LITERACY INSTRUCTION IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A Book of Readings

EXCELSIOR COLLEGE
Acknowledgments:


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About this book . . .

This book of readings forms one component of the recommended resources developed by Excelsior College to help students acquire the knowledge and skills assessed by the Excelsior College examination, *Literacy Instruction in the Elementary School*. The recommended material includes this book of readings and three textbooks.

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Literacy Instruction in the Elementary School

Introduction

The theoretical and practical articles in this book will help prepare you for the Excelsior College Examination, Literacy Instruction in the Elementary School. The readings are conveniently bound together in one volume for easy and economical access.

Members of the Excelsior College faculty selected these articles because they present in-depth information about important and current issues in elementary literacy in addition to what is found in the required textbooks. Most of the articles in this volume examine concerns about teaching children who come from diverse social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. Two of the articles discuss the representation of diverse groups in children’s literature. Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd examine the shortage, as well as the misrepresentation, of the African American experience in literature for primary grade children; the authors suggest important guidelines that teachers might use when selecting high quality literature about the African American experience. Landrum offers criteria for selecting literature containing characters with disabilities and includes annotated book titles for intermediate grade readers. Abt-Perkins and Gomez take another perspective on the important issue of social diversity: they discuss what teachers should know about their own pedagogical assumptions when teaching children who are from diverse socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Similarly, Flores, Cousin, and Dias examine teachers’ beliefs about language and dialect and the implications of those beliefs upon classroom instruction. Fitzgerald describes effective instructional strategies for teaching children who are acquiring English as a second language. Schirmer, Casbon, and Wiss discuss the impact public policy has upon children with disabilities and inclusive classrooms.

Additional articles about technology, writing, and alternative ways to respond to literature are also included in the readings because of the increasing importance these topics have on children’s literacy development. Owens, Hester, and Teale provide an exciting description of the power technology has to motivate children to read and write during inquiry-based learning activities. Sipe tackles the importance of the role a teacher plays in helping children learn to spell; he carefully explains that teachers must assume an active and watchful role if children are to develop from inventive to conventional spellers. Short, Kaufman, and Kahn discuss ways in which teachers can use a variety of sign systems, such as the visual and performing arts, to help children think about and respond to books they have read.

Finally, Harwayne’s article shares the response of New York City children to September 11th. This article presents the views of a number of children about the tragedy and also provides a model for using written response to display and better understand the ways children think about the world.
The stories of these teachers help us see that teaching multiculturally begins with looking at and understanding our own perspectives on culture and education.

In the call for papers for this issue of Language Arts, the editor asked: What programs, practices, materials, issues, or perspectives make sense when we think about teaching multiculturally? We believe that prior to addressing these questions, others that enable teachers to obtain fresh viewpoints on their practice must be posed. We suggest that teaching multiculturally must begin with self-inquiry and that as teachers, we must first examine the relations among our fundamental values, attitudes, dispositions, and belief systems (our personal perspectives), our teaching, and our diverse students’ literacy learning. We must ask ourselves: Who am I? What are my beliefs about teaching, learning, and students? Are my beliefs consonant with my practice? What are the consequences of my teaching for the literacy learning and achievement of all children in my class?

In reflecting on these, we gain a clearer picture of how our race, social class, ethnicity, and other characteristics, such as our language background and gender, shape our teaching and the opportunities for our diverse students’ learning and achievement. In a summer course, “Teaching Writing to Diverse Learners,” we challenged ourselves to provide opportunities for reflection on how our personal perspectives shape our teaching to the 26 language arts teachers who enrolled. Our purposes were to read, talk, and write about how our lives and experiences create environments that enhance or limit the literacy learning of children in our classrooms and to rethink our teaching of writing. In the pages that follow, we describe the course and the beliefs about literacy and learning that grounded it, and we explore its impact on two of the teachers in the year that followed.

Examining Ourselves
As we began thinking about the course, we remembered Delpit’s (1988) challenge to teachers:

We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist ourselves for a moment—and that is not easy. It is painful as well because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another’s angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to start the dialogue. . . . We must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness. (p. 297)

So we began by telling stories of our past teaching to each other—stories about teaching of which we are no longer proud. We wanted to understand why we attempted to teach in these ways in the past and why those practices had been supported by others.

Dawn’s Story
J. D. was the first African American student I had ever taught. In fact, he was one of only a few students of color in my school. I remember how he used to walk into my ninth-grade writing class and take the seat farthest away from the front of the room. He would always make sure that there was at least one empty desk between him and the students who sat in front of and beside him.

I remember being aware of J. D.’s color. I wanted him to contribute to my white students’ understanding of race relations in American society. I felt that they needed to be awakened to issues of prejudice and discrimination. They had become too comfortable in their white, suburban community, I thought, and J. D. could help them see beyond their limited horizon.

With this in mind, I planned a mock interview as part of a writing unit. In the past, I had randomly picked a student to be my interviewee. My implicit message was that all people have something interesting to tell about themselves if only we ask the right questions. That afternoon, I decided to choose J. D. I thought that I could accomplish two goals by interviewing him: I could show J. D. that I wanted him to be a participant in
the class, and I could raise issues about race and prejudice in our society.

J. D. agreed to be interviewed. I suppose he thought that I would ask him the kinds of questions that I had asked other students about their lives and experiences. Instead, I hit J. D. with a barrage of questions about what it felt like to be African American and be discriminated against. He sank in his chair. With all of our eyes upon him, he could not run and hide. So, he responded in short bursts and avoided meeting any of our eyes.

After 10 minutes of such questioning, I allowed J. D. to return to his seat in the corner. I ruefully thanked him for being my "guinea pig" that day.

This story was painful for me to tell. But, it was also too important to keep secret. In telling the story, I saw that instead of inviting J. D. to share his stories in a conversation where we, as a classroom community, could talk openly about race issues, I had objectified J. D. by asking him to represent all African American people. I had not created the classroom context wherein J. D. could represent himself. I had acted from a position of power within that classroom, school, and community. In trying to include J. D., I did nothing but highlight how he was not a member of these same groups. J. D. and I did not share stories of experience; I had decided what J. D.'s story was and how he should share it. J. D. was silenced by my lack of understanding of what it meant to be an "other" in our classroom.

Mary Louise's Story

When I was in my first year as a faculty member here at the university, I conducted quite a few inservice sessions on teaching writing for local elementary school staffs. The principal of one building—where half the children were African American kids living in poverty—called and asked me to follow up an inservice session by teaching a series of related lessons to third graders as their teachers watched.

I had a lot of experience teaching writing to socio-economically diverse groups of children, and I had read a lot about teaching racially and ethnically diverse children, so I thought I was prepared to do a good job. I carefully planned the lessons I would teach. On my first day in each classroom, I introduced and read the majority of a selection of multicultural literature. Then, I led a discussion about the themes in the book, the roles various characters had played, and the language the author had used to share her story. I asked the children to draft new endings to the story and to share these for peer reactions.

In subsequent lessons, we talked about the use of lively language, and the third graders inserted adjectives and adverbs into their texts. On other occasions, we worked on the use of quotation marks and the use of conversation to enliven a story. Finally, each child used a word processor to write a second, and then a third edited draft of her story. The stories were printed, a table of contents and dedication added, and a copy of the book was bound for each child. The day I arrived with the publication for each class became a celebration. Children autographed each other's books and gleefully located their names and story titles in the table of contents. As each book was finished, another teacher would confirm the dates for my guest teaching in her class; and over the fall and winter, I worked in three classrooms.

Despite the children's, parents', teachers', and the principal's pleasure in the writing projects, I have never felt comfortable with this teaching. I have always known that there was something missing in my work at this school. It was not until I began telling Dawn my story that I saw what I had done. While the books represented the experiences and heritages of different racial and ethnic groups, I had denied each student the opportunity to share her own story. I was so focused on providing an activity in common from which all could write that I failed to see that the writing activity itself lacked any intrinsic links to the needs, experiences, or interests of the children in the classes. I saw, fresh and clear, how I had tried to teach multicultural—but at arm's length, so to speak—as I put the books between the children and myself. The stories I had encouraged them to tell were not their own; they were ones I had chosen. The responses I asked them to make were also of my choosing. The children wanted to please me, the visiting university teacher, and they liked sharing their work with each other and seeing it in print. Sadly, we all failed to see what I had done. Like Dawn, I had overlooked the importance of who I was, who the children were, and what they brought to school in my teaching.

Planning the Course

We had both attempted to be cognizant of whom we were teaching as we planned our writing instruction—Dawn, through her attempts to "see" J. D.'s color, and Mary Louise, through her use of multicultural literature with diverse student groups. But neither of us had taken any real risks by inviting our students to tell their own stories on their own terms. It was only in telling these teaching stories to one another that we accomplished what Delpit has suggested—turned ourselves inside out to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness.

In deciding what stories to tell one another and how to share them, we were forced to consider how to present ourselves and how to present the roles others played in our stories. As we planned to tell the stories, and as we told them, we moved from locating ourselves within the role of participant in the experience to one of participant in the story. In the telling, we recognized other possible dimensions to our practice and to our students' reactions to it than had been readily apparent to us alone. For example, Dawn had originally attributed J. D.'s one-word re-
sponses to her questions to his innate shyness. As she told the story, however, she understood that while he may have been shy and his impulse to invite his participation was genuine, she had to take responsibility for his reaction. In the telling, with our common commitments to improving our practice and our trust in one another as part of the storytelling context, we were able to see ourselves in a new light.

As we told our stories, the principles upon which we wanted to base the course became clear. We wanted the teachers in our course to reflect on their practice in ways that lead to what Dyson (1992) and Nystrand (1992) have called dialogic instruction. Nystrand marks dialogic instruction as “eliciting, sustaining, and extending student-initiated contributions” (1992, p. 6). Dyson emphasizes that teachers cannot enter into such dialogues with students without carefully considering the personal and social contexts of students’ texts. Rather than dismissing or overlooking the “unexpected” texts our students create in our writing classrooms, Dyson reminds us that it is the teacher’s role to invite such texts, to struggle to understand the purposes they serve in students’ lives, and to help students craft these so that others inside and outside of the mainstream can understand and value them as well.

In our course, we did not want to talk about dialogic or multicultural writing instruction as if these were things that could be done outside of our own self-critique. We knew that the changes we desired would need to begin on personal ground. Like us, the teachers in our course would need to acknowledge how their instructional decisions were guided by their understandings of who they were, who their students were, and how best to extend students’ literacy learning. More than new techniques or new materials, the teachers would need to explore, as we had done, the personal dimensions of their teaching. They, like us, would require a context and an empathetic audience for telling their stories.

Our goal was to provide a haven, of sorts, for teachers to conduct such self-exploration. We share Delphi’s ideal (1988) that teachers need to learn about communities other than their own and to examine their beliefs toward people unlike them, and we recognize the difficulty of this work. To do as Delphi suggests opens our teaching for review and the possibility that it will be found inadequate. Schools are places that do not sanction vulnerability, ambiguity, or the airing of uncertainty; rather, teachers are expected to publicly, confidently, and competently carry out their duties. Teachers have learned to hide their feelings of self-doubt and to defend themselves against critique, even from their peers. Rarely do teachers come together for the purpose of puzzling through what they do not yet fully understand or questioning accepted practices. We hoped that our classroom would provide a place apart from teachers’ usual work environments to safely air the tensions in their teaching; to unpack the social, economic, and institutional constraints of their work; and to reduce their feelings of anxiety, anger, and fear about their multiple audiences—students, peers, administrators, and parents. So, we planned a series of activities focused on reading, writing, and telling stories of teaching.

**The Course: “Teaching Writing to Diverse Learners”**

We began by asking everyone to read James Baldwin’s “A Talk to Teachers” (1988) in which he argues that teachers contribute to the racial problems in our society if they only work to make their students think, talk, and act just like them. Instead of being “colorblind,” Baldwin calls on teachers to be “color conscious.” To understand the possible connections between their students’ heritages and their literacy, teachers first have to recognize such connections in their own lives; and we hoped that after reading Baldwin, they could do so. We requested that teachers write about and discuss in small groups the ways that their race, ethnicity, social class, and other factors—such as their language background and gender—that affected their beliefs about what to value as literacy learning in their classrooms. The teachers told stories about their literacy experiences, both at home and at school, had made them feel capable, as if they had something to contribute. In the words of one of the teachers (all teachers’ names, unless noted otherwise, are pseudonyms):

School was always a place of comfort for me, and an affirmation that I was worthwhile, intelligent, and part of a whole. I can see that I had the advantage of being part of the acculturated majority power group. Inequalities are built into education for minority students because literature and language are tied to the majority culture. (Norma Barnes, 6/26/90)

Another student responded:

I have lived my entire life in a small town. The one person of color in the community lived with her white grandmother. And socially and economically, I was considered privileged, as were my friends. I went to a small, private college where all of the students in my courses were white. Although I have always tried to live by the statement, “My way is not always the best way,” I have begun to see some new depth to this position. Since we all differ in our cultural, social, and ethnic experience, we will all hold different norms, beliefs, and values about our school literacy experiences. I see this as a spectrum—some views being very close to
mine and others very far, but none more right than the next. (Carolyn Smith, 6/26/90)

And another wrote:

I have always considered myself relatively liberal politically. I argue with people I grew up with and work with, frequently scolding them for their racist, sexist, and materialistic remarks. But after reading Baldwin, I find that maybe my liberal persona is nothing more than an affectation. (Mark Baker, 6/26/90)

This session initiated a process of inquiry on how our experiences had informed our perspectives on literacy learning. Baldwin challenged us to raise critical questions about how our own perspectives shaped the kinds of texts and talk we had come to value in our classrooms. And, perhaps more importantly, he helped us understand the kinds of silences we had come to accept from some of our students.

But, our goal, finally, was not to construct an “encounter group” to relieve white, middle-class guilt. We needed to deal constructively with the problem at hand—to examine how our perspectives permeate all of our interactions with children and to find ways to enter into more dialogic relationships with them. To this end, we read stories of the school literacy experiences of “other” people, those stories that are typically left out of conversations about literacy learning in teacher methods courses. And we started to tell stories of our own teaching to begin the painful process of “re-visioning” our teaching from new ground.

We read stories from people who had to learn to be school literate the hard way—through breaking connections with their homes, families, and communities. Hunger of Memory (1982), for example, is Richard Rodriguez’s story about the painful road to his school success; it is an account of the alienation he experienced as his family is encouraged to “practice” English at home by his elementary school teachers. Rodriguez’s story, and those of Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) and Rose (1989), demonstrate disturbing accounts of schooling; they show teaching that was standardized in materials, methods, and expectations—regardless of the valuable and varied skills and knowledge that low-income children and children of color brought to school. These stories highlight how for many learners on the boundaries of mainstream U. S. life, literacy skills were developed at the expense of the students’ racial and ethnic identities.

Another set of stories we read—those of Delpit (1988), Dyson (1989), Kitagawa (1989), and Jordan (1988)—show the possibilities for dialogic teaching. In these, teachers negotiated their expectations with diverse learners’ interests, needs, and feelings in mind. Using the Author’s Chair, collaborative writing groups, writing conferences, and writing to audiences outside of the classroom were intended to nurture writers’ purposes while honoring the communities from which they came. These teachers of writing took responsibility for recognizing their students’ intentions because they appreciated that, in Kitagawa’s words, “It is the writer who teaches and the reader who is taught” (1989, p. 76). In this other set of stories, the teachers made explicit the link between authorship and authority (Kitagawa, 1989, p. 76). They worked to put their students’ writing in contexts in which they made sense—including social and political contexts.

For some time now, teachers and researchers have been talking and writing about the importance of “getting on kids’ ground,” but these readings moved beyond this position. In these stories, teachers struggled to recognize their own humility in the face of the diversity of students’ experiences and their communicative intentions. They recognized that although we can never understand the totality of all of our students’ racial, social, and ethnic “texts,” we can work toward a position in our teaching where we allow our intentions to be put on hold for the moment as we let ourselves be taught.

All of the readings served as jumping-off points for writing and talking. In addition to the assignment to explore one’s literacy learning that followed the Baldwin article, teachers wrote two responses to other course readings and a final course project—a plan of action for some aspect of their literacy teaching for the next year. Each assignment was discussed in small and large groups, drafted, shared with a peer group of the teachers’ choice, rewritten, and responded to by us both. As we described our hopes for the action plans, we each retold the story of teaching that we had earlier told only to one another. We used these as examples of tensions in teaching that we had identified as requiring our rethinking and revision. We suggested that they, too, might have such questions about their practice and that we could work together to respond to these.

After a lot of discussion and writing, each class participant identified a dilemma. For example, Carolyn Smith, a kindergarten teacher, asked how she might better communicate with incoming students’ parents whose older children had not done well in school. She suspected that the school problems children from these families had experienced in the past were not endemic to family deficiencies but were the result of school literacy expectations—beginning in kindergarten—failing to match or build on those that the children brought to school. For her action plan, Carolyn devised two related goals. First, she
would no longer rely on the kindergarten "screening tests" for information about children's learning and achievement. Instead, she would negotiate time with her peers, school reading specialist, and school administration for get-acquainted parent conferences. At these, she would introduce herself and the program. Most important, these would provide an occasion where she could begin to find out the interests children were bringing to school, as well as the hopes, needs, and expectations their parents brought with them. Second, she would try to focus not on remediating what children failed to bring to school but on inviting their interests into her classroom and building on these. Like her peers Linnea and Alexandra, whose stories we tell in greater detail in the next sections, Carolyn began to refocus her teaching during the course. She, like them, found the support of her classmates and the challenges of the readings, writing, and storytelling, a "good place to begin" (Personal communication, 7/11/90).

Linnea's Story

Linnea Johnson was a fifth-grade teacher from a nearby suburban community. Like Dawn, she had one African American child in her classroom the prior year. During the course, Linnea confronted how her experiences growing up as a white, middle-class person had limited her ability to teach her student Plumer in ways she considered to be successful. Further, she recognized how the community in which she taught reinforced this perspective by propagating a "colorblind" approach to instruction. As a result, she had been afraid to admit that tensions existed between Plumer and herself and that these tensions had limited his opportunities to find a voice—to participate—in her classroom. In the following story, Linnea tells about how her teaching had celebrated Plumer's silence:

As I looked down my class roster, prior to the first day of school, some fellow teachers were trying to help me get started by describing the students to me. Each name would be mentally represented in my mind with each story they told. Near the bottom of the list, my eye fell upon a name that sounded, well, different. The teachers explained that this was a black boy and described him as being very quiet. I filed the information away and continued down the list. What I did not realize was that there was so much to the boy's story.

Soon the first day of school arrived with the usual flurry of excitement coupled with a little anxiety. Most students were chattering before the bell, trying to figure out what this new teacher would be like... mean or nice, funny or boring, and so forth. Plumer entered the room quietly, took his seat, and remained silent. He was the only black student in the fifth grade, a group comprised of approximately 80 students.

During our first days together, I tried to establish a supportive classroom atmosphere which was conducive to learning. I hoped to create a place in which students felt safe and would feel free to express themselves and take risks. This did not happen for Plumer until very late in the school year. While most children were taking part in the activities with vigor, Plumer tended to hang back, on the fringes. He would respond to me in one-word utterances and rarely established eye contact.

I consulted my peers, and they replied that this was the way Plumer was. Very quiet. The year progressed, and Plumer remained silently unnoticed. My teaching responsibilities and challenges were enough to keep my mind occupied, and I thought that Plumer was doing fine.

In the following months, I came to recognize the silence as a mask for anger. Speaking for him, he was in a situation in which he felt a lack of power, the only black student in a white world, with a teacher who did not know that he would have needs different from the rest of his students.

My childhood world consisted of a homogeneous white town. Unfortunately, I grew up where diverse peoples were talked of negatively. They were people to avoid. It is with sadness that I admit I was afraid to deal with Plumer. What I saw was his shell, not the individual inside. I admit that I really did not know that he would have needs different from the rest of my students. I grew up ignorant of the sea of individuals with so much to say and share. I feel my lack of experience with people of color greatly affected the way I reacted to Plumer.

The mistakes I had made with Plumer were made clear very late in the year. We were researching in the library, and Plumer had not yet found a magazine source for his paper. I offered to help him, and he became very defiant. We left the library to discuss the issue. What soon became evident was his anger and pain. It was the first time I had heard him, as Delpit described in her article. I had been listening to his silence, not wanting to hear what was happening. I felt frightened of his diversity but had no choice but to hear him: I traced myself.

Plumer accused me of treating him differently. Immediately, my internal defenses were activated. I thought, 'I have not! I have tried very hard to not make any remarks that may offend you, I have gone out of my way to make this year a smooth one for you. Suddenly, my conscience told me to listen to the angry boy in front of me. I put my fears and biases aside and let him speak, encouraging him every now and then to ask if there was anything else he wanted (needed) to say. It hurt very much to listen to him, but it was very important for both of us. We had the most incredible discussion. We talked about things that made him feel angry, and I explained my actions as well. It would be a lie to say that it was an idealistic situation afterwards, but he and I made a connection that day. We communicated. We heard as well as listened to each other. This experience called on me to reexamine my own values, my own actions, and my own prejudicial beliefs. As an educator, I needed to recognize Plumer's silence for what it was and what I had contributed to it.

Plumer taught me things I had never before faced. As I sit in our seminar, thinking and conversing, I am reminded of Plumer. It is frightening to question the way in which one was brought up and the ways in which one chooses to live life. To wonder if you, through your
own well-meaning intentions, might not be adding to the problem by failing to confront it. I believe that the incidents in my fifth grade parallel with that of the larger society, and that something must be done in an attempt to ease the pain and tension of the situation. (Paper, 6/25/90)

In her words, the course readings and discussions had helped her to see "who I am and who my students are" in new ways (Paper, 6/25/90). In revising her teaching, she set three goals. First, she wanted to be a model for her peers. In her school community, she knew that she was not alone in feeling afraid to raise issues of race in her teaching. Linnea felt that by demonstrating and sharing alternative ways to interact with students like Plumer, she might help her colleagues see the silence of students of color as more than simply shyness. Second, she understood that she needed to educate herself about the contributions of diverse peoples to our nation's history. And, finally, she challenged herself to find ways to help her students, in their primarily monoethnic community, to reflect on social issues from multiple viewpoints. She didn't want her students to feel limited by their school literacy experiences as she felt bound by her own.

In an interview conducted one year after writing her plan, Linnea told new stories of classroom experience. Again, she had one African American boy, Joseph, in her class. In the following story, Linnea tells of how she worked to establish a relationship that would not allow the differences between them to silence Joseph:

As you know from my paper last summer, I had a pretty bad experience with the one black boy I had a year ago. This year I had only one black boy again. But the experience this year was 100% different. Joseph and I talked a lot. He was uncomfortable at times with issues that were coming up in the classroom. We talked about that in private. He really appreciated the fact that I was aware that he felt different, but I didn't want him to be treated differently by others. I think a lot of what caused him to be concerned was the stigmatizing on the playground through name-calling, and so forth. So we discussed these things.

His mother and I communicated from the very beginning. I initiated the contact because I could tell from the first day that Joseph was angry. His mother warned me that he might use, "You're doing this because I'm black." But he never did. He did have a chip on his shoulder, though. The first few weeks were kind of rough. He was really testing me. But once he saw that I would follow through on things (I would call his parents), we settled into a respectful relationship. I recognized the difference between us, but I wasn't going to allow that to be an excuse in terms of my discipline or my effort or his confronting his learning problems. So we worked on these things.

I knew I had made progress when one day we were talking about prejudice as a spelling word. We talked about what it means to prejudge someone before you really have the information. And we talked about times when we had been the victims of prejudice. It took about 5 minutes, and someone said, "Well, I know sometimes people judge others on the color of their skin." This hush fell over the room. Joseph got kind of antsy. And I was wondering if he would want to talk about this or not. I couldn't tell, but usually he would talk all the time.

Well, we continued by writing the words on the board and talking about what was said about prejudice and how that makes us feel. The other kids were giving specific life examples like, "I can't do this because people say I'm just a little kid" or, "They tell me girls can't do those things." But they didn't say anything else about race until Joseph raised his hand and said, "This is how I feel when this happens to me." At this point, the spelling words were gone. And we just talked about his experiences and feelings.

It was good for Joseph because he saw that the kids saw him for his color and for the type of person he was. It was one of those moments. Some of them asked questions of him like, "Well, what did you do?" and, "How did you feel about this or that?" They wanted more information from him. And they did a lot of nodding of their heads. I think this made him feel supported. (Interview, 6/12/91)

Linnea worked to establish an open relationship with Joseph and his mother. She also tried to create a classroom community supportive of the kind of risk taking that she thought was essential to literacy development. And, she had followed Joseph's lead; she was ready to support him in talking about his experiences when he wished to do so.

Besides her story about Joseph, Linnea shared ways in which she had redesigned her writing curriculum so that it would be more inviting for all of her students. For example, she told us she had redesigned the library research project that she had taught the year before to Plumer and his classmates. Instead of working alone, she asked students to work in pairs on the research projects. She also decided to focus the project on contributions that African American people have made to our country's development.

She began the unit by having small groups of students read about a different segment of American history from an African American perspective. Each group also presented what they had learned to the entire class. She then had them research specific African American individuals together in the library and present what they had found to their fellow classmates. They were free to design their presentations in any way they believed would best describe the contribution of their subject. For example, Joseph and his partner wrote a rap to describe the contributions of an African American poet. When all had shared their work, Linnea and her students displayed their writing with illustrations of the African American people whose contributions they celebrated.
During our interview, Linnea was reminded of the changes she had undergone in her own perspective:

I remember my roommate came in after school one day to give me a message. She just looked around my room and said in amazement, “All of these pictures are of black people!” It struck her because she is from the same kind of background as I am. (6/12/91)

In describing why she felt the new research unit had been a success, Linnea said that the activities had been more inclusively designed. Students were working collaboratively, presenting to each other, and experimenting with different genres to fit their purposes. Most important to Linnea was that the unit had helped serve as an “ice-breaker” for everyone. “The students knew that race would be talked about in this classroom. They knew to treat Joseph as someone who comes from a cultural background of which we should all be proud. And they heard this message coming from the teacher.”

Alexandra’s Story

Another teacher in the course, Alexandra Phelps (her actual name), was also concerned about the messages that her writing curriculum sent to the diverse learners in her classroom. Alexandra taught eighth grade in a school community comprised of students from many different backgrounds. Like Mary Louise, Alexandra also wondered why she felt so dissatisfied about her approach to writing instruction when it seemed to be so well accepted by others.

Alexandra is a member of the Yokuts tribe. Early in the course, she identified with Richard Rodriguez’s struggle to reconcile his identity as a “minority” with his position as a scholar. Alexandra had been hired 3 years earlier via an affirmative action program. Frequently, she found herself wondering if she would have been hired had she not been a Yokuts. In one of her papers, Alexandra wrote:

Ever since that day, I have struggled to sort out whether it was my label or my qualifications that resulted in this job offer. . . . To be put in the position of defending a minority label that I am very proud of, yet embarrassed by, is a frustrating situation. . . . When I reflect on Baldwin’s [1988] and Ferdman’s [1990] theses, I find some means to defend my decision to accept the school district’s offer [of a job]. Because of the family stories and history with which I have been raised, I have felt a separateness from and rage about the dominant culture of this country. The treatment and experiences of family members who do “look Indian” [unlike Alexandra] have made me sensitive to racism and power issues in a personal way. (Paper, 6/27/90)

During the course, as she read the words of other people of color, she came to recognize how her experiences could give her a unique perspective to “reflect on what happens in our schools and to advocate for changes to make them more relevant to a broader group of people” (Paper, 6/27/90).

