decisions, some of which relate to managing the classroom but most of which relate to instruction. In those moments, teachers rely heavily on verbal and nonverbal feedback from students (Fogarty, Wang, & Creek, 1983) and tap previous experiences with similar learners to respond productively (Corno, 2008). Characteristically, exemplary teachers make thoughtful adaptations while teaching (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Hoffman & Pearson, 2000) and seize teachable moments (Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley, 1999). Glaser (1977) and Snow (1980) identified teachers who are thoughtfully adaptive as those responsive to the needs of individual students while pursuing the goals set forth by the standards. Furthermore, Bransford, Darling-Hammond, and LePage (2005) offered a framework for teaching and learning that served as a conceptual backdrop for this study. As university professors who taught in a master’s program in reading at a large state university in the south, we were interested in how these concepts played out in classrooms. Based upon Bransford et al’s (2005) conceptual framework, we considered the following external forces that guide teacher decision-making: (a) the standards-based movement (American Federation of Teachers, 2009; Common Core State Standards, 2011; Donnelly & Sadler, 2009); (b) adopted and/or mandated curricula (Shelton, 2005; Westerman, 1991); and (c) student-centered beliefs (Corno, 2008; Gill & Hoffman, 2009).

Existing research on teacher effectiveness lauds thoughtful, adaptive teaching decisions as a key characteristic of effective teachers; yet few researchers have examined the complex decision-making process in great detail. In this study, we examine the sources of information that guided the teachers to make decisions. Rather than simply focusing on managerial decisions related to time, materials, and behavior management (Anderson, 2003; Andrews, 2010), we focused on specific teaching decisions linked to student understanding, particularly those related to literacy. Grounded in observational data from classroom observations, we moved beyond simply identifying teaching decisions to unpacking the forces that influence the in-the-moment decisions teachers make. Specifically, we asked, “Are the teachers’ instructional decisions student-centered, driven by the state standards, or influenced by the school’s adopted curriculum?”
Forces that Guide Teaching

Teaching Is Decision Making

Shavelson (1973) noted, “Any teaching act is a result of a decision, either conscious or unconscious,” and “The basic teaching skill is decision making” (p. 144). Shavelson also posited that every teaching decision is a “complex cognitive processing of available information” about the situation (p. 149). Shavelson and Stern (1981) further described the complex task of negotiating teachers’ own beliefs, the constraints of the curricula, and the goals of the instructional system. Gill and Hoffman’s (2009) study of teacher talk during planning time revealed teachers’ decisions often relate to their beliefs about teaching and learning, as well as their perceptions of the subject matter and their students. Balancing these factors is no easy feat as the negotiation of competing forces often requires teachers to employ “tactical recontextualization and creative adaptation of discourse” (Hansfield, Crumpler, & Dean, 2010, p. 405).

Standards Based Movement

The American schools of the Twentieth Century adequately prepared students for a variety of professions. No one expected all students to attend college or even graduate from high school because agricultural and manufacturing jobs were readily available and respected by society as critical to the success of the nation (American Federation of Teachers, 2009). A century later, American societal norms demand much more. A small minority of students achieving high levels of educational success is no longer acceptable. Rather, post-secondary education is expected to be available and attainable by all. The standards-based movement is an outgrowth of this shift. Policymakers and politicians are advancing this notion with mandates and legislation determining what students at each grade level should know and be able to do (American Federation of Teachers, 2009). Teachers describe both positive and negative aspects of standards-based accountability (Donnelly & Sadler, 2009; Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner, 2004; Swanson & Stevenson, 2002), with novice teachers typically embracing the standards and associated pacing guides, whereas experienced teachers identify the movement as frustrating due to the loss of their professional freedom (Winkler, 2002).

Student-Centered Teaching

Assessment data used to inform instruction are at the heart of student-centered teaching. Teachers who implement the cycle of assess, evaluate, plan, and teach (Jinkins, 2001) are essentially adopting a student-centered approach to teaching. Additionally, student-centered teaching is grounded in the belief that all children can learn (International Reading Association, 2000) and that teaching
should begin with each student’s foundation of knowledge whether it is rich or meager (Clay, 1991). By paying attention to individual differences, teachers can adapt and modify instruction to fit the needs of individual learners. Differentiated instruction can be equated with student-centered teaching as it debunks the myth that one method of teaching fits all learners (Pressley, 2007). Instead, student-centered instruction involves teachers who carefully monitor students’ understanding and modify instruction accordingly (Duffy, 2003). Teachers who adopt a process-oriented approach to instruction modify their teaching in response to students’ reactions. In contrast, teachers who adopt a content-oriented approach focus on covering the required content and do not modify instruction in response to students’ reactions (Peterson & Clark, 1978). Such differentiation of instruction is more prevalent among experienced teachers than their novice counterparts (Westerman, 1991) because it requires a negotiation of sometimes competing forces - the curriculum, the standards, and the student.

**Curriculum-Based Teaching**

Curriculum often refers to the topics taught and the books or materials used. The curriculum might also describe the framework or instructional approach adopted by a teacher, school, or district (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2005). Mandated implementation of curricula does not necessarily create a disconnect for teachers who strive to be student-centered, especially when the philosophy undergirding the curriculum aligns with the teacher’s own beliefs. Oftentimes, however, teachers feel the curriculum takes precedence over the individual students’ needs and does not allow for responsive teaching. After spending almost a full year reflecting on her beliefs about literacy teaching and learning, Miller (2008) noted the struggles between believing what the publishers told her were best teaching practices and what she knew about her own students’ strengths and needs. She wrote, “We’re the ones in the unique and wonderful position to know where our kids have been, where they are now, and where it makes the most sense to take them next. *Real life isn’t scripted. Neither is real teaching*” (p. 17). Clearly, teachers face competing and sometimes conflicting forces as they make instructional decisions.

**Method**

In this third phase of a thoughtfully adaptive teaching study, we report on the findings of two in-service teachers who completed an online graduate level course in diagnostic reading. During the first phase of the study, we concluded that online courses could facilitate teachers’ ability to be adaptive in their teaching
In the second phase of the study, we investigated the lasting effects of the online course on teachers’ ability to be thoughtfully adaptive in their instruction (Massey, Atkinson, & Griffith, 2010). Self-reported survey responses, as well as classroom observations and interviews, indicated that teachers who chose to participate in the follow-up study still reported some levels of adaptive teaching, but the degree of adaptation depended upon the context and environment in which they were teaching.

In this phase of the study, we selected a case study approach (Yin, 2003) in order to move beyond simply identifying thoughtful adaptations to unpacking the forces that guide those thoughtful adaptations and instructional decisions teachers make. We no longer relied on self-reported data, but rather engaged in observations of real-life teaching. We collected field notes, lesson plans, debriefing interviews, and the responses from a teacher decision making survey. Specifically, we asked, “Are the teachers’ instructional decisions student-centered, driven by the state standards, or influenced by the school’s adopted curriculum?”

**Participants**

We used purposive sampling (Silverman, 2000) to select the two teachers. Leslie and Jessica were identified by their school administrators as exemplary teachers of literacy. They were also participants in phases one and two of this study and were selected for this follow-up study because of their geographic proximity.

Leslie was a fifth-year teacher, in her second year as a Reading Recovery teacher (Clay, 1993) in a Title I school in a small city in the South. At the time of the study, she was a recent graduate of a master’s program in reading education at a large state university where we all taught. Her normal school day consisted of teaching reading and writing in a one-on-one setting to four of the most at-risk first graders in her school. Additionally, she taught literacy groups consisting of five to seven students, typically those students who had discontinued Reading Recovery services or who had not qualified for the one-on-one intervention services. Her school had adopted a balanced literacy program based upon the work of Dyson (1982), Fountas and Pinnell (1996), Lyons, Pinnell, and DeFord (1993), Pressley, (2005), and many others. As part of her ongoing professional training related to Reading Recovery, she attended bi-monthly professional development meetings. She also received ongoing coaching from her teacher leader.

Jessica was a first grade teacher in her fifth year of teaching. As a self-contained first grade teacher, Jessica was responsible for teaching all subjects
including math, science, social studies, reading, and writing. She taught in a small city in the Southeastern United States near a military base where the student population, as well as the teacher population, was somewhat transient. As a recent graduate of a master’s program in reading, Jessica’s principal and colleagues viewed her as an instructional leader in her school. At the request of her principal, Jessica sometimes led professional development sessions for the teachers at her school. Her school did not employ an instructional coach, so Jessica did not receive ongoing coaching or mentoring. The school’s adopted curriculum was based upon the tenets of balanced literacy, but some instruction still bore the look of many traditional skill-based approaches.

Data Sources

Data included the in-depth case studies, particularly the thoughtfully adaptive teaching reflections from the first phase of this study. Secondly, data included responses from the Profile for Teacher Decision Making (Griffith, 2011). This survey included thirty questions related to teachers’ beliefs about decision making and fifteen questions about their decision making practices (see Appendix). Additionally, we observed each teacher’s instruction three times for approximately 30 minutes per session. In Leslie’s classroom, the observations documented the teaching of her literacy groups, reflecting a variety of literacy components, including small group and individual reading and writing experiences. In Jessica’s first grade classroom, we observed three lessons that lasted approximately 30 minutes each. Two featured small group guided reading lessons and the third consisted of a whole group word study lesson followed by small group word study lessons.

We used multiple data sources to facilitate triangulation of the data. Data sources included the Profile for Teacher Decision Making responses from each teacher, the thoughtfully adaptive teaching reflections from the in-depth case studies, field notes taken during the observations, teacher lesson plans, and transcripts of the debriefing interviews following each observation. Additionally, discussion notes from our coding meetings served as a data source for this study. Through our data, we provided rich descriptions of the participants by capturing the teachers’ points of views and the constraints of the context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in three phases. We analyzed the data through a qualitative content analysis (Patton, 1990). In Phase I, informal analysis, we
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observed the teachers, took field notes, and discussed the observations informally in order to ground our roles as teacher educators and researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In Phase II, independent coding, we coded our data separately, writing analytical and methodological memos on the data sources. We used three primary codes—student-centered, curriculum-based, and standards-based—to code the data, though we remained open to new codes. In Phase III, analytic conversation and category convergence, we shared our results with one another, discussing the coding to confirm and clarify our coding schemes. In places of disagreement, we discussed the coding process and returned to the observational notes. In each case, we resolved our differences or decided to code a particular instance as representative of two or more codes.

Limitations of the Study

The common limitation of case studies is the small number of participants in the data set. Although this small number does not allow us to generalize our findings beyond the two participants, we benefitted from the luxury of becoming intimately familiar with the participants’ data and discussing each participant in depth.

A further limitation of our study is the variance between the two teachers’ classroom settings, and we fully acknowledge that these two teachers were not from perfectly matched contexts. Jessica taught in a typical first grade classroom; in contrast, Leslie taught in a pull-out, small group setting. Leslie’s additional training as a Reading Recovery teacher also contributed to her decision-making process.

Findings

Profile for Teacher Decision Making

Results from the Profile for Teacher Decision Making (Griffith, 2011) indicated that the two teachers featured in this study shared similar beliefs about the importance of student-centered teaching. Both indicated that they believed the standards and the curriculum should influence teaching decisions to a lesser degree than the needs of their students. Both teachers reported that, in practice, students’ responses and needs guided their teaching decisions. A slight difference in their use of standards to guide instruction indicated that as a teacher of struggling readers, Leslie used the standards to guide her teaching decisions to a lesser extent than Jessica.
Leslie

A variety of forces guided Leslie’s teaching decisions. Students’ responses often influenced her decisions and were therefore coded as student-centered. For example, when talking with Laticia about her writing, Leslie said, “I’m looking at your spacing and it’s easy to read. Did you put a period to tell your reader you are stopping?” When Laticia added a period, Leslie continued to support her by asking, “Let’s see if that’s going to sound right – the leaves turn green and you can swim. Do you need to stop here or here?” Next, she guided this young writer to refine a writing skill. Through this brief interaction, the teacher validated the student’s writing attempts while supporting a new or developing understanding of punctuation. Other examples of student-centered decision making included comments such as, “This is working for this student/this is not ‘working for this student,” and, “The student understands this concept/this student needs further support on that concept.” In addition to knowledge of individual students’ academic understandings, Leslie knew each child’s behavioral tendencies. She made comments about students’ personalities and work styles and how these factors influenced her decisions. For example, when Leslie reflected on how she interacted with the students in the small group, she revealed that one student needed a lot of specific praise in a gentle tone because of her personality and home life, whereas another student needed less attention because he tended to be “very focused and self-directed.”

Other times, Leslie based her teaching decisions upon the standards for the particular grade level she was teaching. When the spelling principle of adding –ed to words to form the past tense surfaced in a writing lesson, Leslie capitalized on the teachable moment by saying to the group of students, “I like how you are trying [to write] leap. Now how do we make it say leaped?” When the students added –ed, she said, “Smart. It made it easier to think about the first part [of the word].” Throughout the observations, we documented evidence of Leslie’s addressing concepts and skills required by the state standards for her grade level. She noted objective numbers and standard principles from the state’s standard course of study throughout her lesson plans, but more importantly she captured teachable moments that specifically addressed the standards for her grade level.

The school’s adopted curriculum, balanced literacy, sometimes guided Leslie’s teaching decisions. Teachers in her school received extensive professional development in the area of balanced literacy and consistent literacy coaching provided evidence of curricular buy-in by the teachers and administrators. Balanced literacy was Leslie’s chosen personal curriculum as well as the one adopted by the
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school. Thus, she was not fighting against a mandated curriculum in which she did not have faith. She spent many years immersed in the theory and practice of that curriculum, so she made informed decisions about what components to enhance and what components to omit. For instance, when introducing the new book in guided reading, she chose to omit the planned discussion of unusual phrases because she noted that students “caught the gist, so I ... wanted to leave that [out].”

Balanced literacy instruction allowed for great flexibility in terms of teaching decisions, but the school’s mandated use of thinking maps sometimes caused a disconnect for Leslie. During the initial lesson briefing, Leslie commented on the district’s requirement to use thinking maps in all of her lessons. She chose to use a multi-flow map during the interactive writing portion of the lesson because it seemed like the most logical place to insert the curriculum requirement. Yet throughout the lesson briefing and the post-lesson interview, Leslie expressed dissatisfaction with this requirement as it forced her to focus the lesson on meeting this mandate, rather than the more important purpose of advancing her students’ literacy understandings.

A variety of forces influenced Leslie’s decisions, however, her students’ needs guided most of her decisions. In one lesson, we coded her decisions as student-centered twenty-one times; standards-based eleven times; and curriculum-based eight times. When reflecting on the interactive writing portion of the lesson, Leslie expressed surprise at Brianna’s attempt to write the word man,

I kind of thought she would get man a little bit easier, and I think it was the m that was tripping her. From what I could see with what she was writing, she was trying to figure out how to make it.... That’s something I’ll have to watch for next time.