Through reading and discussing Baldwin, Ferdman, and Rodriguez, Alexandra began making “an uneasy peace” with herself as a person of color and as a teacher (Paper, 6/27/90). For her final course project, Alexandra tried to imagine a new writing curriculum that would put into practice her desires to advocate for change on behalf of others. In her teacher preparation courses, Alexandra had been taught to standardize her approach to curriculum. She had been encouraged to create worksheets, story-starters, and other language games to engage her students in acquiring writing skills. Despite the fact that her students seemed to enjoy these activities, Alexandra was dissatisfied with her writing curriculum. In an interview one year after the course, she reflected on the questions she had begun to ask herself during the summer:

I had started to articulate for myself why I was teaching in this way. I asked myself: What does this have to do with sharing real life experiences with kids and having real purposes for writing? It is too easy to forget the big picture, the purpose of schools, why we do what we do, is it fair what we do, who’s the winner and who’s the loser—that sort of thing—when you are teaching. (5/27/91)

While her classroom was a pleasant and engaging place for student writers, her curriculum had failed to connect students’ lives to their classroom writing experiences. In her words, Alexandra wanted to teach writing in ways that felt “more natural to me personally.” So, in her plan for the following year, she redesigned her classroom as a reading/writing workshop. The results, as Alexandra explained a year later, were powerful.

I have a black female student who turned in a piece of writing a few weeks ago that I’ve passed around to just about everybody in this building. She called it, “The Harder You Push Me Down, the Higher I’ll Bounce.” She is an ED (emotionally disturbed) student who was writing about how she got suspended one day for a confrontation she had had with a substitute teacher in her ED room. In her version of the story, the two adults in the room had exaggerated what had happened. She goes through all of these emotions as she tells this story. The story evolves into how she had problem-solved this thing. And she ends the story with, “At school, you have something I want—an education—so I need to live down my past, but I’m trying and I wish someone would notice that I’m trying.” It was like 15 pages. Amazing.

I had a Hmong girl in my class who is 14 and a mother. In her culture, in her home, she is an adult. So when she goes home, she cooks and cleans, and she is feeling kind of enslaved right now. She is going through a very rough time. But it is really interesting in writing.
She writes pure fantasy—*Sweet Valley Twins* style. She turns in repeatedly 30-page stories about Jimmy and Jean. And they go to the park, and Jimmy says, "I love you, Jean, and here's this ring, and here's a dress for you." She is leading a wild fantasy life, an escapist life, through her writing. She is even writing in math class, her teacher tells me. It is really important to her. (Interview, 5/27/91)

Alexandra talked about the new connections that she and her students had experienced once they had left behind the story-starters to become storytellers. Alexandra connected with her students, and her students made new connections between their personal and school lives. Over the next year, Alexandra became confident that she no longer needed to expend her teaching energies "finding worksheets that fit in." Instead, she gave herself and her students permission to find ways to accomplish the same ends through means "that make you comfortable." (Interview, 5/27/91)

**Discussion**

How had Alexandra and Linnea answered the core questions we posed in the course: Who am I? What are my beliefs about teaching, learning, and students? Are my beliefs consonant with my practice? What are the consequences of my teaching for the literacy learning and achievement of all children in my class? During the summer, both Alexandra and Linnea clarified for themselves how their personal perspectives had specific consequences for their literacy instruction.

The course sharpened Alexandra's understanding of her own identity and how who she was could contribute to her teaching and her students' learning. She saw how she had formerly narrowed the possible contexts in which students could write—that the language games and story-starters she had formerly used did not capture students' interests in writing, yet failed to invite the forms and intentions of students' lived experiences. One year later, Alexandra reflected on how her altered perspectives enabled her students to connect their lives inside and outside of school through their writing experiences.

Linnea had never before confronted how her membership in a particular social class and racial group had bound how she viewed others and how others viewed her and her classroom actions. While her student, Plumer, had angrily pointed out her different treatment of him, and Linnea recognized that she needed to change her practice somehow, she had failed to see how she had reacted to him from a position of power. Plumer's story, read in the context of the stories of Rodriguez, Rose, and Delphi, helped Linnea understand that she had been complicit in maintaining Plumer's silence in her classroom.

In the year following the course, Linnea stopped being afraid of difference. She initiated conversations and personal contact with Joseph and his family. She made time to chat with Joseph during the school day and phoned his mother because she wanted to be sure that she had done her part to connect with him. Joseph reacted positively to Linnea's attentions. He spoke up often in class, became known as a great storyteller by his classmates, and felt liked by his teacher.

Linnea insured that Joseph could not say that she treated him differently because of his skin color. She had begun to alter her perspectives and to make consonant changes in her teaching practices. In addition to modifying her personal approach to the African American child in her class, Linnea had also revised her research assignment for the entire class. As Baldwin had implored, she had moved from being "colorblind" to being conscious of color in her instruction.

We do not claim, however, that Linnea's teaching had become dialogic. For example, many of Linnea's conversations with Joseph focused on his behavior and attitudes toward school, rather than on his interests, knowledge, or skills. In addition, the topic for the library research project—the contributions of African Americans to U.S. history—did not emerge from students' interests. While Linnea was well-intentioned—she wanted to open her classroom to the experiences of "others"—she continued to base her instruction on what she assumed her students would be interested in. She, like Dawn, had neglected to begin on student ground.

We do not suggest that either Linnea or Alexandra have the answer for a multicultural approach to writing instruction. Just as Linnea and Dawn had assumed that the realities of one African American boy were the realities of another, we can't assume that all teaching realities require the same action. Rather, the stories Alexandra and Linnea tell about their teaching set the foundation for ongoing self-examination. We argue that teachers need to make visible to themselves what they bring to their dialogues with student writers through reflection on: (1) how their literacy histories compare to those of others; (2) how their personal experiences may have been privileged in school settings; and (3) how their literacy experiences are tied to their identities. For without such self-examination, teachers may not ask the critical questions about their practice that allow them to invite and extend the literacy forms, skills, and interests that all children bring to school.
References


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Literacy and Students Who Are Learning English as a Second Language

Jill Fitzgerald

The number of immigrant, migrant, and refugee students in United States schools who have little knowledge of the English language is large and growing. To a great extent, their future success in the United States hinges on acquisition and facility with English orality and literacy. However, these students are often at great risk for reading and writing failure.

Many teachers ask questions such as the following about how to help English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students learn to read and write: What do teachers need to know about cultural issues associated with second-language learning? How do teachers introduce reading and writing in English? When should reading and writing in English begin? This article addresses such issues about the literacy development of ESL students. The article's major premises are: (a) What is known about language and literacy acquisition and development in native languages applies to literacy acquisition and development in second languages, and (b) sound practices for literacy teaching and learning in native languages are also sound practices for ESL students. Using these two premises, recent findings on native-language literacy learning and development frame suggestions for setting up classroom environments conducive to successful literacy learning for ESL students. Specifically, the article opens with a discussion of the need for attention to literacy development for ESL students. Next, typical methods of addressing the needs of language-minority students in United States schools are discussed, including how literacy issues are treated. Last, teaching guidelines and exemplary classroom practices are suggested for enhancing English literacy development of language-minority students. The guidelines and practices, some of which are contrary to those of traditional ESL programs, emanate from current research and theory in literacy and language learning.

It is important to note that in many situations, students have opportunities to be biliterate, i.e., to develop literacy in both their native language and in English. Considerable research indicates that significant cognitive benefits can accrue from maintenance and enhancement of native language and literacy alongside English language and literacy development (for examples of benefits, see Hakuta, Ferdman, & Diaz, 1987). The present article, however, focuses only on ESL literacy issues.

Need for attention to literacy development of ESL students

Sizable and growing language-minority populations

The number of students who are learning English as a second language in United States schools has dramatically increased over the last decade. For example, Asian/Pacific Islander presence in the United States increased 107.8% from 1980 to 1990, and Hispanic populations increased 53% (Forum, 1991). Most recent estimates are that over 2.2 million students in our schools have limited English proficiency (The Condition of Bilingual Education in the Nation: A Report to the Congress and the President, 1991). In our nation's largest school districts, currently about 1 out of every 3 students may be a language-minority student (National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1991). NCBE projects that by the year 2000 there will be over 3.4 million students with limited English proficiency in American schools, and by 2035 the number will have nearly doubled to 7.8 million.

While there are pockets of large numbers of language-minority students in the United States, for example in Texas and California, such students are dispersed throughout nearly
all states of the union (Condition, 1991). Spanish is the predominant language spoken in the homes of speakers of languages other than English, but more than 20 other languages are spoken as well (Numbers and Needs: Ethnic and Linguistic Minorities in the United States, 1991).

Academic/literacy achievement of language-minority students

Statistics on the academic and literacy achievement of language-minority students suggest a dire need for teachers' attention to literacy, the most fundamental of all academic abilities. For example, the lagging literacy achievement of children whose native language is Spanish is a growing concern. The gap between Spanish-speaking children and their nonminority, English-speaking peers widens increasingly throughout the school years (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991).

Figures from the Department of Public Instruction in my own state, North Carolina, illustrate the extent of literacy/achievement lag for language-minority students. Nearly half (42%) of all students with limited English proficiency who took the California Achievement Test (approximately 1,500 students) during the 1988-89 academic year scored below the 25th percentile (L.G. Toussaint, personal communication, October 1991). This figure is even more devastating when one considers that most students with limited English proficiency were exempted from taking the test because of their inability with English. In the following year, 32 school districts reported that 139 students with limited English proficiency had been retained in their grade level (L.G. Toussaint, personal communication, October 1991). Though these are figures from only one state, they are likely to be representative of many situations in the country.

Typical programs for language-minority students

Language-minority students' right of access to education without discrimination has been recognized in United States schools for almost two decades. The federal government now mandates that special provisions be made for every student with limited English proficiency in every school in the nation. Most states offer some type of special certification in teaching ESL (or in bilingual education). Tremendous variation is likely in the extent to which teachers holding such certification have had courses in contemporary issues and aspects of literacy training and development.

Many types of programs for language-minority students are implemented in United States schools, but four emerge as most common. No one type of approach has been found to be most effective (Condition, 1991). Where there are relatively small numbers of language-minority students and where funds for special programs are especially limited, pullout ESL programs are most common (Weber, 1991). In such a program students with limited English proficiency typically attend small-group classes conducted by a special teacher for a designated amount of time each week. Usually no instruction in the native language is provided.

Where there are large numbers of language-minority students (e.g., California or Texas), or where funds for special programs are more bountiful, three other types of programs are more common: transitional bilingual, content ESL, and two-way bilingual (Condition, 1991). In a transitional bilingual approach, beginning instruction in the children's native language is provided as a foundation before instruction in English. Some or all content areas may be taught in the native language for 2 or 3 years while spoken English is also taught. Content ESL programs offer ESL instruction within a "sheltered English" approach. Used in areas of the country where language-minority students speak many different languages, specially trained teachers provide content area instruction in English, modifying their language and methods to ensure its comprehensibility for the language-minority students. In two-way bilingual education programs, instruction is designed to help students achieve competence both in English and in their native languages.

Two highly important points about programs for language-minority students stand out: (a) They tend to be based on a view that minimizes the interrelatedness of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Condition, 1991); and (b) they often focus on spoken proficiency in English (Weber, 1991). Instruction is often based on the assumption that progress in reading and writing is directly dependent on progress in speaking and listening (Weber, 1991). The "listening-speaking first" approach has been based on early research on the me-
chancics of language and language learning, and on earlier views of reading and writing as symbol-to-speech translation.

Further, many programs for language-minority students tend "...to focus on teaching English grammar, morphology, and syntax and often disassociate language learning from its functional...and social bases" (Condition, 1991, p. 63). For example, the details of learning skills, such as identifying subjects and verbs, are likely to take precedence over more global issues, such as comprehending or producing whole, connected discourse in relation to purposes of the moment.

**Instructional guidelines, exemplary practices, and their supporting research and theory**

Research findings indicate that reading processes in a second language probably are not significantly different from those in a first language (Alderson, 1984). The same is also true for writing, though less evidence is available to support the belief (Edelsky, 1981; Hudelson, 1986, 1987). While literacy processes in first and second languages tend to be similar, two areas of potential differences should be noted. One is that initial reading and writing may be slower and more arduous in English because of lack of fluency. The other is that language-minority students may have limited background knowledge for specific content and vocabulary meaning in English (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1988). Consequently, in classroom lessons extra effort may be required to enhance students' background knowledge and specific vocabulary.

The guidelines that follow emanate directly from what is currently known about the development of reading and writing in native languages, but are couched in the context of the special needs of language-minority learners.

**Understand the role of cultural and societal contexts in second-language learning**

Teachers of students with limited English proficiency are more likely to be effective if they are sensitive to various aspects of the cultural and societal contexts of second-language learning. Here are a few of the many complex ways in which cultural and societal contexts are important in classrooms with ESL literacy learners.

**Student perception of teacher support.** Students who work in an environment where they believe the target language group appears supportive of their learning the target language tend to make greater gains in proficiency than others (Hakuta, Ferdman, & Diaz, 1987). Teachers who are sensitive to such bases for language-minority students' motivation or lack of it can attempt to bolster their motivational levels by ensuring that their own instruction is permeated with (a) respect for and appreciation of cultures different from their own, and (b) a sense of understanding of the difficulties of becoming literate in English.

**Background knowledge.** Cultural knowledge and values affect comprehension and composition of specific texts (Cazden, 1988). For example, in one study, Indians who read a text in English about a North American wedding tended to make events consistent with those of Indian weddings, resulting in distortions (Steffensen, Joag-Dev, & Anderson, 1979). Students from other cultures are likely to benefit from orientations to North American values and behaviors. They should also profit from clarification of cultural and other background issues as they read and write about specific topics. Further, teachers can also invite students to elaborate on their understandings of given concepts in their own cultures, and then they can help to relate their understandings to a North American perspective.

**Incongruencies between home and school cultures.** Different families and cultures hold different expectations for learning and schooling and for the potential benefits of schooling for children. Incongruencies in expectations, values, views, or beliefs between home and school can powerfully affect student learning. One way in which home and school cultures can be incongruent is that families of language-minority students may come from cultures where schools do not exist or where long-term schooling is not required. In such cases, families may not be aware of the pivotal nature of schooling in North American lives.

Another way in which home and school cultures can be incongruent is when teachers' methods do not match those expected by parents or by students. Some research suggests that different cultures hold different beliefs about what constitutes good teaching (Lareau,
1989). For example, parents with low literacy levels may think methods akin to “skill and drill” are the most appropriate ones to use (Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991). Likewise, some black parents may most appreciate teachers who focus on basics and are directive (Delpit, 1988). Many language-minority students’ parents may share similar beliefs. They may not understand or support teachers’ use of other methods.

Similarly, home-culture learning can be at odds with typical routines used in mainstream North American lessons. For example, in many Hispanic communities, when individuals come together to transact any business, it is considered rude to begin the agenda right away (Caizen, 1988). Children learn that effective participants in such situations use a few minutes of the opening period to talk about families and health. Yet many North American classroom routines follow an abrupt pattern of teacher initiation of topic, followed by student response, and then by teacher evaluation of the response (Caizen, 1988). Many Hispanic students may be alienated by the routine.

To give another example, Hawaiian children learn what some others have called “talk-story” through oral participation in their home cultures (Au & Mason, 1983). Talk-story is an oral narrative that rambles. It happens through conrapuntal conversation. That is, the speaker tries to draw others into the story as co-narrators. Others leap into the story, offering information and elaborating, and two or more individuals often talk at the same time. Students who have learned “talk-story” at home tend to disengage themselves from classroom participation structures that require single-speaker turn taking.

What can teachers do to address home and school cultural incongruencies? First, they can be aware of the possibilities of incongruencies, and they can therefore look for them. For example, lessons that continually go awry, extended lack of student progress, and lack of student involvement can be cues to teachers of ESL learners that some sort of cultural incongruity may be operating.

Second, where home-interaction patterns and classroom lesson routines are incongruous and therefore are sources of difficulty, teachers might consider changing aspects of their routines to make them compatible with patterns familiar to the children. This is quite obviously easier said than done, particularly in situations where teachers work with students from many different cultures. Often it is impossible to determine exactly what is incongruent. However, sometimes teachers can discover the natural language interaction patterns of youngsters by observing them in situations where they play or work with peers (Caizen, 1988). Sometimes they learn about particular patterns through reading or studying about cross-cultural similarities and differences, such as ones described in this article.

Where cultural incongruity determinations can be made and where classroom modifications are reasonable, the modifications would likely effect greater student learning. For instance, during reading lessons when a teacher of Hawaiian children allowed open turn taking that resembled the children’s home-culture “talk-story” interaction, students spent more time on the reading task, gave more correct responses, and discussed more of the text content (Au & Mason, 1983). As another example, Caizen (1988) described a Mexican-American teacher of Spanish-English bilingual first graders. The teacher was highly admired and respected by her students and by families in the local community. Caizen suggests the admiration was due, at least in part, to her personalized and affectionate style of teaching that had features congruent with the students’ home-culture expectations. The features included using endearing forms of address, such as pa and ma (hun); using diminutives, such as calladitos (quiet little ones—children) to express closeness; requiring the children to act respectfully, such as telling them to say “excuse me” (“Con permiso; di, pa”); and demonstrating her knowledge of the children’s family life (for example, expressing her understanding of the extended family in Hispanic life by saying “Thank God for those grandmothers who take care of us…” when one of her students talked about his sick grandmother).

Third, teachers can explain to ESL students their rules of classroom interaction, their methods, and the reasons for them (Delpit, 1988). North American classroom routines and literacy methods are familiar to many persons in mainstream North American society. To ESL students, they are not only unfamiliar, they are potential “insider secrets” that can keep ESL students on the outside of a powerful learning network. Making the rules
and routines and the reasons for them explicit may help to ease the students into an inner circle.

Fourth, teachers can find ways to reach out to the students' families to bridge distances created by home and school culture incongruencies. Again, they can try to clarify for parents their rules of classroom interaction, their methods, and the reasons for them. They can explain potential benefits of their approaches. Teachers can reach out in several ways. They might arrange in their classrooms group meetings with the families to show them students' work; they might visit their students' homes, carrying portfolios of student reading and writing activities; and they might open their classroom doors for daytime family drop-in observations.

Family language barriers can present major difficulties for teachers of ESL learners. However, even when entire families do not speak any English, teachers' efforts to reach out, to be open, and to be available are often understood and appreciated. Also, sometimes in group settings a translator emerges. Encouraging parents to bring friends with them for drop-in classroom visits, as well as at other times, can also help. 

*Immerse students in reading and writing situations as apprentices*

Results of work on the conditions under which reading and writing develop in native languages can be applied to classrooms with ESL students. The results suggest that literacy learning in native languages happens by socializing youngsters into the functions and meaning of reading and writing. That is, through interactions with others in a literate environment, students acquire a broad base of knowledge about the conventions and purposes of print (Nystrand, 1989; Rigg, 1991). In a sense, individuals become better readers and writers by being apprentices or by being immersed in reading-writing circumstances with other novices and proficient readers and writers. Thus, ESL students who are beginning to learn to read and write in English, as well as those who are more advanced, benefit from classrooms and curricula structured to focus on and revolve around the functions and purposes of reading and writing in everyday and academic situations (Edelsky, 1986; Grabe, 1991; Raimes, 1991; Rigg, 1991).

There are countless examples of such immersion or socializing experiences. Virtually any authentic reading or writing engagement of an ESL learner with another person (adult or child) is an immersion experience. Here are two illustrative practices. Dialogue journals are excellent ways of socializing ESL learners into literacy (Arthur, 1991). A dialogue journal can be a sort of ongoing conversation between a teacher and an ESL student. First, the student makes an entry into a spiral notebook. If at all possible, the entry should be initiated by the student so that the student has responsibility for controlling and directing the conversation. However, sometimes the student may need some help in making an entry. The teacher might prompt entries by suggesting an array of events that happened during the day (e.g., "Do you have any thoughts about what happened between you and your friend on the playground today?" or "You really seemed to like the book we read this morning. How about writing something about that?"). Or, when students are more experienced at dialogue-journal writing, the teacher might occasionally make the first entry. Students who can write extremely little English can be encouraged to both write and draw to express themselves. Then, the partners exchange the journals, each responding to what the other has written. Partners can question, react, challenge, or otherwise express themselves as freely as possible. New material can be introduced, but prior entries should be reacted to first. Journals can be exchanged as often as desired, but at least weekly.

A group reading conference (Fitzgerald, 1989) is another example of a way to immerse ESL students in a social literacy network. One approach to conducting such a conference is as follows. A group of four to eight children meets with the teacher. All children could be ESL students, or there could be a mixture of ESL and English-speaking students. Together, they read a published text written by a professional author. After reading, the teacher asks questions such as: What was it about? What did you like about it? If the author were here, what comments, questions, or suggestions would you have? Beginning ESL students should be encouraged to participate as fully as possible by speaking key words, pointing to text, or pantomiming if necessary.
Capitalize on the interrelatedness of orality and literacy

Few individuals would dispute the view that reading, writing, listening, and speaking are interrelated. Yet traditional approaches to helping students with limited English proficiency have tended to separate orality and literacy, focusing primarily on listening and speaking capacities. However, recent research supports the contention that activities that tend to combine the four modes are more likely to positively enhance both literacy and orality development (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983).

Many activities frequently espoused in language experience, whole language, and process writing approaches capitalize on the interrelatedness of the four modes of language. Here's one scenario from a local ESL teacher's classroom as she worked with 4 second-grade students. Although the scenario is from an ESL classroom setting, a similar one could easily be accomplished in a self-contained classroom, a reading resource classroom, or nearly any other situation. The children's native languages in the ESL classroom setting were Arabic, Japanese, and Spanish; three had begun to develop limited English vocabularies of about 200-300 words; the student who spoke Arabic had a more restricted English vocabulary of about 25 words. The teacher was mainly working on helping the students create a general understanding of what was read and encouraging them to enter into communication about the text through all four language modes. She began by saying that they were going to learn something about a bear. She pointed to the word bear on the board, showed several pictures of bears, said bear aloud each time, and asked the children to say the word. She pantomimed a bear, made funny faces, scratched herself, sat, and walked like a bear. The children imitated her. She repeated the pantomime, saying sentences aloud to describe each action, such as "The bear sits," "The bear eats," and "The bear walks." Several of the sentences appeared in the text they were about to read. Next, she presented a big book about a bear. The children sat on the floor with the teacher as she held the big book and read aloud, page by page. She pointed to the words as she read. Sometimes she asked one or all of the students to repeat a word, phrase, or sentence as she pointed to it. She paused often to elicit discussion, probe, and question the students. After completing a first reading, she asked the students to reread the text aloud along with her as best they could. Then she helped the students rewrite the book by assigning different parts to each child. Each child drew a picture of the assigned part (e.g., "The bear sits") and wrote the accompanying sentence under the picture. Two children wrote complete sentences. Two wrote only the word bear. Finally, the children held up their pictures and read their parts aloud.

Immerse students in literacy situations at the earliest possible time

Two tenets of a recent conceptualization of the development of early literacy suggest that ESL learners should be immersed in reading and writing at the earliest possible time. That is, it is not necessary to make literacy instruction contingent upon considerable listening/speaking proficiency. The first tenet is that literacy development begins long before formal instruction. Whereas formerly minimal listening and speaking capacities were considered prerequisites to learning to read and write, considerable research now suggests that literacy development, conceived broadly, begins in early infancy concomitantly with listening and speaking (Goodman, Goodman, & Flores, 1979; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). This tenet has been supported in research with young children whose native language is English and with students who are learning English as a second language (Edelsky, 1986; Hudelson, 1984; Rigg, 1991). Even infants, when exposed to reading and writing, develop concepts of the functions or purposes of literacy, of what print is, of "storyness," and of directionality in reading connected text in English.

The second tenet is that reading and writing develop concomitantly. That is, it is not necessary to withhold writing until considerable reading proficiency is established. The former notion that reading precedes writing has been supplanted. Writing begins when children learn that they can draw objects. Soon they discover that they can draw pictures that have meaning to tell stories. Next, they draw letters and words and scribble. Eventually, they begin using invented spellings and finally learn regularities of composit-
tion. Learning about writing can develop alongside, or in relation to, learning about reading.

Thus, in practice the guideline “immerse students in literacy situations at the earliest possible time” means that reading and writing can be introduced as soon as ESL students enter the classroom. There is no magic number of listening- or speaking-vocabulary words that must be understood before reading and writing can begin.

Focus on the “big things” first

Research on successful second-language learners’ devices for learning English suggests that teachers who primarily promote attention to “big things” in initial reading and writing acquisition are more likely to effectively help their students (Nurss & Hough, 1992). Successful students of English as a second language start by focusing on holistic features of language—features which revolve around communicative functions and intentions (Chaudron, 1988; Krashen, 1982). For example, they try to ignore mistakes and focus on keeping their audiences interested, getting and giving main ideas, and tailoring messages to fit audiences.

Teachers who help ESL learners get the big things first while reading and writing will highlight getting and giving main ideas or gists; making important inferences; seeing and making structures for texts; and developing metacognitive strategies such as rereading to search for needed information. “Small things” such as the following are not continually ignored, but are initially deemphasized: getting and making details, using correct grammar, standard punctuation and spelling, pronouncing words correctly, and using word recognition techniques such as phonics. The ESL-teacher scenario described at the end of the earlier section on the interrelatedness of orality and literacy shows ways in which a teacher can focus on big things and delay attention to small things.

Immerse learners in reading and writing across the curriculum

Research on using reading and writing to learn shows the power of using print, through both reading and writing, to enhance learning in content areas. Among the most noted benefits of using reading and writing to learn are improved understanding of the specific content being read or written about; improved ability to organize, to interpret, to generalize, to perceive logical relations, and to evaluate arguments; and improved reading and writing abilities (Vacca & Vacca, 1986). Further, using content area materials to help language-minority students learn English has been shown to increase student motivation, provide more opportunities for students to acknowledge and explore their own prior knowledge on issues, and provide meaningful, contextualized language-learning situations (Crandall, 1987).

This guideline is reflected in classroom practice with ESL learners in two ways. One way is to sometimes use content area materials when the main purpose is to focus on reading and writing instruction. This can be easily accomplished by presenting content area trade books and textbooks, as well as content specific pieces from young children’s magazines. Children can also write on topics normally considered to be content area focused. Another way the guideline is reflected in classroom practice is to have children read and write when the main purpose is to focus on learning specific content. Sometimes both purposes are equally weighted. For example, a local first-grade teacher I know asked her students, some of whom were language-minority students, to learn about whales through a myriad of reading and writing tasks over a 2-month period. She wanted the students to learn about whales, but she saw equal importance in the development of their reading and writing abilities.

Create classroom communities conducive to risk-taking

There are at least two reasons for creating supportive social classroom networks that allow language-minority students to take risks. One grows out of information presented earlier in this article. That is, reading and writing develop through social interactions. Consequently, literacy is more likely to develop through activities that create relationships between English learners and English speakers representing various literacy levels. Language-minority students will only risk involvement in such situations if they are fully supported by peers and teachers.

A second reason is that risk taking and the
ability to de-emphasize one's own mistakes are essential to successful learning in general and to learning English in particular. In most situations, increased success is also accompanied by increased failure (Swets, 1973). Interestingly, the most successful ESL learners have been described as willing to take risks in learning English through experimentation in using whatever words they need to maintain communication (Wong-Fillmore, 1979). In their experimentation, they make many mistakes, but the success of communication outweighs the mistakes.

Several teacher actions can help make classrooms safe for ESL literacy learners:

- Encourage experimentation in reading and writing by allowing students to "play" with language. For example, choose some texts to read that overtly play with language themselves, such as Dr. Seuss books. Or, allow new word inventions during oral reading, writing, and discussions.
- Continually reward ESL learners' efforts to understand and communicate in reading and writing by praising, smiling, and showing your engagement with their efforts through eye contact and positive facial expression.
- Downplay mistakes made during conversation, oral reading, or writing.
- Be patient. Allow ESL learners plenty of time to read words silently or aloud and to express thoughts orally or in writing.
- If there are other English-speaking students in the class, talk with them about how they can help ESL learners. Other students will tend to imitate the behaviors the teacher models, but explicit discussions with them can also be useful to help them to focus on ESL students' efforts and to ignore mistakes.

Conclusion

Learning to read and write in English is a fundamental right, as well as responsibility, of language-minority students in the United States. Increasing numbers of students with limited English proficiency pose special challenges to educators. Current research and theory in literacy and language development suggest guidelines for language-minority students' literacy learning. Importantly, the guidelines can be used by both specialized (e.g., ESL teachers and reading teachers) and mainstream teachers.

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Transforming Deficit Myths about Learning, Language, and Culture

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Too often it is assumed that children who come from non-mainstream backgrounds are at risk just because they are from non-mainstream backgrounds. This article puts to rest the deficit myths about such children and proposes alternative ways of seeing the strengths they bring to the language arts classroom.

For years our school system has identified students who differ from the mainstream with certain labels. As the decades change, so do the labels. But the same kinds of children are identified as slow learners, learning disabled, culturally deprived, semi-lingual, limited-English speaking, or the label of the late 1980s and early 1990s—at risk. Who are these children? They are largely the children of minority groups, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, children who are bilingual, or children who speak English as a second language.

We can look back historically and see the development of categories that have been used to identify and stereotype each of the minority groups represented in this population—Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, African Americans, immigrant Asians, and Native Americans—and more generally, the students who are identified as learning disabled. And we currently have a situation in which many students are doubly labeled—as linguistic minorities and as special education students (Cummins, 1984, 1986; Hume, 1988; Ortiz & Yates, 1983; Stone, 1991).

The category at risk continues to be used, like the categories of the past, to separate and classify certain groups of students. Students are identified as at risk for failure from the day they enter the school doors—and this label is used to rationalize their failure if they do encounter difficulty in school (Oakes, 1985).

In this article we critique the label at risk and discuss four myths or habits, habitually unexamined attitudes, which form the basis of this deficit view of students who are not from an Anglo middle-class world. Underlying these myths are the historical, social, political, and economic policies of those in power that are used to control those who are not in power. These policies establish a subordinate role that these groups are expected to conform to and accept.

We compare these myths with alternatives based on different conceptions about children. We cite research from our own work and that of colleagues which indicates how education for students can be meaningful and successful when the basic assumptions underlying these myths are challenged and replaced with other more constructive beliefs. We argue that teachers are the key to successfully reinterpreting the identification of children “at risk.” Educators who have rejected these deficit myths and nonproductive beliefs have been immersed in settings in which they learn to critically reflect on these traditional ways of looking at students and replace them with a more positive view. It is only through the process of changing ourselves as teachers that we are able to view our students from a different perspective.

Critiquing the Label At Risk

The label at risk, like other labels, is socially constructed through society’s designation of patterns of behavior that are considered acceptable or nonacceptable (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Tomlinson, 1981, 1982). Yet we often accept the label as truth and tend not to connect a label with the social, political, and economic atmosphere in which the label is born and used. Fine (1990) argues that the term at risk is an ideological diversion. “It satisfies both the desire to isolate these people, by the Right, and to display them, by the Left” (p. 55). The term is used deceptively to explain failure without considering “class, race/ethnicity, and gender inequities” (p. 65). From Fine’s view, the use of such a term “keeps us from being broadly, radically, and structurally
creative about transforming schools and social conditions for today's and tomorrow's youth" (p. 65).

A wealth of evidence exists about the effect of these labels. All of the groups that tend to be labeled as at risk make up a large percentage of the drop-out population. A study by the American Council on Education indicated that "the proportion of Latino students completing high school slid from 60.1% in 1984 to 55.9% in 1989 . . . the completion rate for blacks rose slightly during the same period from 74.7% to 76.1%" (p. 1). In California, one state with a large minority population, the high school completion rate was 67.3% in general. For Latinos, it was 53.7% and for African Americans, 53.5% (Merl, 1991). Those students in special education are in double jeopardy. The Department of Education estimated that the drop-out rate among students in special education is at least 19% greater than for nonhandicapped students (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Zigmond, 1990).

Many children of color are also identified as special needs learners. Classes designated for the learning disabled and mildly retarded are disproportionately made up of children from low-income and minority families (Cummins, 1984, 1986). The U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights reported on data from the 1986–87 school year: "While minority students constituted 30% of all public school students, they accounted for 42% of all students classified as educable mentally retarded (EMR), 40% of those classified as trainable mentally retarded (TMR), and 35% of those classified as seriously emotionally disturbed (SED)" (Hume, 1988, p. 5).

Thus, we have entrenched social and political policies that have had negative effects for children. We argue that these policies are based on habits rather than realities. Only by examining these habits are we able to consider how, through our language and actions, we continue to perpetuate policies that have a destructive effect on children.

Critiquing the Habitudes That Guide A Deficit View

Myth 1: "At risk" children have a language problem. Their language and culture is deficient. They lack experiences. These deficits cause them to have learning problems.

The at risk label perpetuates the language and cultural deficit myth because variables such as non-English speaking, immigrant, low-income households, poorly educated parents, etc., are often listed as characteristics for identifying "at risk" students. Implicit in such a list are the deficit views of biological and cultural determinism.

Language Deficiency and Biological Determinism

One of the most pervasive and pernicious myths about "at risk" students is that they have a language deficit. This myth is reserved not just for bilingual and non-English-speaking students. It is also commonly held about African American and other minorities. It is not possible to trace fully the original source of this myth in this article, but we can point to specific places in the research literature where language differences are associated with deficiencies.

Prior to a beginning enlightenment in the 1960s, there was an extensive body of research literature that examined the relationship between language and intelligence as measured by IQ tests (Gould, 1981). A great deal of the research has focused specifically on the effect of bilingualism on intelligence (Hornby, 1977). The historical context in which this research took place, however, preordained the results. During the first half of this century, much of this research was conducted with recent immigrants to the United States who were seen as coming from inferior races and cultures (Hakuta, 1986). The results of the IQ tests, which were seen as valid measures of intelligence regardless of language and cultural differences, confirmed the pre-held beliefs of scientists—immigrants were inherently less intelligent. Indeed, the cause of this intellectual deficiency was not related to language; rather, it was the other way around. The "language or bilingual handicap" was the result of a general "genetic inferiority" within the immigrants. The linguistic deficiency was a secondary and necessary outcome of "hereditary deprivation."

Vestiges of this belief persist in our society and schools to this day. Although not usually publically voiced, this view often underlies attitudes and behaviors of teachers and others toward non-English-speaking immigrant students.

Language Deficiency and Cultural Determinism

The language deficiency myth is also perpetuated by a culturally deterministic perspective which argues that differences in social class or ethnic group experiences expose students to linguistically different environments. In this view the language of students from different cultures is seen as inadequate for dealing with the complex
uses of language required in educational contexts. The more benign form of cultural determinism admits that both a basic cultural deficiency and social factors such as prejudice and social class hamper student performance.

Teachers who describe their students as "a-lingual" (they don't speak any language well) or who explain poor student classroom performance as a function of cultural or home deficiencies are actually resorting to an extreme form of the cultural deprivation explanation. It is this perspective that negates and invalidates student experiences and permits educators to demand that students (and parents) give themselves to school to be made over and properly acculturated. Such language/cultural deficiency can only be cured by having the student change, to "learn English and be American!"

Myth 2: "At risk" children need to be separated from the regular class and need a structured program based on hierarchical notions of language development.

Our schools have institutionalized methods for working with students who encounter difficulty within the mainstream so they are no longer seen as the "problem" of the regular classroom teacher. Educators, policy makers, and parents have complacently accepted that if a child has a problem, the explanation for the problem is found in the child. We often do not question the teaching that has or has not taken place. Instead, the student is identified and placed in a categorical language or special education program. An entire bureaucracy has evolved as a result of our focus on finding deficits in the child's learning ability, language, and culture.

Certainly, some children need some additional support; but categorical programs necessitate identification, labeling, and separation for the student to receive help. This process often negates any possible positive effect from the extra help (Taylor, 1990a). Instead it renders hopelessness, voicelessness, and despair. Such separation also conflicts with our understanding of how cognitive development is best supported. Vygotsky postulates that since cognition is a social process, individuals become proficient learners by engaging in social interactions and experiences under the direction of those more proficient than themselves. Since knowledge is socially constructed, individuals must be exposed to demonstrations by more proficient learners—both peers and adults—to understand the actual use of a particular cognitive process. When the less proficient learners are separated from the proficient learners, the demonstrations taking place in the classroom are decreased or provided by others who are also confused by the process being discussed by the class.

We must also raise questions about the curriculum delivered in the separate program. There has been an assumption that the specialist will provide programs that are more individual, more supportive, and deal more explicitly with student needs. Yet, data from evaluations of special education and Chapter 1 programs indicate that frequently this is not the case (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989; Lipsky & Gartner, 1989). Instruction in the categorical programs designed for these students has been typically based on a different model—a hierarchical model focusing on subskill mastery. The content of the lessons is often so fragmented that the intended goal of the lesson is obscured by its perceived simplicity. That is, the teaching is organized at low levels of cognition based on the (mis)assumptions that "these" children need more direct instruction on the separate parts in order to later understand the complexity of the whole. Unfortunately, this additive perspective results in a self-fulfilling prophecy. The students are confused and do not become proficient language users, not because of their inability to learn, but rather because they do not have opportunities to practice the whole process.

Myth 3: Standardized tests can accurately identify and categorize students who are at risk for learning/language problems.

We have a long history of using standardized assessments to identify and classify students. Reading and math assessments are the yardsticks that are used to measure academic achievement. Basically, "at riskness" is determined by these measures. Current tests used to identify and classify students encountering difficulties measure the complex cognitive processes of language, reading, writing, mathematics, and reasoning through simplistic means. Many question the construct validity of almost all of these assessments, including tests of intelligence (Gardner, 1983; Gould, 1981; Rogoff & Lave, 1984); reading and language (Meier, 1981); and mathematics (Lave, 1988; Rogoff & Lave, 1984). Although there are attempts to construct measures that are more valid, measures that capture the complexity of human thinking have not yet been defined.

Myth 4: "At risk" children have problems because parents don't care, can't read, or don't work with them.

Blaming the children's parents, the culture, and their language for their lack of success in school has been a classic strategy used to subordinate
and continue to fault the "victim." This "blaming the victim" strategy is not a useful one. Fine (1990) argues that as part of this strategy, public schools represent themselves "as the means for low-income students to escape their local communities" (p. 62).

In a study conducted by Trueba, Moll, and Díaz (1982), interviews revealed that teachers considered Latino parents to be unconcerned about the academic progress of their students. Teachers arrived at these conclusions on the basis of the lack of parent-initiated contact with teachers, especially when students were considered to be academically marginal. Interviews with parents, however, revealed a completely different perspective. Parents were extremely concerned about the education of their children, but they were reluctant to contact teachers and school personnel about this for several reasons. First, as recent immigrants from Mexico, they still held the perspective that the classroom was the teacher's domain. Any attempt to influence what took place, especially on pedagogical basis, was seen by parents as an intrusion into the professional arena of the teacher. It would be considered rude and insulting for parents to presume to "interfere" with the teacher. Parents felt that their role was to support the teacher at home, especially in matters of discipline.

Despite this view, parents were still very concerned about the impact of school on their children and the relative lack of knowledge they had about this institution in the United States. In an attempt to learn more about the schools, parents organized "Cafes de Amistad" (Friendship Coffees), to which all interested Spanish-speaking parents could come and discuss school and share knowledge. The discussions were very pragmatic. "Why does my daughter have to dress for P.E. even if I request that she not dress due to slight illness or menstruation?" "Why are there no doors on the bathroom stalls?" "Who do we see about finding out about our child going to college?" These discussions revealed a significant knowledge gap in their understanding of school but were manifestations of their extensive concern with knowing more about school.

A second reason stated by parents for not contacting the teacher was their English language fluency and the possibility of embarrassment or miscommunication. Not surprisingly, teachers had interpreted parental silence as a lack of concern or interest. Nothing could have been farther from the truth. The problem was not with the parents but with school personnel who misin-

terpreted parental behavior through the lens of a perspective that reflected only the view of the institution.

**New Assumptions**

Based on our beliefs and knowledge about the learning and teaching of language and the role of culture in learning and language, we propose the following four alternative views about children. We believe these assumptions apply to all children, and we have applied them in our experiences in schools. Underlying these beliefs is a philosophy of learning and teaching that focuses on knowledge construction and language as a means of mediation (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Siegel & Carey, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978). It uses new frameworks—socio-psycholinguistics, socio-historical psychology, socio-psychogenesis, and the socio-political philosophy of learning and teaching—to give the teacher the understanding necessary to restructure the social organization of the learning and teaching of language and literacy through mutually constructed social contexts (Flores, 1986). This new knowledge challenges the status quo literacy and biliteracy curriculum and asks teachers to revalue their habits and practices related to the traditional way of teaching language and literacy (K. Goodman, 1991).

**Assumption 1: Children are proficient language users and bring many experiences into the classroom.**

When we accept our children's knowledge about language, learning, and culture, we not only validate their being but acknowledge their self-worth. We do not disrupt, impose, or threaten their learning processes: Many research studies from multiple disciplines have demonstrated the language and cultural strengths that language learners bring to school (e.g., Anderson & Stokes, 1984; Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1983; Díaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986; Edelsky, 1986; Emig, 1983; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Goodman & Goodman, 1978; Y. Goodman, 1990; Graves, 1983; Halliday, 1975, 1978; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Heath, 1983; Lindfors, 1987; Moll, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1989; Wells, 1986).

Whole language pedagogy is using this research base as a foundation from which to support students in becoming proficient readers and writers in school. These knowledge bases are being applied to all students, including those who are usually identified as "at risk." By building on the language experiences brought to school by the students, teachers validate students' present knowledge and use it as a stepping stone for the
development of more complex understanding.

Assumption 2: Children need opportunities to learn language in rich, integrated settings and can be successful in regular classroom programs.

Creating social contexts in which children engage in authentic language and literacy use is a fundamental theory-in-practice guiding the organization, facilitation, monitoring, and assessment of language learning and teaching (Edelsky, Draper, & Smith, 1986; Freire, 1970; Halliday, 1978). Among the many practices or social contexts that provide opportunities for children to learn language and teachers to teach language are Daily Read-Alouds, Reading Partners, D.E.A.R. Time (Drop Everything and Read), Pen Pals, Literature Studies, Theme Cycles, Writers’ Workshop, Interactive Journals, Learning Logs, Collaborative Stories, Inquiry and Research, and Scientific Method. Other contexts remain to be created, developed, and refined.

The teacher acts as a cultural mediator, organizing the learning in order to mediate levels of knowledge between the teacher and the students and among students themselves (Díaz & Flores, 1990). By the teacher’s deliberate demonstrations of how written language is used in the social context of authentic dialogue, children’s acquisition of literacy knowledge will be facilitated and not impeded (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Flores, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). When the teacher deliberately organizes and establishes the social context for authentic oral and written dialogue, she co-creates and mediates knowledge through zones of proximal development as the children “come to know” written language through meaningful social interaction with more capable peers and adults (Vygotsky, 1978). Bilingual children are not only learning literacy in one language, but in two.

Assumption 3: The language development of these students can be effectively monitored by observing their language use in authentic settings across the curriculum.

We propose that primary sources—actual samples of children’s work—be used to document their growth and/or regressions, the peaks and valleys. Much work in authentic assessment and portfolio assessment has taken place already (Bartoli & Botel, 1988; Goodman, Goodman, & Hood, 1988; Harp, 1990; Linek, 1991; Valencia, 1990).

Evaluation based on the perspective of the learner considers the larger social, political, and cultural contexts in which the student lives, learns, and uses language (Taylor, 1990b). It also places us face-to-face with our previous assumptions about evaluation and testing. “Observations of abilities that contradict test scores should not be denied. Rather, they should be accepted as evidence of the complexity of the student’s learning and a challenge to the limitations of standardized tests” (Taylor, 1990b, p. xiii). Like our other new assumptions, the change in evaluation is not just a change in practice, but rather a shift in our basic perspectives regarding how we look at a child’s language use and development.

Assumption 4: The parents of these children are interested in the achievement and success of their children in the school setting and can be partners in the educational experience of their children.

“Fundamental to a strong school-community relationship are certain beliefs . . . that low-income parents and communities are precisely the “public” and the constituency to whom public schools are accountable” (Fine, 1990, p. 62). There is extensive research that documents the intense interest that parents of minority students have in the education of their children. The following are but a few examples of the many efforts in which parents have collaborated with teachers and researchers to learn about working with their children. Cummins (1989) cites the work of Alma Flor Ada with migrant parents in a family literacy project. As part of this work, 50 to 60 Spanish-speaking parents met after their working day to select and read children’s books to and with their children and to discuss these books with other parents. The program was very successful and well-attended. Parents became familiar with school expectations for their children and learned how to be supportive of school efforts. Trueba and Delgado-Gaitan (1989) established a similar after-school literacy program for elementary students and parents and found parents to be eager and willing participants.

Heath’s (1983) well-known work in minority schooling was initiated in great part at the bequest of African American parents in the black community. They were concerned about the poor performance of their children and wanted to have an explanation. Similarly, Trueba, Moll, and Díaz (1982) found that Spanish-speaking, immigrant parents in a California border town were extremely interested in how schooling affected their children but were reluctant to contact teachers because of fears of encroaching on teachers’ professional jurisdiction. In recent work by Moll and Greenberg (1990), teachers are incorporating the “funds of knowledge” of parents from the Latino barrio in order to integrate home and school. As
these cases show, parents are greatly concerned about how their children do in school and are willing to sacrifice their time after an often grueling work day to help the children do better in school.

**A Practical Application of These Assumptions**

It is easy to criticize, and it is even easier to speak in generalities about what "should" be done to make education better. In this section we present a brief, anecdotal sketch of an inner-city school in transformation. The transformation is occurring through the application of the assumptions described above. Mark Keppel Elementary is prototypical of large urban school districts across the United States. It serves 600 students, of whom 84% are Latino; 7.5%, African American; 2%, Asian American; and 1%, Anglo American. Every parent, with only a single exception, is classified as an unskilled laborer. Like other schools of this type, this school scored very low on standardized achievement measures, at the 1 percentile of all schools in California on the California Assessment Program (CAP Test) and at the 3 percentile when compared to schools serving similar neighborhoods and students.

The transformation process began 3 years ago as part of a project that sought to implement successful elements of bilingual programs (Spiegel-Coleman & Acosta, in progress). The principal and teachers agreed to implement a curriculum that incorporated the assumptions described above and that focused on whole language pedagogy (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1990; K. Goodman, 1986). The Los Angeles County Case Studies Project targeted 6 schools that would be committed to long-term staff development and curricular shift from a very traditional "hierarchical skills" instructional model to a "holistic" pedagogy. The Los Angeles County consultants, along with the site principals, collectively planned and coordinated the staff development that was conducted by the first and third authors.

Teachers' pedagogical knowledge (intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal) about the learning and teaching of language and literacy was the focus of the on-going staff development. The members of the group collaboratively committed themselves to engage in a long-term transformation in beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, and attitudes. The teachers and the principal, Howard Bryan, worked on accepting the new assumptions and applying them in the classrooms and in the school every day.

They replaced their myths with these new assumptions: (1) Our children bring many strengths to the classroom—ability to learn, proficient language use, and cultural experiences; (2) The teacher can organize the daily social interactions with a multitude of opportunities for language and literacy use; (3) Teachers know how to monitor the children's development across many settings on a daily basis; and (4) Parents are interested in their children's schooling success. The educators at this school faced the deficit myths head-on, rose above the power of such myths, and applied their new pedagogical knowledge about language and literacy development. It took courage, commitment, a willingness to take risks, and hard work.

In a nutshell, here is part of their story. When we started working together (teachers, principals, consultants), many staff members lamented the children's "lack of experiences," "lack of parental support in reading," and "lack of language" as the culprits for the children's "inability" to learn how to read and write "at grade level." The underlying beliefs and assumptions related to these statements were the myths that governed the language and cultural deficit knowledge about "these" kinds of children. The change process began with a focus on three areas: staff development; demonstrations, observations, and coaching; and study groups.

**Staff Development**

Traditionally, staff development is presented to teachers, and they magically are supposed to implement it. Given that we were venturing into a long-term commitment of collaborative teaching/learning/research, we started by organizing and planning day-long staff development meetings by grade levels and teacher needs. However, this traditional social structure left teachers frustrated because they could not use the practices suggested in the meetings. It was not enough to support teachers in changing practices in their classrooms. It was by listening and acknowledging the frustrations and dissonance that led us to pose the problems of the dialectic between learning and teaching for ourselves. Faced with the simultaneous challenges of creating new knowledge and constructing new social contexts in the classrooms for authentic literacy uses, the teachers resisted, confronted, and explored. The frustrations and curiosities led to creating new ways to deal with their uncertainties and struggles for understanding how the teacher plays the major role in the learning/teaching process. This mediation of
teachers' knowledge mainly took place through demonstrations, observations, and coaching.

**Demonstrations, Observations, and Coaching**

Teachers mediated their students' understandings about language, and the teacher-researcher mediated the teachers' understandings about language learning and knowledge construction. The demonstrations by the teacher/researcher were based on teachers' questions, concerns, issues raised, and need to know. For example, the primary-grade teachers had several concerns about interactive journals. They wanted to know: (1) how to respond to the children's journal entries more authentically, (2) how to mediate between the children's levels of knowledge, (3) how to get reluctant children to write, and (4) how to orchestrate the multiple responses during a given time period.

Authentic responses were difficult because teachers were not accustomed to engaging in authentic dialogue using written language with the children. Sharing personal experiences, emotions, feelings, and commentaries were not the norm. Thus, demonstrations in the classrooms served as a mediation between the teacher-researcher's intent and the teachers' growing understanding of this intent. These demonstrations provided an impetus for further discussion and reflection among the teachers and led to the establishment of study groups. These study groups provided the forum for structured debriefing.

**Study Groups**

Initially, a small group of interested teachers began to meet voluntarily, but this structure did not work. They called it a study group, but it had no organized structure or meeting time. The commitment and need were there, but meeting "whenever" for "whatever" blocked the initial intent, intellectual sharing, sparring, and debate. Faced with this problem, both the teachers and the principal decided to structure formally these study groups so that they met regularly within the traditional school day. This led to reorganizing faculty meetings from the traditional, mundane, everyday-business-as-usual meetings to very lively, dialogic encounters about theories and practices related to their growing understandings, disequilibrium, frustrations, and inquiries about language and literacy learning and teaching. Teachers needed time to think, to develop, to share, to plan, to debate, to question, and to reflect critically with each other. Eventually, this need became so apparent that now every Wednesday is a shortened school day for children, and teachers can use the time to meet in their study groups at least twice a month.

During these study group sessions, the teachers read research articles, books, or chapters. They use these to expand their intellectual understanding. The other Wednesdays are devoted to various leadership teams' needs such as student reviews, assemblies, athletics, parent/community issues, grade-level needs, school politics, and budget allocations. The institutionalization of the study group not only shifted the teachers' social relations about the value of collaborative learning but also (simultaneously) shifted the power relations between administration and teachers. The principal and teachers co-created new social structures to share the work needed to accomplish the multitude of tasks in schooling.

Within a few months of questioning myths, reorganizing the teaching of language and literacy, and focusing on the children's strengths, teachers were amazed to see the differences in the children's knowledge and use of written language. They compared what they used to do with what they were now doing. These continuous critical reflections initially resulted in guilt about how they had harmed the children previously. But, they had only done what they thought was in the best interest of the children.

Now, 3 years later, when asked about the impact of their change process, many of the teachers at Mark Keppel School commented that their beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, attitudes, and instructional practices had significantly shifted. Related to their perceptions of the children's language (oral and written) and experiential capabilities, they critically reflected with the following comments:

"I have more contact with the children on a daily basis and know where my children are in their knowledge construction about written language."

"I understand how the children 'come to know' the alphabetic principles of the English and Spanish languages."

"We also know that our teaching impedes or facilitates our children's learning."

"I am learning how to mediate between my kids' levels of knowledge and the knowledge that they need to acquire."

"We accept our children's language, experiences, and knowledge about the world; and we begin with that."

"We know that the teacher makes a significant difference in the success or failure of our students."

Making a positive difference in the lives of our children while they are in school is the challenge at hand for all teachers. "Seeing the success that
the children are having gives me more confidence to continue" was another of the many comments that several of the teachers reiterated.

The principal's leadership role and willingness to shift power relation was also essential to this transformation. One of his fundamental goals was to change attitudes. He commented:

As the curricular and administrative leader of the school, I wanted to facilitate attitude change. I told teachers that we don't accept low expectations. We can't afford it any longer. If you allow children to do poorly because of outside influences, then you are making an excuse for their failure. The teacher's attitude is more important than her ability to teach.

With such commitment and leadership, the school transformed from a low-academic-achieving school to one with a significant academic performance record. For example, the third-grade CAP scores had risen to the 33rd percentile in comparison to all California schools and to the 82nd percentile for similar schools. These scores reflect significant gains, gains that all involved attribute to the restructuring of attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about "at risk" students. Commitment, collaboration, destruction of myths, hard work, and the courage to change made a significant difference in children's lives in school.

Conclusion

The myths about children of color, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and children identified as learning disabled need to be exposed and discarded from our beliefs, our expectations, and from our everyday practices. Debilitating myths imprison the mind and render people voiceless and therefore powerless. This voicelessness and powerlessness perpetuates the cycle of oppression, the cycle of inadequacy, the cycle of failure. We can no longer believe in these myths; we can no longer tolerate their intellectual presence; we must begin to transform ourselves by not participating in their daily use. We believe in the philosophy articulated by Stenhouse (1985): "It is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of the school by understanding it" (p. vi).

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Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Elementary School Classrooms

Barbara R. Schirmer, Jay Casbon, and Lindy L. Twiss

The purpose of this new column is to provide a forum for the discussion of current research, practice, and trends regarding the literacy learning of diverse learners. Over the next 2 years, we will discuss proven and promising instructional strategies and techniques, examine issues that present difficulty and challenge to teachers and children, and discuss the influence of laws and policies on the literacy development of students with disabilities, students from diverse economic backgrounds, students from families in which non-English languages are used, and students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups.

One of the controversial topics currently engaging U.S. educators is the inclusion of children with disabilities into general education classrooms. In 1993, the Council for Exceptional Children developed a policy statement on inclusive schools and community settings in which they wrote:

CEC believes that a continuum of services must be available for all children, youth, and young adults. CEC also believes that the concept of inclusion is a meaningful goal to be pursued in our schools and communities. In addition, CEC believes children, youth, and young adults with disabilities should be served whenever possible in general education classrooms in inclusive neighborhood schools and community settings. Such settings should be strengthened and supported by an infusion of specially trained personnel and other appropriate supportive practices according to the individual needs of the child.