Some of the interactions focused on an individual student’s needs, whereas others focused on the strengths and needs of the group of learners. Leslie was continuously assessing understanding. As she said, “Everyone else didn’t have any trouble because I watched them. They all wrote it fast. They were able to make that link with can and man.”

Throughout the data, we noted that interactions revealed multiple influences guiding her decisions. In other words, there were multiple forces at work in many of her in-the-moment decisions. For instance, a student in Leslie’s group prompted mention of a particular skill that the rest of the group was not ready to learn yet, but because the teacher knew it was a required standard, she introduced it to the group as if to prime their pumps for learning it later. She used her knowledge of
the standards to guide decisions about what the students needed to know next. While keeping the grade level standards in mind, Leslie gathered information about the students’ current understandings. When asked to comment on the modifications she made in the writing portion of the lesson, Leslie explained,

I did not expect her to be able to write it so fast. She is a bit higher than some of the others. She’s got a lot [of] higher level thinking going on – I said that before we started – but she also was able to get the -ed at the end, which most of the time they just say -d. So I wanted to bring that to everyone’s attention.

Examples like this one illustrate her tendency to make decisions based upon the standards while maintaining her focus on the responses of the students.

As our coding proceeded, we identified an additional code; professional knowledge that guided many of Leslie’s teaching decisions. Initially, we looked for evidence of teaching decisions influenced by the student, the standards, or the adopted curriculum. Interestingly, a number of Leslie’s teaching decisions were influenced by another force - the teacher’s professional knowledge. These examples included knowledge of formal and informal assessments, knowledge of the developmental nature of literacy, and knowledge of various instructional approaches. She accessed this knowledge when making decisions about an individual child, about the curriculum, and about the standards. Leslie continually puzzled through students’ responses that surprised her. In the following exchange, she revealed professional knowledge about the complexities of how words work. When reflecting on Brianna’s ability to use the word part /gr/ to write the word green, but her struggle to recall if the letter m had one hump or two, Leslie stated,

It’s very interesting to see the difference in those two levels of words, and how she can know one so well and be able to pull the parts out of it and not distinguish between the m and the n in the next word.

Interactions like this one indicated that this teacher was aware of the subtleties of students’ responses and what such responses meant in terms of individual students’ knowledge and understanding.

**Jessica**

The context in which Jennifer taught was not unlike many other schools across the country. The school’s adopted literacy assessment which required students to read both expository and narrative texts at a certain level by the end of the school year profoundly influenced Jessica’s teaching decisions.
with Jessica revealed that her school espoused a balanced literacy approach, but instructional decisions were largely driven by assessment results. Along with the accuracy rates, students’ comprehension was assessed with a retelling protocol consisting of counting the number of items/events the students could recall from the passage. The goal of helping her students reach this assessment benchmark influenced many of Jessica’s instructional decisions. During the lesson debriefing following the guided reading lessons, Jessica reflected on a time when she modified the lesson or its objectives. She stated,

The objectives stayed the same the entire time because what I want all groups that I’m working on right now, particularly the lower groups, is to learn how to pick out the important information... [to] write down the key words so they can use [them] to retell the story. The assessment that we’re going to have to do at the end of the year, the level 15/16 book is a hard read and they cannot retell it without those notes.... That’s the rationale for what we’re doing.”

Upon initial analysis, Jessica’s teaching decisions appeared to be driven solely by the curriculum, with few instances of student-centered decision making. In one lesson, we coded her decisions as student-centered six times, standards-based two times, and curriculum-based twelve times. After a more thorough review of the data, we came to the understanding that Jessica made her student-centered decisions in light of the district benchmark assessments. Groups of students, rather than individuals, framed her student-centered decisions. As Shavelson and Stern (1981) noted, “Teachers’ judgments about students’ reading ability directly influence their decisions about grouping for reading instruction. Once students have been grouped, the reading group and not the individual student becomes the unit for planning instruction” (p. 470). For instance, Jessica noted that one student was using the illustrations to retell the story. As she said,

I noticed that she was inserting information into her retelling that wasn’t part of the story. Well, it was part of the story but it wasn’t part of the written text... and so I complimented her on that because I wanted the others to hear that, ‘Look. She’s using the photographs to help her retell.’

Although her student-centered decision making differed greatly in abundance and in format from Leslie’s, we believe that while Jessica gave authority to the curriculum, she was very conscientious about wanting her students to be able to meet the district benchmark. This benchmark was her measuring stick for
success, and she felt committed to help her students reach that goal by the end of the school year. Therefore, every aspect of her reading instruction was colored by the end goal of passing the benchmark assessment.

Jessica’s word study lesson, by contrast, provided more examples of a variety of teacher decision making forces. The school did not have an adopted curriculum for spelling or phonics, so Jessica chose to utilize a word study approach based upon the work of Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston (2008). In the word study lesson, we noted that Jessica responded to students’ comments about the spelling principle and chose to seize several teachable moments to clarify the concept for the students. For instance, when studying the spelling principle of dropping the e before adding -ing or -ed, one student offered the word come as a word to change to the past tense. In this instance, the students and the spelling standards for her grade level influenced Jessica’s decision to model how to form the past tense of irregular verbs like come. In some ways, the word study curriculum that promoted the discovery of spelling principles through the manipulation of and study of words also guided her decision.

In one of the interviews, Robin took on the role of coach, trying to help Jessica identify places where she made a teaching decision and guiding her through the process of analyzing what forces influenced that decision. In an effort to help Jessica reflect on a decision, Robin stated, “I think, if I’m understanding your objectives clearly, you’re trying to get them to pay attention to and gather information from the text and not just the words alone…” After this exchange, Jessica noted, “It’s hard, I think, as a teacher to reflect on what you do because you just automatically do it. You don’t think, ‘Oh, I’m thoughtfully adapting my instruction’ because …for a lot of teachers, it just comes! It’s just what you do!” Jessica’s response aligns with Parker and Gehrke’s (1986) findings that teachers tend to be more aware of decision making when things are going poorly but are likely making many in-the-moment decisions automatically and are therefore unaware of the process. Because Jessica’s colleagues viewed her as an instructional leader in her school, she received no formal coaching or mentoring by other professionals. Reflecting on practice, particularly teaching decisions, was not a cultural expectation in her school. While Jessica had reflected upon her teaching practice throughout her graduate studies, such reflection was not as evident in her current classroom practice. Along those same lines, there was minimal evidence of Jessica’s using her own professional knowledge, particularly in terms of questioning the curriculum and curriculum benchmark assessments. She knew the measure by
which she and her students would be judged and she implemented strategies to help students reach those curricular goals.

**Discussion**

Both Leslie and Jessica emerged as exemplary students in their graduate reading education courses by demonstrating strong abilities to be thoughtfully adaptive. However, analysis of observations and interviews revealed striking differences in the decision making forces to which each gave authority. In Leslie’s case, her professional knowledge was the determining factor in her ability to make teaching decisions that allowed her to balance her desires to be student-centered while also addressing the state standards using the adopted curriculum. For Jessica, the context in which she taught greatly influenced her teaching decisions. The curriculum assessment influenced her student-centered decisions.

**Context Matters**

In terms of forces that guide teachers’ instructional decisions, the findings from this study indicate that context matters. Throughout this study, we discovered that two teachers who reported very similar beliefs about student-centered teaching, standards-based teaching, and curriculum-based teaching reflected dramatic differences in how they enacted their beliefs into practice.

Leslie’s teaching occurred in a small group setting. She had the luxury of meeting the needs of the most at-risk first graders in small groups every day for an intense time frame. She did not have to deal with other classroom obligations and distractions, like keeping the other students engaged in meaningful learning activities. Nor did she have to attend to routine managerial tasks such as noting lunch counts or collecting picture money. She focused only on literacy development, so she could capitalize on her knowledge of the literacy standards for her grade level and use the balanced literacy curriculum to meet the individual needs of her students. Because of this context, the responses of her students drove her teaching decisions.

Jessica’s teaching, by contrast, occurred in the real-life milieu of a first grade classroom. She was responsible for teaching every child every subject and was bound by the school’s mandated curriculum assessment. As indicated by her responses on the decision making survey, Jessica wanted her teaching decisions to be guided by the students, but the context of her situation indicated that she gave authority to the school’s adopted curriculum instead. A closer look at the complexities of her beliefs and practices, however, revealed that her attempts to help students reach the benchmark goal of the adopted curriculum could, in fact,
be considered student-centered practices. She wanted each child to reach the goal and sometimes developed a tunnel-vision approach to helping students obtain that goal. When the context changed and the mandated curriculum and curriculum assessments were minimized, as in the word study lesson, Jessica’s teaching decisions became more student-centered and responsive to individual children’s responses. In light of these findings, we now understand that the context greatly influences the forces that guide teachers’ decisions.

**Ongoing Professional Development Matters in Teacher Decision Making**

This study also documented differences between teachers who continued to receive professional development in the field and teachers who did not continue to be a part of a professional learning community after leaving their graduate program. The culture at Leslie’s school promoted ongoing professional development. In this professional learning community, Leslie received coaching for three years. As a result, she began to coach herself and could readily identify instances when she made a teaching decision, as well as articulate why she made that decision. The lesson debriefings were characterized by self-posed questions that Leslie also answered for herself, as if she was recreating a coaching session like so many she experienced before. Leslie articulated the questions she heard her literacy coach and mentor pose so many times before and used those questions to reflect on her teaching decisions. These reflections were part of the fiber of her teaching self and Leslie’s teaching decisions were stronger because of them.

As an appointed instructional leader in her school, Jessica did not receive ongoing professional development or coaching. Therefore, she did not reflect on her teaching in the same way as Leslie. She was clearly a celebrated and respected teacher in her school and was identified as an exemplary graduate student in her Master’s program, yet self-questioning was less apparent. Her lesson debriefings became a coaching session of sorts as the researcher posed questions about her practice and probed her to think more deeply about a particular line of inquiry related to a student or an instructional decision. She puzzled through how to effectively balance the curricular demands with the needs of the students. After the first two lesson debriefings, the third lesson was characterized by more thoughtful teaching decisions and responsive to the individual needs of the students, indicating that even short, informal coaching sessions can positively impact teacher decision making.
Implications

In this age of increased accountability and less teacher autonomy, we turn back to Dewey’s idea of the teacher’s professional spirit (Boydstron, 1912-1914). We must not forget that teachers’ professional spirits are closely linked to their abilities to access their knowledge of individual students, the subject matter they teach, and the standards for which they are held accountable. It is this spirit that allows them to make thoughtful teaching decisions. As students of Marie Clay’s (1991, 1998) teachings, we began this study with the bias that student-centered decision making would result in the best teaching decisions. Now, we believe that the best teachers skillfully balance the curriculum and the required standards with individual students’ needs. This balancing of forces is only possible when teachers possess a bank of professional knowledge upon which to draw. Additionally, continued enhancement of this professional knowledge, paired with ongoing reflection within a professional community of learners offers teachers the depth of understanding to balance such forces and move students forward as learners.

This study has implication for teacher preparation programs. If our goal is to create thoughtful, reflective professionals who are guided by a variety of forces for decision making, then we need to teach preservice teachers and those who return for graduate study to be keen observers of children, to know the standards intimately, and to understand how curricular programs can be modified. Courses should be grounded in situational contexts that encourage preservice and in-service teachers to unpack teaching decisions in the videos they view, in the classrooms in which they observe, and in the lessons they teach.

Similarly, this study has implication for in-service teachers – those who return to universities for graduate studies as well as those who seek professional learning opportunities in other settings. All teachers need school-based professional development opportunities that encourage them to consider the needs of individual students in light of the demands of the adopted curricula and the mandated standards. Professional learning communities that promote collegial and administrative conversations centered on the use of professional knowledge to make the very best teaching decisions are critical if all teachers are to continue making thoughtful, student-centered decisions.

Finally, we must reflect on how this study influences future research in the field of teacher preparation. As noted by Duffy, Webb, and Davis (2009), teacher preparation programs often promote and assess conditional and procedural knowledge but rarely have the resources to evaluate reflective and adaptive knowledge (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2007). All of the research related to
teacher preparation means little if we fail to follow the students into the field to observe the long-term impact of our programs on actual practice. As noted in this study, if we are to help teachers refine their practices we need to understand the contexts in which they operate. Further, we must promote and support engagement in professional learning communities so that teachers continue to refine their teaching craft and decision-making skills. Finally, we must help teachers access their professional knowledge so they can balance the forces that guide teaching decisions such that they and their students can reach their full potential.
References


Massey, D., Atkinson, T., & Griffith, R., (2010, December). Developing adaptive teachers in online, graduate-level literacy courses: Transfer to classroom teaching. Symposium session presented at the National Reading Conference/Literacy Research Association, Fort Worth, TX.


Appendix

PROFILE FOR TEACHER DECISION MAKING (Griffith, 2011)

**Demographics:**
1. What grade level do you currently teach?

2. Including this school year, how many years have you taught?

3. Select the statement that most accurately describes your educational background:
   - Completed some undergraduate courses
   - Awarded a Bachelor’s degree
   - Completed some graduate courses
   - Awarded a Master’s degree
   - Completed some doctoral courses
   - Awarded a Ph.D. or Ed.D

4. Please describe any other professional development you have received. Include any specialized training and/or leadership roles. (Eg. Reading Recovery trained, instructional coach, lead teacher, Nationally Board Certified, etc...)

5. Do you teach in a Reading First School?

6. Within the last five years, has your school ever failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)?

7. Has your school adopted an instructional program that you are expected to follow? If yes, which one(s)?
Beliefs:
Read the following statements and choose one response that most closely matches your BELIEFS

1. All students enter school with varying levels of understandings and the teacher has an obligation to understand what each student knows.
   I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

2. It is important for teachers to consider a student’s developmental level when deciding what to teach.
   I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

3. When planning lessons, teachers should first think about what the students know and then about what they need to know next.
   I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

4. All students bring some level of knowledge to the school setting.
   I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

5. All students are entitled to work on tasks that ensure some level of success.
   I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

6. When reflecting on lessons, teachers should consider how the class as a whole performed.
   I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

7. When reflecting on lessons, teachers should consider how individual students performed.
   I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

8. When teaching a lesson, teachers should base teaching decisions on the ongoing feedback (verbal and nonverbal) received from students.
   I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

9. Teachers should modify lessons while teaching based upon feedback (verbal and nonverbal) that they receive from students.
   I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

10. When a child enters a classroom knowing less than his/her peers, the teacher should employ strategies that help the student catch up to his/her peers.
    I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

11. When the school year begins, the teacher should assume that all students are ready for the curriculum at that grade level.
    I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree
12. Curriculum standards are essential because they ensure that all students are taught the same material.
   ![Rating Scale]

13. Teachers should strive to plan standards-based lessons.
   ![Rating Scale]

14. The main goal for teachers should be to plan and organize tasks so that students can attain the standards for that subject and/or grade level.
   ![Rating Scale]

15. Teachers should use standards-aligned assessments to guide instruction.
   ![Rating Scale]

16. Standardized end-of-grade or end-of-course tests required by the state allow teacher to evaluate students’ understandings of the standards.
   ![Rating Scale]

17. When planning lessons, teachers should first think about the standards for the subject area and grade level.
   ![Rating Scale]

18. A teacher’s job is to act as a “more knowledgeable other;” addressing the required standards in an efficient and effective manner.
   ![Rating Scale]

19. The state standards adequately address the concepts that are essential for all students to know.
   ![Rating Scale]

20. Teaching to the standards is the most effective way to ensure that all students receive a quality education.
   ![Rating Scale]

21. Teachers should strictly adhere to the prescribed programs adopted by their schools.
   ![Rating Scale]

22. Curriculum pacing guides help ensure that the teacher teach all of the material students need.
   ![Rating Scale]

23. A scripted program is essential for a beginning teacher.
   ![Rating Scale]
24. Scripted lessons help the teacher prepare and deliver focused lessons.