The inclusive schools movement has been driven by two forces. The first, and what some individuals call the roots of the inclusion movement in the United States, is the civil rights movement. Years after the 1954 Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka ruling had established the right of all children to equal opportunity for an education, parents of children with disabilities looked to this U.S. Supreme Court decision to provide a basis for litigation and legislation that would protect the rights of their children. Discussions regarding "separate but equal" in the 1950s and 1960s were reignited in the 1990s as individuals with disabilities, parents, educators, and public policy makers scrutinized the separateness of special education. When the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 was passed in the U.S., it stipulated that children should be educated in the least restrictive environment and required that "special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of handicapped children from the regular educational environment occur only when the nature or severity of the handicap is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily" (89 Stat. 781). This law was last amended in 1990 and reitled the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, but the provision that children with disabilities should be educated in the least restrictive environment has not changed.

The second force is the school reform movement. As Lipsky and Gartner (1992) noted, inclusion is part of the third wave of school reform. The first wave focused on standards, curriculum, teacher certification requirements, and salary. The second wave focused on teacher empowerment, school-based management, and parental choice. And the third wave focuses on the student: Giving students respect, building upon their knowledge, providing them control over the learning process and appropriate materials, helping them to see the connection between subjects, encouraging cooperation among students—these are the necessary predicates to increases in student learning, the bases for student improvement. (p. 5)

Both of these forces have led advocates of full inclusion to believe that children with disabilities should be educated in general education classrooms in neighborhood schools. They argue that not only are these classrooms the least restrictive environment for children with disabilities, but also that inclusive schools will raise standards, increase student achievement, enhance positive self-identity, encourage strong social relationships, and enable students to develop the knowledge and skills to become lifelong independent learners. Advocates believe that inclusive schools benefit all children because they do not emphasize disability or inability; they focus on ability.

Although this stance has ignited passionate argument, U.S. school districts have not waited for educators to resolve the debate. Instead, educators have begun to look to the neighborhood school as the first option for the child with a disability and to consider other educational placements only in light of compelling evidence that the child cannot succeed in the general education classroom with age-appropriate peers, even if given substantial support.

As children with disabilities enter general education classrooms, classroom teachers are asking for help in developing models, strategies, and techniques that will enable all of their students to be successful learners. We looked at one group of special education students in a public elementary school to see what the challenges are, what types of help their teachers are being given, and how well the goals of inclusion are being met.
One school

In the school we visited, 31 fifth- and sixth-grade students, 10 through 12 years of age, qualify for special education because of health impairment, hearing impairment, learning disability, behavior disorder, fetal alcohol syndrome, or attention deficit with hyperactivity disorder. These 31 students receive help from one special education teacher for 40 minutes to 3 hours daily, depending on their individualized education plans, and they spend the remainder of the school day in their regular classrooms. When the special education students are in the regular classrooms, class sizes number between 30 and 32. In addition to the direct teaching provided by the special and regular education teachers, an educational specialist has responsibility for assisting with curriculum development and modification, classroom schedules, behavior management systems, monitoring student progress, data-collection systems, ordering materials, and parent communication.

The regular classroom teachers report that their greatest challenge is providing appropriate literacy instruction to those children whose reading and writing abilities may be as many as 5 years below grade level. Teachers also recognize that the children’s special physical, emotional, social, learning, and communication needs make it necessary to seek ways to modify the strategies they use. For example, most of these teachers are whole language enthusiasts, believing deeply that the focus of literacy instruction should always be on the meaningful use of language in authentic context, children should be given choice and ownership, and processes should be emphasized over products. Yet the strategies that reflect these beliefs have not always been successful with individual children.

As a team, these teachers have developed workable short-term strategies, are considering a variety of long-term strategies, and are open to promising ideas. Each strategy is measured against the goals of inclusion by asking the following questions:

1. Does this strategy enhance the children’s self-identity and encourage positive social relationships?

2. Is this strategy based on high expectations and will it result in high achievement?

3. Does this strategy encourage the children to be autonomous learners?

Short-term strategies: A workable compromise. Currently, the special education teacher uses a pull-out model for literacy instruction. She is using a highly structured, direct instruction model for reading, incorporating some basal materials and some trade books. This seems to contradict her whole language philosophy, but she has found that attention to skills, frequent and positive reinforcement, and the way that the children’s attention is held throughout instruction have had an extremely positive effect on the children’s reading achievement. And because the children see themselves as successful readers, she has found that their self-concepts have improved.

Writing instruction is often based on the use of imagery. The children lie on the floor and close their eyes, except for the children who are deaf, and the teacher tells an imagery-evoking story starter. She has found that the imagery and relaxation are critical for breaking through the negative feelings that most of her students have about writing. Her students also write in dialogue journals daily and participate in sustained silent reading in their regular classrooms.

These strategies for developing literacy are working well for the short term, but the teachers would like to encourage more collaborative learning with children in the regular education classrooms in order to develop greater independence and self-motivation.

Long-term strategies: Workable possibilities. The highest priority for the teachers is to be able to team teach. The special education teacher would like to spend time in each regular classroom during the school day team teaching with the regular teacher, trying out instructional strategies, working with individual special education students, and adapting materials and curriculum. During this time, she could also help the classroom teacher conceptualize her learning goals in ways that would allow for different levels of attainment and different degrees of emphasis for each child.

Teachers want to try cooperative learning and peer tutoring in the inclusive classrooms. These models have worked effectively with the regular education students, but the low reading levels of many of the special education students have made teachers reluctant to try these models with heterogeneous groups or pairings of special education and regular education students. Teachers fear that the special education students will always be on the receiving end of information and will never be the experts or teachers within their groups. Teachers are seeking ways to provide different levels of reading materials on the same topic, assign roles that take into account individual abilities, and provide multiple ways for students to contribute, such as through art or music. The teachers would also like to try strategies such as Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1986; Moore, 1988) and K-W-L (Ogle, 1986), which have been successful with both regular education students and students with reading difficulties.

Promising ideas. Many of the most promising approaches for developing literacy in children with disabilities require one-to-one tutoring and are geared for the young reader. It is difficult for teachers with 30 or more students in their classrooms (a) to figure out how to implement a strategy that is as labor intensive as tutoring and (b) to justify a strategy that segregates students from one another.

One approach that keeps all students together for literacy instruction is a modification of the CIRC (Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition) method (Jenkins et al., 1994). In this approach, reading ability groups are eliminated; all elementary students receive reading and language arts instruction within their regular classrooms; and individual needs are met through peer and cross-age tutoring, supplemental instruction for students who are having extreme difficulty with decoding, and in-class instructional support from specialists. Jenkins et al. (1994) found positive effects on reading vocabulary, total reading, and language scores for the regular, remedial, and special education students in Grades 1 through 6.
The future of inclusion

It is not yet clear how many local educational agencies have adopted a full inclusion model for educating students with disabilities. States and local school districts that rarely use separate facilities for educating students with disabilities have “a systemic commitment to directing special education resources toward enabling more students with disabilities to be appropriately served in general education settings” (Hasazi, Johnston, Liggett, & Schattman, 1994, p. 496). These schools look like the inclusive schools described by Schrag and Burnette (1994), where “students work in more flexible learning environments, with flexible curricula and instruction that are accessible to all” (p. 64).

Inclusion is based on the understanding that both special education teachers and general education teachers have expertise about models and theories, characteristics of learners, assessment, learning styles, learning environments, strategies and techniques, curriculum, classroom management, and child development. By combining their knowledge and talents, they can develop strategies that focus less on matching the child’s disability to the teaching method and more on methods that are effective with all children.

References


Messages to Ground Zero:  
Children Respond to September 11, 2001  

*Shelley Harwayne and the children of New York City*

On the morning of September 11, 2001, many of our New York City students saw, heard, smelled, and felt things that none of the grown-ups were prepared to explain. Our students, as well as students throughout the United States, picked up their pens, pencils, crayons, markers, and paintbrushes, and attempted to make sense of this most incomprehensible act. They attempted to use their words and their art to wrap their arms around the tragedy and to offer condolence, comfort others, and bear witness.

Along with colleagues from the New York City Board of Education, I collected letters, poems, and artwork by children in response to the tragedy. The following pieces are excerpts from a book, *Messages to Ground Zero: Children Respond to September 11, 2001* (Heinemann, 2002). Proceeds from the sale of this book will go to the Fund for the Public Schools, New York City. The donations are marked specifically to benefit children who lost a parent in the tragedy or were forced to evacuate their schools. The donations must assist each child with support for academics, participation in after-school programs, or counseling.

“I rushed to the window to see smoke coming from the World Trade Center.

I saw an explosion coming from the other tower.

*There was also an explosion coming from my heart when I saw the ball of fire.*”

Andy, Grade 5, Manhattan
On September 11th my mom picked me up early from school. She asked if I knew what had happened. I said yes, the trains are not working and the buses are not running. That’s not all that had happened. Then two airplanes hit the Twin Tower. People ran for their lives. The smoke was rising. Finally, it came down. Finally, it was over. But it’s not over for New York.

Jenna, age 7, Manhattan

THE DAY

Everyone started the day like any other. The usual hustle and bustle of the morning. People drinking huge mugs of coffee.

Until something unusual happened, two airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center.

The whole city froze for a second. The whole world froze for a second. Now everything is different.

Jack, Grade 4, Manhattan

Dear Fireman,

my name is Cadence. I’m missing an uncle, please find him. His name is Gonzales. His family misses him. We’ll keep praying for him. If he’s alive and you find him, tell him “Cadence and his family miss him.” He was the best uncle in the world. I feel like crying.

Love, Cadence

Class 4-HO7

Cadence, Grade 4
I ASK MYSELF

"Why is there so much hatred and envy?" I asked myself as I saw the pain in my fellow classmates' eyes. I saw tears roll down many faces as they anxiously wondered about their loved ones. It was hard to grasp. I stared at the screen, incredulous. I saw the flaming giants, brothers built with time and effort, crumble in a matter of seconds.

We cannot do this to ourselves, we cannot. Do we all not bleed red? Are we not the same inside? The hearts and minds of the men capable of this atrocious act were twisted and that was perhaps the greatest difference.

So why is there so much hatred and envy, I ask myself. Why?

Crissy, Grade 12, Queens

SHOULD I HAVE KILLED
OSAMA BIN LADEN?

I have a very vivid imaginary life. In that world, I love to fly in my jet, to drive fast cars on racetracks, to lick on a lollypop that never runs out.

Since September 11th, I have been imagining that the world never changed, that the World Trade Center never collapsed, that there were no hijackers in the air, that little kids and grandmas did not die in the fire.

In my imaginary world, I am free to travel in time. I'm face to face with Osama Bin Laden and we're both children. I also have the power to see into the future and see the evil he will bring to the world. I look into his eyes and try to ask him, "Do you need help? Do you need love?" I try to figure out who has offended him so much that he could never forget and never forgive. I have the chance to kill him so the firefighters could go home on September 11th, so their kids would not be orphans, so there would be no cloud above Manhattan.

I cannot, though. I know there will always be someone else who will try to bring evil to the world, and I am not an evil person who can kill another.

I know all about evil. I lived it in Moscow, Russia where people were evil and hated those who were different just because of their background. That hate brought death. I smelled death around me. I hid under the bed when the tanks were shooting and the helicopter was hanging above my roof. I know all too well how that terror made me stutter.

On September 11th, I knew I was not imagining anything. I knew it was a war. But this war was different. This war was worse than any other. This war reminded me of when I was in California with my uncle on July 4. I heard the fire works and thought that war started. But I was wrong. My uncle said there are no wars in America. But now I realize he was wrong.

Kevin, Grade 5, Manhattan
I don't want anyone to be terrorists in the world. I want everybody to love one another, and be peaceful. I don't feel good about it because it could have been this school. Who knows? It could have happened. I do not want to feel this way.

Taylor, Grade 2, Brooklyn

A WORLD WORTH CREATING?

Imagine a world that's all the same
Of one color, one race, and even one name.
Where March is like May and day is like night.
And content is like angry and prideness like fright.
A world full of people, but no one to speak
Because no thoughts are special, nor feelings unique.

Is that a world that's worth creating?
Where day by day our lives keep fading
Our differences make us who we really are
So let's stop the fighting and let's stop the war!

Emerita, Grade 8, Brooklyn

Hope is that source of strength,
That feeling that gets you through the day
... It's what helps us overcome
the obstacles that we face.

Charles, Grade 10, Manhattan

Ivonne, High School, Queens
African American Children’s Literature that Helps Students Find Themselves: Selection Guidelines for Grade K–3

Bena R. Hefflin and Mary Alice Barksdale-Ladd

Guidelines and suggested books can help teachers provide literature that reflects African American children’s experiences.

Literature is a powerful medium. Through it, children construct messages about their cultures and roles in society. Literature offers them personal stories, a view of their cultural surroundings, and insight on themselves. When children read books that are interesting and meaningful to them, they can find support for the process of defining themselves as individuals and understanding their developing roles within their families and communities.

From the time they enter school, most African American children read literature that seldom offers messages about them, their past, or their future. All too often books used in primary classrooms contain too few African American characters, or they include characters who are African American in appearance only. Many of these stories say little about African American culture, or they present only the history of African Americans as slaves without including any “nonslavery” or modern representations. In short, today’s African American children often cannot find themselves in the literature they are given to read.

The purpose of this article is to suggest guidelines for selecting African American children’s literature of high literary and artistic quality for Grades K–3. To validate the importance of African Americans in society, the guidelines are for all teachers, whether they have African American children in their classrooms or not. We also provide a list of selected recent books with an African American context that meet the same criteria for quality.

What if you can’t find yourself?

To read for years and not encounter stories that connect closely with one’s own cultural understandings and life experiences is problematic. One primary motivation for reading fiction involves the pleasure that can be taken in relating to characters, their lives, their problems, and their experiences. When readers frequently encounter texts that feature characters with whom they can connect, they will see how others are like them and how reading can play a role in their lives. A love of reading will result. Alternatively, when readers do not encounter characters who are like them, reading is likely to be frustrating rather than pleasurable. For children, repeated frustration is not likely to lead to personal affirmations and the development of a love of reading. If teachers continually present African American children with texts in which the main characters are predominantly animals and white people, it stands to reason that these children may begin to wonder whether they, their families, and their communities fit into the world of reading. Our interviews with African American adults, remembering their early years in school, speak of this type of reading experience as being one of isolation. (All adult and student names are pseudonyms.)

For the first 15 years of my life, I didn’t find myself in books, and I didn’t relate to them. Once I discovered books and characters I could relate to, I gained the love of reading. (Tracey)
The joy of reading is in stepping into the experience of the characters. When the characters look like, talk like, think like, and act like us, it's easy to share in the experience. I think that after we've had that experience a few times, it becomes easier to understand the experiences of people who are less like us. But in becoming a reader, and learning to love reading, experiencing books that mirror our own lives is extremely important—which for me began when I became an adult. (Robin)

I didn't feel a strong connection between my world and classroom-related literature experiences. My learning experiences did not speak to me because people who looked like me weren't in the literature. I didn't value my experiences with literature in my early years of learning. (Tyrone)

Similarly, the third-grade African American students we interviewed voiced their preferences, needs, and concerns:

Well, we're black, and it doesn't mean that I don't like white people in stories, but I like seeing people in the book that are my same color. I like seeing black people in books because mostly they have white people in commercials and shows and stuff. And it's like in a book you can see black people. (Keisha)

It's not that I don't like white people or nothing, but you're glad because you don't see a lot of books that have black people in them. And it's not to be rude to white people, but you can imagine what they're [black people] thinking of... it might give you a better idea. Again, nothing against white people, but you like to see blacks because [white authors] portray black people like they don't got no manners or nothing. And white people, they know everything and they get a good education. But, that's not always true cause the black people, they get a good education too. But they portray us as not having any manners. When you see [black] people like that, [white] people think that we're stupid. (Marisa)

I like reading about my heritage and I like stories about black people. There isn't anything wrong with white people... they're just a different color. They're actually people, so they're the same as us, but a different color. But, I would like to see more, you know, black people in stories. (LaVon)

The problem of not finding oneself in books runs deep and wide in the context of schooling in the United States. Historically, the absence of black images in children's literature was birthed from the social structures that slavery imposed. The inaccurate images of African Americans that appeared in literature from 1830–1900 were nurtured by stereotypes, a publishing industry that was not invested in authentic portrayals of African Americans, and lack of understanding (MacCann, 1998). There was very little change in characterizations of African Americans or the number of texts featuring authentic African American characters from 1900 until about 1970 (Harris, 1997). As a result, historically, the vast content of children's literature connoted a clear message: African American children are not valued in society, and books have little to offer them that is personal, relevant, and affirming (Harris, 1993; Sims-Bishop, 1987).

Given the absence and misrepresentation that so many African Americans—young and old—feel about the literature of their youth, we searched for African American children's literature of high literary and artistic quality for Grades K–3. Our plan was to locate literature that establishes African American children as children, authenticates their own world (Clifton, 1981), and—most important—speaks to these children about themselves and their lives (Harris, 1990; Sims-Bishop, 1993).

But how much of this literature is available? Where do you find it? How do you select high-quality African American literature that will lead to affirming reading experiences in which children will be able to relate to stories and characters?

How much African American children's literature is available?

The number of African American children's books steadily increased in the latter part of the 20th century, especially in the 1990s (Harris, 1997; Rand, Parker, & Foster, 1998; Sims-Bishop, 1997). In real terms, however, the increase was very small. For example, in 1998 approximately 4,500 books were published in the United States for children (Hornig, Moore-Kruse, & Schlesiman, 1999). Only 3% of these books featured African Americans as main characters or focused on African American culture (Rand et al., 1998). Of this 3%, only two thirds of the books were created by African American authors or illustrators (Hornig et al., 1999).

Here is the bottom line: Very few books with African American protagonists are published for children. Our bottom line reduces this number even further: How many of these books are high-quality works of literature for African American children?

What are the characteristics of “good” African American children's literature?

The answer to this question is complex. "Goodness," as it turns out, depends on a number of factors: How the literature evolved, readability, marketing, and audience appeal are essential considerations (Temple, Martinez, Yokota, & Naylor,
1998). For our purposes, two interrelated layers mark the characteristics of good African American children’s literature: those characteristics general to all children’s literature and those specific to African American children’s literature.

**General characteristics.** Characteristics of excellence in children’s books are a result of the literary and artistic craft of the author and illustrator. The skills with which authors and illustrators use the tools of their medium to tell the tale are the most essential characteristics that distinguish good children’s literature from the rest. “To know what ‘good books’ are for different children requires some intelligent way of talking about goodness and mediocrity in books—an accepted set of terms for looking at the literary features of children’s books” (Temple et al., 1998, p. 7). By drawing upon Temple et al.’s (1998) framework on the qualities of children’s literature, and Huh, Hepler, Hickman, and Klefer’s (2000), Cullinan and Galda’s (1994), and Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson’s (1999) guidelines for evaluating children’s picture books, we outlined the characteristics of an author’s and illustrator’s craft that mark high-quality children’s literature.

In seeking well-developed narratives for primary-grade children, readers should look for works that contain the following characteristics.

1. **Books should include memorable, well-portrayed characters;** in contemporary stories these characters are usually children the same age as the child reader.

2. **Books should present a plot that provides interesting events in an understandable sequence.** Plots produce conflict to build excitement and suspense. For primary-grade readers plots should be direct and clear so that children will not have difficulty following the sequence of events, yet plots should be complex enough to capture the attention and lead to predictions, questions, and wonderings. In realistic stories the plot should deal with problems, events, or issues that children will understand and to which they can relate.

3. **Books should incorporate well-crafted language that is concrete and vivid—the language should read smoothly and reflect the mood of the story.**

4. **Books should contain a worthy and truthful theme.** Further, the illustrator’s work should catch the attention of the reader, move the story forward, and enhance the meanings and tone presented by the author.

Table 1 outlines these characteristics, along with key questions, so they can be readily used to rate (from 1–5) the overall quality of a children’s book.

**Specific characteristics.** In addition to these general considerations for selecting high-quality chil-

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**Recommended high-quality African American children’s literature, K-3**

There were no mirrors in Nana’s house for her granddaughter to look into and judge herself against another culture’s definition of beauty. This story about inner beauty teaches how to love yourself just the way you are, and not to compare yourself with other forms of beauty.

A young boy loves to play the violin, but his father needs a bat boy for his baseball team, not a violin player. The boy decides to play his violin in the dugout, and he manages to inspire the players.

Sarah Ann’s family prepares for a hurricane by boarding up windows and storing water for the family. During the harsh winds, Sarah Ann realizes that she left her favorite doll outside and runs off to find her. There is considerable damage, but somehow the doll is found safely after the storm.

Madelia can’t wait to go home from church to play with her six new jars of watercolors. As Madelia thinks about what she is going to paint, she waits impatiently for the sermon to end. Suddenly, Madelia becomes inspired and knows precisely what she will do.

This picture book describes how a little boy named Montsho looks around his environment and notices that things associated with blackness are bad. Montsho learns to appreciate his dark skin when his grandfather teaches him about his African heritage.

While his sister Sarah goes off to school, Jonathan stays at home and plays throughout his busy day. As he anxiously listens and waits for Sarah to come home, he rides his firetruck, watches mall falling through the mail slot, plays with his teddy bear, and listens to the sounds of the tree trimmers. Jonathan finally hears the sound of Sarah’s yellow school bus. His sister is finally home!

Susan and Sarah help their aunt locate a key that unlocks the door to Great-Aunt Flossie’s house. They are surprised to discover a family Bible in which Susan is given permission to write her own and Sarah’s name.

(continued)
Recommended high-quality African American children’s literature, K–3 (continued)


April and her sister love to jump Double Dutch. But nobody in the neighborhood wants to jump rope, until Uncle Zambezi arrives with a pair of brightly dyed jump ropes from Africa and claims that they will grant wishes.


This is a retelling of Helen Bannerman’s *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1923, HarperCollins). In this story a little boy named Sam (in fact all of the characters are called Sam) outsmarts a gang of hungry tigers. The tigers turn into a pool of butter, and that night Sam and his family have tigerstriped pancakes for dinner.


When a young girl is caught in her first lie to her mother, she decides to tell only the truth. Soon, she begins to spread the truth all over town about how Thomas didn’t have enough money for lunch and needed to borrow some from the teacher. She learns there’s a right and wrong way to tell the truth.


In the late 1800s, a young girl wakes to the festive, celebratory sounds of street vendors busily selling their produce on Market Street in New Orleans, Louisiana. She is mesmerized by Creole women in red bandannas, baskets of richly colored fresh fruits and vegetables, and a jazz parade that lights up the town.


This story, set in the early 1900s, is about a unique friendship between a little gift named Tia and her employer, an elderly woman named Miss Hartwell. Tia loves music; Miss Hartwell teaches her how to play the piano. In return Miss Hartwell is given a rare and precious gift.


A little boy works very hard and saves his money to buy a new bike, only to discover that he doesn’t have enough.


In this modern tall tale, Addy, a house slave on Simon Plenty’s plantation, finds a little boy floating down the river in a basket. Addy is taken by the boy’s ability to call fish to jump out of the river and into her wagon. In no time at all, the little boy grows into a giant named Jabe, who has the strength of 50 men and the ability to transport slaves away to freedom.

...continued

...children’s literature, there are specific guidelines to note with regard to the selection of the most appropriate African American children’s literature. We have developed a more detailed set of guidelines aimed specifically at African American children’s literature, based upon the work of Sims-Bishop (1997), Banks (1991), our own experiences, and those of teachers with whom we have collaborated. There are specific authors and illustrators who have established solid reputations for publishing culturally sensitive literature for children. While we would not recommend that selections of African American literature for children come exclusively from these works, familiarity with these authors, illustrators, and their works is very helpful in becoming accomplished at selecting high-quality texts to share with children.

As general guidelines (in addition to drawing from works established well-known African American authors and illustrators) we recommend that teachers and parents look for books that have the following characteristics.

1. Books should include characters who are well developed and portrayed in authentic, realistic contexts.

2. Books should use language that is authentic and realistic, particularly dialogue that correctly portrays African American dialect appropriate to the character.

3. Books should incorporate illustrations that portray African American characters and settings authentically and realistically.

4. Books should present accurate information.

We have found these guidelines, as outlined in Table 2, to be workable tenets for the selection of high-quality African American children’s literature. While all of these story elements may not be found in every good African American children’s book, the more elements that are found, the greater the likely appeal for all children. These guidelines also include key questions and a rating scale (from 1–5) to evaluate the quality of African American children’s literature.

How do the characteristics apply to a specific piece of literature?

To illustrate how these general and specific characteristics work in practice, we applied them to the African American children’s biography *Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra* by Andrea Davis-Pinkney and Brian Pinkney (Hyperion, 1998). Although biography is nonfiction, it can be evaluated similarly to fiction due to its narrative form. However, there is an additional requirement for biography—accuracy.
The story describes the life of legendary Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington and provides a glimpse into one of the liveliest eras of American music history. In this tribute to the jazz legend, the music is portrayed through illustrations that represent constant motion with vivid spirals, waves, and colorful swirls. Table 3 illustrates how we applied the general characteristics of children's literature to the story. Our rating for each of the characteristics is noted in Table 3.

**Character.** The text is realistic and engaging as it introduces a young Duke Ellington who does not enjoy playing the piano because he finds it boring. As the story progresses, Duke becomes a teenager and begins incorporating sounds and rhythms that he finds exciting. Over time, Duke develops a unique style that transforms the music industry.

**Plot.** The book chronicles Duke Ellington's musical career. The story begins with his childhood—he was born in 1899 in Washington, D.C.—and ends when he became an adult and played at New York City's Carnegie Hall on January 23, 1943. The story is presented chronologically, so it is easy for children to follow; however, it is written so as to keep children wondering about what will happen and where the story will lead.

Students will enjoy the story because it addresses a problem that is common for many children. Duke Ellington was introduced to a new skill, and, although he understood that practice was essential in developing this skill, he found that practice was very boring. Duke addressed the problem in a unique way that involved setting and accomplishing personal goals (facets of a child's life that parents and teachers alike impress upon young children). Duke Ellington became successful because he was talented and had the resourcefulness and encouragement to build upon his talents.

**Well-crafted language.** The story contains natural, vivid language used in culturally appropriate, soulful, descriptive ways. For example, one line reads, "Duke's Creole Love Call was spicier than a pot of jambalaya. His Mood Indigo was a musical stream that swelled over the airwaves" (p. 11).

**Worthy, subtle, and truthful theme.** Students will identify with and remember the theme of the story—growing up and finding yourself—because it is presented in an entirely believable way. In addition, this is an appropriate literary element for young readers to reflect upon as they look at themselves and their own processes of growing up and finding themselves as individuals with unique talents and qualities.

**Quality of illustrations.** The illustrator uses the elements of shape, color, texture, rhythm, variety, space, paint, expressionism, and representation in divergent, self-expressive, artistic ways.

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**Recommended high-quality African American children's literature, K–3 (continued)**


This autobiographical picture book describes how young Louis Armstrong received his first instruments. Before playing the trumpet, he played the bugle and the cornet. His first musical success occurred in the Colored Waifs' Home Band.


Siegelson, Kim. *In the time of the drums* (2000 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award). 1999. Ill. Brian Pinkney. Hyperion Books for Children. ISBN 078680436X. US$15.00. This story is based on the Gullah legend of a slave rebellion at Ibo's Landing in South Carolina. Mentu's grandmother Twi was born in Africa and remembers her experiences well. Twi teaches her grandson many things, including how to play ancient rhythms on a goatskin drum. One day, slave ships arrive at Mentu and Twi's island. The slaves refuse to get off the ships because they know they are not at home. Twi knows she must take her people back to Africa, so together Twi and the slaves walk into the ocean for home. Mentu is left all alone, but he grows up strong, begins a family of his own, and teaches them all that his grandmother taught him.


Recommended high-quality African American children’s literature, K–3 (continued)

This South African tale describes how a farmer named Thulani wants to do no more than lie in the sun all day. After a series of one-sided exchanges with others to make his life easier, he finds that his crop is worth something after all. A pocketful of sunflower seeds proves to be very beneficial.