I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

25. Teachers should use program-based assessments to guide instruction.

I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

26. Teachers should trust that instructional programs are designed to meet the needs of all learners.

I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

27. Teachers should trust that modifications for students performing below grade level are adequately addressed by instructional programs.

I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

28. Teachers should trust that modifications for students performing above grade level are adequately addressed by instructional programs.

I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

29. A teacher’s job is to act as a bearer of information; delivering the information presented in the instructional program.

I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

30. When making instructional decisions, teachers should trust the experts that designed the instructional programs.

I... Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree
Practice:
Read the following statements and choose the responses that most closely matches your PRACTICE

1a. When teaching, I think first about what my students know and then about what I need to teach them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Usually</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1b. I do this because:
- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

2a. When teaching, I base my teaching decisions on ongoing feedback (verbal and nonverbal) that I receive from my students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Usually</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

2b. I do this because:
- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

3a. When teaching, I employ multiple strategies to help students who are performing below grade level to “catch up” with peers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Usually</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

3b. I do this because:
- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

4a. When teaching, I can identify the strengths and needs of each student in my class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Usually</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4b. I do this because:
- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

5a. When teaching, I plan tasks of varying levels of difficulty to address the varying needs of my students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Usually</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

5b. I do this because:
- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.
6a. When teaching, I rely only on the curriculum-based assessments to inform my instruction.

| Almost Never | Seldom | Sometimes | Usually |

6b. I do this because:
· I believe it is the right thing to do.
· I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
· It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

7a. When teaching, I stick to the lessons provided by my school’s instructional program.

| Almost Never | Seldom | Sometimes | Usually |

7b. I do this because:
· I believe it is the right thing to do.
· I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
· It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

8a. When teaching, I only use the modifications and materials provided by the instructional program to meet the range of needs in my classroom.

| Almost Never | Seldom | Sometimes | Usually |

8b. I do this because:
· I believe it is the right thing to do.
· I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
· It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

9a. When teaching, I deliver the information exactly as it is presented by the instructional program adopted by my school.

| Almost Never | Seldom | Sometimes | Usually |

9b. I do this because:
· I believe it is the right thing to do.
· I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
· It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

10a. When teaching, I trust the experts who designed the instructional program adopted by my school.

| Almost Never | Seldom | Sometimes | Usually |

10b. I do this because:
· I believe it is the right thing to do.
· I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
· It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

11a. When teaching, I begin my planning with the standards for my grade level and subject area.

| Almost Never | Seldom | Sometimes | Usually |
11b. I do this because:
   · I believe it is the right thing to do.
   · I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
   · It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

12a. When teaching, I diligently address the standards for my grade level and subject area.

Almost Never    Seldom    Sometimes    Usually

12b. I do this because:
   · I believe it is the right thing to do.
   · I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
   · It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

13a. When teaching, I assume that all of my students are ready for the curriculum at my grade level

Almost Never    Seldom    Sometimes    Usually

13b. I do this because:
   · I believe it is the right thing to do.
   · I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
   · It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

14a. When teaching, I view my main goal as planning and organizing lessons that allow students to attain the standards for my grade level and subject area.

Almost Never    Seldom    Sometimes    Usually

14b. I do this because:
   · I believe it is the right thing to do.
   · I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
   · It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

15a. When teaching, I consult a pacing guide to ensure that I cover all of the required standards for my grade level and subject area.

Almost Never    Seldom    Sometimes    Usually

15b. I do this because:
   · I believe it is the right thing to do.
   · I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
   · It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.
About the Authors

Dr. Robin Griffith is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at Texas Christian University.

Dr. Dixie Massey is a senior lecturer at the University of Washington.

Dr. Terry S. Atkinson is an Associate Professor of Literacy Studies in the College of Education at East Carolina University.
SOCIALIZING YOUNG READERS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF BODY SIZE IMAGES IN CALDECOTT MEDAL WINNERS

Dr. Linda Wedwick, Dr. Nancy Latham

Abstract

Many studies have examined gender issues in children’s literature, but a review of the literature reveals that few studies have examined the instances of fatness in the images. Studying the fat representation in the images of children’s literature is important because exposure to a variety of body types may slow the rate of children’s body dissatisfaction. The present study examines exposure to body size images in picture books. Results of this content analysis indicate that there are fewer books with fat characters when compared to those without. However, when examining every image of body size within each text, there is a considerably larger number of non-fat images than fat images that readers are exposed to.
Introduction

When you think about books that touched you as a young child, do you visualize the images, or do you think about the words? Can you see the grass around the little house in *The Little House* by Virginia Lee Burton? The colors created a peacefulness that took over no matter what went on around the house. Consider *Make Way for Ducklings* by Robert McCloskey, what are the memorable aspects of that book? For us, our clearest vision is of the police officer, his urgency to stop traffic as the ducks confidently cross the street. We have read this book aloud to many students as well. Their observations of the other images include the loudness of the whistle, the noise of the traffic screeching to a halt, and the curiosity of the strangers on the street. Miguel, a 4-year old boy in a Pre-K classroom, worried that the whistle would scare the baby ducks. Sarah, a 5-year-old in the same classroom, laughed, “Look at his fat cheeks!” The text does not describe these inferences; however, the children use these images to experience the story as constructed by the illustrator. This may be because the images and the text work together in the experience of meaning making that is more than the sum of its parts (Kiefer, 2008).

Of course, the stories themselves are memorable, but the pictures leave a lasting impression. Kiefer (2008) explains that the pictures invoke an affective response because the reader brings an emotional association to the elements of the artwork. If these illustrations are that powerful, the lasting power that allows us to remember into adulthood, then how do these illustrations contribute to our understanding of the world around us? What messages in these lasting images form our idea of reality? Considering the impact that illustrations have on young readers, it is no surprise that a prestigious award exists to recognize outstanding illustrations in picture books.

Caldecott winners are often studied by researchers, and these particular picture books have a predominant place in classrooms. Critical studies of Caldecott winners have examined the portrayal of old people (Dellman-Jenkins & Yang, 1997), perceptions of gender (Frawley, 2008), readability levels (Chamberlain & Leal, 1999), and the images of females, minorities, and the aged (Hurley & Chadwick, 1998). Gender is by far the most common focus of the studies involving Caldecott books. For example, Davis and McDaniel (1999) examined the instances of gender portrayal in Caldecott winners from 1972 through 1997. Their purpose was to follow up on Czaplinski’s (1972) study that also counted instances of each gender in both text and pictures of Caldecott winners from 1940 through 1971. The Davis and McDaniel study found that the instances of female
characters in pictures dropped from 48 percent identified in the Czaplinski study to 40 percent.

**Young Children and Critical Literacy**

The present study takes a critical literacy stance in its examination of children’s literature. Although, critical literacy often analyzes political, economic, and social contexts, this study specifically focuses on the social and cultural constructions of body size images both present and not present within texts. Beck (2005) suggests that texts and language are not neutral, and the current study found that neither are images. Hollindale (1988) describes children’s literature as inescapably didactic, and other researchers have asserted a similar claim (Apol, 1998; Nodelman, 1999; Boutte, 2002). All texts position readers (Bourke, 2008), but Nodelman (1999) suggests that “picture books are a significant means by which we integrate young children into the ideology of our culture” (p. 73). Critical literacy would suggest that the reader endures a power relationship between that which is privileged by the author or illustrator and the reader’s own background and experiences. For example, the privileging of one ideal body type reinforces the dominant social and cultural ideology and creates an image of power that is constructed through the interaction with the text/author and the reader.

One goal of critical literacy is to examine the privileged ideology by asking critical questions about what or who is missing. What group is without a voice? When teachers model this critical practice, students will become critical readers. Without critical pedagogy, inexperienced, young readers may not be able to identify on their own the overt and covert ideological underpinnings in texts and images. Nodelman (1999) believed that the intended audience (young readers) of children’s literature is inexperienced and uses the pictures to make sense of the text to construct an understanding of their world. However, Styles and Arizpe (2001) found in their study that both fluent and below average readers were “capable of subtle and engaged analysis of visual texts” (p. 280). Images, such as those in the picture books that teachers read aloud, and young children read on their own, can be deceiving to young readers. It is assumed that the pictures in these books make visual the words from the text but also represent the actual world (Nodelman, 1999). The enabling environment that Styles and Arizpe (2001) created in their study allowed the children to read the images critically. The environment consisted of an experienced adult reader, an emphasis on talk and image, questions that supported critical thinking, and a high quality text. This
critical pedagogy allowed what Nodelman would call the inexperienced reader to engage in image analysis. Similarly, when individual readers encounter multiple perspectives, critical thinking is more likely to occur and the possibility for understanding the human experience increases (Pace, 2006).

Engagement in critical image analysis by the inexperienced reader also has social justice implications. Dever, Sorenson, and Broderick (2005) describe children’s books as a “bridge or way to vicariously experience social justice situations” (p.19). For the young child, this bridge to understanding social justice and discrimination is also built by images as well as text. The consistent disregard of any group based on a physical characteristic is problematic and impacts how one constructs concepts, such as ideal body size. These narrowly defined constructions manifest themselves into accepted habits of intolerance and discrimination over time. Galda and Beach (2001) suggest that researchers “need to examine how students acquire interpretive and social practices over time through participation in particular types of communities of practice” (p. 67). The community of practice in this study could be, for example, the traditional read-aloud in the early childhood classroom. In these communities, children experience the over exposure of one body size and the underexposure of others.

Young Children and Body Image Dissatisfaction

Studying body size specifically in the images of children’s literature is important because exposure to more realistic body types and larger body types may slow the rate of children’s body image dissatisfaction. According to the Centers for Disease Control from 1978-2008, “childhood obesity” increased from 5.0% to 10.4% for children aged two to five years, 6.5% to 19.6% for children six to eleven years, and 5.0% to 18.1% for adolescents aged 12 to 19 years (Childhood Overweight and Obesity, p. 1). These statistics suggest that children will see an increasing variance of body type both in their classroom and in the world around them. If there is a disconnect between the body size images in picture books and other media and the variety of body sizes in the world around them, children may experience body image dissatisfaction.

Researchers more recently began to investigate how early children internalize body size stereotypes and experience body image dissatisfaction. Body image studies, such as those conducted by Birbeck and Drummond (2005) and Tiggemann (2001), used images to determine young children’s understanding of body image. In their study involving eight young girls between five and seven years, Birbeck and Drummond (2005) found that the six and seven year olds demonstrated body image dissatisfaction more readily than five year olds.
Tiggemann (2001) reports that by six years old, girls already have developed a desire to be thin, and Cramer and Steinwert (1998) claim that even four- and five-year-olds show a dislike for large body images. In Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive (2006), young girls were more likely to report body dissatisfaction after being exposed to images of Barbie than after exposure to images of Emme, a doll with a larger body size. Furthermore, “if negative effects can be demonstrated after a single exposure to images of Barbie dolls, then repeated exposure is likely to be more damaging” (Dittmar, Halliwell, & Ive, 2006). The question remains whether equal exposure to images of body types like Barbie and body types like Emme in texts and media would lesson the aversion to fatness.

**Design for a Critical Analysis**

Both Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive’s (2006) study and Tiggemann’s (2001) study suggest more research on body image and body dissatisfaction is needed on younger children, rather than just on those who have already internalized social constructions like fat and thin. We believe that understanding the rate or frequency of exposure to diverse body size images will lead to a better understanding of what is perceived to be valued and de-valued, privileged and marginalized, tolerated and unaccepted.

The present study examines exposure to body size images, particularly fat images in picture books and extends a previous study of fat representations and stereotypes in adolescent fiction (Wedwick, 2005). In this study fat and not fat are used as neutral descriptors of body size. Because body image is socially and culturally constructed, and this construct may be different across cultures (Birbeck & Drummond, 2003) fat images in this study were identified at the book level using a comparative structural analysis. For each book, images of fat characters were identified as those drawn larger in comparison to other characters drawn in the book. The images in Figures 1-4 help to illustrate the comparative structure used for determining fat and not fat descriptors. For example, in Duffy and the Devil (Zemach, 1973), all characters in the book are drawn with round body types, especially in comparison to how characters are drawn in other texts (see Figure 1).

However, because all of the characters are drawn large and round, there is no comparative structure within the text. Therefore, no characters in this book are counted as fat. In Oxcart Man (Hall, 1979), however, the illustrations create a comparative structure by showing variance in the body images (see Figure 2).
The images on the left of the page are drawn with thinner features than the images on the right. Therefore, in this particular image, the researchers were able to affirm that a *fat* image exists in this book. Both *Make Way for Ducklings* (McCloskey, 1941) (see Figure 3) and *Officer Buckle and Gloria* (Rathmann, 1995) (see Figure 4) further ground the notion of a comparative structure for determining *fat* and *not fat* descriptors.
Figure 3: Make Way for Duclings

Figure 4: Officer Buckle and Gloria
This comparative structure was used to answer the following research questions.

1. How prevalent are fat images in literature for young children, specifically Caldecott Award Winning books?
2. How has the prevalence of fat images changed over time?
3. Is there any gender variance of fat images?
4. Is there a connection between body size and character role?

Critical Image Analysis Method

This study used a content analysis approach to identify the prevalence of fat images in Caldecott winners. Fraenkel and Wallen (2000) suggest that a content analysis provides an indirect way to study a group’s communication because a “group’s conscious and unconscious beliefs, attitudes, values, and ideas are often revealed in their communication” (p. 469). A content analysis can take the form of a conceptual analysis or a relational analysis. The conceptual analysis examines the existence and frequency of concepts in a text (Busch, De Maret, Flynn, Kellum, Le, Meyers, Saunders, White, and Palmquist, 2005). For example, Robson (2001) examined economics textbook to determine the number of references relating to race, ethnicity, and gender (REG). Robson counted the number of pages in the textbook containing the words Blacks, African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asian Americans, race, sex, minorities, women, gender, female, single/welfare mothers, and any variation of these words. Relational analysis goes beyond examining the presence or frequency of a particular concept by exploring the relationships between the concepts. For example, McCabe (1996) conducted a relational analysis of fifth grade social studies textbooks by exploring the semantic structure of a sentence containing either “African-American” or “black.”