This picture book celebrates African American identity through hair. Every night before bedtime Keyana sits down with her mother to get her hair combed. It hurts, but her mother gently reminds her of all the different ways that she can wear her hair.

Set in the late 1800s, this lyrical tribute describes what it was like for African American pioneers to journey westward to Oklahoma to begin a new life. Newly freed slaves were anxious to receive railroad tickets to travel to a place where all people were promised free land and a new beginning.

Dave’s wobbly tooth finally comes out when he sneezes. But he doesn’t know where it went. His grandfather and the tooth fairy get a shock when they look under his pillow later that evening.

During the midsummer heat, families from all over cross the wooden bridge at Pigeon Creek and travel to grandma and grandpa’s home for a special reunion. They gather at church for fellowship, to learn about their heritage, and to celebrate the gospel.

Function of illustrations. The illustrations are eye catching. The bold, vibrant colors and intricately detailed scenes set the mood and add luster to the story. The dancers leap off the page while the visual interpretations of the music serve as devices that transport the reader to this era of music history.

Table 4 demonstrates how we applied the specific characteristics of African American children’s literature to the story. The ratings for the characteristics are noted in Table 4.

Character portrayal. The author identifies the characters as African American and presents a positive, realistic message about Duke Ellington’s musical career. Duke Ellington’s desire was to celebrate the history of African American culture through his music. He accomplished this goal through songs about “the glories of dark skin, the pride of African heritage, and the triumphs of black people from the days of slavery to years of civil rights struggle” (p. 26).

Language use. The story is a narrative in which African American dialogue true to the characters is used in several parts of the story. For example, a section reads, “Yo, you got the Duke?” “Slide me some King of the Keys, please!” and “Gonna play me that Piano Prince and his band” (p. 23). This dialogue represents African American dialect that is historically accurate for the period of time in which Duke Ellington lived. Had the entire story been written in this way, it might have been difficult for students to understand. Instead, the author has chosen to intersperse this type of dialect in the text, providing readers with a perspective on African American language use in the world of Duke Ellington and, thus, helping the reader enter the world of Duke Ellington.

Illustration authenticity. The illustrations in the story reveal variety in African American physical features and coloring. For example, Duke is referred to as having “honey-colored fingertips” while other characters appear to be darker in color—a reflection of reality (p. 21). The illustrations also present positive images of African Americans as in the scenes portraying New York City’s Carnegie Hall and the Cotton Club in Harlem.

Information accuracy. The book contains authentic information about Duke Ellington’s musical career. The story highlights the African American experience by describing how African Americans supported and enjoyed listening to Duke Ellington’s music. At the end, the author includes facts about Duke Ellington’s life and provides the sources used to obtain the information.

Valuable book, valued readers

The guidelines presented in this article provide a way for teachers and parents to thoughtfully and purposefully evaluate the quality of African American children’s literature for the primary grades. Determining quality, in this case, lies in the ability to select literature that is affirming and liberating to children. Historically, African American children did not have literature that reflected their experiences. To find the best of this literature, then, is to help these children find themselves in books. To read literature that mirrors themselves and their lives is to feel valued—to have power.
Table 1
General characteristics of high-quality primary-grade picture books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>• Does the story contain a memorable character who is about the same age as the students?</td>
<td>1 Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is the plot direct, clear, and stimulating?</td>
<td>2 Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Will students understand the problems, events, and issues?</td>
<td>3 High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Will students be able to easily follow the sequence of events?</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Will students enjoy the story?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-crafted language</td>
<td>• Does the story contain natural, vivid language?</td>
<td>1 Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Do the words evoke clear, concrete images of characters and actions?</td>
<td>2 Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the language reflect the mood of the story?</td>
<td>3 High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthy, subtle, and truthful theme</td>
<td>• Is the story’s theme one that students will find worthy, subtle, and truthful?</td>
<td>1 Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Will the theme interest students?</td>
<td>2 Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is the author’s intended message understandable without being heavy-handed?</td>
<td>3 High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of illustrations</td>
<td>• Does the illustrator use elements of media, design, and style in original and expressive ways?</td>
<td>1 Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function of illustrations</td>
<td>• Do the illustrations establish the mood, theme, and setting as the story unfolds?</td>
<td>2 Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Do they add or clarify information?</td>
<td>3 High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Do they enrich the story?</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When African American children encounter literature that offers messages about them, their culture, and their roles in society, they have enhanced opportunities to reflect upon themselves as people and their own development. Culturally sensitive stories, views, and insights can allow children to realize that literature has value for them as individuals. To select a balanced collection of stories, we included in our bibliography (see Sidebar) literature that plays and riffs with everyday events of African American life and literature that represents accurate, authentic accounts of slavery. With repeated exposure to engaging literature in which children find themselves establishing personal connections with characters, the likelihood is great that reading will become an appealing activity. Over time, the love of reading may empower students both as readers and as individuals. For teachers and parents interested in finding African American children's literature, we have carefully crafted an annotated bibliography of books from 1996–2000 that meet our selection guidelines for high-quality African American children's literature. We suggest the bibliography be used as a starting point in selecting literature, and note that the list should be expanded according to individual needs and preferences. The books are recommended for beginning, young, and early intermediate readers (K–3). The title, author, illustrator, year, summary, publisher, ISBN (International Standard Book Number), and price are provided for each book. The books are arranged in alphabetical order beginning with the author's last name.
Table 2
Specific characteristics of high-quality African American children’s literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character portrayal</td>
<td>• Does the author identify the characters as African American?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the author include current and accurate information about African American beliefs, traditions, shared values, and other cultural referents?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the author present realistic and positive images of African Americans?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language use</td>
<td>• Does the dialogue correctly portray African American dialect?</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is the language authentic and realistic?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Will students understand, identify with, and accurately reflect upon the characters’ language?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustration authenticity</td>
<td>• Do the illustrations reflect reality?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Do they reveal variety in settings and African American physical features</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and coloring, or are characters merely colored brown?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Do the illustrations present positive images of African Americans in aethetically pleasing ways?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information accuracy</td>
<td>• Does the story contain a motif or an authentic aspect of African American history?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is the information accurate?</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the story add a distinctive voice or worldview?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hefflin teaches at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania (School of Education, Department of Instruction & Learning, 4H01 Posvar Hall, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, USA). Barksdale-Ladd teaches at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida, USA.

References


### Table 3

General characteristics of high-quality primary-grade picture books applied to *Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>• The story begins with a child protagonist (Duke Ellington) and follows him in his adult life through his musical career.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 Low Medium High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>• A chronological plot follows the challenges and successes of Duke Ellington's life.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 Low Medium High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-crafted language</td>
<td>• The language is used in ways appropriate for understanding jazz.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 Low Medium High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthy, subtle, and truthful theme</td>
<td>• Students will identify with the theme of growing up and finding yourself.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 Low Medium High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of illustrations</td>
<td>• The illustrator uses the visual elements of line, shape, and color effectively.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 Low Medium High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function of illustrations</td>
<td>• The illustrations are integral to the story and extend the text.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 Low Medium High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 4  
Specific characteristics of high-quality African American children’s literature applied to *Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character portrayal</td>
<td>• The author presents accurate and positive images of an African American whose outstanding musical career is portrayed.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language use</td>
<td>• The dialogue accurately portrays African American dialect of the time.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The language of the text is rich and flows well.</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustration authenticity</td>
<td>• The illustrations reveal variety in African American physical features and coloring.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The illustrations reveal a variety of settings.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The illustrations present positive images of African Americans.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information accuracy</td>
<td>• The story contains authentic, accurate information about Duke Ellington’s musical career.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
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Selecting Intermediate Novels that Feature Characters with Disabilities

Judith Landrum

Characters with disabilities can create opportunities for learning about and accepting differences.

My nephew, Seth, who has severe cerebral palsy, went to a preschool that integrated a high proportion of disabled children with nondisabled children. His older brother, Evan, was in the same preschool but in a different class. One day Evan was telling his mom a story about Sara, a girl in his class. Hesitantly, his mother asked, "Does she look...like Seth?" Evan responded, "Oh, no, Mom. She has freckles."

Not all of us have classrooms in which the daily interaction between disabled and nondisabled children is so frequent that students notice freckles as much as they do wheelchairs, sign language, or a Braille typewriter. As a result, many students and adults feel awkward around people different from themselves and may avoid them. In order to help all of us feel more comfortable, we need more opportunities, like Seth and Evan had in their preschool, that put a high priority on inclusion. Mainstreaming helps students see their peers as multidimensional, not exclusively as disabled; plus, it enables students with disabilities to see the similarities between themselves and others (Mellon, 1989). Sometimes, however, mainstreaming is less successful or the opportunity is unavailable, and students notice only the differences.

Literature is another avenue by which students gain a more complex perception of themselves and others. According to Rosenblatt (1983), literature enables readers to better understand themselves and others by stepping into the world of the characters of a given text. Multiple studies have demonstrated that literature featuring characters with disabilities can spark a healthy acceptance of self and others in young readers (Andrews, 1998; Dobo, 1982; Salende & Moe, 1983). Reading alone, however, is not enough to make a difference. True change in perception occurs when reading includes two critically important variables: follow-up discussion or activities for the literature (Salende & Moe, 1983; Umerlik, 1992) and stories that present characters with disabilities accurately, realistically, and positively (Gross & Ortiz, 1994; Heim, 1994).

As teachers of reading and literature, most of us agree that one purpose of literature is to enable students to better understand themselves and others (Protherough, 1990). Finding these good reads, as well as separating the chaff from the wheat, is the tough part. Therefore, the purpose of this article is twofold: to outline specific criteria for selecting intermediate literature that portrays characters with disabilities, and to provide a list of novels published between 1990 and 1999 that feature such characters.

Establishing criteria

My design process for the evaluative criteria in the Sidebar was circular, rather than linear, and I gleaned input from several sources. First, I outlined vital traits of good intermediate literature to create a base draft. To solidify the dimensions that reflect this specific genre, I compared notes with a kindergarten teacher who was completing a similar project on picture books for her master's thesis (Hersey, 1996). Independently, we both requested input on drafted criteria from people with permanent
disabilities and parents of children with disabilities. Finally, I consulted other texts as a final touchstone for the criteria (Andrews, 1998; Baskin & Harris, 1977, 1984; Robertson, 1992; Slapin, Lessing, & Belkind, 1987). During this process, I continually looped back and forth between these sources to revise the criteria (see Sidebar).

These criteria are best applied by analyzing three categories—plot, character, and tone—then determining if any problems emerge. Due to space limitations, only an example for character analysis is demonstrated here.

Applying criteria to a text

Although teachers may see the strengths in a text like See Ya, Simon by David Hill, they may prematurely eliminate it because Simon, Nathan (protagonist), and the guys frequently talk not only about liking girls, but also about how good they look in a pair of jeans. This book may raise concerns of appropriateness because some upper intermediate readers are becoming aware of their sexuality, and some are not. Nonetheless, this element of sexuality is critically important, rather than detrimental to the characters in the text. It illustrates that although Simon has muscular dystrophy and is bound by a wheelchair, he is not asexual. Rather, his character reveals a natural interest in girls, connecting him to his peers who are also experiencing puberty. Equally important, Simon is always pulling practical jokes and has a great disposition, but he still can be hateful and crabby. Simon's condition is a part of who he is but not all that he is. Finally, even though the boys talk about which girls look good, that is the limit; sexual innuendoes and references are innocent and appropriate for intermediate readers.

On the other hand, Summer of the Swans by Betsy Byars, the 1971 Newbery Medal winner, is often taught in middle or upper elementary school. However, it would receive a low rating according to my criteria. Although it does not fit in the time period of the texts reviewed here, it is presented as a poor example for this genre, due to the character development. In Summer of the Swans, Sara’s younger brother Charlie has mental retardation and is mute. Sara enters the novel as a typical, frustrated, insecure, self-centered teen. Soon after that, Charlie gets lost and is completely helpless to find his way home. When Charlie is found at the end, Sara realizes the depth of her love for her younger brother and the shallowness of her all-consuming teenage egocentrism before he was lost. Regarding the criteria on character, note that Charlie is not really an active participant in the plot, and even though it focuses on finding him, he seems to exist outside the story. The dialogue emphasizes what Charlie cannot do more so that what he can. Finally, the text implies that initially Charlie was rejected by some family members due to his disability. Unfortunately, Charlie remains a one-dimensional being whose only developed trait is his disability. Rather than a child with a disability he is a disability. Therefore, I would be uncomfortable selecting this text based on the evaluative criteria.

Intermediate literature published between 1990 and 1999 that features characters with disabilities

As with designing the evaluative criteria, I consulted multiple sources to create this book list. Upon request, almost every publisher of intermediate literature (written in English) sent me copies of all the texts they had published in this genre, including those in press. In addition, I consulted Books In Print (online—http://www.booksinprint.com/bip/), What Do Young Adults Read Next? (Spencer, 1994), the holdings of a public library of a major U.S. city, and the children’s collection at a local university. The parameters for the book list include texts written in English, the genre of novel, texts published between 1990 and 1999, and texts that feature characters with permanent disabilities.

Finding books was not as difficult as determining where to draw the line between intermediate and adolescent fiction as well as between intermediate and children’s fiction. Therefore, the list includes texts that students in Grades 4 to 7 may enjoy reading. Obviously, some books may be appropriate for older or younger audiences, depending upon a student’s reading skill and maturity, as well as whether the text will be used for a unit, book club, or independent reading.

To streamline the process for locating appropriate texts, a description of the book appears in the bibliography. Each one-sentence description includes the character’s age and disability and an allusion to the novel’s primary theme or conflict; unfortunately, space does not permit more details.
Criteria for evaluating novels that feature characters with disabilities

Plot
1. The events are realistic and reasonable rather than unrealistic and contrived.
2. The disabled characters are active participants in the plot and its various conflicts; they initiate action rather than exist outside of it.
3. The unfolding of the plot focuses on what the characters with disabilities can do rather than what they cannot do.
5. For the most part, the same narrative could exist without a disabled character; it is not a didactic theme for a cause.
6. The disabled character faces conflicts similar to those of his or her peer group.
7. Although both the climax and the ending may include the disability of one of the characters, it does not focus on the disability.
8. A cure for the disability is not the solution to the disabled characters’ problems or conflicts, nor will the cure give them a normal life. Similarly, attitude will not prevent or create a cure.
9. Even though the book is fiction, all the data pertaining to the disability is accurate.

Character development
1. The disabled characters are portrayed as strong and independent, rather than passive, atypically naïve, childlike, or dependent.
2. The disabled characters are competent individuals who speak for themselves.
3. The prominent traits of the characters with disabilities are what they can do, as opposed to what they cannot do.
4. The disabled characters portray a full range of emotions: anger, sadness, joy, love, pride, shame, and so forth.
5. The disabled characters’ temperament is not dramatically different than the other characters. An extraordinary positive or negative temperament may imply that the disability was caused by attitude or vice versa.
6. The disabled characters may or may not be coming to terms with their sexuality, typical of readers of intermediate and adolescent fiction; however, they are not represented as asexual.
7. The disabled characters are not portrayed only as outsiders or rejected by their peers because they are disabled; they have friends, families, and so on.
8. The disabled characters are developed as multidimensional and round; they are not flat or stock characters.
9. The disabled characters are not portrayed artificially as heroes or victims.

Bibliography
Angela tells this story, as the same crew from *Egg-Drop Blues* struggles with seventh-grade hormones and with getting a wheelchair for Wayne, their classmate who is a sincere friend despite his anger at his paralysis.
Judge, a bright sixth grader, figures out strategies to work through his dyslexia and other struggles: grades, divorce, friends, and siblings.
Brian’s sixth-grade teacher tells him that due to his dyslexia he needs to work differently for better grades instead of working harder. Unfortunately, messing up is socially more acceptable.
This novel gets inside the head of Nick, a very talented, frustrated, belligerent, and deaf seventh grader, who uncovers a dangerous exotic bird-smuggling ring on a remote island.
Although visually impaired, seventh grader Paul Fisher sees beneath the veneer of family, friends, and community; it takes a tragedy for him to see the connection between his vision and his football star brother.
Fifteen-year-old Midget perceives himself as physically abnormal, emotionally disturbed, and the victim of psychological abuse; a sailboat helps him change.
At 12, Bryn must adjust to her mother’s death, a new community, living with relatives, and to Winnie, her delightful cousin with Down Syndrome.
A car accident leaves 13-year-old Kristy using a wheelchair and trapped in an eerie old house with a new stepsister, a new stepsister, and a vengeful witch.

(continued)
Butts, Nancy. (1996). *Cheshire moon*. Arden, NC: Front Street. Like many adolescents, 15-year-old Miranda is hurting and angry: She has lost her cousin, Timothy; the hearing world expects her to use sound; and weird dreams link her to Boone, a teenage handyman with his own problems.


Conly, Jane L. (1993). *Crazy lady!* New York: HarperCollins. The characters in this novel may have disabilities such as severe mental retardation, borderline insanity, mild paralysis, and mental slowness, but each one has something to offer the others; Vernon, a seventh grader, narrates.

Cutler, Jane. (1997). *Spaceman*. New York: Dutton. Compared with his 10-year-old peers, Gary is bigger, slower, and terribly frustrated; then he meets Ms. Block and her students at a school that helps children find their best individual learning styles.


Helfman, Elizabeth. (1992). *On being Sarah*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman. The inner voice of Sarah Bennett, a 12-year-old girl with cerebral palsy, mirrors the same feelings and concerns as her peers: being loved, being a friend, being made fun of, and being picked on.


Janover, Caroline. (1995). *The worst speller in jr. high*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing. For the most part, seventh grader Kate can juggle dating, popularity, family responsibilities, and school activities as she works around her dyslexia; however, she can't work around her mother's cancer.

Konigsburg, E.L. (1999). *The view from Saturday*. New York: Simon & Schuster. The sixth-grade team at Epiphany Middle School, coached by Ms. Olinski, a paraplegic, may win the Academic Bowl this year even though they compete with seventh and eighth graders from all over the state.

brother with Down Syndrome who's learning to speak via dolphins, and Wendy begins to feel that life is unbearable.


McElfresh, Lynn E. (1999). *Can you feel the thunder?* New York: Simon & Schuster. Thirteen-year-old Mic tries to understand how his older sister, Stephanie, can be blind, deaf, assertive, and content; or how Vern, his new neighbor with dyslexia, can be proud of a sock collection and nonchalant about baseball skills.


Orr, Wendy. (1999). *Peeling the onion*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell. When 17-year-old Anna Duncan breaks her neck in a car accident, she must peel back her beautiful, popular, and karate champion layers to find out who she is at the core.

Paulsen, Gary. (1991) *The monument*. New York: Delacorte Press. When a commissioned artist designs a war memorial for Bolton, Kansas, the community is angry and resentful, but Rocky, a 13-year-old with a leg brace, is transformed.

Philbrick, Rodman. (1996). *Freak the mighty*. New York: Scholastic. Max (academically slow and physically huge) and Kevin (brilliant but trapped in a stunted body) barely remember each other from preschool, but as a team in seventh grade they are greater than the sum of their parts.


Platt, Chris. (1998). *Willow King*. New York: Random House. Thirteen-year-old Katie may have one leg shorter than the other, but she protects a crippled foal from euthanasia and nurses him back to health and maybe to a championship.

Quinn, Patrick. (1991). *Matthew Pinkowski's special summer*. Washington, DC: Kendall Green Publications. Matthew has never been able to read well, but during the summer after sixth grade, he serendipitously meets new friends with different learning struggles and realizes that each of them can master life's challenges.


Shreve, Susan R. (1991). *The gift of the girl who couldn't hear*. New York: William Morrow. Initially, Eliza believes that since Lucy cannot hear, she cannot understand the cruel insults and plots of their seventh-grade girlfriends; eventually, Eliza realizes that Lucy understands, but rises above the others.

Skurzynski, Gloria. (1999). *Spider's voice*. New York: Simon & Schuster. When Abelard, the famous 12th-century French scholar, hires tongue-tied 12-year-old Aran to be a watchman for him and his lover, all of their lives are woven together and changed forever.

Spinelli, Jerry. (1997). *Crash*. New York: Scholastic. Crash, a gifted seventh-grade athlete, mows down everyone in his path so he can win until his grandfather's paralysis teaches him that winners should sometimes lose.


A family with teenagers adopts a 6-year-old Korean orphan who turns out to be deaf; they wrestle with whether it’s better to have him live in their loving home or to attend a special boarding school.


Timothy, an elderly sailor, teaches 11-year-old Phillip, recently blinded in a shipwreck, how to fend and care for himself despite his blindness.


When their parents suddenly die, 14-year-old Drew and mute 8-year-old Evan must live with distant relatives in a house haunted by ghosts and a family secret.


Sixth grader Judy may walk with a cane, but she teaches her popular friend Courtney that the secret to life isn’t popularity—it’s getting up when life knocks you down.


Satisfied as an only child, 11-year-old Marsha finds her life suddenly changed when her parents adopt a younger, developmentally delayed—but never tantrum delayed—sister.


Woodrow, the new kid in seventh grade, is visually impaired; yet, with his sense of humor, perception, and optimism he helps his cousin, Beauty, see the truth in her past and present worlds.


Delrita, an eighth grader, believes that Punky, her uncle and playmate with Down Syndrome, should be pampered and protected; unexpected events force Delrita to rethink her beliefs.


Seventh grader Buddy faces issues like senility, divorce, teen alcoholism, poverty, parental unemployment, and abandonment—as well as the pain and joys of a 9-year-old sister with Down Syndrome.

**Increasing awareness**

This genre, like everything else our students read, ranges widely in quality. *Crazy Lady!* by Jane Conly not only meets all the criteria for this genre, but is also a highly engaging read on multiple levels. On the other hand, a text such as *Fighting Tackle* by Matt Christopher may not be a good choice for a unit because it lacks depth and complexity, but it may be an engaging book club or independent read for athletic males, like many other Matt Christopher novels. Books that failed multiple criteria for this genre or were poorly written were not included in the bibliography.

According to the World Health Organization (Scheer & Groce, 1988), approximately 10% of the global population has a disability. Logically, not all classrooms can accommodate a high ratio of students with and without disabilities, as did the preschool my nephews attended. However, as classroom teachers, we may be able to use this genre as a means to increase our students’ awareness and acceptance of self and others, to the point that “freckles” can be the most distinguishing feature among students.

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**References**


Where Do You Want to Go Today?
Inquiry-Based Learning and Technology Integration

Roxanne Farwick Owens, Jennifer L. Hester and William H. Teale

Providing a choice of subjects to study and a range of new technologies with which to study them produced positive results in two programs.

Alisha and Chloe (all children's names are pseudonyms) breathlessly shared the results of their inquiry-based learning project.

We wanted to learn about hippotherapy because we like horses, and we wanted to do a service project, and we like to work with the special ed. kids, so this way we could combine all of our interests. In our class, you propose a project and then plan the exploration. You can use computers and books and live resources like people to help you find the information; then you have to create stuff and do something. So we used the Internet to find out about how working with horses can help kids with special needs to work on all kinds of skills, and we interviewed someone who works at a special stable, and then we made a brochure about it, and then we took interested kids to a place where they do it.

Next, it was Josh's turn.

My grandfather had Alzheimer's so I wanted to learn about it. I really got interested in the brain, so I decided to do an inquiry on diseases of the brain. I interviewed experts online and used the Internet and books. I created an interactive multimedia presentation where I presented information about the diseases of the brain, and then there were case studies where based on the symptoms, students had to determine what the appropriate diagnostic test would be to give. If they picked the wrong test, it meant they hadn't understood all of the information about the particular disease, so they had to go back and reread. That was my best project. I really learned a lot, and I think the other kids did, too.

A current U.S. television advertising campaign asks, "Where do you want to go today?"

With the addition of various technology-based resources to classrooms, the same question could be posed to elementary and middle school children. Computers and Internet technologies are by no means a magical solution to raising educational achievement in our schools, but they do provide an array of new opportunities for accessing information and promoting significant learning among students. We have explored those opportunities through technology-enhanced, inquiry-based learning projects. School has traditionally focused on having children answer questions; inquiry-based learning turns that on its head, involving children in formulating engaging questions and then participating in various language and literacy experiences to answer them. In other words, questions act as the vehicle to understanding.

In this article we describe two projects that incorporated inquiry into urban educational settings. In both of these instances, technology played a key role in allowing children to conduct their inquiries and in affecting their learning outcomes. We discuss what we learned as a result of implementing these projects. We offer practical considerations for employing technology-enhanced inquiry in the classroom and discuss broader theoretical issues related to the contribution of technology to literacy learning and motivation when students ask their own significant learning questions, which, in the long run, lead them to more questions.
Inquiry-based learning and how it functions as part of a literacy program

Inquiry-based learning is a way of thinking about teaching and learning. Grabe and Grabe (2000) defined it as both a methodology and a philosophy:

Inquiry involves finding sources of information appropriate to a task, working to understand the information resources and how they relate to the task, and then, in those cases for which some action is expected, applying this understanding in a productive way. (p. 21)

Students select a topic of interest to research; they formulate questions about the topic; gather, sift, and synthesize information; and finally do something with it. The last component is often the most difficult aspect for many students, but it is what distinguishes inquiry-based projects from typical school research projects. Inquiry involves more than reporting on a topic, it requires students to move beyond the Who, What, Where, When questions that so often form the basis of classroom research projects. When inquiry-based learning is used well, students engage in “What does this mean, and how can I use this information?” questions. They are pushed to expand their understandings by creating new connections. The focus on inquiry heightens involvement and motivation for reading and writing and for reading and writing instruction. Coupling literacy activities in the context of something meaningful and interesting to students themselves increases the chance for success.

Inquiry also differs from thematic teaching, as Short et al. (1996) suggested:

Instead of using the theme as an excuse to teach science, social studies, mathematics, reading, and writing, these knowledge systems and sign systems become tools for inquiry—exploring, finding, and researching students’ own questions. Curriculum does not focus on activities and books, but on inquiry. (p. 11)

The most successful inquiry projects emerge from topics that are of real interest to the students. These topics may be derived from themes studied as a class, but if so, it is imperative that students have a choice of topics about which they truly wonder and care.

There are a number of ways that inquiry is approached with students. Short, Harste, and Burke (1996), for example, believed that inquiry is the curriculum and differentiate it from theme-based units. The “Authoring Cycle”—their curricular framework for inquiry—is a recursive process that begins with students’ prior knowledge and interests and leads to students’ taking action and learning. They believed children should be involved in this inquiry cycle throughout the entire school day and year.

Our approach in engaging children in inquiry has been more focused, employing it as one facet of an overall curriculum. In our view, inquiry-based projects complement other components of the literacy program such as instruction in comprehension, word study, and writing. In other words, rather than inquiries being what children do virtually all day, there is an identifiable time when students work on their inquiries.

The projects we refer to in this article happen to be after-school and summer programs. But in other settings where we have been involved (e.g., Owens, 1997), technology-based inquiry was part of the regular school day. We mention this in order to provide a picture of how inquiry-based instruction was implemented in the urban and suburban settings where we have worked with teachers. On the whole, the teachers have opted for inquiry to be one aspect of their day rather than a comprehensive program, even in schools with strong teacher commitment to inquiry-based teaching and adequate materials, technology, and technical support. This seems to stem from the realities of the demands and accountability these teachers experience in their public school settings.

Facets of inquiry-based teaching

Linda Rief (1999) suggested that teachers ask themselves a few key questions in preparation for inquiry-based instruction, “When was the last time I really learned about something in depth? How did I go about learning it? How do I know I know this?” (p. 3). Exploring our own learning motivations and processes helps us to examine our teaching. In thinking about questions like those Rief posed, many teachers conclude that being interested in the topic, having a plan for how to research it, and having a purpose for engaging in the project (e.g., the “do something” part), are integral parts of their own learning and thus need to play a larger role in their teaching. We have found that effective implementation of inquiry-based teaching is characterized by a number of factors.