This study utilizes elements of both a conceptual analysis and a relational analysis. We collected 71 Caldecott medal winners from 1938-2008 to determine how many books contained fat images. Additionally, we wanted to investigate emerging trends relative to time, gender, and roles in the fat images. A data form was completed separately on each book by each researcher. The data form included book title, author, illustrator, genre, year published, and an analysis of all illustrated characters in the book. In this first round of analysis, we documented the existence of a fat image within each book by indicating yes or no on the data form. If a fat image was present within the book, we further documented the gender and role of that fat character. Both researchers then compared their data forms to confirm inter-rater reliability. Because we used the comparative structure
(described above) of fat and not fat at the book level to code, the researcher’s personal constructions/notions of fat and not fat did not influence their coding. Therefore, there was 99 percent agreement on the number of books that contained at least one image of a fat character. Additionally, the researchers were consistent with their labels of roles for the fat characters, requiring very little debate of category names for the roles.

The role was documented as occupation or function in the illustrations. Because there are so many roles represented in children’s literature, roles were first labeled and then collapsed into broader categories of like roles once patterns emerged. Table 1 explains how roles were sorted into categories. Categories consisted of Royalty, Military, Professional, Policeman, Townspeople, and Other.

Table 1: Role Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role Category</th>
<th>Original Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Royalty</td>
<td>King, queen, prince, princess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>General, knight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Nurser, waiter, teacher, baker, janitor, dancer, miller, construction worker, merchant, conductor, dentist, principal, president, street cleaner, salesperson, agent, tailor, corn planter, pot maker, arrow maker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Officer</td>
<td>Policeman, security guard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People Groups</td>
<td>Villagers, crowds, tribesmen, townspeople</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Sorcerer, witch, Santa, traveler, burglar, hermit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The single role category of Policeman was designated because a pattern emerged early in the data collection that many police officers were drawn larger than other characters, so we chose to analyze this role separately. Gender was categorized as Female (mom, girl, grandma, maiden, sister, woman) and Male (boy, dad, grandpa, brother, man). Animal characters were not coded into role categories and gender categories. Data collected were then numerically coded and transferred into SPSS. Frequency counts were used to identify trends in the literature.

After this initial data collection and analysis, the researchers began their second level of data collection in order to compare the total instances or exposures of fat and not fat images in the illustrations. In light of the findings from previous studies of young children’s responses to body image pictures, we
wanted to determine the overall frequency of exposure of fat images to not fat images that exists in these popular read alouds in early elementary classrooms. In this second round of data collection, we counted every image that we could differentiate, including all characters in a crowd scene as long as body image could be distinguished. Again, the comparative structure of body size at the book level was used for this data collection process. The researchers made every effort not to count a character more than one time in subsequent pages; however, it is possible that duplicate counting may have occurred. Even though this is a limitation to the study, the possibility of duplicative counting could have occurred for both fat and not fat images. These data were also numerically coded and entered into SPSS for analysis and frequency counts.

**The Prevalence of Fat Images**

Based on the research questions, the data provided a clear perspective on both the presence and absence of diverse body sizes depicted in Caldecott medal winners. Research question one addressed the prevalence of fat images within the illustrations. Table 2 illustrates the number of books that contained at least one fat image. Of the 71 books examined, 29 (40 percent) of them had at least one illustration of a fat character when body size was compared at the book level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title/Author</th>
<th>Total Fat Images</th>
<th>Total Not Fat Images</th>
<th>Total Character Images</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>Animals of the Bible, A Picture Book (Fish)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Mei LI (Handforth)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Abraham Lincoln (d’Aulaire)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>They Were Strong and Good (Lawson)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Make Way for Ducklings (McCloskey)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>The Little House (Burton)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>Many Moons (Thurber)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Prayer for a Child (Field)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>The Rooster Crows (Petersham)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>The Little Island (Brown)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>White Snow, Bright Snow (Tresselt)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>The Big Snow (Hader)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Song of the Swallows (Politi)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>The Egg Tree (Milhous)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Title/Author</td>
<td>Total Fat Images</td>
<td>Total Not Fat Images</td>
<td>Total Character Images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Finders Keepers (Lipkind)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>The Biggest Bear (Ward)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Madeline’s Rescue (Bemelmans)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>Cinderella, or the Little Glass Slipper (Perrault)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Frog Went A-Courting’ (Langstaff)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>A Tree is Nice (Udry)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Time of Wonder (McCloskey)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Chantideer and the Fox (Cooney)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Nine Days to Christmas (Ets)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Babushka and the Three Kings (Robbins)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Once a Mouse (Brown)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>The Snowy Day (Keats)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Where the Wild Things Are (Sendak)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>May I Bring a Friend (Schenk)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Always Room for One More (Leodhas)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Sam, Bangs, &amp; Moonshine (Ness)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Drummer Hoff (Embereley)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>The Fool of the World and the Flying Shi</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Ransome)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Sylvester and the Magic Pebble (Steig)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>A Story A Story (Haley)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>One Fine Day (Hogrogain)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>The Funny Little Woman (Mosel)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Duffy and he Devil (Zemach)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Arrow to the Sun (McDermutt)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Why Mosquitos Buzz in Peoples Ears</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Aardema)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Ashnati to Zulu (Musgrove)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Noah’s Ark (Spier)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses (Goble)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Ox Cart Man (Hall)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Fables (Lobel)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Jumanji (Allsburg)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Shadow (Brown)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>The Glorious Flight (Prorensen)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When examining these frequency counts from Table 2, clearly there are more books that do not have a fat image (60 percent) than those that do (40 percent). However, counting the existence of one image in a book does not reveal the rate of exposure that we ultimately wanted to determine from this content analysis. Therefore, the second round of data collection and analysis looked at the overall exposure of fat images to not fat images to investigate the frequency of exposure to a variety of body types.
Using the same comparative structure to determine fat and not fat, the researchers counted every body image illustrated on each page of all 71 books. Table 3 shows that when using frequency counts of all body images within the 71 books, there is a considerably larger number of not fat images (3260) than fat images (85) that readers are exposed to.

Table 3: Decade Ranking of Presence of Fat Images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Fat Body Image</th>
<th>Not Fat Body Image</th>
<th>Chance of Exposure to Fat Image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940’s</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>966</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950’s</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960’s</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970’s</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980’s</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990’s</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000’s</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These findings create a different perspective by which to consider how children internalize the social constructs of a culture. With only three percent exposure to fat body images, the Caldecott winners may be contributing to children’s body image dissatisfaction. When you consider Dittmar, et.al (2006) findings that a single exposure to Barbie had a negative effect, what will be the damage of 97 percent exposure to not fat images and three percent exposure to fat images?

**How Has the Prevalence of Fat Images Changed Over Time?**

To answer research question two, the researchers examined the books over time to see if any trends emerged in regard to prevalence of fat images and the date of publication. Although not predominate, trends of fat images emerged as a result of the data analysis. Table 4 illustrates the number of fat images compiled by decade along with the chance of a child being exposed to a fat image when viewing Caldecott winners.
This analysis indicates that books awarded in the 1950’s contained the greatest likelihood that a child would be exposed to fat images (6.7 percent), and Caldecott winners from the 1970’s present the least number of fat images across the decade with the chance of exposure less than one percent. When comparing more currently awarded books with the earliest awarded books, there is little difference. Regardless of this difference from 1950 to 1970, the first three decades combined and the last three decades combined show the similar rate of exposure (3 percent and 3.1 percent respectively).

**Gender Variance of Fat Images**

Research question 3 allowed the researchers to examine the fat images by gender. Table 2 shows the proportion of fat and not fat images relative to gender. Gender counts revealed 34 percent fat female images and 33 percent fat male images, suggesting that there is similar exposure of female and male fat images. Keep in mind that the number of gender occurrences in books will not equal 71 because some of the books do not contain human characters. Surprisingly, there was comparatively the same number of books with one or more female fat images as there were with male fat images.

**The Connection Between Body Size and Character Role**

Finally, to answer research question 4, the researchers examined the relationship between character role and body size. Table 5 displays the frequency data related to roles that characters play in the Caldecott winners examined. (These role categories and how codes were collapsed are described in Table 1). These data reveal that crowd scenes contain the strongest message of one acceptable body size.
A crowd scene existed in 34 of the books analyzed. Twenty-five of these 34 books (68%) with crowd scenes contain only not fat body images. Professional roles also reveal a high frequency of not fat body images. Of the twenty-two books that included a professional role, only eight of them illustrate the character with a fat body image. Lastly, the category of policeman was separated from the larger professional role category because of the prevalence of fat images for this role. Although there were only 10 books containing a police officer, seven of the books show the officer with a fat body.

### Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that young readers are not exposed to images of fat at the same or similar frequency to images of not fat. Although gender connections to particular body types may have been hypothesized at the onset of this study, the opposite became obviously clear. Through this content analysis the researchers found no significant link between gender and body image depictions but did find a noticeable and significant lack of instances of fat body illustrations when compared to the instances of not fat character images.

If a single exposure to a Barbie-like body image, such as in the Dittmer, Halliwell, and Ive (2006) study impacts body dissatisfaction, what kind of impact will repeated exposure in Caldecott books have? In other words, how does recurrent Barbie-like body images further cement the anti-obesity messages predominate in the media? As the findings in this study demonstrate, whether looking at main characters, supporting characters, or even crowd scenes full of people as well as looking at roles such as parents, heros, leaders, bullies, and those needing assistance, larger body image is consistently not found. This is even more powerful for the young child due to the importance of the images in constructing meaning of the text as well as their developmentally appropriate desire to read and
re-read the same texts. A lack of instances of large body size in picture books creates a distorted view. Nodelman (1999) suggests that both adults and children learn to be “more aware of the distortions in picture book representations” (p. 79). Understanding these distortions allows the reader to examine the degree to which the illustrations misrepresent the world and to be less influenced by the ideologies (Nodelman, 1999). Likewise, Unsworth and Wheeler (2002) suggest that reviewers of pictures should consider more carefully the images of the book and their role in the narrative.

When considering this lack of exposure to a variety of body images, one might assume that young, inexperienced readers will be influenced by books they are exposed to in and out of the classroom. Birbeck and Drummond’s (2006) study revealed that 5 and 6 year-olds showed negative perceptions of fatness. The child participants used stories they read at school more often than other media messages when contextualizing their own stories. The researchers believe that schools should provide assistance that would allow for appropriate interpretation of “obesity” discourse that surrounds them at home and school. They suggest introducing concepts like critical literacy to young children because “critical literacy is a useful tool in questioning societal stereotypes that appear to have been absorbed by these children” (p. 432).

As teachers of young children we are trained to look at our literature choices to make sure ethnicity is not being stereotypically illustrated and look for any message in text or illustration of gender stereotyping. How often do teachers of young children systematically examine their literature choices looking for a range of body size? Our systematic examination of the Caldecott winners showed very little variance. Teachers need to consider the findings of this study as they choose texts to use in the early childhood classroom. Of course, this study only examined Caldecott winners because of their popularity in classrooms, so other texts should be examined as well. Helping teachers become more conscious of these body image messages that exist in the picture books they use in the classroom may lead to choices that maximize young children’s exposure to illustrations of various body sizes. Hopefully, texts that depict a variety of body images which better represent the world will become more readily available. Just as teachers strive to provide young children with literature that non-stereotypically and equally depict characters of different races and that avoid gender-role bias and ageism, teachers also need to strive to pick literature which avoids the message through illustration of only one acceptable body type.
Like Beck (2005), we encourage the questioning of why some constructions of knowledge are legitimated over others. In the spirit of critical literacy, we set out to determine if the popular social construction of body size was legitimatized in Caldecott winners. Marginalizing one body type in favor of another creates a social inequity that expands into the economic and political realms. Our goal is to create a critical awareness of this marginalization and encourage individuals to challenge the status quo in all children’s literature as it relates to body image.
References


About the Authors

Linda Wedwick is an associate professor and coordinator of graduate studies for the School of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University. She currently teaches both graduate and undergraduate courses in assessment and early adolescent literacy learning.

Dr. Nancy Latham joined the faculty at Illinois State University in August of 2004 in the School of Teaching & Learning. In addition to her role as an associate professor in the Early Childhood Program, Dr. Latham currently serves as the Associate Director of Curriculum & Assessment for the School.
Abstract

In order to identify materials that would encourage urban eighth graders to read, the authors asked students about the importance they placed on reading, about their own reading abilities, and the role of race and genre in their book choice. On the basis of subscale scores from the “Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Reading Survey” (Pitcher, et. al., 2007) these students, as a whole, placed low value on reading, with females indicating a slightly higher value than males. In contrast, males indicated stronger self-concepts about their reading abilities than females. As a subgroup, Hispanic males reported the lowest overall average self-concept, or perceived reading strength. Hispanic males and females both reported valuing reading less than any other subgroup. One way to increase reading for all of these students may be to use the yearly award books identified for each of the minority groups involved so that students can see themselves in the books they read. Another approach may be to stock the top choices identified by students via indicators like the “Reading Preferences Checklist” (Fisher, Brozo, Frey, & Ivey, 2011), so that a wide variety of relevant, quality text can entice these reluctant readers. Engagement is critical.
Background

Marisol, a middle-secondary urban educator (pseudonyms are used), stopped by my office at Midwest University with some concerns:

Marisol: My students don’t read much. I am sure if they read more, their test scores would be higher. Maybe reading isn’t important to them. Are the novels too hard or irrelevant? Many of my kids are non-White, but the characters in their books are generally Caucasian. Do you have any suggestions?

Anna: Have you asked them what they like to read or if they think their books are too difficult? Would they tell you whether or not they connected with the characters in their books?

Of course, asking such questions to 148 eighth graders is no simple task. We brainstormed and decided that a group-administered questionnaire would probably be the most efficient way to start the process of linking these students with reading material. Engagement theory (e.g., Tracey & Morrow, 2006) guided our thinking about the importance of student involvement in classroom literacy. We tried to operationalize student involvement by asking them about their reading preferences, values and self-concepts. We articulated our questions so we could find a tool to guide us to some answers. Our questions were: a). Do students see themselves as capable of doing the reading they are asked to do? b). At this point in their lives, do these students believe reading is important? c). How does the race or ethnicity of the characters in books affect their reading? d). What do students say they would like to read?

Procedures

We began by digging through a variety of reading inventories and interest inventories and decided to both combine and slightly adapt what was available. As our main instrument we used the “Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Reading Survey” or AMRP developed by Pitcher, et al., (2007) (see Appendix). This is a profile specifically constructed for adolescents. The AMRP includes two sections: the reading survey and a conversational interview. The reading survey is a 20-item, group administered instrument. Items are based on a 4-point scale, with the most positive responses receiving 4 points and the least positive receiving 1 point. The highest total score possible is 80 points. This section provides scores that give the examiner a general idea of a student’s “Self-concept as a reader,” or perceived reading strength and her “Value of reading,” or perceived importance of reading. In order to calculate the Self-concept raw score and Value
raw score, all student responses were added, as directed by the scoring protocol, in the appropriate column. The full survey raw score was obtained by combining the column raw scores. Raw scores were converted to percentage scores, again as directed in the protocol, by dividing the total possible score by either 40 for each subscale or 80 for the full survey for a possible total 100%. The professor in this study calculated all raw scores and percentage scores. Additionally, a School of Education student was hired to do the same in order to check for any errors. Interrater reliability was 99%. These two components, Self-concept and Value, were appropriate for answering our first two questions.

The conversational interview component of the AMRP is individually administered and contains 14 open-ended items. Questions included in this section, while interesting, did not directly align with our queries, so this portion of the survey was not used at this time. Instead, one objective and three open-ended, constructed response items were added to the AMRP in order to answer our third guiding question. The objective item was inserted as number 21 of the survey instrument. Written in the same manner as the other items, it stated:

I would read more often if I had books about teens that were the same race I am
• read a lot more
• read a little more
• my reading would not change

Item 21 was not included when raw and percentage scores were calculated. Marisol’s open-ended questions attempted to get at this same issue more qualitatively and asked:

1. How often do you encounter or read books with characters of your race or ethnicity?
2. If you do not encounter or read books with characters of your race or ethnicity, how does it make you feel?
3. Do you think you would be more likely to read books for pleasure if they were about characters with your racial or ethnic background?

According to Sims Bishop (1982), “successful young adult literature for minorities must engage the reader by its familiarity,” (p. 12). Therefore, not only should the reader see herself represented in the protagonist, but also the story should reflect the familiar circumstances of her own life. Guild and Hughes-Hassell (2001) elaborated on these points. They insisted that literature for urban youth should accurately portray the physical context and the social interactions of
their neighborhoods, church organizations and extended kinships. We were curious whether the eighth graders in this study agreed with these researchers.

Also, in part, because authors like Sims Bishop (1982) and Guild and Hughes-Hassell (2001) stressed the importance of realistic fiction for urban minority youth, Marisol wondered if her students would note this genre as a preference. To examine this issue and answer our fourth question, we included the 20-item “Reading Preferences Checklist” (Fisher, Brozo, Frey, & Ivey, 2011) as part of the data collection. Students were directed to “Check the kinds of books you like to read” from a wide range of text types.

Table 1 presents demographic information on the students who participated in this study:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Percent of race by gender</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male (72)</td>
<td>Female (76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>7% (5)</td>
<td>12% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>1% (1)</td>
<td>1% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>50% (36)</td>
<td>39% (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>14% (10)</td>
<td>20% (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>3% (2)</td>
<td>1% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Racial</td>
<td>24% (17)</td>
<td>28% (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (“American”)</td>
<td>.6% (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The school these students attended was located in the state capitol and has approximately 69% of its students eligible for free or reduced lunch.

**Findings**

An examination of individual survey items and AMRP “self concept” and “value” of reading percentage scores allowed the authors to better understand the lens through which Marisol’s students viewed reading. We examined responses by gender, by race and as a whole. The study’s questions provide the organization for our findings.

**Do Students see Themselves as Capable Readers?**

The subscale for a student’s perceived reading strength, or “Self –concept as a reader” was based on a combination of 10 items identified by AMRP developers. Survey items that made up this construct, asked the reader to compare his/her
reading ability to that of peers, or to self-assess one’s ability to figure out new words, read out loud, comprehend and answer questions about text. Included was an item that directly asked students to judge their ability:

I am________

• a poor reader
• an OK reader
• a good reader
• a very good reader

Males in this group of eighth graders were slightly more confident about their reading ability than females. On the specific item above, 35% of males and 24% of females rated themselves “very good” readers. Overall, on the Self-concept subscale, the 68 males who completed the survey had an average score of 77%. Females, who completed this survey (N=74), averaged 72% on this subscale. Eighth graders as a whole averaged 75%, which appears to indicate a moderate level of confidence with their reading abilities. Native American males reported reading self-concepts higher (90%) than males in other racial groups, and significantly higher than males in Hispanic groups (65%). However, there were only two Native American males in this group. The largest male subgroup, White males, who numbered 34, indicated the next largest Self-concept in reading, with a confidence average at 82%. In the female groups, multi-racial females reported the highest self-concepts as readers (79%), and African American females the lowest (66%). Tables 2a ad 2b present student averages in percentages of Self-concept for reading, by gender and racial group.

Table 2a: Averages of Female Self-Concept for Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female Self-Concept</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Racial</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Do Students Believe Reading Is Important?

Despite the fact that males, overall indicated a higher perceived reading strength than females, males made it clear that they were less interested in reading books. Given the statement, “Reading a book is something I like to do,” 57% of males said either “never,” or “not very often.” These negative inclinations toward books were expressed by 32% of females, a smaller, though still alarming percentage. White females were the only female respondents who emphatically noted, “I don’t like reading!” (3/30 or 10%).

According to the 10 survey items that indicate one’s “Value of reading,” females reported valuing reading a bit more than males. Males averaged 57% and females, 63%, with a combined gender average for these eighth graders of 60%. Survey questions in this category focused on an individual’s belief that reading is “fun,” that those who read are “interesting” people, good books are shared, libraries are positive places, and one’s desire to read and to receive books as gifts. The concept of females valuing reading more than males noted here, aligns with the findings of other researchers (e.g., Pitcher et al., 2007). When asked directly about the importance of reading, 82% of males and 88% of females indicated on that specific item, that “Knowing how to read well” was “important” or “very important.” Only 3% of males and 1% of females claimed that knowing how to read well was “not very important.”

Examining these values by racial group, Hispanic males reported valuing reading least (49%) and a single male who reported his race as “American,” indicated valuing reading the most at, 68%. Among females, multi-racial females reported valuing reading most (71%) and Hispanic females valued reading least (58%). Tables 3a and 3b present student averages in percentages, of Value for reading, by gender and racial group.

---

### Table 2b: Averages of Male Self-Concept for Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Self-Concept</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Racial</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (“American”)</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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---

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Table 3a: Averages of Female Value for Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Value for Reading</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Racial</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3b: Averages of Male Value for Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Value for Reading</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other (“American”)</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Racial</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How Does Race or Ethnicity of Characters Affect One’s Reading?

On the issue of reading about characters who were the same race or ethnicity as they, (our third question) we noted both confusion and ambivalence among the students. Although children are aware of differences in the race of people by the time they are in preschool (e.g., Perlman, Kankesan, & Zhang, 2010), perhaps those racial lines both blur and become more focused as students age. Their teacher, Marisol elaborated,

Kids seem to be less aware of race, especially because so many of the kids are of mixed ethnicity at our school rather than Black or White. Even the White students didn’t seem to know what the term Caucasian meant, so I think kids are just less focused on identifying themselves with a racial group than perhaps kids have been previously, and it seems to be more of an afterthought for them. Others did not know what ethnicity meant. I also noticed that they hadn’t seemed like they had given much thought to the race of characters they read about. Perhaps this would be something they’d do, as they got older and more critical in their thinking. (personal communication, September 20, 2011).
After some discussion and explanation for her students regarding racial identities, they responded to the question, “I would read more often if I had books about teens who were the same race as I am” in the following manner:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Read a lot more</td>
<td>Read a lot more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Read a little more</td>
<td>Read a little more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My reading would not change</td>
<td>My reading would not change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If 29% of males and 38% of females would read more, given books with characters with whom they identified, it would be an easy enough fix to give them those books. Additionally, many students noted in their written responses that they wanted some kind of connection with the character, whether it was personality or interests, race or ethnicity, they didn’t especially care, they just wanted a connection. Others specifically said they wanted a same-race connection. In the qualitative response section, about half of the multiracial females (10/21 or 48%) took the time to write about their interest in connecting with a character via race. One female said, “I find that I enjoy a book more when I have more in common with the characters” (Katrina, May 13, 2011). Another female noted, “I have never read a book with a Mexican. Mostly they are White. If it has a Mexican there [sic] about gangs” (Maria, May 13, 2011). Several others pointed out that while it “bothered” them not to see characters like themselves in books, “I still like to read all books” (Olivia, May 13, 2011). Of the group of females who identified themselves as “Hispanic,” 10/15 or 67% also wrote comments indicating their desire to connect. Evidently frustrated, Marta asked, “Why can’t they ever have books relating to me?” (May 13, 2011). Corinne said that not seeing herself in the novels “makes me feel like an outcast” (May 13, 2011). Isabel thought that books about individuals like her could provide an opportunity to learn more about her ethnicity. Examining feedback from African American females 7/8 (88%) indicated that they also would read more if they had access to books with more African American characters. Meeshawn said that it is simply “harder to find [stories] about people of my race” (May 13, 2011). When students actually wrote comments rather than checking a box to indicate a response, a greater level of concern was expressed regarding seeing themselves in the books they read.

We found it curious that none of the White respondents noted that they typically do see themselves in the books they read. Examining the races of the
protagonists in Newbery books, which are books that have won an award because they are “marked by excellence in [literary] quality,” (Association for Library Service to Children, p. 11) and therefore regularly placed in school classrooms and libraries, Nisse (2008), found that 72% of the main characters were White, even though the representation of this racial group in the U.S. population in 2010 was only 63% (Census Bureau). Latinos made up 16.3% of the U.S. population in 2010 (Census Bureau) and 17% of Marisol’s eighth grade population, but constituted only 3.7% of protagonists in Newbery books (Nisse, 2008). Indeed this minority group did not see themselves represented in a collection of books considered exemplary for adolescent readers.

Fewer multiracial males seemed concerned about the race of the main characters and even those who were, appeared more indifferent overall. When asked in a constructed response section if they would be more likely to read books with characters of the same ethnicity, their responses were, “kinda, not really” (Oscar, May 13, 2011), “possibly” or “I could maybe relate to it” (Anonymous, May 13, 2011). They were very noncommittal. Several Hispanic males who responded on the objective questions that they would “read a lot more” if books had same race characters, wrote “No” or “IDK” (I don’t know) when asked essentially the same question in a constructed response format. However, in the constructed response format, the word “ethnicity” (would you read more books if characters were of the same race or ethnicity as you) was used. Perhaps these eighth grade males were confused by the term ethnicity. Some of the African American males who marked that they would read a lot more in the multiple choice format, left the constructed response questions blank. Once again with White male respondents, as with other male groups, answers were made in an ambiguous fashion: “Probably, maybe not” (Ed, May 13, 2011).

What Do Students Want to Read?

Specific genre preferences for our group, (our fourth question) chosen from the list of genres provided by Fisher, Brozo, Frey and Ivey (2011) are presented in Tables 4a and 4b.
According to Guild and Hughes-Hassell (2001), “Young adult novels about urban minority teens should represent a realistic picture of life in large urban cities—the limitations of poverty, the impermanence and mal-adaption of family structure...the physical danger associated with violence and drug use, and the isolating effects of geographic segregation within inner city neighborhoods” (p. 373). The females in Marisol’s school ranked realistic fiction number three in terms of preferences and the males ranked this genre number eight. Some researchers view these types of novels as providing a safe haven from which teens can observe the interactions of environmental stressors and vicariously make decisions that allow them to negotiate a safe passage through these difficulties and into adulthood. Additionally, appropriate novels, according to Guild & Hughes-

### Table 4a: Reading Preferences of Eighth Grade Urban Females When Directed to Check the Kind of Material They Like to Read

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genres</th>
<th>N=76</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scary books</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funny Novels</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiction novels about people my age</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series books</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines about people</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventure Novels</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture Books</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartoons, comics, or graphic novels</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetry books</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books written mostly for adults</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy and science fiction novels</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical fiction</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books or magazines about sports</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books about animals</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines about hobbies</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographies</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information books about history</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines about cars and trucks</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information books about science</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information books about math</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...
Table 4b: Reading Preferences of Eighth Grade Urban Males When Directed to Check the Kind of Material They Like to Read

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genres</th>
<th>N=72</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cartoons, comics or graphic novels</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funny novels</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series books</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books or magazines about sports</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventure novels</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scary books</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy and science fiction novels</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiction novels about people my age</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture books</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical fiction</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines about cars and trucks</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books about animals</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information books about history</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographies</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines about hobbies</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books written mostly for adults</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines about people</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information books about science</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetry books</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information books about math</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Successful young adult literature for minorities, said Sims Bishop (1982) should validate the significance of the minority individual, “it must give minority youth a vision for a better future and a sense that such a future is attainable” (pp. 361-362). This kind of empowerment, according to Sims Bishop, rarely happens as a result of one book. She believes that there must be a large body of authentic literature available in order to achieve this goal. Unfortunately, based on the content analysis of 4,255 book reviews completed by Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, and Gilmore-Clough (2003), a large body of realistic fiction with minority protagonists does not exist. According to these authors, while the U.S. Census for 2000 indicated that one third of the population consisted of people of color; only one sixth of the books they analyzed contained even one protagonist of color. If
young adult literature is to help urban minority youth attain “successful bi-cultural growth,” warns Guild and Hughes-Hassell, many more books must be available.

It would seem appropriate for teachers to choose books from various award categories since they have already been vetted and deemed of high quality. While Newbery award books, (those with primarily White protagonists) have been around since 1922, awards for books that focus on specific races are a more recent development. The Correta Scott King Award, for example, which honors African American writers and illustrators, was first issued in 1970. The Americas Award winners are those books that present authentic and engaging portrayals of Latin America, the Caribbean, or Latinos in the U.S. These have been given only since 1993. The Asian/Pacific American Awards for Literature (APAAL) promote Asian/Pacific American culture and heritage and are given based on literary and artistic merit. Awards are given annually in picture book, children’s/young adult, and adult categories. The first sets of APAAL awards were granted in 2001. The most recent category of racially focused awards is the American Indian Youth Services Literature Award, first given in 2006. This book award was created to identify and honor the very best writing and illustrations by and about American Indians. Awards are given in three categories: picture book, middle school, and young adult. Having award books available that celebrate all of these racial identities would allow students to choose books and choice is a factor known to be important to motivate students to read (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). Choice and the availability of books that students find interesting are components of engagement theory. As Tracey and Morrow (2006) have noted, “engaged readers spend 500% more time reading than disengaged readers” (p. 65). The benefits of time spent reading are profound.

Regarding preferences for in-class reading engagement, we were surprised that 42% of males and 34% of females said that they would like their “teachers to read out loud in my classes” as frequently as “every day” and “almost every day.”