Student curiosity. Perhaps most fundamental is a classroom environment that honors and stimulates curiosity. Brenda Kraber, a 23-year veteran of teaching who has been using an
The nature of the topic itself is often a difficulty for students. They frequently run into problems with chosen topics that are difficult to study because they are too broad, too narrow, or just not clearly defined. This is one area where appropriate teacher guidance and opportunities for students to reflect on topics can help. For example, students in Mrs. Kraber’s class complete a “Project Proposal” that requires them to choose from six types of project (Communication, Invention, Decision Making, Service, Scientific Investigation, Simulation) and to show how the topic selected passes the “Who Cares?” test. The Who Cares test requires the student to write a series of questions indicating the level of information that will be sought. Students may also define their inquiry more clearly through the use of King’s (1991) “question stems.” These include the following: How is ____ related to ____? What is a new example of ____? What are some possible solutions for the problem of ____? Explain why _____. What do you think would happen if ____? Why is ____ important? These stems help students to push their thinking beyond literal details and into more intriguing content.

For example, Andre, a fifth grader, wanted to conduct an inquiry about football. His initial questions were primarily information seeking (Martinello & Cook, 2000): When was football invented? Who invented it? Where was it invented? What was the first team’s name? What are the rules? What equipment is used? Which team has won the most Super Bowls? Through appropriate teacher modeling and scaffolding, he was able to add data synthesis and evaluation questions such as these: How is football related to games played in other countries? How has the game of football changed since it was invented? What causes the most common football injury? How do football players’ salaries compare to salaries of baseball players and basketball players? Why is football such a popular sport to watch? Why is the XFL [Extreme Football League] having a hard time catching on? Because there was potentially intriguing information and analysis that could result from these questions, the “Who Cares?” test was passed. But the “do something” component was still missing.

Andre was encouraged to use another technique to look at the topic through various perspectives. This takes the form of asking questions about the topic from different disciplines or exploring it through the eyes of someone in a par-
ticular profession. Examples include the following: What would be a good science question (math question, history question) related to this topic? What kind of question would a doctor (lawyer, artist, banker, mother, construction worker) ask about this topic? Because Andre had a relative who sustained a serious injury in a football game, the “What question would a doctor ask about this topic?” stimulated his thinking. He decided to focus on the “common injuries” information and subsequently created an Invention inquiry centered on the stem question “What are some possible solutions for the problem of common football injuries?” He explored potential adaptations in the rules of the game and the equipment used. His Microsoft PowerPoint presentation incorporated slow motion video clips of bone crunching encounters from football games and recommendations for how modifications in safety equipment (represented through diagrams) could lessen the occurrence of these injuries.

Although students play an important part in the decision-making in an inquiry-based classroom, topic choice should not be considered completely a student-driven endeavor. Teachers can foster inquiries by sparking interest in topics that students may not have even considered on their own. Also, students may not select a certain topic on their own because they lack the prior knowledge about it; however, if the teacher introduces the topic and captures student curiosity, a worthwhile inquiry could result.

In certain situations, it is helpful for teachers to play a more direct role in topic selection by providing themes from which students choose their particular inquiries. This can help ensure that reading matter, technology resources, and other materials are available for students as they engage in the inquiry process. In today’s standards-driven curricular world, theme selection also helps teachers align students’ inquiries with the school’s curriculum. In the summer inquiry-based literacy and technology program that we implemented, themes had to be teacher-selected in order to preview and purchase reading materials, secure community mentors, and more important, to generate interest so students would enroll in the program.

If themes must be selected, it is important that they be broad and interest students. For example, in preparation for The Extra Edge program described later, we asked approximately 70 middle-school-aged students to write about one topic of interest that they would like to study if given the opportunity. We told them to imagine that they would be able to study the topic extensively through reading, talking to experts, taking field trips, and creating “something” to teach others about what they learned. The students’ responses fit into 10 areas of study. We ended up selecting four themes from these areas that we thought would not only capture the students’ interest, but also would have age-appropriate reading materials and Internet sites as well as the possibility for community partnerships. Students enrolled in the theme of their choice and then developed their inquiry questions within those themes.

Facilitate the process of gathering and presenting information. An inquiry-based approach may benefit students of all ability levels, but students who have been unsuccessful in school are often particularly well served. Baum, Renzulli, and Hébert (1994) found that student-centered inquiry projects have the potential to reverse patterns of underachievement in students. They noted the importance of the teacher in facilitating this reversal. Teachers who took the time to get to know the students and their interests, used their time with the students to facilitate the inquiry process rather than counsel them regarding their underachievement, provided resources when the students reached a roadblock, and gave opportunities for the students to share their projects with others had students who improved academically during the year of the study and in the following year. Validating or creating student interest, guiding them through the framework of the process, and providing resources when necessary may offer the support students need to succeed.

Technology and inquiry. A final factor that we found to be particularly effective in implementing inquiry-based teaching is the use of technology, particularly computer- and Internet-related technologies. We have seen such technologies motivate and maintain student interest, provide unique sources and even types of information, and afford opportunities for extending the nature of students’ reading and writing processes into multimedia composition and comprehension.

Technology as cognitive support for inquiry

A predominant view of technology in education during the past two decades has focused on computers as “tools.” There is disagreement on the definition of tool, as well as discussion centering on how, why, and even if these tools
should be integrated into the classroom (Cordes & Miller, 2000; Jonassen & Reeves, 1996; Zajonc, 1985). Our purpose in this article is not to engage in this debate; technology is here and its integration into the classroom—right or wrong—will continue to be a focus in today's schools. Our goal is to suggest an approach that honors students as learners, teachers as facilitators, and technology as an external implement that enhances cognition, particularly in areas of reading and writing.

A view of technology as predominantly a tutor and a communicator of information fails to acknowledge that students are active constructors of knowledge (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992). When students use technology to access information, analyze it, interpret it, and represent it in a new way, the computer becomes a conduit for the construction of knowledge, rather than merely a tutor. Jonassen and Reeves (1996) suggested the need for an "intellectual partnership" between learners and various cognitive tools, including the computer (p. 696). Students use technology to support their learning endeavors. The technology is not the focus of the learning, but it provides an essential vehicle for getting to the destination. Learning should drive the technology, not vice versa (Wepner, Valsmont, & Thurlow, 2000). The inquiry—what the student wants to learn—provides the fuel for the vehicle. Without fuel, the vehicle is useless.

Inquiry-based learning is not new; however, the availability of technology to support the process provides a key element. At its most simplistic level, technology allows students to organize and edit their projects more easily. At a more complex level, technology allows students to communicate with experts around the world, to access information from a vast array of resources, and to create high-quality presentations that combine text, sound, and visual images in ways that lead to what may be called "new literacies" (Leu, 2001).

Of course, information on the Internet is often inaccurate. However, teachers can use a "recommender system" to learn the quality of information on the Web. Recommender systems represent an emerging Internet technology that operates on the principle of "social information filtering." In essence, this approach provides word-of-mouth opinions and recommendations from trusted sources. For example, if you wanted to try a new restaurant, you might ask friends or look at a restaurant guide. This same premise applies to professional information filtering. A recommender system can provide opinions about websites by teachers from around the country or around the world who are participating in the construction of the system. For instance, a group of educators may form to provide recommendations on a particular topic (e.g., information on the Holocaust) or for a certain grade level (e.g., good websites for third graders). This at least lets a teacher know that particular materials or sites are deemed to be of high quality and usability by the educators participating in the group. An example of a recommender system can be found at http://it-edtech.ed.usu.edu/alteredvista.

Technology also encourages students to think differently about school. Access to technology makes school seem more "real world" to the students and consequently, their learning pushes the boundaries of the traditional school curriculum. Students are no longer limited by the materials available in their school or local community, nor are they confined to studying topics presented in their science or social studies textbooks. Instead, they can use these as starting points from which to extend and refine their explorations. As a teacher with 8 years of experience using inquiry learning noted,

When I need information for something I'm doing—for instance preparing a lesson—I might use the phone to confer with an expert, I might use the Internet to see what other teachers have done, I might go to the university library, I might create a database on the computer with relevant documents, I might use PowerPoint to create transparencies. Giving kids access to these same experiences and resources makes learning more real to them. It's not just an exercise done for a grade. It is a meaningful task with a purpose and an outcome.

**Urban inquiry-based programs: Intellectual partnerships in action**

We provide here brief descriptions of two university-sponsored, inquiry-based programs we have been involved with during the past 3 years. Over 100 7- to 15-year-old urban students participated in these programs. In both programs, children worked with adults to explore topics of interest using the frameworks outlined earlier, based on work by Grabe and Grabe (2000) and Short, Harste, and Burke (1996). These two projects demonstrate how technology-enhanced inquiry evolves differently depending on circumstances, resources, and the children and teachers involved, illustrating, therefore, that there is no one way to do inquiry-based instruction.

The Extra Edge was a 5-week summer read-
ing and writing program designed to help inner-
city, middle school children who experienced
difficulty with reading and writing, were not
very motivated to achieve in school, and were
in danger of being retained in eighth grade. The
specific instructional components of The Extra
Edge focused on the following:

- Comprehension and critical thinking
- Word analysis and vocabulary acquisition
- The writing process
- Writing as a response to reading

The program provided students with 4 hours
of intense literacy instruction, 4 days a week. To
sustain student motivation and achieve our liter-
acy goals, teachers devoted 50% of their instruc-
tional time to teaching comprehension, word
analysis, and writing with a fiction text that all
the students studying the theme read. In addi-
tion to providing a forum for explicitly teaching
reading and writing strategies and skills, the nov-
el helped the students and teachers develop a
common language and background to guide in-
quiry development and understand key concepts
about the theme being studied.

The remaining 50% of instructional time was
devoted to inquiry development where the stu-
dents applied the literacy strategies and skills that
they learned to read and interpret nonfiction texts,
websites, and other reading materials. Students
were frequently reminded to use their word anal-
ysis and comprehension strategies while reading.
Writing was used as a tool for communication
with their intended audience and to clarify under-
standing during inquiry development, a time dedi-
cated to generating questions to develop inquiries
and creating projects for presentation night.
Technology was primarily used during the inquiry
development portion of the instruction.

Specific uses of technology to support the
inquiry included data gathering (Internet search-
es, multimedia encyclopedias, online interviews,
content-specific software packages), data man-
gement (notetaking, charts, graphs), and pre-
sentation (creating a brochure or other printed
material, constructing a Web page, creating a
PowerPoint presentation).

In addition to working with their university
partners, students worked with community part-
ners from local museums, and other cultural and
business entities. Input from local experts helped
the students to deepen understandings of their top-
ics. One of the most notable outcomes of The
Extra Edge was the eagerness with which the stu-
dents approached the design and completion of
their projects for the final presentation night. The
students were asked to create projects that ex-
plained their inquiries and what they learned to an
audience of parents, peers, siblings, and a variety
of adult visitors. They were to include an audio
component, a visual component, and an audience
participation component in their presentations.

The students quickly learned that PowerPoint
presentations, word-processed documents on
poster boards, computer graphics, and video made
fulfilling the project requirements both easy and
enjoyable. As they shared their projects with one
another in the days before the presentation night,
their conversations were flooded with ideas for
using even more technology to improve their pro-
jects. For example, when the Internet technology
group projected their website for the others to see,
two boys in the aviation group decided to replace
their poster boards with PowerPoint presenta-
tions. Additionally, a student who could not attend
the presentation night decided to have his presenta-
tion videotaped after viewing a classmate’s
videotaped interview with a dolphin trainer. The
inquiry-based format of The Extra Edge provided
the students with a social learning opportunity
that allowed them to motivate and learn from one
another. The different forms of technology creat-
ed a “polished finish” to the projects that, for the
students, generated an unexpected sense of pride
in their work and impressed the audience.

The second inquiry program we discuss—
the Learning By Association Project—is a col-
laboration that began 3 years ago between a
university and an inner-city nonprofit social ser-
service agency. Students enrolled in a reading met-
ods course meet on a weekly basis with children
from the agency’s after-school program to create
inquiry projects. The children participate on a
voluntary basis and may reenroll each academic
quarter. Partners work together for 8 weeks. On
the final night, participants share their work with
one another and with parents and teachers.

During the first year of this program, only 4
computers and a limited amount of software
were available, Internet access was not. Because
an average of 20 children signed up each academ-
ic quarter, they did not spend much time on the
computer. They spent the majority of their time
using print resources to research their topics.
While students enjoyed the one-on-one atten-
tion from their university partners, and parents
and teachers reported growth in their reading and
writing abilities, the project products tended to
resemble traditional school reports. Students had
difficulty moving beyond "Here is what I learned about dogs."

A federal grant allowed for the purchase of 17 computers, a digital video camera, a scanner, a color laserjet printer, and a DSL line for Internet access. Initially, the computers distracted students. During the 75-minute weekly session, students spent half of the time in the computer lab and the other half in another room working on project-related tasks. While they were in the computer lab, they wanted to explore Internet sites that had nothing to do with their topics. They read all of the advertising banners on each Web page. They wanted to use the cameras hooked up to each computer to see what friends across the room were doing. However, for most students the computers became less interesting as they became more engaged in their inquiries.

Twelve-year-old Juan had been a participant in the program for five academic quarters. According to his classroom teacher, he read approximately two grades below level and had particular difficulty with inferential comprehension. While waiting for his partner to arrive, Juan could be seen talking animatedly and roughhousing with his friends in the hall. Once his university partner arrived, a shrug of the shoulders seemed to be Juan's main method of communication. No matter how friendly and upbeat each of his partners were Juan remained quiet. He was not uncooperative, he just seemed hesitant. Other than suggesting the initial topic of sports, he tended to agree with whatever his partner suggested they do. On project presentation night, he preferred to hold the poster and have the university partner explain it to the audience. After each presentation night, Juan indicated that he had enjoyed working on his project and would be back next quarter.

During the academic quarter when the new computer lab opened, Juan began in his usual hesitant manner, and again he indicated that he wanted to do a sports-related inquiry. His tutor recommended that they work toward creating a PowerPoint presentation that included video clips and that perhaps after learning about a few sports, they could invent a new sport that they could teach to the other students in the program.

Juan continued to begin each session with one-word responses and shoulder shrugs, but he quickly became more lively. He wanted to show other students the websites he found. He asked if he could sign up for extra computer time to research his topic during the lab's open access time slots. He carefully read printed materials and highlighted important information. He asked to use a dictionary so he could be sure he spelled things correctly in his written product. During the project presentation night, Juan narrated the PowerPoint presentation while his partner sat in a chair in the audience.

What made the difference for Juan? Was it the access to a wider variety of resources? Was it the lure of creating a flashy PowerPoint presentation? Was it the topic focus? Was it a combination of these factors? It is difficult to say. However, it is clear that technology helped Juan to learn more about his topic and to enhance his reading and writing abilities.

Access to technology experts is every bit as important as access to technology itself when implementing inquiry-based programs. In The Extra Edge, one of the themes was Internet technology. The students studying Internet technology decided to form a group inquiry on the experiences of the other students in the summer program, and created a website for their project. Their inquiry became: How do we create a website that shows what all students have learned in the program? The program only had four computers with Internet access. The students were led by an outstanding teacher with much experience in language arts instruction but limited Internet and no Web design experience. We were extremely fortunate that the community mentor for Internet technology graciously provided us with a workspace and released one of his website specialists to assist the students and teacher in creating the website. Without this mentor's additional support, the teacher and students would have had to change their inquiry.

There were many incidents where those involved in the inquiry process had to be flexible and prepared with alternative resources when directing students' inquiries. One of the themes in the summer inquiry-based literacy program was art and architecture. The directors of the program, the teacher, and an artist-in-residence spent months selecting materials and planning field trips to guide students' inquiries primarily in architecture. Within the first week of the program, two girls dropped from the class and the three remaining boys became discipline problems. After a heartfelt discussion with the boys about their behavior, we learned that the boys had a true passion for drawing and did not see architecture as having anything to do with art or their interests for that matter. We immediately signed out books on drawing and purchased sketch pads and other art supplies. Instead of the
already-scheduled architectural walking-tour field trips, the artist-in-residence and the teacher booked studio time at the university and scheduled walks to observe urban life. The group’s inquiries focused on techniques for improving their sketching and painting and using writing as a means for sharing their discoveries on project presentation night. When the boys’ teacher the previous school year came to project night, she was in awe about the amount of writing and the skill with which the students led the audience through simple sketching techniques.

Lessons learned

In addition to what we learned about inquiry, literacy, and technology that has already been discussed, we offer the following ABCs of observations and lessons learned as a result of our experiences with inquiry-based learning:

- **A: Approach with enthusiasm.** Learners will notice the teacher’s excitement immediately. The teacher needs to communicate, “This is going to be a different way of doing things—I’m not an expert on all of the topics that we’ll be exploring. We’ll be learning together and that will be so exciting!” The teacher’s modeling of the inquiry process will speak volumes to the students.

- **B: Beware of hyperleaping.** The computer seems to bring out the attention deficit in all of us. Students need to learn how to narrow their topic so that their searches can be focused and fruitful. It is easy (and tempting) to get lost in cyberspace. A search that begins with the rain forests can hyper-leap to the latest in vacation clothes. Therefore, the importance of well-formulated questions again becomes key. Students can self-check by periodically asking, “Is this information even remotely connected to any of my questions?” If the answer is no, then a quick click of the “Back” button is in order.

- **C: Critical reading skills.** Though always important, critical reading skills are more necessary than ever. Students must learn how to judge the accuracy and legitimacy of their sources in ways they may not have used in the past. Gone are the days when the majority of information for a project comes from an encyclopedia or a textbook. There are thousands of websites related to environmental issues. Students need to know how to determine which would be most useful—the site from the Sierra Club or someone’s personal homepage. Just because a site is listed in the first set of hits that appear on the search screen does not mean it is a legitimate or useful site. A tobacco company might have paid to make sure that their site was in the top 20 for particular searches. Would this be the most bias-free place to look for information about smoking? Students must question what they find on the Internet. Students also need to learn how to skim and scan so that they can quickly determine whether a particular website relates to their specific inquiry. Becoming adept at skimming and scanning helps them to determine quickly if the website is written at a “kid friendly” level. Finally, students must become adept at comparing and contrasting information from different sources. These intertextual connections are key in developing critical reading. For example, as the students in The Extra Edge gained baseline knowledge about their inquiries, they frequently found conflicting information in different sources. For many of them, this was an exciting but confusing experience because they never thought of challenging the accuracy of written material or experts for that matter. This became a teaching point as the teachers guided students in evaluating the credibility and accuracy of the Internet sites and reading materials as well as the information learned from the community mentors.

- **D: Delve into topics while protecting the students.** Even the most innocent search on the Internet can lead to inappropriate material. Search engines such as AOL’s Kids Only (http://webcenter.search.aol.com/kids/) and Yahooligans (http://www.yahooligans.com) can be effective filters. However, it is always good for the teacher to keep an eye on the computer screens when students are searching for material. Previewing and bookmarking appropriate sites prior to student searches may also prove to be safe and useful. Although this is more time consuming than using a search engine to filter inappropriate material, it provides the added advantage of narrowing student searches and using instructional time effectively.
• **E: Expand horizons.** It is natural for students to want to spend time on “fun” sites. The World Wrestling Federation site or the Pokémon site may have great appeal to students because of their familiarity with them. The teacher can assist in expanding the students’ horizons by directing them to websites that relate specifically to their projects and that are presented in an engaging manner. Video clips, sound, and photos can all capture interest and hook students into exploring a particular topic in more depth. Web-based sources like http://www.educationworld.com or http://discoverschool.com/schrockguide can assist the teacher in finding relevant educational materials of this type.

• **F: Facilitate the process.** Perhaps the most important thing the teacher needs to do is to act as a facilitator. She or he must continuously discuss the project with the students, ask questions to keep the inquiry meaningful and focused, and monitor progress. The teacher initially is the one who pushes both the “Who Cares” and the “Do Something” aspects of the projects, but eventually, as the students become more adept at the process, these become habitual. Students must sometimes be reminded that the flashiest PowerPoint presentation complete with imported movie clips may not be as informative as another presentation. Teachers can monitor that the students are not spending inordinate amounts of time on the technical side of the presentation at the expense of the content.

Also, having 25 different inquiry-based projects easily becomes overwhelming to a teacher. She or he may decide to have the students select topics in groups, or the teacher may choose to facilitate a class project. (For recommendations of Internet-based projects, see Leu [2001], http://ed.web.sdsu.edu/webquest/webquest.html and http://gsh.lightspan.com/pr/index.dfn)

• **G: Go for it.** Don’t be intimidated by inquiry-based learning or the technology associated with it. Inquiry is a process, though not necessarily a linear one. Start at the end with an established idea for what to do with the information; begin with some stem questions or perspective questions to refine the seed of an idea; or jump in someplace in the middle.

### Future of technology-enhanced inquiry-based instruction

Some school districts have made concerted efforts to provide teachers with technology and training in how to integrate it with instruction. The integration factor is probably the most important in determining whether technology will enhance or detract from learning goals. Salomon, Perkins, and Globerson (1991) pointed out, “No important impact can be expected when the same old activity is carried out with a technology that makes it a bit faster or easier; the activity itself has to change” (p. 8). When teachers are willing to examine their beliefs about learning—to ask, “What does the technology allow me to do better, not just differently?”—student learning can be enhanced. School districts that have spent large amounts of money on hardware and software, but have neglected to encourage teachers to examine their own teaching and curricular beliefs and have failed to provide instruction in the possibilities for technology integration, are struggling to understand why they are not seeing changes in student outcomes. School districts that have not found the funds to purchase hardware, or that have had difficulty funding the necessary wiring and infrastructure needed to support large-scale technology initiatives, struggle with the fear that they are contributing to the creation of a society of haves and have nots.

### Where will you go today?

With the technical resources available today, we can go literally anywhere without leaving our classrooms. We can take our students on a tour of the Egyptian pyramids. We can watch astronauts conducting science experiments in space through a live Internet video camera. We can follow a dogsled team through the Iditarod race. We can connect to experts around the world. We can access rare documents and archives. We can hear the voices and see the images of heroes who have long since departed this world. All of this can occur with the quick click of a few buttons.

Of course, virtual experiences should not be considered a replacement for actual experiences, but how many of us would otherwise ever have the opportunity to sail around the world with someone or participate in a discussion with a Nobel prize-winner? Technology provides a vehicle to take us through these experiences. We—the learners—provide the fuel. Our inquiries, our questions, our explorations determine the path of
the journey and the ultimate destination. While
the destination is important, an old Taoist say-
ing reminds us that often, the journey is the
reward (Deng, 1992).

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"I Just Need to Draw": Responding to Literature across Multiple Sign Systems

Kathy G. Short, Gloria Kauffman and Leslie H. Kahn

Here are helpful ideas for teachers who want to make multiple sign systems a part of the reading and writing curriculum.

One day, as Gloria Kauffman’s students left the class read-aloud, Ramon said in a heartfelt voice, “Oh, I just need to draw.” Ramon’s comment reminded us that while talk plays a significant role in students’ interpretations of literature, they need many ways of thinking and responding available to them. We decided to explore the potential for understanding that becomes available when students respond to literature through multiple sign systems. In their lives outside school, learners naturally move between art, music, movement, mathematics, drama, and language as ways to think about the world. They talk and write, but they also sketch, sing, play, solve problems, and dance their way to new insights. It is only in schools that students are restricted to using one sign system at a time to think.

When we first used literature in our curriculum, students were assigned retellings, wrote book summaries, filled out worksheets on literary elements and story structures, and answered comprehension questions to “prove” they had read the book. We quickly realized that students were focusing on details and extracting information from text instead of having a “lived-through” experience within the story world (Rosenblatt, 1978). We wanted students to actively construct understandings as they entered the world of literature to learn about life and to make sense of their experiences and feelings. Rosenblatt’s transactional theories connected with our own experiences as readers, and so we incorporated literature discussion groups and written response into the curriculum. While these engagements provided opportunities for students to think critically about literature, it became clear that we needed to expand these opportunities for response beyond talking and writing.

We have explored the integration of sign systems within an inquiry curriculum at a broad level (Kahn, Fisher, & Pitt, 1994; Short et al., 1996). In this article we focus on one aspect of our work, responding to literature through multiple sign systems. By sign systems we mean multiple ways of knowing—the ways in which humans share and make meaning, specifically through music, art, mathematics, drama, and language (Short & Harste, with Burke, 1996). We will focus particularly on transmediation, the process of taking understandings from one system and moving them into another sign system (Siegel, 1995). In this case, we are interested in how students take what they understand through language as they read and talk about literature and transform those understandings by expressing their ideas in art, drama, music, or math. Because each sign system has a different potential for meaning (Eisner, 1994), students do not transfer the same meaning, but create new ideas, and so their understandings of a book become more complex. They are not simply doing an activity or presentation from a book, but instead use these sign systems as tools for thinking.

The examples we share of responding to literature through multiple sign systems are organized according to the type of response they support—initial aesthetic responses, reflection and critical analysis, intertextual connections, presentations, and responses to texts in other sign systems. While we highlight art, drama, music, and math because of the focus of this arti-
cle, students continuously responded through talk and writing as well. The article ends with a brief discussion of the theory of sign systems and transmediation that supports our work.

Examples from Leslie Kahn’s and Gloria’s classrooms are woven throughout our discussion. Both Leslie and Gloria teach in multiage fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms in diverse classroom settings in Tucson, Arizona, USA. Leslie previously taught fourth, fifth, and sixth grade, and Gloria has taught first through fifth grade and primary multiage classes. They involve their students in read-aloud experiences and provide many books and reading materials for independent reading and research. Their students also engage in small-group literature circles where they choose the group they would like to join to discuss a particular book or text set. The discussions always occur within the context of a broader classroom inquiry, and the books are never read as an isolated experience. These literature circles encourage students to share their connections and to engage in collaborative thinking through their understandings about literature and life (Short & Harste, with Burke, 1996).

Exploring the initial aesthetic response

Rosenblatt (1978) argued that students need to share their initial aesthetic responses to a book so they can attend to their inner state—the feelings and connections they experience as they live within a book. Everyone has a right to his or her own experience, and so there is no right or wrong response. Later, they critically examine those responses, but first they share their personal, unexamined, tentative thinking about a book.

In literature circles, students usually begin with conversations that meander from topic to topic before moving to focused dialogue. These conversations can be facilitated by encouraging students to explore their initial responses through other sign systems. We’ve sat in literature circles with students, especially young children, who obviously had connections and feelings that they couldn’t yet put into words. Responding in other sign systems gives them a way to think about and share their feelings and images.

While we often use literature logs to encourage children to respond through writing, we find that many children need to incorporate sketching and diagramming into their responses. Mardell, age 9, wrote long, boring retellings in her log until Gloria invited children to use webs, charts, sketches, and diagrams. Mardell’s logs immediately took on a different quality as she combined words and images to think in more complex ways (see Figure 1).

Many of these initial responses occur so quickly that we don’t even see them. We decided to build opportunities for this response into the daily class read-aloud of a chapter book. One day after reading a particularly poignant chapter in Star Fisher (Yep, 1991), Leslie invited students to respond, saying “Before we talk about this, what do you need to do to think about this book? To express yourself? To figure out the book?” Students moved into a variety of responses. Because her students had worked with a drama expert, they felt comfortable with this sign system and several created dramas of scenes from the book. Others sketched images, and several created music using glasses and water because instruments were not available.