Concluding Thoughts

In order to encourage a group of 148 eighth graders to read more, the authors asked questions about their perceived reading strength, the importance they placed on reading, and the role of race and genre related to their book choice. On the basis of subscale scores from the “Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Reading Survey” (Pitcher, et al., 2007), students as a whole placed low value on reading. However, these low scores may be due to the nature of the specific questions asked in this subcategory (e.g., reading being “fun,” a library being a
“great place to spend time,” etc.). When simply asked about the importance of reading, almost all students indicated that “Knowing how to read well” was “important” or “very important.” As a group, females indicated a slightly higher value for reading, but males, overall, possessed better self-concepts as readers. This did not hold true for the Hispanic subgroup where Hispanic males reported the lowest overall average self-concept or perceived reading strength. Both Hispanic males and females reported valuing reading less than other subgroups. We were concerned about this and wondered why it might be the case?

According to Schneider, Martinez and Owens (2006) multiple barriers exist for Hispanics in their efforts to educate themselves in the United States. Barriers such as parents’ lack of knowledge about the educational system, their own limited education, poor relationships with teachers, inadequate school resources, or a family’s immigrant background all may serve to undermine academic success. This lack of academic success then manifests itself in “Hispanics having the lowest rates of high school and college degree attainment” (p. 179). The trajectory toward educational attainment begins at home during a child’s early years. Parent-child interactions, use of rich language, and book reading are instrumental in a child’s later school success (e.g., Padak & Rasinski, 2007). Unfortunately, however, “Hispanic children age 3 to 5 are less likely to be read to” (Schneider, Martinez & Owens, 2006, p. 181), visit a library, or hear a story, than non-Hispanic children. As a matter of fact, according to Schneider, et al., Hispanic families at all income levels except the highest, “are less likely than other groups to participate in literacy activities” (p. 182). Getting one’s child to the library or enrolled in preschool takes logistical, organizational and literacy skills on the part of any parent. Given parents who have not completed high school, do not speak English in the home, or have very limited income, it is easy to see why these literacy activities may not occur for some segments of our population.

Another school-related problem for Hispanic children may be teacher perceptions. Reardon and Galindo (cited in Schneider, et al., 2006) “found that Hispanic students entering kindergarten were rated lower than white students by their teachers, regardless of their academic ability” (p. 191). Unfortunately, these lowered expectations are realized in both fourth and eighth-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, where Hispanic students have tended to score almost 30 points lower than non-Hispanic whites over a period of two decades (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Poor relationships between minority teens and their teachers in general (see Rosenbloom & Way, 2004) and
Mexican-American teens and their teachers in particular appear to persist (Martinez, 2003).

While the above factors are complex and deep rooted, perhaps at least one small step could be taken by providing students access to books with cultural environments and main characters with whom they relate. As more than one-third of participants in this study told us, “I would read more often if I had books about teens who were the same race as I am” (adapted AMRP survey). Steps toward engagement are significant because, as Guthrie (2004) pointed out, “engaged reading can overcome traditional barriers to reading achievement, including gender, parental education, and income” (p. 5). For Hispanic students in particular, this may be critical.

Award books for students from many racial and cultural backgrounds are available, although the recency of specialized minority book awards seems to make them less known and less common on school shelves. This may be a critical oversight because according to findings from the 2009 Program for International Students Assessment (PISA) in the areas of engagement and achievement, “In virtually all 65 participating countries students who enjoy reading the most perform significantly better than students who enjoy reading the least” (Brozo & Shiel, 2012, p. 14). One factor in literary engagement that teachers can directly influence is the availability of a variety of quality books. Such books for Hispanic students may include The Dreamer, for grades 4 and up, by Pam Munoz Ryan or Return to Sender, by Julia Alvarez, grades 5-9, winners of the 2011 and 2010 Americas Award respectively. For younger Hispanic children, Clemente, by Willie Perdomo, grades K-3 and What Can You Do with a Paleta?/Que Puedes Hacer Con Una Paleta? for PreK-3 by Carmen Tafolla were also 2011 and 2010 Americas Award winners. Award books for African American students are Kadir Nelson’s Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans or illustrator Shane W. Evans’ Underground: Finding the Light to Freedom, winners of the 2012 Coretta Scott King Book Award. The most recent American Indian Youth Literature Award winners include The Christmas Coat: Memories of My Sioux Childhood, by Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve (2011) in the picture book category; Free Throw and Triple Threat, both written by Jaqueline Guest, winners in the 2011 middle school category; and My Life In An Indian Boarding School, by Adam Fortunate Eagle (2010), winner in the young adult category. In the AsianPacific American awards for Literature (APALA) category, the picture book winner for 2010 was Yasmin’s Hammer by Ann Malaspina; the Children’s
Literature winner was *Heart of a Samurai*, by Margi Preus (2010); and the Young Adult Literature winner, *Shooting Kabul*, by N.H. Senzai (2010).

The scary, funny, graphic novels, sports, and adventure books also noted as preferences by students in this and other studies (e.g., Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Worthy, Moorman & Turner, 1999) need to be vetted and made available. Given the repercussions of a lack of engagement by teens, and especially Hispanic youth, it appears to be essential to have materials these students want to read and find relevant to their lives. Perhaps they would then value reading more and ultimately improve their reading and self-concepts for reading. As educators, we must start somewhere.
References


Minority Book Awards

Americas Award, Hispanic:

Coretta Scott King Book Award, African American:

American Indian Youth Literature Award, Native American

Asian Pacific American Awards, Asian American
Appendix A

Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Reading Survey

Name: ____________________________

Date: ____________________________

Sample 1. I am in: ____________
   Sixth grade          Seventh grade
   Eighth grade         Ninth grade
   Tenth grade          Eleventh grade
   Twelfth grade

Sample 2. I am a ____________
   Male            Female

Sample 3. My race/ethnicity is ____________
   African-American    Asian/Asian American
   Caucasian           Hispanic
   Native American     Multi-racial/Multi-ethnic
   Other: Please Specify ____________.

1. My friends think I am ____________
   A very good reader    a good reader
   an OK reader           a poor reader

2. Reading a book is something I like to do.
   Never             Not very often
   Sometimes        Often

3. I read ____________
   not as well as my friends
   about the same as my friends
   a little better than my friends
   a lot better than my friends

4. My best friends think reading is ____________
   really fun           fun
   OK to do             no fun at all

5. When I come to a word I don’t know, I can ____________
   almost always figure it out
   sometimes figure it out
   almost never figure it out
   never figure it out
6. I tell my friends about good books I read
    I never do this
    I almost never do this
    I do this some of the time
    I do this a lot

7. When I am reading by myself, I understand _____________
    Almost everything I read
    Some of what I read
    Almost none of what I read
    None of what I read

8. People who read a lot are _____________
    very interesting    interesting
    not very interesting boring

9. I am ________________
    a poor reader    an OK reader
    a good reader    a very good reader

10. I think libraries are _______________
     a great place to spend time
     an interesting place to spend time
     an OK place to spend time
     a boring place to spend time

11. I worry about what other kinds think about my reading ___________
     every day    almost every day
     once in a while    never

12. Knowing how to read well is _____________
    not very important    sort of important
    important    very important

13. When my teacher asks me a question about what I have read, I ___________
    can never think of an answer
    have trouble thinking of an answer
    sometimes think of an answer
    always think of answer

14. I think reading is _____________
    a boring way to spend time
    an OK way to spend time
    an interesting way to spend time
    a great way to spend
15. Reading is __________
   very easy for me  kind of easy for me
   kind of hard for me  very hard for me

16. As an adult, I will spend __________
   none of my time reading
   very little time reading
   some of my time reading
   a lot of my time reading

17. When I am in a group talking about what we are reading, I _______
   almost never talk about my ideas
   sometimes talk about my ideas
   almost always talk about my ideas
   always talk about my ideas

18. I would like for my teachers to read out loud in my classes __________
   every day  almost every day
   once in a while  never

19. When I read out loud I am a __________
   poor reader  OK reader
   good reader  very good reader

20. When someone gives me a book for a present, I feel __________
   very happy  sort of happy
   sort of unhappy  unhappy

Reprinted from Pitcher, S.M., Albright, L.K., DeLaney, C.J., Walker, N.T.,
Seunarinesingh, K., Mogge, S., Headley, K.N., Ridgeway, V.G., Peck, S., Hunt, R.,
Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 50(5), 378-396.

Teacher Added:
21. I would read more often if I have books about teens who were the same race as
   I am
   read a lot more
   read a little more
   my reading would not change
About the Author

Arlene L. Barry, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the University of Kansas. Her research interests include the history of literacy, adolescent literacy, especially striving readers, and assessment.
THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL INTERACTION ON STUDENT LEARNING

Dr. Beth Hurst, Dr. Randall Wallace, Dr. Sarah Nixon

Abstract

Due to the lack of student engagement in the common lecture-centered model, we explored a model of instructional delivery where our undergraduate and graduate classes were structured so that students had opportunities for daily interaction with each other. Specifically, we examined how students perceived the value of social interaction on their learning by reflecting on their classroom experiences at the end of each class period. Three literacy teacher preparation courses during a summer session were chosen for this study based on the highly interactive nature of each course. The purpose of the study was not to determine the difference between different models of instruction, but to determine our students’ perceptions of the value of the social interaction that was taking place in our classrooms on their learning. The findings reveal that students in all three courses perceived that social interaction improved their learning by enhancing their knowledge of literacy and teaching and their critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
The Impact of Social Interaction on Student Learning

Today’s students have taken to social networking like fish to water; yet, from our perspectives, there is little social interaction taking place in many of today’s classrooms from kindergarten through college. The model of discourse in most classrooms is a one-way communication from the teacher to the students. For example, the first thing one kindergartner said to his mother after his first day of school was: “All teachers do is talk, talk, talk.” He said the same thing after his first day of high school and his first day of college. His observations are not uncommon. As early as 1984, Goodlad wrote “the data from our observations in more than 1,000 classrooms support the popular image of a teacher standing in front of a class imparting knowledge to a group of students” (p. 105). Smith wrote in 1998 that teachers talk 90% of the time in classrooms. Frey, Fisher, and Allen (2009) observed that “students are expected to sit hour after hour, taking notes, and answering the occasional question with little interaction with peers” (p. 70).

The concept of teachers doing all of the talking in classrooms is in direct contrast to the philosophy that learning is primarily a social activity (Dewey, 1963; Lindeman, 1926) and the idea that the person who is doing the work is the person doing the learning (Hurst, 1998). Teachers expend a lot of energy preparing lectures. They must read various texts and synthesize the information, pick out the most important points and organize them in a cohesive manner, write lecture notes, and then deliver the information to students who sit passively often thinking of everything but what the teacher is saying. Who is doing all of the work in this process? The teacher. The teacher is the one reading, writing, thinking, speaking, and therefore, the one who is learning. Vacca and Vacca (2002) contend that we need to shift “the burden of learning from teachers’ shoulders to students” (p. 7). Wilkinson, Soter, and Murphy (2010) agree “there needs to be a gradual release of responsibility for control of the discussion from teacher to students” (p. 156). Probst (2007) states, “it’s the student who should be doing most of the work” (p. 43).

One way for students to shoulder the responsibility for learning is for them to be the readers, writers, speakers, listeners, and thinkers in the classroom through active engagement in social interaction with others (Alvermann & Phelps, 2005; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). For the purpose of this study, we define social interaction as meaningful dialogue among learners. Socially interactive learners are engaged learners (Vacca et al., 2011). Routman (2005) contends “students learn more when they are able to talk to one another and be actively involved” (p. 207). In short, social interaction is vital to the learning process.
Years ago, Goodman (1986) stressed that reading, writing, listening, and speaking should be kept whole (as in whole language) instead of teaching each one separately. He promoted that reading, writing, listening, and speaking should be incorporated into everything students do throughout the day. Because reading, writing, and social interaction are part of everyday life in the real world, it does not make sense for classrooms to be social interaction-free zones where the teacher talks while students listen. Gee (2001) contends “reading and writing cannot be separated from speaking, listening, and interacting, on the one hand, or using language to think about and act on the world, on the other” (p. 714).

Kasten (1997) found it “amusing that the teachers of another era spent so much time keeping their classes quiet and then wondered why so many students were terrified of occasional oral reports and even continued into adulthood to be uncomfortable speaking to a group” (p. 100). She stated “teachers and principals of the past who worked hard to keep children quiet (myself included) did not know how critical social interaction and collaboration are in learning” (p. 99). They also may not have known how to incorporate social interaction into their classrooms. The problem is not that students are unwilling to talk; many teachers say they spend the better part of their days trying to get their students to stop talking (whether in person or texting). The problem is getting the students to talk about the subject at hand.

**Social Interaction among Teachers**

The social constructivist theory is based on the belief that individuals actively construct knowledge and understanding and that constructing understandings of one’s world is an active, mind-engaging process. In other words, information must be mentally acted upon in order to have meaning for the learner (Piaget, 1979; Sigel & Cocking, 1977). According to constructivist views, learning involves building on the background knowledge the learner brings to the situation and restructuring initial knowledge. Since learners have different background knowledge, experience, and interests, they make different connections in building their knowledge over time. Brooks and Brooks (1993) state:

We construct our own understandings of the world in which we live. We search for tools to help us understand our experiences. To do so is human nature.... Each of us makes sense of our world by synthesizing new experiences into what we have previously come to understand. (p. 4)
Within a constructivist framework, the learning of skills and concepts occur within meaningful and integrated contexts not in an isolated and hierarchical manner. Learning is built over time as initial knowledge is revised when new questions arise and old knowledge is challenged. “Deep understanding, not imitative behavior, is the goal....We look not for what students can repeat, but for what they can generate, demonstrate, and exhibit” (Brooks & Brooks, 1993, p. 16).

One way to prepare teachers to incorporate social interaction in their classrooms is to incorporate it into teacher education courses. When social interaction becomes part of the classroom dynamics, classrooms become active places; teachers need to experience this for themselves so they know how to create this type of learning environment in their own classrooms (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

Students are not the only ones who need to be talking and listening to one another while learning. Teachers are often left to navigate through a maze of complex activities. Teachers are bombarded by problems originating from student need and from various negotiations with students, parents, and administrators. Furthermore, curriculum is multifaceted with instruction relying on assessment, management, and effective presentation. Success depends on teachers having a thorough understanding of a variety of subject areas, learning how to reflect on their efforts, and developing problem-solving skills regarding any number of potential problems.

Encouraging social interaction among teachers is one of the most effective ways for teachers to learn creative methods to solve complex problems (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Teachers, like students, can effectively improve their learning skills by frequently discussing the dynamics of their classroom with peers experiencing the same challenges. Good teachers are highly motivated to improve the content of their curricula for their students and the quality of their interactions with parents and administrators. They will take the time to communicate with others when they see the value in the communication; they will promptly commit to educational activities they think will help them improve their instruction (Bakkenes, De Brabander, & Imants, 1999).