As Leslie continued reading the book aloud the next day, she noticed that this experience gave her students permission to think more broadly. They had considered the story from different perspectives and had thought about their own feelings and thoughts with others. They made a wider range of connections in their talk about the chapters after each read-aloud.

Gloria issued the same invitation when she finished reading aloud The Barn (Avi, 1994) as part of a family focus. She mentioned that art materials and other tools were available and brought out various music tapes. Cynthia took out her log and wrote about her personal connections. Rueben, Tito, and Adam looked through the music and played a pastoral piece by Beethoven as they discussed scenes within the book that were important to them. They then made pen-and-ink drawings of these scenes. Other children used tempera, pastels, watercolors, chalk, charcoal, and pencil to visually portray images from the book that reflected their emotional responses. After sharing these responses informally, students came together in a class meeting to talk about the book.

Gloria and Kathy Short interviewed the students several weeks later and asked them whether responding first in many different ways affected their thinking. Children felt that these responses allowed them to express their feelings, to try out ideas they had in their minds about the book, to learn more about the book, to understand how it felt to live during that period, to
make more connections, and to experience the emotions of children in the story. They stated they could try out ideas they had in their minds, and that helped them talk more deeply about the book when they met for discussion.

These initial responses don’t have to be this involved. We find that simply giving students a few minutes to quietly sketch or write about a book before gathering for a group discussion changes the talk. They have time to prepare for the discussion by thinking about personal connections, and so the talk moves beyond retellings to broader connections and issues.

Math is the one sign system that many teachers don’t believe is connected to literature response. When Leslie taped her students’ discussions of literature, she found many examples of the use of mathematics to understand books (Kahn, 1994). (Pseudonyms are used for all of Leslie’s students.) Students constantly referred to concepts such as money, probability, directionality, and time. They used logical conditionals—“If they never would have gotten stuck in there, then he never would have wished for his father” (William, age 12). They discussed how characters used visual markers to solve problems and find their way. They made comparisons to weigh decisions that characters were making—“Why can’t they keep the farm, because the farm is worth a lot of money? That way, they’d get more money” (James, age 12). They posed problems, such as when Tony struggled with the concepts of atomic bombs and why people in Japan could not outrun the radiation. Mathematical thinking was an important tool for children to talk through their understandings.

Art is another important tool for thinking. Sketch to Stretch (Short & Harste, with Burke, 1996) encourages children to move their responses from language into art by inviting them to sketch what the book means to them. They are not drawing an illustration of the book’s plot, but a quick sketch of the connections and images the book raises in their minds. Kathy introduced this engagement to Leslie’s students during a study of war by showing them sketches she had collected from another group. She then read aloud Bang, Bang, You’re Dead (Fitzugh, 1969) and invited them to sketch their meanings to share in small groups. In this picture book, a group of children learn the difference between playing war and having a real war when their play turns into actual fighting on the playground. Students’ sketches included messages about sports and competition, gangs, and wars in which both sides kill each other. Creating and talking through their drawings gave them a chance to explore connections to their lives and the world in interpreting the book (see Figure 2).

Sketching also plays a role in graffiti or
sounding boards (Short & Harste, with Burke, 1996). Gloria often uses graffiti boards when her students are discussing text sets, sets of conceptually related books. A large sheet of paper is placed on the table, and as the group reads through the books each child takes one area of the paper and jots down words, sketches images, and notes connections. There’s no effort to work together or to organize the ideas. The board captures children’s in-process thinking and becomes a source of ideas once they begin to search for connections across the books.

When Gloria interviewed her students, they said that these boards help them express their feelings and are a safe place to put anything down in whatever way they want. They can draw to get out feelings; write to explain what they are doing; use charts, flow charts, and webs to sort out ideas as well as to gather more ideas; and make diagrams to explain their thinking.

Because initial aesthetic responses focus on personal connections and tentative thinking about a book, students’ responses are often not the ones we would predict. When we encourage students to think about a book across other sign systems, their responses are even further from what we expect. We have learned not only to listen carefully and accept student responses without judgment, but also to ask questions that allow us to understand their connections.

Extending response through reflection and analysis

While free response is necessary, it is not sufficient for students to become critical thinkers who consider alternative perspectives (Rosenblatt, 1978). They need to be encouraged to reflect on and analyze their responses and take intellectual responsibility for their views. In literature circles, this talk is often characterized as dialogue where students coproduce meaning through critique and inquiry into their thinking about literature (Peterson, 1992). They search for questions and issues that really matter to them as learners and then pursue these through critique, “storying,” and thoughtful listening and responding to one another. They move from sharing a wide range of connections in conversations to intensively considering several focused issues through dialogue to extend and critique their response. Taking time to think and reflect carefully is essential to dialogue.

In our work with students, we found that this time of reflective analysis can involve students in thoughtful and productive transmediations across sign systems when they take their understandings from reading and consider them in another system. These transmediations provide students with alternative perspectives and so support them in more complex thinking.

There is obviously a close relationship between exploring initial responses and reflecting on those responses. Students do not neatly divide their thinking but move back and forth. They can also use the same engagement at different times for different purposes. While Sketch to Stretch can support initial responses, students can use it to think about a particular issue. A group of Gloria’s students wanted to think about the issue of the children being caught between Jacob and Sarah as they worked out their relationship in Sarah, Plain and Tall (MacLachlan, 1985). The group decided to discuss this issue, and so members created individual sketches about their thinking that they brought to the group.

Figure 2
Sketch to Stretch (Thomas, Ramon, William, age 12)
Group members held up their sketches for others to examine and discuss before talking about why they had drawn that particular sketch. One child drew Jacob and Sarah having a tug-of-war on a rope that represented the children. Another drew Sarah as a hermit crab trying on a new shell, and still another drew her as a treasure chest opening to reveal the treasures inside. In this case, the sketches supported a critical analysis of an issue, instead of facilitating the sharing of many connections and feelings.

As part of a broad focus on communication, a group of third-grade boys in Gloria’s classroom worked with a text set on art as a way of seeing the world. Animalia (Base, 1986) was in this set, and the boys spent several days intently examining the illustrations. They talked about the illustrator’s use of detail, color, size, perspective, and repetition; the relationships between the objects and the letter of the alphabet; and the artist’s signature on each page. After several days, they chose their favorite picture and went over to the keyboard. Several boys had taken piano lessons, and they began to strike the keys to find a tune that fit their thinking about the painting. They tried different melodies and kept adding, repeating, and revising the notes they were playing. The music was not a presentation for classmates, but it was created to help them reflect on and analyze one particular illustration.

Michelle was in a text-set group looking at the use of light and dark in illustrations. This group was part of a broader focus on visual literacy and nature in Gloria’s classroom in which students engaged in illustrator studies. Out of this initial exploration, an inquiry group on light and dark emerged. Michelle looked through the books and sketched ways illustrators use light and dark in her log and on a graffiti board. To think more about what she was seeing, she created a web in her log where she noted the variations of light and dark and where to find these in pictures. Organizing her observations into a web pulled together her thinking. She shared her web with her literature circle, and the group used it to move to a more in-depth examination and discussion of light and dark images in illustrations. Similarly, a group reading The Cay (Taylor, 1969) created a story map of the island with the events and characters, which gave them a visual picture they could use to think through the plot and recreate the story world (see Figure 3).

A group of sixth graders in Leslie’s classroom read Toughboy and Sister (Hill, 1990) while studying survival. This is the story of two children stranded on an island in Alaska. The group initially explored many issues but then focused on how the children survived. They used mathematical thinking to question the children’s decision to eat one type of food until it was gone and then go to another food. They discussed other patterns the children could have used to eat the food and whether these patterns would make eating more interesting or allow the food to last longer. These issues came up later when they explored the relationship between time, food, and starvation in Holocaust novels.

Leslie read aloud We Remember the Holocaust (Adler, 1989) during a broad focus on racism and the Holocaust. As the class discussed this book, it was obvious that the students were struggling to understand the feelings associated with prejudice, and so Leslie encouraged them to move into drama. The students first worked individually on storyboards of a possible drama. These were shared with the class and resulted in a number of dramas that helped children reflect more deeply on prejudice. One drama involved students portraying characters with two characters talking to each other or an interviewer talking to a character (such as Hitler, a Nazi soldier, a Jew, a German citizen, or a teacher). They also took dramatic scenes from books they had read earlier, such as Snow Treasure (McSwigan, 1942), and played them out in their own Arizona desert context. These dramas allowed students to cross the lines of friendship, ability, and ethnicity in their relationships and to gain deeper insights about prejudice (see Figure 4).

**Constructing understandings through intertextuality**

Intertextuality refers to the process of making connections with past texts in order to construct understandings of new texts. Readers understand the new by searching past experiences with texts and life to find connections that will bring meaning to the current text. The greater the range of experiences and texts considered, the more complex the understandings (Short, 1992). Typically, intertextuality is defined as the connections students make between pieces of written literature. Because we extended our definition of text, students had a wider range of connections to consider as they read and responded. For us, text refers to any chunk of meaning that has unity and can be shared with others (Short, 1986; Siegel, 1984). A text therefore can be a novel, a piece of art, a play, a dance, a song, or a mathematical equation.
The most common intertextual connections that students make are to movies and the mass media. These texts fill their lives and are a natural point of connection. For example, Raul brought connections about the maze and echoes from the movie *The Name of the Rose* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, director, 1986) into a discussion about two boys lost in a cave in *Building Blocks* (Voigt, 1984) and how they might use echoes to find their way. While teachers often do not value these connections to movies and television shows, these are the most easily accessible texts for children and a significant point of reference for their views of texts and life.

During the Holocaust inquiry, Leslie placed many reproductions of photographs and primary source documents around the room. As the sixth-grade students read, they often made intertextual connections with these photographs. One powerful connection was when Gabriel noticed that a photograph matched an illustration in *Rose Blanche* (Innocenti, 1985), a picture book about a concentration camp. The book immediately took on a different meaning as students realized that these books were not just stories but reflected actual historical events. The books alone did not persuade them that these events had occurred, but when “intertextualized” with the photographs both took on new meaning. Sean pointed out that if the Nazis came into their classroom, “they would take the photographs away so we couldn’t prove that this happened.”

Students also make intertextual connections with experiences involving movement. During a focus on prejudice, a group of boys in Gloria’s classroom discussed *Baseball Saved Us* (Mochizuki, 1993), a story about a boy in a Japanese American internment camp and his involvement in baseball. In trying to understand the character’s feelings during the game and his fear of failing in front of others, the boys described their own experiences with sports and with trying to hit the ball while their fathers watched. They intertextualized their own emotional and kinesthetic experiences with those of the character in the book and so were able to understand the character in a different way.

Gloria encouraged intertextualizing across texts from different sign systems when her intermediate students used text sets on storytelling.
Matthew looked at a painting by Vincent Van Gogh of the artist’s bedroom and made an intertextual connection to *The Barn* (Avi, 1994) and to his own memories of his grandmother. Intertextualizing the art and the book triggered a memory, and Matthew took a broader perspective on death beyond the story details.

**Transforming understandings through presentations**

Once students have explored a book or text set through responses and talk in a literature circle, they usually pull their understandings together to share with the class (Kauffman & Ediger, 1998). Sometimes they share informally, and other times they create a presentation where they consider the best way to present what they have been thinking about in their literature circles. Planning these presentations often involves transmediation; students talk about what they consider the most significant ideas from their discussions and then take those understandings into other sign systems.

Drama is often a creative tool for students to use to present their thinking to others. A group of 9-year-olds in Gloria’s classroom read a folk tale set of “magic pot” variants. They developed a list of characteristics of a “magic pot” story in their discussions and then used these to develop their own original drama for the class. Their drama focused on giving and sharing and how the unlimited pot rewarded giving.

Some of the groups in Leslie’s classroom who read a text set of novels about racism and the Holocaust used charcoal to produce dark, powerful images about the Holocaust. They were influenced by books on “degenerate art,” the art that Hitler had denigrated and outlawed, and saw this style of art as a way they could convey their own inner feelings about the horror and pain.

Children often combine art and mathematics in their presentations, such as when a group in Leslie’s class read *Journey of the Sparrows* (Buss, 1991) about illegal refugees and created a circle graph to compare the expenditures of an average American family with what they thought the El Salvadoran family might spend. Another group read *The Cay* (Taylor, 1969) as part of their class focus on racism. They created four panels that used geometric shapes to reflect relationships ranging from mutual respect to prejudice and death. Adam (see Figure 5) and Ramon explained their thinking as follows:
Figure 5
Sketch of literature presentation (Adam, age 12)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>circle and line don’t get along</th>
<th>circle likes square better than line</th>
<th>line starts to make a triangle</th>
<th>line makes another triangle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Circle" /> <img src="image2" alt="Line" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Circle" /> <img src="image4" alt="Square" /></td>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Triangle" /></td>
<td><img src="image6" alt="Star" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>circle likes line for his different patterns</td>
<td>circle and line become good friends</td>
<td>circle and line make a star</td>
<td>circle and line become good friends</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adam: In the first one, circle and line don’t get along. In the second one, the circle likes square better than line so the line starts getting jealous. So he makes a triangle and then the line makes another triangle and it makes a star. So then circle likes line and circle and line become good friends because he has different patterns.

Ramon: I did my idea with what prejudice means to me. And it means to me that if two things are different and if they look the same, it doesn’t really matter. It’s still prejudice, because it’s the way you act.

Some students incorporate music with their presentations. A literature circle in Gloria’s classroom read *The Lucky Stone* (Clifton, 1979) as part of an inquiry on slavery. During the class focus, Gloria played tapes of spirituals from that period, and the class talked about how slaves used these songs to pass messages. As the group members talked about how to present their interpretation that the stone in their book reflected hope and luck, they decided to take the melody of one song and create their own prayer asking for strength and hope as a way to present this book to the class.

Often the most engaging presentations use multiple sign systems. A third-grade group in Gloria’s classroom explored a text set around the theme of ugly ducklings and acceptance of self (e.g., *The Ugly Duckling*, Cauley, 1979; *Beauty and the Beast*, Mayer, 1978; *Crow Boy*, Yashima, 1955; *Sleeping Ugly*, Yoken, 1981). They chose music and created a dance for their presentation, in which Jason put a paper bag over his head and the others taunted him. Later in the dance, he turned his cloak around and took off his paper bag to signify that he was beautiful inside. The others put paper bags over their heads to signify that they were ugly on the inside. After the dance, Jason painted a picture about internal and external beauty.

Responding to texts from other sign systems

These same ideas about response to literature are relevant when students respond to texts from other sign systems. Instead of students responding to a literary text, they might view a piece of art and respond through music, dance, or language to that text. They might listen to a piece of music and respond mathematically to explore the rhythms and patterns or artistically through painting the images in their minds. Just as with literary texts, they transmigrate across sign systems as they respond to these “texts” in order to share their initial response, extend their response through reflection and analysis, make intertextual connections, and present their understandings.
During a year-long focus on racism, Leslie's class engaged in a study of the Holocaust. Leslie showed a short black-and-white video called *The Ambulans* (available through video stores in the U.S.) in which Jewish children enter a truck with a Red Cross symbol, believing they are safe when they are, in fact, in great danger. This video text became a powerful point of response through talk and drama as students moved into small groups of four. Group members took turns at the roles of rescuer, victim, bystander, and aggressor in situations from their own lives to experience the video from different perspectives.

These dramas gave students a chance to express their feelings and think about the discomfort and horror they felt watching the video. They created their own situations to think about how they would react. They entered into these dramas with a seriousness that reflected their need to think through the video and the connections to their lives.

When Gloria was teaching a primary multigage class, the students listened to musical texts from the Walt Disney Co. movie *Fantasia* (Samuel Armstrong, director, 1940) during a focus on storytelling in different cultures. Many began spontaneously creating their own movements and dances as one form of response to the music. During one piece, Sean made martial arts moves, but during another piece, he created a ballet dance. He changed his moves on the basis of the musical text and the feelings and images each one created in his mind. Others drew, created drama scenes, or chose a book to read as they listened to the music. Several children commented that moving to the music allowed them to listen, really hear the instruments, and feel the rhythm. They could express their feelings and learn more about the music.

Gloria brought in many texts including art prints as part of an inquiry on human rights. As students explored these art prints, several created their own chalk drawings and wrote poetry to think through their response to a particular piece of art. After viewing a painting of a modern city, Leola, a fifth grader, produced a drawing and a poem (see Figure 6) that connect modern violence, her own experiences with prejudice because of her skin color, and previous class inquiries into the Columbus Quincentenary.

**The role of sign systems and transmediation in learning**

In our work with response to literature, we no longer do cute art or drama activities with a book. Instead, students use sign systems as tools for thinking about a book and for sharing their thinking with others. Within a sign system perspective, literacy is defined broadly as all the ways in which we make and share meaning—including music, art, mathematics, movement, drama, and language (Short & Harste, with Burke, 1996). This perspective takes us beyond just doing activities for fun or to increase comprehension to a different understanding of the role of these systems in thinking and learning.

Often sign systems other than language are used only for presentations at the end of literature discussion, sending the message that these systems are just ways to communicate ideas already developed through language. Because we believe that all sign systems are potential tools for thinking and exploring new ideas and for communicating and going public with ideas, these systems need to be available throughout the entire literary experience.

While schools have focused on language, the other sign systems are basic processes that should be available to all learners. Sign systems are not just for use by a few "gifted" people with special talents or intelligences. Although we have different abilities within different systems, we all have the potential to use these systems as tools for making and sharing meaning. We do not all expect to become professional writers, but we do use reading and writing to go about our daily lives. The other sign systems should have this same availability in daily life without the expectation that we will become professional musicians or theoretical mathematicians.

It is true that many adults are uncomfortable with some of these sign systems, but that is the result of a lack of exposure to, and use of, those systems in schools. If we had been immersed as students in these systems in the same ways we were surrounded with language throughout the school day, we would be able to use them in more meaningful ways in our lives today.

Sign systems are significant because they form the basis for creative and critical thought processes (Eco, 1976). In the process of taking our ideas public through a sign system, we create new ideas that go beyond our original conceptions. Once these ideas are in a stable public form, we can critique, think and reflect critically, and revisit and edit those ideas. If we view an experience from the perspectives of different sign systems, we add to the complexity of our thinking through new connections because each sign system offers a distinctive way of making mean-
Racism
This wind is blowing but
nobody is knowing.
The animals are dying
and people are crying.
Racism is going
but nobody is bearing
the fact
of its going.
The Taino are dead.
The Spanish?
But nothing is to be said.
The gun goes off
a bewildered sound
nobody cares
lying on the ground
A person in pain
not ashamed
Why?
Did I do this?
Such pain?

Figure 6
Poem and drawing (Leola, age 11)

ing (Eisner, 1994). There are parts of the world
we can never know, and understandings that we
can never communicate to others, if all of the
sign systems are not available. Sign systems are
thus multiple ways of knowing about the world.

Flexibility in sign-system use is important to
becoming a successful learner, just as flexibility
in cueing systems is important to becoming a
successful reader (Harste, 1994). We know that
readers need flexibility when using a range of
appropriate cueing systems within the reading
event. The same is true with sign systems.
Within an experience, learners need fluidity
when moving among sign systems to be effective
in their meaning making and to create more
complex understandings. They need to be able to
choose the sign systems that are most effective
for a particular message or that support their un-
derstandings about a particular issue.

We also realize that all sign systems involve
processes of interpreting and composing and that
these processes are interdependent (Short &
Kauffman, in press). It has become a cliché to
say that students learn about reading through
writing and about writing through reading, but
this cliché is grounded in important understand-
ings about this relationship. It is not uncommon,
however, for students to be expected to “com-
pose” meanings in art when we do not surround
them with art in the same way that we surround
writers with literature. This article focused on
the use of sign systems to compose and think
through ideas as readers respond to literature.
However, unless students are surrounded by art
prints, musical recordings, dance videos, drama
performances, and mathematical diagrams, they
will not have the demonstrations they need to
compose in those systems.

We have argued in this article that one way
learners push their understandings and create
more complex meanings is through transmedia-
tion (Siegel, 1984; Suhor, 1984). Transmediation
is the process of taking understandings created in
one sign system and moving them into another
sign system. This process is not a simple transfer
or translation of meaning from one system to an-
other because the meaning potentials in each
system differ. Instead, learners transform their
understandings through inventing a connection
so that the content of one sign system is mapped
onto the expression plane of another (Siegel,
1995). They search for commonalities in mean-
ings across sign systems, but because each sys-
tem has different meaning potentials, and there is
no one-to-one correspondence, their search cre-
ates anomalies and tension. In turn, this tension
encourages learners to invent a way to cross the
gap as they move to another sign system, and in
so doing they think and reflect generatively.
They create a metaphor that allows them to make
new connections, ask their own questions, and
open new lines of thinking (Siegel, 1995).

Transmediation is thus a generative process
in which new meanings are produced and the
learner’s understandings are enhanced. When students take the meanings they are constructing through reading, writing, or talk and think about them through art, music, drama, or mathematics, they create new meaning potentials. The other sign systems become woven into their talk about literature and provide multiple perspectives and points of connection that add to the complexity of the issues and ideas they consider.

Final thoughts

We noted a number of recurring themes in our observations of children and our interviews with them as they responded to literature through a range of sign systems. Children stated that the availability of a range of systems gave them the opportunity to think more broadly, to consider other ideas, to connect to memories, and to think through feelings. The availability of multiple sign systems created a larger pool of ideas and connections from which they could pull in thinking, solving problems, gaining new understandings, and responding to literature.

Children noted that they could more fully enter into and reflect on the story world because they experienced it from so many perspectives. They had not just talked about the book and done analytical thinking but had used art, music, mathematics, and movement to imaginatively and aesthetically consider the story. By engaging in transmediation across sign systems, they were encouraged to think and reflect creatively and to position themselves as meaning makers and inquirers. They were supported in gaining new perspectives and creating new visions about literature and life.


Children’s books cited


References


Invention, Convention and Intervention: Invented Spelling and the Teacher’s Role

Lawrence R. Sipe

This article highlights the teacher’s critical role in spelling instruction and provides examples of how to support spelling development in classrooms.

The following two vignettes of first-grade children and their writing are used to indicate subtle confusions and tensions that seem to be present in both teachers’ and children’s ideas about early attempts to spell. All names are pseudonyms.

Kelly is in first grade and is receiving individual help in reading. She’s doing very well, and her reading teacher thinks that she is probably functioning in the average range of her fellow classmates, but Kelly’s classroom teacher disagrees. She shows the reading teacher Kelly’s classroom journal, and the two teachers confer. It seems Kelly is able to spell many words on her own when she writes with her reading teacher, but the same words are not spelled conventionally in her journal. The reading teacher decides to talk to Kelly about this. The next time Kelly comes to her lesson, she places her classroom journal and her writing folder side by side. “Kelly,” she says, “you spelled all these words correctly when you were with me, but look at your journal—you spelled them any which way in here. Why?” Kelly shrugs her shoulders. “My teacher gives me a break—she just wants me to come close.”

Fred chews thoughtfully on his pencil as he tries to encode the word down. For the past 30 minutes, he has been deeply engaged in writing the sentence “Bats hang upside down” following a group lesson about bats. The process has been full of signs of metacognition, as he thinks aloud, rereads his message, evaluates it, and changes it when it doesn’t match what he has in mind. He’s justifiably proud of his effort, and beckons to his teacher, reading the sentence to her. She praises his efforts, and asks him if he could write one more thing about bats. He immediately thinks of writing, “Bats sleep in the daytime,” while the teacher moves on to another child. He copies bats from his previous sentence. Then, while saying “bats sleep” to himself, he writes a B and a T, followed by a series of scribbles and letter-like shapes, ending with a backwards N, a lowercase n, and a Y. This is done very quickly, with no sounding out or apparent subvocalization. He calls his teacher again, and the following exchange occurs:

Fred: Mrs. Myron, I’m done. “Bats hang upside down.”
Teacher: What else did you write? You have two things. What does the other thing say?
F: This one? Bats hang up—I mean Bats sleep... in...the...day...time (pointing to the words and the scribbles in the second sentence).
T: Good. You wrote two things down.

Then something very interesting happens:

Fred: I didn’t get this right, did I? (pointing to the second sentence)
Teacher: What didn’t you get right?
F: Words.
T: Did you get some of it right?
F: Yeah.
T: Well, you just need to get as many right as you can. You don’t need to spell all of these words yet. When you do, then you’ll get ‘em all right, but right now I just want you to get as many right as you can. Good for you. You did a good job.
What is happening in these two situations?
Kelly had mistakenly concluded that her classroom teacher’s expectations were not the same as those of her reading teacher; “coming close” was good enough, even when she knew how to spell the word. Fred was demonstrating a form of mature metacognitive self-evaluation. He knew that what he had written was nonsense; he wasn’t satisfied with it, and in his own way he let the teacher know. Fred was self-aware to the point of being able to realistically evaluate his writing, isolating the sentence in which he had merely pretended to write.

In this article, I argue that we need to look closely at children’s emerging capacities as writers, focusing especially on the issue of invented (or temporary) spelling, and its use and misuse in classroom practice. In order to understand the current situation, we need to examine the history of the concept of invented spelling and its theoretical underpinnings in the general context of the paradigm of emergent literacy. We need to deal with perceived tensions between the honoring of children’s approximations and our desire to assist them in making the transition to conventional literacy. In the second part of the article, I describe in detail several teacher interventions that both honor children’s attempts and actively assist them in their journey to becoming more mature readers and writers.

The concept of invented spelling
The idea that children achieve mastery of the conventional forms of literacy through gradual and successive approximations is one of the most important concepts in the emergent literacy model. Invented spelling is an elegant example of this approximation (DeFord, 1980). Discussions of invented spelling often begin with the seminal work of Charles Read (1971), who examined preschool children who constructed their own spellings of words before they received formal instruction. Longitudinal case studies of children’s writing (Bissex, 1980) found that spelling progressed from scribbles to letter-like shapes to sequences of letters. When the alphabet was grasped, children often encoded words by their initial consonants, followed by ending sounds. Medial sounds were the last to be heard and encoded. The whole process seemed to be like a camera lens coming very slowly into focus, as the spellings gradually came closer to conventional forms. Such research showed that, contrary to the behaviorist view that incorrect spellings contributed to confusion and the formation of bad habits, children’s attempts at writing were evidence of the active process of meaning making that had sustained them when they had learned spoken language (Temple, Nathan, & Burris, 1982). Parents had responded to their meaning when they had asked for “wa-wa,” ignoring the incorrect pronunciation; in a similar way, researchers argue that children’s incorrect spellings should be seen in a developmental light as well. Just as children had eventually learned correct syntax and articulation of oral language, they would gradually self-construct the generative rules which would lead them into more mature and conventional uses of written language.

From this perspective, spelling errors made during the process of writing were not viewed as impediments to learning, but as opportunities for the observant teacher to notice how children were making sense of sound-letter relationships. They provided a window on the process children were engaged in, and they could be analyzed: A child’s spelling of monster as “MSTR” tells us about the sophistication of that child’s understanding of the way words work (Henderson, 1980). In a parallel way, children’s miscues in reading were valued as indications of their attempts at using visual, semantic, and syntactic information and integrating this information to make meaning. The miscues could be analyzed to gain insight on children’s internal theories of reading (Goodman, 1969).

Accentuating the positive qualities of children’s attempts at meaning making and communication, whether in reading or writing, is another of the major legacies of the paradigm shift from a readiness model to an emergent model of literacy. Researchers and teachers let children show what they could do and what they did know rather than what they had not yet mastered. Clark’s (1988) research indicated that children’s writing and the ability to spell regularly are developed by invented spelling. Closely connected to this positive emphasis was the idea that children are empowered by our acceptance of their invented spelling. They are able to write purposefully and with communicative intent from the very beginning of school, and even before. They can say, “I can do this myself. I am a writer” (Hansen, 1987).