Two fundamental processes that help teachers improve their skills are reflection and collaboration. Teachers need to use reflection to evaluate and inform their practices and use collaboration to learn to negotiate effective interactions among themselves, the students, parents, and administration (Askell-Williams, Murray-Harvey, & Lawson, 2007). Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) suggest preservice and inservice courses should focus on developing
teachers who have a deeper understanding of themselves as educators and of the students they educate. These authors state that effective professional development must “be collaborative, involving a sharing of knowledge among educators and a focus on teachers’ communities of practice rather than on individual teachers” (p. 643). Furthermore, they argue:

Teachers learn by doing, reading, and reflecting (just as students do); by collaborating with other teachers. This kind of learning enables teachers to make the leap from theory to accomplished practice. In addition to a powerful base of theoretical knowledge, such learning requires settings that support teacher inquiry and collaboration and strategies grounded in teachers’ questions and concerns. To understand deeply, teachers must learn about, see, and experience learning-centered and learner-centered teaching practices. (pp. 242-243)

A goal of teacher education programs should be to present curriculum in such a way as to teach the necessity of social interaction. Preservice and inservice programs need to model how social interaction encourages collective problem solving and knowledge sharing (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). In this study, instead of the common lecture-centered model, we explored a model of discourse where our undergraduate and graduate students interacted with each other during each class period. The purpose of this study was to determine our students’ perceptions of the impact of social interaction on their learning. We wanted to know: 1) How does social interaction contribute to our students’ learning? 2) What do our students learn about literacy through social interaction in our courses? and 3) Are we preparing our students to utilize social interaction in their future classrooms?

**Methodology**

Three literacy teacher preparation courses during a summer session were chosen for this study because of the highly interactive nature of each course: (a) an undergraduate content area literacy course (N=15), (b) a graduate content area literacy course (N=17), and (c) a graduate literacy tutoring course (N=13) for a total of 45 students. The last few minutes of each class were devoted to students completing an exit slip where they answered three questions. Exit slips, according to Vacca et al. (2011), are index cards or half sheets of paper where “students react to what they are studying or to what’s happening in class” so teachers can obtain feedback regarding the day’s lesson (p. 292). The exit slips were filled out after
each class period because the lesson content and student experiences were unique and distinctive each day.

The intent of our investigation was to gather information regarding our students’ perspectives of our highly interactive and reflective classes. The limitations of our investigation were that: 1) we did not set out to determine the difference between different models of instruction, but to determine our students’ perceptions of the value of the social interaction that was taking place in our classrooms on their learning; 2) we did not formally estimate the reliability and validity of the exit slips; and 3) we did not examine the demographics of our sample (e.g., looking for variation between graduate and undergraduate students or between elementary and secondary students).

In order to answer research question one regarding students’ perceptions of how social interaction contributed to their learning, we asked the following two questions: How did collaborating with colleagues during today’s class help you when thinking about your students and future lesson plans (student interest, engagement, and self-direction)? and What did you learn about the concept of collaboration from working with others in class today? Both exit slip questions were analyzed together to answer question one. In order to answer research question two concerning what our students learned about literacy through social interaction, we asked: What did you learn about literacy from collaborating with colleagues today? In order to answer research question three regarding our students’ opinions on how prepared they feel to incorporate social interaction in their future classrooms, students completed an additional exit slip on the final day of class. They were asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 how prepared they feel to incorporate social interaction in their future classrooms. At the end of data collection, we each analyzed our own set of data, and then we combined the data to look for patterns of responses among the three sets of student responses.

**Individual Class Data Analysis**

What follows is a description of each of the three courses, along with each instructor’s individual analysis of the students’ responses to the exit slips throughout the course.

**Undergraduate Content Area Literacy Course (Hurst)**

The purpose of the undergraduate content area literacy course at our university is to teach future middle and high school teachers from every content area how to incorporate reading strategies into their daily lessons. In my classes, I define a reading strategy as something that provides students with the impetus to
actually read and interact with a text and with others. An example of the reading strategies modeled includes K-W-L (Ogle, 1986), List-Group-Label (Taba, 1967), Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (Stauffer, 1969), Semantic Feature Analysis (Baumann, Kame’enui, & Ash, 2003), Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy (Haggard, 1982), Jigsaw (Aronson, 1978), Guided Reading Procedure (Manzo, 1975), Found Poems (Hobgood, 1998), and Memory Game (Robinson & Hurst, 2007). The ideal reading strategy, in my opinion, is one that naturally incorporates reading, writing, and social interaction. I also espouse Glasser’s (1993) idea that one of the basic human needs is to have fun, and I find reading strategies show students learning can be fun and enjoyable. For the reading strategies, the reading can be any type of text; writing can be any form from freewriting to brainstorming lists to reflective writing; and social interaction can be anything from whole group discussions to turning to a neighbor to discuss to grouping students in any number of ways.

To provide an example of a reading strategy, one of the strategies I model in my class is the use of a combination of written and verbal learning logs (Hurst, 2005). Students are asked to read the text, not for what they think will be on a test, but for what they find interesting or for something that draws their attention. On a piece of paper with a line drawn vertically down the center, students jot down on the left side what it was that piqued their interest (writing the page number in the left margin), and then on the right side they explain why they found it interesting. Students are asked to write about at least three things of interest. The reading and writing for this activity is completed independently. The social interaction occurs the following class period when students take turns sharing with the class one thing from their learning log. By the time each student has shared something of interest from the text, and with me embedding points in the discussion that I want covered, we have had a fairly thorough discussion of the text. Through this strategy, students read the text, interact with the text through writing, and interact with others about the text.

Since the purpose of the course is to provide future teachers with a repertoire of reading strategies and a mindset for how to incorporate them into their daily teaching, my class is structured so that every class period, instead of me lecturing about the importance of utilizing reading strategies, I model the strategies using various types of texts. Additionally, one of the requirements for the class is for each preservice teacher to choose a reading strategy to model for the class using a text from the student’s content area, so each class period includes the modeling of one or two strategies by me and one strategy modeled by a student.
Since social interaction is one element of each reading strategy, it is inherent in the structure of the class.

During this summer session, there were 15 undergraduate preservice teachers in the class from the following subject areas: math, English, science, history, physical education, family and consumer science, art, agriculture, and business. The two credit hour class met two days a week for three hours for five weeks. Exit slips were completed at the end of each class period to answer the three research questions.

Research question one: How did social interaction contribute to our students' learning?

To analyze the students’ 180 responses on the exit slips regarding how social interaction impacted their learning, the number of times each response was given was tabulated. Four themes accounted for 57% of the responses. Students believe social interaction: (a) helps students learn from others (23%), (b) makes learning fun (16%), (c) gets students interested and engaged (10%), and (d) allows students a chance to talk in the classroom (8%). The four themes did not surprise me, but the sheer number of different responses did. In addition to the four themes, the remaining 43% of the responses included 25 different topics: it improves comprehension, makes the classroom a learning environment, helps students become comfortable and confident, prepares students for the real world, teaches students how to work together, makes students want to come to class, helps students develop social skills, helps students improve their communication skills, makes it so students are the ones working in the classroom, helps teachers get to know students better, provides for more ownership of learning, prepares well-rounded students, helps time pass and breaks monotony, builds group mentality, and promotes self-assigned roles in groups.

One student wrote, “social interaction encourages students to think, read, conclude, summarize, question, etc.” Another student’s comment closely matches Vacca et al.’s (2011) views: “We were able to achieve more, faster, and more accurately when we worked in groups” (Student); Vacca et al. asserted when students work together in cooperative groups they “produce more ideas, participate more, and take greater intellectual risks” (p. 152). Another student used the term “a hive mind” to describe how that particular group worked together, while another student referred to “the whole being greater than the sum of the parts.” Several students mentioned that learning with others is more effective than learning on their own.
Research question two: What did our students learn about literacy through social interaction in our courses?

In analyzing 180 the responses to what students learned about literacy, the four most often given responses were: they learned that (a) reading can be fun (25%), (b) reading strategies help get students to actually read (22%), (c) reading strategies help students learn a lot of material (15%), and (d) other students’ interpretations of a text can help all students better understand the text (10%). In addition to these four responses, the remaining 18% was divided into 32 additional responses that were mentioned more than once including: always give students a reason to read, the importance of prior knowledge, the best way to become a better reader is to read, there will be many different reading levels in our classrooms, reading can be made enjoyable by adding diversity to teaching methods, reading and sharing make for more learning to take place, the classroom does not have to be quiet, how to determine the grade level of a text, interest plays an important role in comprehension, many things students can do when they come to a word they do not know, phrasing and fluency play an important role in reading, the importance of teaching how to read between the lines, discussion increases comprehension, discussion makes self-initiated information-seeking more likely, everyone gets something different out of a text, and how to get students in English classes to actually read literature.

Research question three: Did we prepare our students to utilize social interaction in their future classrooms?

When students were asked on the last day of class to rate on a scale of 1-10 how prepared they feel to incorporate social interaction in their future classrooms (10 meaning the most prepared), 12 out of 15 (80%) students responded with a score from 8-10. The remaining three (20%) responded with scores from 5-7. Further research would be helpful to determine if these students actually incorporate social interaction in their future classrooms as often as they intended.

In conclusion, based on the responses to the questions on the exit slips in this one summer course, it appears the preservice teachers found social interaction contributed to their learning, they learned about literacy through social interaction, and they plan to carry on the practice in their future classrooms. One student wrote:

*I learn best by being in an active learning environment. As a future teacher, I envision my classroom as being very interactive. Students will always be engaged in group learning, small projects, group discussions, debate, etc. I feel this type of environment*
makes learning fun and engages the students like me who struggle in a lecture environment.

Graduate Content Area Literacy Course (Nixon)

Our graduate content area literacy course is designed to provide a framework for teachers to help students with literacy in the content areas, metacognition, study skills, and critical thinking skills. Course competencies focus on increasing relevant knowledge, pedagogical and professional practice, and professional attributes related to content area literacy. The majority of the students who take this course are working on graduate degrees in Masters of Science in Education-Reading (MSED-RDG) and Masters in the Art of Teaching (MAT). A smaller number of students are pursuing degrees in MSED-Elementary Education or more specific discipline-based graduate degrees in MSED-Secondary Education or Masters of Art (MA).

My summer course consisted of 17 graduate students: a total of eight MAT students representing agriculture, biology, business, English, family & consumer science, and Spanish; four MSED-RDG students; a total three MSED-Secondary Education students representing Chemistry, Educational Administration, and English; one MSED-Elementary Education; and one MA-Theater student. Eleven of these students (65%) had no formal teaching experience; however, all of them had completed at least one practicum and student teaching, and several had worked as substitute teachers. Six students (35%) had one to three years of formal teaching experience; two were elementary teachers, three taught high school, and one taught at the college level. The three credit hour class met for five weeks, twice a week for four hours and 30 minutes for a total of 45 contact hours.

I define a literacy strategy as a purposeful activity that actively engages students in reading, writing, and discussion. During each class, I use demonstration lessons to model numerous literacy strategies, such as Anticipation Guides (Vacca et al., 2011), ReQuest (Manzo, 1969), Reciprocal Teaching (Brown & Palincsar, 1984), Questioning the Author (Beck et al., 1997), Discussion Webs (Alvermann, 1991), Word Sorts (Gillet & Kita, 1979), Concept Circles (Vacca et al., 2011), Point of View Guides (Wood, 1988), Unsent Letters (Smith, 2002), and RAFT writing (Holston & Santa, 1985). Each lesson is structured around one short piece of text using various topics (to cover the range of disciplines) and types of texts (textbook excerpts; primary documents; short story; poetry; articles from magazines, newspapers, and the internet; art work; music lyrics). These demonstration lessons are taught in a 45-55 minute block—the same timeframe the teachers in class have
to work with in their own classrooms. After the lesson is taught, we unpack it, discussing each strategy from various aspects such as: theory and pedagogical features, strengths and benefits, skill-building aspects, as well as any possible drawbacks to using it. Each demonstration lesson utilizes various strategies from the course text, *Content Area Reading* (Vacca et al., 2011), and is structured around the ERR instructional framework, a “working instructional guide” (Steele, 2001, p. 7) consisting of three stages: Evocation, Realization of Meaning, and Reflection. According to Steele, the ERR framework “provides a model for understanding teaching processes and serves as a mechanism for organizing instruction that corresponds to what is known about how students learn best” (p. 8). The ERR framework is similar to the before reading, during reading, and after reading (B-D-A) lesson structure (Vacca et al.). Vacca et al. state, “What a teacher does before reading, during reading, and after reading (B-D-A) is crucial to active and purposeful reading” (p. 131). They describe the B-D-A lesson structure as “a generic framework for planning content literacy lessons. How teachers adapt the B-D-A lesson depends on the students in the class, the text that they are studying, and the kinds of activities that will be reflected in the lesson” (p. 138).

During the summer semester, I require all students to present two lessons: one 15-minute mini-lesson that utilizes one literacy strategy from the text and incorporates discussion in pairs, small groups, and/or whole class; and a longer, more in-depth 35-40 minute presentation that employs the ERR framework and utilizes multiple strategies for each stage of the lesson as well as various types of collaborative discussions (i.e., pair shares, small group, whole class). At the completion of each class meeting, students filled out an exit slip requesting their thoughts and perspectives on the role of collaboration and social interaction that occurred in class that day. Comments on the exit slips might address my demonstration lesson, students’ mini-lessons, or their longer, more in-depth lesson presentations. Exit slips were then analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) by examining students’ comments for emerging themes and placing data into interrelated categories. Once categories were formed, I asked a qualified colleague to review the categories for integrity and conclusiveness (Merriam, 1992).

**Research question one: How did social interaction contribute to our students’ learning?**

Students were asked to comment on what they learned about the concept of collaboration from working with others in class. After examination of 170 exit
slips, analysis of data revealed that students found social interaction: (a) encouraged different perspectives (24%); (b) created an effective working environment (22%); (c) enhanced critical thinking (21%); (d) expanded comprehension and retention by activating prior knowledge, making connections, and consolidating new ideas (18%); (e) demonstrated application and modifications of various literacy strategies and collaborative learning (8%); and (f) promoted ownership of one’s own education by actively engaging and motivating students (7%). One student commented, “It [social interaction] made me think in different ways.” Another student noted, “I love ‘doing!’ It helps me think deeper and remember longer!” Additionally, one student wrote, “social interaction activates learning beyond the topic.”

**Research question two: What did our students learn about literacy through social interaction in our courses?**

Students were invited to ponder what they learned about literacy when collaborating with others. Analysis of data revealed the extent of the depth of students’ collaborative literacy experiences. Through social interaction, they realized: (a) an increase of knowledge regarding the act of reading (25%); (b) the ERR framework is vital organization tool (24%); (c) there are different ways to approach reading tasks (18%); (d) each reader interprets texts differently (11%); (e) the importance of activating students’ prior knowledge before reading (9%); (f) the clarification and consolidation of new information through reflective discussion (8%); and (g) why students need to monitor their own comprehension while reading (5%).

One student thoughtfully remarked,

*All students need opportunities to talk about what we’re reading. By doing this, I learned that reading is not just an individual action—it should not just be an individual act— but also a community action that helps us to connect to the text and clarify ideas.*

**Research question three: Did we prepare our students to utilize social interaction in their future classrooms?**

On the final day of class, students were asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 how prepared they felt they were to incorporate social interaction in their future classrooms. Eight students (47%) gave themselves a 10, the highest rating, while 7 students (41%) rated their level of preparedness a 9. Two students (12%) marked 8. Many students commented they would implement social interaction strategies in
their future classes because they believed this method helped strengthen their own comprehension and retention of knowledge, and they personally found it to be an effective teaching tool.

In conclusion, students in this summer graduate content literacy course discovered that social interaction with their colleagues offered a myriad of benefits: enhanced critical thinking, a variety of perspectives, an effective working environment, ownership of one’s learning, deeper comprehension, and an opportunity to apply the instructional strategies. Additionally, through social interaction these graduate students expanded their knowledge of literacy: they experienced different ways to approach various literacy tasks; they learned each reader interprets text in unique and different ways; and they discovered the importance of activating prior knowledge, monitoring comprehension, and consolidating knowledge through active, robust discussion. In summary, as teachers, they recognized and appreciated the importance of social interaction in the acquisition of content area knowledge.

**Graduate Literacy Tutoring Course (Wallace)**

During the summer session, I taught two combined literacy courses required for a Masters of Science in Education-Reading (MSED-RDG) and required by the State of Missouri for Special Reading Teacher Certification. The graduate students taking these two courses, Assessment of Reading Problems and Remediation of Reading Problems, are teachers in a practicum-based project called the Summer Reading Academy. The first week of instruction is devoted to learning and reviewing different assessment instruments, discussing ways assessment results should drive instruction, and reviewing the components of effective lesson plans. Over the next seven weeks, the graduate students work with struggling grade-school readers in a rather unique, teacher-collaborative setting. This was the third time I had taught these reading courses and directed the Summer Reading Academy. I frequently state at the beginning of these courses that the graduate students would learn more from each other than they would from my instruction. The questions on the exit slips permitted an examination of this idea.

This summer, the Summer Reading Academy consisted of 12 graduate students enrolled in the Graduate Reading Program who were currently teaching in the public schools and one not currently teaching, but who had prior teaching experience. These 13 teachers worked with 32 grade-school struggling readers ranging in age from 5 to 12 years with skill levels ranging from pre-primer to grade six. The Summer Reading Academy was housed in four classrooms. Three
classrooms had three teachers each and one classroom had a group of four teachers. Some of the teachers were assigned to work with two struggling readers and some with three struggling readers. Readers were placed in one of the four rooms based upon age and estimated reading skill. The teachers were to provide at least 45 minutes of individual instruction to students assigned as their primary responsibility. While some teachers were working individually with their students, other teachers were working in small group activities such as writer’s workshop, shared reading, and word work. The teachers worked together to create a classroom milieu that met the literacy needs of all students in their room by developing a classroom theme and a schedule of literacy activities with $250 to purchase necessary instructional materials.

Throughout the semester, the teachers created a portfolio containing their assessment results, lesson plans, and pre- and post-tutoring reports; in addition, each week the teachers sent home a portfolio of student artifacts along with notes to parents. The portfolio was returned every Monday morning with a parent signature indicating they had reviewed his or her child’s work.

The teachers met with students every morning for seven weeks, Monday through Thursday, from 8:30 to 11:30. From 7:30 to 8:00, we met as a whole class for instruction, then from 8:00 to 8:30, teachers met to collaborate about classroom planning and schedule coordination. The last 20 minutes of the day was specifically set aside for personal reflection and to complete the exit slips.

To analyze the exit slips, I read through all responses several times to identify themes. After I identified what I thought were logical themes, I went back through the statements and color-coded each theme with a different colored highlighter. Then I tabulated the percentages of responses that corresponded to each theme.

**Research question one: How did social interaction contribute to our students’ learning?**

The focus of this question was to ask our students (teachers) to reflect on what was learned about teaching. After examining 535 responses, four themes were identified. First, 42% of the responses suggested that collaboration helped teachers learn new reading strategies and improve their lesson planning (both short- and long-term plans). Second, 24% of the responses suggested that collaboration, through discussion and observation of others’ teaching, culminated in the sharing ideas and resources. Third, 22% of the responses suggested that collaboration helped teachers in various problem-solving situations involving individual students,
parents, curriculum, and procedures. And fourth, 12% of the responses delineated the characteristics for successful collaboration and benefits of collaboration. The bases for successful collaboration were cooperation, positive attitude, give and take personalities, friendship, trust, open communication, and being good listeners. The benefits included multiple insights, different perspectives and talents, inspiration, confidence building, and personal validation.

**Research question two: What did our students learn about literacy through social interaction in our courses?**

The focus of this question was to ask our students (teachers) to reflect upon what was learned about the subject of literacy. After examining 282 responses, two themes were identified. First, 49% of the responses specifically mentioned they had learned more about a specific reading foundation. The two foundational reading skills most frequently mentioned were phonics (word-based skills) and comprehension. Second, 51% of the responses delineated a pedagogical consideration centered on program delivery such as interest, engagement, high-quality books, appropriate reading level, cooperative learning, differentiation, assessment, strategy building, and modeling.

**Research question three: Did we prepare our students to utilize social interaction in their future classrooms?**

On the last day of class a concluding exit slip was given to the students (teachers) that asked them to rate from 1 (low) to 10 (high) how prepared they felt they were to incorporate social interaction in their future classrooms. Ten of the graduate students responded “10,” one “9.5,” one “9,” and one “8.” The mean response was “9.7.” One unsolicited response was: “I love interaction with colleagues and I am always asking questions and looking for opinions on more effective methods.”

In conclusion, social interaction among the graduate students during the Summer Reading Academy focused on learning new content-related information, sharing ideas and resources about teaching, problem solving about situations that arose during their teaching, and providing insights into the qualities and dynamics of a successful literacy program. First, the teachers in each classroom came from different grade levels, fields of study, areas of expertise (e.g., special education), and school districts. The social interaction among this diverse set of individuals became an authoritative resource. The advice or modeling by one teacher was often “new” to the others in the class. There was the “Eggbert Lesson,” poetry lessons, graphic organizers, Depth of Knowledge questions on a beach ball,
different ideas to improve writing, and many other ideas that others professed they would incorporate in their upcoming school-year curriculum. Second, the use of multiple teachers created invaluable sharing opportunities. Colleagues helped each other with planning, assessment, “bouncing” writing activities around for Writer’s Workshop, guided reading lessons, classroom management techniques, and ways to build student confidence and motivate students. Third, social interaction was useful in solving various problems encountered during their teaching. Many times the graduate students commented: “Two heads are better than one.” The problems, where support and insight were needed, included discussing a child’s progress with his or her parent, motivating particular students, and ways to help individual students become successful. And finally, social interaction, itself, was analyzed by the graduate students. They saw social interaction as successful when they became good listeners, felt trusted, and were comfortable offering different perspectives to a problem. The social interaction experience triggered many new ideas, was comforting and confidence building, and created friends or as one of them referred to the others as “their closest allies.”

By synthesizing these four themes, an even greater reason for the importance of social interaction in the classroom setting can be seen. Social interaction assisted these graduate students (teachers) to grow multi-dimensionally. Their teaching skills improved with respect to curriculum, problem-solving skills, and student learning, and, most importantly, they improved by better understanding themselves as both teachers and learners.

Findings and Discussion

Our study sought to answer three research questions. First, we wanted to know how social interaction contributed to our students’ learning. Analysis of data revealed three findings: (a) students learned from others, thus enhancing comprehension and retention by activating prior knowledge, making connections, and consolidating new ideas; (b) social interaction created a positive working environment; and (c) social interaction provided a means for our students to view topics from multiple perspectives and enhance their critical thinking and problem solving skills. Our findings indicate that students in all three courses recognized a strong connection between social interaction in the classroom and their learning. They perceived that interacting with their classmates contributed greatly to their learning in the class. This concept is strongly supported in the literature (Bromley, 2008; Dewey, 1963; Kasten, 1997; Smith, 1998; Vacca et al., 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2010). Ketch (2005) contends, “Conversation helps individuals make sense of their
world. It helps to build empathy, understanding, respect for different opinions, and ownership of the learning process” (p. 8). Almasi and Gambrell (1997) believe “participation in peer discussions improves students’ ability to monitor their understanding of text, to verbalize their thoughts, to consider alternative perspectives, and to assume responsibility for their own learning” (p. 152).

Furthermore, students in our study noted that social interaction enhanced their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In 1926, Lindeman wrote about the importance of discussions as a method of instruction for developing thinking skills. He advocated that all students should be taught a set of analytical skills that could be applied to a range of situations, beyond curriculum, and he believed the best way to teach and hone these skills was through small group discussions. Eight decades later, many researchers still concur. For example, Roberts and Billings (2008) believe that thinking is a “fundamental literacy skill” (p. 33). They state, “There is no question that reading, writing, speaking, and listening are interconnected skills that develop synergistically. They are also the key to teaching thinking” (p. 33). Additionally, Wilkinson et al. (2010) contend “talk offers students a means to combine their intellectual resources to collectively make sense of experience and to solve problems” (p. 143). One of our students stated: “Social interaction is important in the classroom because it gets students to communication with each other. When there is talking, learning is taking place.”

Second, we wanted to know what our students learned about literacy through social interaction in our courses. As a result of data analysis, findings revealed that participants of this study expanded their pedagogical knowledge of program delivery. However, the majority (60%) of the students in this study did not have any formal teaching experience and were studying to be secondary content teachers rather than literacy teachers; consequently, findings noted that these preservice teachers increased their general knowledge regarding the act of reading. On the other hand, 40% of the teachers in this study were practicing elementary teachers; thus, findings indicated that they learned more about specific reading skills such as phonics, comprehension, activation of prior knowledge, and retention. Teachers must become lifelong learners who continue to develop and hone their craft by observing students, working with other teachers, and reflecting on their own teaching. This type of learning process, based on social interaction, ultimately helps teachers take the theoretical aspects of teaching and translate it into useful classroom practice (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Bean (2004) contends “when teachers are involved in an activity that is especially meaningful to them, they will become more engaged in the process and are
generally more willing to apply what they are learning to their classroom practices” (p. 91).

Finally, we sought to find out if we had prepared our students to utilize social interaction in their future classrooms. The overall mean response from the three classes to this question was 9.21 out of a 10 point scale. Table 1 shows the percentages for each class.

Table 1: Student Responses to Utilizing Social Interaction in Future Classrooms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Undergraduate content reading class (n=15) % of responses</th>
<th>Graduate content reading class (n=17) % of responses</th>
<th>Graduate practicum-based class (n=13) % of responses</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>76</td>
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<td>9.5</td>
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</table>

One study participant noted:

“I want to use social interaction in my future classroom because it is more fun, it allows students to learn from classmates, allows teachers to teach, and allows teachers to learn more about the students’ personalities and interests.” Another student wrote: “It makes the classroom more of a learning environment by encouraging students to think, read, conclude, summarize, question, etc.”

In addition to students’ responses on a Likert scale about if they plan to incorporate social interaction in their future classrooms, they also communicated through their daily responses that they plan to do so because they reported that talking was an important part of their learning process in that it enhanced their comprehension and retention of new information about literacy. According to Routman (2003), “Talking with others about what we read increases our understanding. Collaborative talk is a powerful way to make meaning” (p. 126). Raphael, Brock, and Wallace (1997) believe “it is through talk that children make
sense of their world, and through talk that teachers and students construct meaning” (p. 178).

For over a century, researchers and scholars have been writing about the importance of actively engaging students in their own learning process. Dewey (1963) believed in active engagement in the learning process because it is through this active involvement that knowledge is constructed and, therefore, owned by the learner.

**Implications**

Social interaction among preservice and inservice teachers enhances and improves their skills as teachers and learners. Preservice teachers benefit from working with other students who model how to teach and reflect on one’s experiences, and inservice teachers learn to refine their craft of teaching from collaborating with other teachers—teachers at the same grade-level, at different grade-levels, and specialists. For students, the typical lecture, note-taking, and exam format does not model the process we ultimately want to see in the classroom. We want school classrooms active and engaging. To teach our preservice teachers how to do this, we want to model a socially-interactive process that teaches our students to become active learners.

For teachers, the traditional workshop format does not follow what we know to be good teaching practice (Borko, 2004). Harwell (2003) states professional development is “not an event, it’s a process” (p. 1). The professional development paradigm in education, where a specialist presents a workshop to a group of teachers, often does not translate into improved teaching in the classroom. This format usually requires the teacher to work in isolation or in a group on activities outside the context of a classroom of students. A more successful manner of teacher development should consider how teachers develop insights into the craft of teaching and how they change their behavior to improve their instructional techniques or strategies.

Page (2010) suggests learning is individualized, constructed, interactive, emotional, and social. These characteristics are similar among all types of learners. In short, teachers learn in the same manner as their students. According to Buchler (2003),

Teachers need time and support to re-examine, redefine, and reabsorb what it means today to be a student who is responsible, who takes charge, and who self-regulates in the context of today’s changing learning environment. This rethinking process may help
teachers both foster lifelong learning in their students as well as realize the goal themselves. (p. 1)

The components for successful teacher development need to include open conversation and dialogue, collaboration, and knowledge of subject. Teachers, like students, learn best when motivated to learn and are actively engaged in the learning process. Teachers need to commit to become independent learners, self-motivated to improve their teaching, and to test their ideas in real-life contexts.

To improve their instructional behavior, teachers should self-analyze and reflect when evaluating their teaching. They must be open to the comments and ideas offered from observing teachers and be willing share their ideas and evaluations when observing other teachers.

Learning is a constructive process where teachers try out specified activities in the classroom with students and then debrief the results with other teachers in the same classroom (Borko, 2004). Teachers must be able to converse honestly and address issues such as what are the best ways to teach a child, group of children, or class. Teachers are generally eager to talk about teaching with others; but, rarely do teachers share their thoughts and ideas about teaching and practice ways to improve their skills in a context of classroom students and other teachers (Borko, 2004).

Final Thoughts

Students in our classes this summer noted that social interaction positively impacted their learning and they plan to carry on the tradition in their future classrooms. Li (2006) states “Teachers need to create a safe and nonthreatening learning community in which students feel comfortable participating and in which students develop confidence that they can learn and achieve high academic standards” (p. 39). According to Bromley (2008), active engagement helps create “a positive classroom environment and establish a community of learners who support each other” (p. 111). When we model this type of environment in our college classes for teachers, our hope as teacher educators is that the teachers will implement social interaction in their own classrooms.
The Impact of Social Interaction

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Harwell, S.H. (2003). Teacher professional development: It’s not an event, it’s a process. Waco, TX: CORD.


**About the Authors**

Beth Hurst and Sarah Nixon are professors, and Randall Wallace is an associate professor, in the Reading, Foundations, and Technology Department at Missouri State University where they teach graduate and undergraduate reading/literacy courses for elementary, middle school, and secondary teachers.
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