Finally, by engaging in the process of invented spelling, children discover for themselves more about the relationships between sounds and letters. They practice applying the alphabetic
principle and gain in phonemic awareness (Gentry, 1981, 1987). One first-grade teacher called the invented spelling her children did during writing her “applied phonics program.” Invented spelling thus assists in the development of reading, and is one powerful component of reciprocal gains afforded by the connections between reading and writing. Writing slows down the whole process of dealing with text, so that children can see relationships between sounds and words more clearly (Clay, 1991a). It is possible that, at least for some children, writing may be an easier “way into” literacy than reading. In reading, the message is not known, but in writing the writer already knows the message. In reading, the task involves going from letters and letter sequences to sounds, whereas in writing the process is reversed: going from sounds (which are already known and automatic) to letters. In this way, writing can be viewed as an easier task than reading, because it proceeds from the known to the unknown, rather than from what is unknown to what is known (Chomsky, 1971, 1979).

Where is the teacher?

The theoretical and descriptive research, therefore, has been quite rich in describing what is happening cognitively as children learn to spell. What is still lacking is an equally rich articulation of what adults do that assists children’s development. As Cazden (1992) wrote, “We now know much about the active child, but we still have much to learn about the active teacher” (p. 15). The stage was set for the careful descriptive research about children’s invented spellings to be interpreted in a prescriptive way. The way it was falsely interpreted was “hands off.” The message received (though not necessarily the message given) was this: Children will learn to spell in their own good time, and teacher interventions of any kind are suspect. Perhaps the most critical voice in questioning an “anything goes” approach to invented spelling was that of Marie Clay: “[C]hildren use what they know to solve their new problems, and that, young though they are, they form hypotheses about what might work in print. I have a sense that many teachers are directing children to produce writing nonsense and children are obliging them, as they typically do” (1991b, p. 268).

In the last two decades, educators have rediscovered a theoretical voice that provides a way of conceptualizing the teacher as an active participant in the classroom without ignoring the child as the constructor of his or her own meaning. Vygotsky’s (1978, 1986) theories came as a welcome antidote to the hands-off approach. Although Vygotsky felt that peers could also assist, he did not argue that interaction with peers was the primary way in which learning occurred. Whereas a Piagetian model places perhaps greater emphasis on social interaction of peers (Kamii & Randazzo, 1985), for Vygotsky interactions between the learner and an “expert other” are crucial, and his concept of “mediation” provides a way of conceptualizing a strong role for the teacher in assisting the child in that “zone of proximal development” between what was already grasped firmly and what was unknown. He argued that what children can do with assistance today, they can do independently tomorrow; he described learning in such a way as to emphasize its dynamic process rather than its products.

Yet, for many teachers, the hands-off message remains. We seem to have created inaccurate metaphors, which limit our understanding of the learning process. Newkirk (1991) wrote,

We are trapped by organic metaphors that suggest that the child’s “unfolding” will be hindered if the teacher has objectives for that unfolding. We use misleading metaphors of property—“ownership”—that invariably imply that the teacher is an outsider in the learning process. (p. 69)

When we use organic metaphors, we are trapped into thinking that children’s rate of growth is predetermined, as if any attempt to assist were an intrusion and a dangerous action, like forcibly opening the petals of a flower bud, and thereby ruining the flower. Power, empowerment, and “ownership” are falsely conceived as a zero-sum game, where if the teacher exerts more influence, the children will necessarily exert less (e.g., Garan, 1994). Even the use of the common metaphor of “construction” implies the same thing: The teacher stands on the sidelines and observes while the real activity, the real construction of meaning, is accomplished by children alone. Perhaps we need to think more of the “co-construction” of meaning, so that the partnership among children, their peers, and adults is emphasized.

The dichotomies we have set up are subtly false, as well: process versus product; children’s invention versus teachers’ imposition of convention; student ownership versus teacher intervention; risk-taking versus passive reception; transaction versus transmission. The realities of the classroom are much more subtle, fluid, and dynamic than this, and should not be di-
chotomized in this way. The sensitive teacher will sometimes find it appropriate to emphasize products and conventions. According to Newkirk (1991),

If we stress child-centeredness and the lack of teacher direction, the almost divine right of the child to choose from a wide array of options the teacher helps place before him or her, then we may appear more permissive than we are. We are often trapped into a rhetoric of freedom that makes it difficult to acknowledge our own influence in the process classroom. By stressing process over product (as if they can be separated), we fail to demonstrate that we expect a high quality of writing from students—and usually get it. (p. 70)

An active role for the teacher is suggested by Calkins (1986), Cazden (1992), Routman (1993), Schickedanz (1990), and Weaver (1990) who feared that the constructivist theory of literacy learning has been translated into laissez-faire classrooms, and who argued for both active students and active teachers. It may be that some children (particularly children whose culture does not match the school’s “culture of power”) will fare best when teachers are explicit in their directions and in their teaching, without harming children’s independence and sense of self-worth (Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Some examples of helpful teacher intervention

It is important to recognize that teachers’ activities during the drafting stage of writing, when children are first getting down ideas, must not inhibit children’s willingness and desire to write. How can we help children make the transition to more conventional forms of spelling? This is of particular concern for children who don’t seem to be taking on the tasks of reading and writing. If the answer is not simply more time and more immersion in purposeful and meaningful literacy activities, then how can the teacher help? What does instruction look like when both the child and the teacher are active participants? What does scaffolding look like?

Hearing sounds in words

One of the techniques used in the writing portion of the Reading Recovery lesson (Clay, 1993) provides an elegant example of scaffolding in a one-to-one situation. It can also be adapted for classroom use during conferences. During the lesson, the child generates her or his own sentence or story, which is composed on the bottom portion of a double page. The top portion is the “practice page,” for trying out words of which the child is unsure. After having read the book Mrs. Wishy-Washy (Cowley, 1999), for example, Kenny decides to write his own story about it. He generates the sentence, “She got them all clean.” He confidently writes *She* and then rehearses the sentence again, “*Got* has a *g*,” he says, “but I know it has some more letters.” The teacher says, “Let’s make a box for it.” She quickly draws a rectangle on the practice page, and draws partitions within it so that it has three compartments, corresponding to the three sounds in *got*.

This is a technique adapted from the Russian psychologist Elkonin (Clay, 1979), who developed it in order to assist children in hearing the sounds in words. The teacher places three round markers or pennies under each of the compartments. As Kenny says *got* slowly, he pushes the markers up into the boxes.

The teacher has taught him to synchronize the pushing with his articulation of the sounds. He knows that he has to “stretch out” the word so that he is saying the last sound just as he comes to the final box. As Kenny says the /t/, his finger pushes the third marker into the box above it. “I heard the /g/ here,” he says, pointing to the first box, and he writes it there.

He then moves the markers down below the boxes, and pushes them up again, saying the word slowly. This time, he says, “I hear a /r/ here,” pointing to the third box, and writes it as well. The third time, he hears the medial vowel, and writes *o* in the middle box. He’s then ready to add the word to his story. For the word *them*, he pauses, and the teacher says, “It starts like a word you know.” Kenny thinks for a minute and says “*the*—it starts like *the*.” He writes *th*, and the teacher says, “It has an *e* like *the*, too.” After saying the word slowly, Kenny hears the final sound and writes the *m*. He’s able to write *all* independently, but needs another sound box for *clean*. The same procedure is employed as for *got*: The teacher draws a rectangle with four boxes (corresponding to the four phonemes in *clean*).

Kenny pushes up the markers, saying the word slowly. He says “/k/” for the first sound, and the teacher praises him, saying, “Yes, it could be a /k/; is there anything else it could be?” He writes *c*, then *l*, saying, “I heard an *l*, too.” Pushing up again, he hears the long *e*, and the teacher tells him that it is spelled the same way as *eat*, a word she knows he can write. He is able to hear the *n* by himself. Kenny has made some links to words he already knows, and the similarity between *k* and *c* has been made clearer to
him. He has learned that the way words sound is not necessarily the way they look—it sounds like there is only an e in clean, but it turns out that there are two letters; this has been linked with another word he knows, eat. Kenny has contributed a great deal to the task, and the teacher has assisted him with the parts that are difficult; she has “scaffolded” the task. At the end of the process, the words are spelled conventionally, but that was not the purpose of the task: The purpose was to help him hear sounds in words. In a sense, we might say that it has helped to prepare him for invented spelling.

Most children may not need this kind of help; but without it, independent writing time would be a frustrating and defeating activity for Kenny. He now has a tool that can help him to write. For the teacher to say, “Write it like it sounds, and I’ll be able to read it” is not useful for Kenny, because that is precisely what he is unable to do. Children who know this procedure have been observed pushing up with their fingers as they say words slowly, and then being able to write a tricky word. When children have been introduced to the technique, the teacher can employ it quickly while circulating during independent writing time. For children who are already good at invented spelling, the technique can stretch their capacities and help them make links to what they already know. A further refinement of the technique (used with more advanced children) is to make boxes corresponding to the number of letters (rather than sounds) in the word.

Children who are ready for this can consider what looks right as well as what sounds right.

If Kenny were writing a multisyllable word, he would be taught to clap the syllables. The purpose is not to tell how many parts the word has, but rather to assist him in segmenting the parts of the word so that it can be more easily written. If a child is trying to write the word yesterday, for example, it is easier to hear the sounds (and represent them in writing) in three smaller segments. Classroom teachers have found this simple technique to be greatly effective in helping children to hear sounds in words and record them.

**Have-a-Go**

A variety of activities can be used to support students in identifying and correcting misspelled words with guidance from the teacher or peers. An additional activity that also involves attention to syllabication, teacher scaffolding, and sounding out syllables is the use of a Have-a-Go chart (Bolton & Snowball, 1993). When the student is interested in working on words within his text, he gets the Have-a-Go chart (see Figure 2). The chart is divided into four columns. The student begins with the left column, writing the word or words that he or she has identified as incorrect and would like assistance in spelling. In the second column, “Have-a-Go,” he or she attempts to spell the word correctly with assistance from the teacher or a peer. As demonstrated in the previous examples, the teacher can scaffold understanding with a variety of instructional techniques, including the
use of clapping syllables or “stretching” the word. The student then writes a revision of the word. If this is incorrect, the teacher either refers the student to a dictionary or writes the word for the student. In the final column, the student rewrites the word after finding out the correct spelling. Students should be encouraged to recall the correct spelling when writing in the last column in order to commit the spelling to memory.

**Interactive writing**

Interactive writing (Pinnell & McCarrier, 1993) is a technique of group composition intended for use with emergent writers. It is both similar to and different from the traditional language experience approach. Like the language experience approach, it is done with a group of children and their teacher, the children deciding as a group on the message they wish to write. Like language experience, interactive writing places a high value on using children’s own words to ensure that the message relates to their own experience and use of oral language. Another similarity is that the message is written on a large piece of paper with lettering of a size that can easily be seen by the children. In interactive writing, however, the children are more involved in the actual writing of the message. The children contribute what they know about spelling and letter formation, and the teacher scaffolds their attempts by supplying spellings and other items of knowledge they lack. Thus the pen is shared between the teacher and the children, and the children do most of the recording of the text. Interactive writing is done for a wide range of purposes. Like traditional language experience, it demonstrates that what we say can be written down and then read, making clear the vital links between reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Unlike language experience, it not only models conventional reading and writing behavior, but also scaffolds children's participation in the process. By actively involving the children, interactive writing helps them feel that they are “members of the literacy club,” through structuring an environment for taking risks. Children draw upon their fund of literacy knowledge and have the experience of integrating and using that knowledge for a real and functional purpose.

Interactive writing does not occur in isolation. It is set in the context of a holistic early literacy framework (Glasbrenner, 1989), which includes several other literacy activities: reading aloud, both collaborative and independent familiar rereading, shared reading, various activities done as text extensions, and independent writing. In order to explain interactive writing more fully, I will present a summary of an interactive writing session conducted by a Kindergarten teacher.

The children have been working for several days on activities related to *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* (Galdone, 1981). They have heard the story read several times by the teacher and have also written a list of characters and words to describe the setting. These words have been written on chart paper and posted on the wall.

To begin the interactive writing lesson, the teacher reads the book aloud again. The children frequently chime in with words and phrases they remember. Then the teacher is ready to begin the interactive writing itself, which is done on a hori-
horizontally ruled piece of chart paper on an easel that is low enough for the children to use. The teacher sits on a low chair beside it. She connects what the children are going to do with what they have already done by saying that the class has written about the characters and the setting, but they now need to "tell our story." The children decide to write the sentence, "The three billy goats gruff were hungry." What follows is not a transcript, but is a fairly detailed record of the interactions.

1. The teacher asks what word should be written first. The task is writing *the*, and a child comes up to the chart to write it.

2. A child writes *the*, but the *e* is backwards. The teacher points this out, saying it's all right to make a mistake—we just fix it with correction tape. The child writes *e*.

3. The children remember the entire sentence again, in order to locate the next word that needs to be written—*three*.

4. Children call out various letters. One spells *three* correctly. The teacher acknowledges this.

5. A child [not the one who spelled *three* correctly] comes to the easel and writes the numeral 3. Another child helps to make a "three-finger space" at the teacher's request.

6. The children reread what has been written so far: *The 3*.

7. When they get to the next word, *billy*, several children call out *b*.

8. The teacher asks a child to come write "her" *b* (because this letter begins her name). Another child helps by making a space after 3.

9. The teacher encourages children to say the word *billy* slowly. Several children say *l*.

10. The teacher says there are two *l*s "and an *i* in here that you can't hear so well." (She's already put in the *i* herself because she knows that most children in the group are not at the stage where they use medial vowels in their writing.)

11. For the long-*e* sound at the end of *billy*, the teacher asks, "Who remembers when we talked about this sound?" Some children say *e*, but the teacher reminds them that it sounds like the sound at the end of *Suzy*, one of the children's names. Children say *y*.

12. Suzy writes the *y*.

13. This child also rereads what is written so far: *The 3 billy*.

14. The children proceed similarly for the word *goats*. The teacher assists with a prompt for the final *s* by saying, "What do I need to make it more than one?"

15. The teacher says, "Now we want to write *gruff.*" Several children call out letters.

16. A child comes to write. The teacher says, "We have a problem—there's not enough room [at the right side of the page]. So where do we go?" The child shows where to start a new line and writes the *g*.

17. Children are prompted to say the word slowly. Several call out different letters. The same child who wrote *g* also writes *f*.

18. The teacher says, "Then there's a *u* (writing it). And then finish it."

19. Children call out *f*.

20. The teacher says, "It's Frank's *f* and mine," (the teacher's first name begins with *F*). A child writes two *f*s, as the teacher says that there are two *f*s.

21. The children proceed similarly for the words *were* and *hungry*.

22. The teacher prompts for a period, and a child writes it.

23. The child who wrote the period reads the whole sentence, pointing to the words.

24. The teacher calls on a few more children to come up and read the sentence. One child makes a matching mistake, realizes it, and goes back to the beginning of the sentence to reread.

25. When she is finished, the teacher says, "I like the way you went back [to make it match]. When you say *hungry*, where do you get to?" Children say, "the end," and one child points to *hungry* in the sentence.

This interactive writing lesson lasted 13 minutes and 30 seconds. All of the children were involved in writing and reading the sentence. The children had done interactive writing many times before; they frequently anticipated what question the teacher would ask next. A number of children had a clearly developed sense of the initial and final letters in words: They could hear the sounds in these positions, and represent them with letters. Medial vowels and internal nasals (*billy; hungry*) were much more difficult, as research suggests (Read, 1971). The teacher dealt with some variants (for example the final *y* having the long-*e* sound) as the opportunity arose. One word (*the*) was written fluently without any analysis. The teacher accepted a child's decision to write the numeral 3 instead of the word. One structural feature was dealt with (*s* to indicate plurals in *goats*). Conventions of writing (left to right; top to bottom; spacing; punctuation) were modeled by both the teacher and the children. After rehearsing the sentence, the children were able to remember the text they had decided upon, and rereading the sentence kept this fresh in their minds. Some children were clearly more able than others, but the teacher was able to find ways for everyone to be actively involved and to feel successful. The completed sentence was the first part of the retelling of a story that the children had heard and discussed several times before, and thus was heavily contextualized. The teacher later added a few more sentences to complete the short summary of the story in several more interactive writing lessons.
Linking the known to the new

A third teacher intervention for spelling is one that can be done with the whole class, small groups, or individuals. This technique draws from a variety of sources, including the word sort method (Zutell, 1996), schema theory (Anderson, 1984), Goswami’s research on onset and rime (1986), other research on phonemic awareness, and the work of Clay (1979, 1991a, 1991b). The phrase “known to new” is Clay’s. The basic idea is that learning anything new is a matter of linking this new knowledge in some way with what is already known. This theoretical principle of all learning is naturally applied by many children without help from the teacher. Mike, for example, was trying to write the word like, and had already written an l. He knew how to spell his own name; and he looked up at the top of his paper at his name as he vocalized “like—Mike.” Then he was able to complete the spelling of like because he had made a link between a known word and the new word he was working on.

It may be that many (or most) children grasp this powerful principle of linking the known to the new. Whenever children “overgeneralize” a spelling pattern, they are making use of this principle. However, some children need to be explicitly taught the ways and means of linking new spellings with words they already know how to spell. The level of teacher scaffolding varies with what the child needs. Here is one possible sequence of increasing support, based on Brad’s desire to write bright:

1. “Do you know a word that starts like (rhymes with, is like) bright?” Brad may need no more than this to make a link and proceed.

2. If Brad cannot think of a word that is like the word he wants to write, the teacher may suggest a word, asking, “Do you know how to write light?” If this is a known word, this may be enough of a scaffold to get the child started.

3. Often, children can read a word which they cannot write conventionally. The teacher may write a word, for example, light, and say, “I’m writing a word you know that will help you with bright.” If Brad can read light, he may be able to use that knowledge to spell bright.

All of these examples show joint problem-solving situations where the child becomes a co-constructor of meaning along with an “expert other.” The creativity and independence of children who participate in such activities is not hampered, but rather is enhanced by the teacher’s active involvement and scaffolding.

Active teaching and active learning

In the last two decades, educators have made enormous strides in theory and classroom practice related to writing. No one would want to return to the days of delaying writing until children could spell conventionally. Writing without being overly concerned with conventions that may impede the flow of thoughts is one of the most powerful literacy activities for children (Adams, 1990). It has made it possible for children to engage in writing meaningful, communicative text far earlier than we ever dreamed. It honors children as active participants in their own construction of literacy in a way that enables the development of phonemic awareness and fosters independence and control.

But an active child does not imply an inactive teacher. Teachers should be more than just close observers of children, as important as that is. Active intervention by the teacher and judicious use of direct, explicit instruction can help children along the literacy road (Spiegel, 1992). For some children, this is critical; simply waiting for them to bloom will not help (Clay, 1991a). Though our intentions were good, the dichotomies we have created—invention versus convention; process versus product; meaning versus surface features; even independence versus dependence—have probably made the transition to conventional literacy harder, not easier, for children. The metaphors we use—“ownership”; “growing”; “unfolding”—have become traps rather than heuristic guides. In an essay entitled “The Enemy Is Orthodoxy,” Graves (1984) pointed out that age and extensive use produce rigid ways of interpreting and implementing even the most robust theories. He argued that the writing process approach was being applied in inflexible ways, and that teachers needed to be aware of this natural tendency. In the same way, perhaps, we need to reexamine the orthodoxies that have grown up around the concept of invented spelling and the way it is applied in the classroom. In another book on writing, Graves (1994) stated that “when first-grade children learn to spell, they need much more teaching than I’ve demonstrated in the past” (p. xvi). We need to grapple long and hard with the concept of “development,” and consider how learning (and teaching) may enhance and encourage development. We need to recognize that active teaching and active learning go hand in hand. Kelly and Fred, the two children whose stories began this article, deserve that clearer vision.
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References


Children's books cited


Language is the most powerful, most readily available tool we have for representing the world to ourselves and ourselves to the world. Language is not only a means of communication, it is a primary instrument of thought, a defining feature of culture, and an unmistakable mark of personal identity. Encouraging and enabling students to learn to use language effectively is certainly one of society’s most important tasks.

—Standards for the English Language Arts, 1996

The Standards for the English Language Arts, prepared by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), define what our two organizations believe students should know about and be able to do with language as a result of their kindergarten through grade twelve schooling. The standards grow out of a national conversation about the goals and purposes of English language arts education. Our aim is to ensure that all students develop the literacy skills they need to succeed in school, in the workplace, and in the various domains of life.

This professional summary of the Standards reviews the rationale for defining these English language arts standards and the perspective on language learning that informs them. After presenting two of the standards and discussing them briefly, we provide a vignette to illustrate how the standards might be manifested in a classroom setting.

The standards and vignettes are not meant to prescribe instructional approaches. Instead, we hope that teachers and administrators will translate the standards for themselves, responding to the particular needs of their students and communities, and that our work will serve as a starting point for ongoing discussions about English language arts curricula and classroom activities. Thus, the English language arts standards represent not an end but a beginning—a starting point for discussion and action within states, districts, and individual schools across the country.

WHY STANDARDS ARE NEEDED

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS HAVE LAUNCHED A SERIES OF AMBITIOUS PROJECTS TO DEFINE VOLUNTARY STANDARDS FOR SCIENCE, MATHEMATICS, ART, MUSIC, FOREIGN LANGUAGES, SOCIAL STUDIES, ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS, AND OTHER SUBJECTS. WE BELIEVE THAT THE ACT OF DEFINING SUCH STANDARDS IS WORTHWHILE BECAUSE IT INVITES FURTHER REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION ABOUT THE FUNDAMENTAL GOALS OF PUBLIC SCHOOLING. IN ARTICULATING CONTENT STANDARDS FOR THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS, THEN, WE ARE MOTIVATED BY THREE CORE BELIEFS:

FIRST, WE BELIEVE THAT STANDARDS ARE NEEDED TO PREPARE STUDENTS FOR THE LITERACY REQUIREMENTS OF THE FUTURE AS WELL AS THE PRESENT. CHANGES IN TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY HAVE ALTERED AND WILL CONTINUE TO ALTER THE WAYS IN WHICH WE USE LANGUAGE TO COMMUNICATE AND COLLABORATE. STUDENTS MUST BE PREPARED TO MEET THESE DEMANDS.

LITERACY EXPECTATIONS HAVE Risen OVER TIME AND ARE LIKELY TO CONTINUE TO ACCELERATE IN THE COMING DECADES. TO PARTICIPATE FULLY IN SOCIETY AND THE WORKPLACE IN THE YEAR 2020, CITIZENS WILL NEED POWERFUL LITERACY ABILITIES THAT UNTIL NOW HAVE BEEN ACHIEVED BY ONLY A SMALL PERCENTAGE OF THE POPULATION. AT THE SAME TIME, INDIVIDUALS WILL NEED TO DEVELOP TECHNOLOGICAL COMPETENCIES UNDREAMED OF AS RECENTLY AS TEN YEARS AGO.

ACCORDINGLY, BEING LITERATE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY MEANS BEING ACTIVE, CRITICAL, AND CREATIVE USERS OF PRINT AND SPOKEN LANGUAGE AS WELL AS THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF FILM AND TELEVISION, COMMERCIAL AND POLITICAL ADVERTISING, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND MORE. IT ALSO MEANS BEING ABLE TO USE AN ARRAY OF TECHNOLOGIES TO GATHER
information and communicate with others. Based on this expanded definition of literacy, the English language arts standards address not only reading and writing, but also speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing. The standards also acknowledge technology's important role in each of these areas.

Second, we believe that standards can articulate a shared vision of what the nation's teachers, literacy researchers, teacher educators, parents, and others expect students to attain in the English language arts, and what we can do to ensure that this vision is realized.

Varying curricular and instructional approaches are being used in English language arts classrooms across the country, yet beneath this diversity of approaches there is remarkable consensus. Teachers share the belief that students should develop competencies in the English language arts that will prepare them for the diverse literacy demands that will face them throughout their lives. Teachers also agree that the English language arts are important not only as subjects in and of themselves, but also as supporting skills for students' learning in all other subjects. Finally, teachers believe that students can best develop language competencies (like other competencies) through meaningful activities and settings.

This vision of English language arts education, embodied in the standards, must be shared by all those who have a stake in the future of our schools—not just teachers, but also school administrators, policymakers, parents, and members of the general public.

Third, we believe that standards are necessary to promote high educational expectations for all students and to bridge the documented disparities that exist in educational opportunities. Standards can help us ensure that all students become informed citizens and participate fully in society.

To prepare all students to become literate citizens, we must hold high expectations for every student and every school. All students in this country can achieve the standards set forth in this document, and we believe that it is the responsibility not only of schools and teachers but also of policymakers, parents, and communities to ensure that this occurs.

At the same time, standards, by themselves, cannot erase the impact of poverty, ethnic or cultural discrimination, low levels of family literacy, and social and political disenfranchisement. We must therefore ensure that all students have equal opportunities to learn, that inequities in school resources are addressed, that schools have an adequate number of knowledgeable teachers, and that we provide safe and supportive environments for learning.
The perspective that informs the English language arts standards, presented in the figure below, places the learner at the core. Because the standards are learner-centered, they focus on the ways in which students actively participate in their learning, acquire knowledge, shape experience, and respond to their own particular needs and goals through the English language arts.

The three circles at the heart of the model represent three dimensions of language learning: content, purpose, and development. The content dimension elaborates what students should know and be able to do with the English language arts. This includes knowledge of spoken, visual, and written texts and of the processes involved in creating, interpreting, and critiquing such texts. The purpose dimension articulates why students use the language arts—that is, the ends to which we direct our literacy practices. And the development dimension focuses on how students grow as language users. Surrounding these circles is a larger circle labeled “context.” Because all language learning takes place in, shapes, and is in turn shaped by particular social and cultural contexts, this dimension encompasses the standards as a whole.

The intersections of the content, purpose, and development circles in the figure reflect the profound interrelations of what, why, and how in English language arts learning. Although the standards concentrate primarily on the content dimension, the other dimensions are always present. To put it differently, within each standard, content issues—such as the appropriate range and depth of reading materials—are closely linked to purpose and developmental processes.
THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS: A SELECTION

The complete set of twelve standards is presented and elaborated in the full document. While we wish to emphasize the complex interrelationships among the standards, and the importance of viewing them as a whole, we have listed them separately in order to facilitate and focus discussion. Let us briefly examine two of the standards here.

Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend their reading and develop their understanding of texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meanings and of other texts, their word-identification strategies, and their understanding of text patterns (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, text organization).

Students become knowledgeable and strategic readers by studying a broad range of texts. Through extensive reading, they learn which approaches to use to comprehend, interpret, and evaluate the various texts they encounter.

Flexibility in applying different reading strategies is of the greatest importance: students need to know how to vary their approaches according to the nature of the text, the purpose of the reading, and their own knowledge and experience. Through practice and experience, students learn to adapt the tactics they are using if they sense that things are not going well or if they move from one genre or context to another.

Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

Students need frequent opportunities to write about different topics and for different audiences and purposes. These opportunities enable students to understand the varying demands of different kinds of writing tasks and to recognize how to adapt tone, style, and content to the particular task at hand. They need guidance and practice to develop their competencies in academic writing, whether they are responding to literary works or writing for other school subjects.

As writers hear how different readers interpret and evaluate their work, they learn how to use constructive criticism to revise or recast their writing. This process helps students to internalize a sense of what their readers need and expect. It also extends the body of knowledge that they bring to future writing tasks, giving them greater confidence and versatility as writers.