Making Literacy Connections

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Shared Reading with Informational Text: Teaching Text Features to Emergent Readers

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Instructional conversations focused on text type, text structure, and text complexity are common across grade levels due to the current emphasis on standards based curricula. For example, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (2010), as well as many state standards, have generated discussion about teaching with informational text. These conversations highlight the importance of using a variety of text types with students to support learning opportunities. Specifically, these standards call for a balance between the amount of informational text and literature used for instruction beginning in kindergarten and throughout elementary school. Certainly, exposure to nonfiction text is vital and beneficial for students as they learn to read and read to learn (Fingeret, 2008). Emergent readers (i.e., students in the earliest stage of reading acquisition) are at the beginning of an exciting literacy-learning journey; engagement with informational text through shared reading provides opportunities for socially constructed collaborative interactions that can enhance content knowledge and reading strategies (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014).

Students need early opportunities with informational text because once students reach the proficient reader level, they are often expected to read to learn content, which can be difficult if they lack early exposure to informational text (Duke, 2004; Stead, 2014). Further, when students have limited opportunities to engage with informational text, they may struggle to comprehend the content. Informational text can be easily integrated through a shared reading approach into thematic units to support emergent readers' content and literacy learning in preschool and beyond. The focus of this article is teaching emergent readers to navigate the unique text features found in informational text, which can in turn enhance comprehension.

Literature Review

Comprehension

The main purpose for reading a text is to comprehend it (Pressley, 2006). Research points to several comprehension strategies that can and should be taught to developing readers: predicting, visualizing, summarizing, questioning, connecting to prior knowledge, analyzing text structure, and determining important ideas (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). These strategies are important for readers to apply to all texts; in fact, proficient readers do apply these to all texts. All of these comprehension strategies can be modeled through shared reading with our youngest readers and explicitly taught to older students as well (Block & Pressley, 2007).

When students struggle to read a difficult text, comprehension can suffer (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Informational texts can exacerbate this issue, due to vocabulary demands and the lack of students' background knowledge (Allington, 2002). In addition, since young students often lack exposure to nonfiction texts, they are often unfamiliar with the unique text features found in this genre, which can further compromise comprehension (Duke, 2000; Hoffman, Collins, & Schickedanz, 2015). Teacher support and explicit comprehension instruction provided during instruction can help to mediate these issues for developing readers, and ultimately increase comprehension.

Text Features

Informational text is written differently than literature; there are differences in language and text structure. In addition, informational text often contains distinct text features. Text features are special portions of text that are set apart. For example, headings, the table of contents, photos with captions, and glossaries are all common text features. Authors include specific text features to supplement the information written in the text; this supplemental information is important for text comprehension and content understanding (Duke, 2013). When properly used, text features can help readers identify important information and ultimately enhance comprehension (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2010). Table 1 provides examples and descriptions of text features common found in emergent level informational texts.

While text features are designed to help the reader comprehend text more deeply, this does not always happen (Bluestein, 2010). Struggling readers may skip text features all together, thinking that the information is extraneous or too difficult to read. Even if students do glance at each text feature, they may be

confused by the way the information is presented (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2010). When considering emergent readers, it is unlikely that they will notice some

Table 1. Common informational text features in emergent level texts

Text Feature	Purpose
Table of contents	• Helps the reader to identify key topics • Provides page number to help with locating specific information • Located at the front of the book
Title	• Informs the reader of the main topic for the section • Usually located at the top of a page
Heading	• Divides the text into smaller chunks • Provides main topic of each section • Helps the reader locate important information
Glossary	• A list of key terms and definitions which can help readers learn new vocabulary words • Usually located in the back of a book
Bold print	• Highlights important words or phrases • Sometimes bold print words are defined in the glossary or in another section of the text
Index	• An alphabetical list of information in the book • Provides matching page numbers for each item • Helps the reader locate specific information in the text • Usually located at the back of the book
Photos or illustrations	• Visual aids designed to enhance understanding of concepts presented in the text
Diagrams	• Visual aid • Provides an illustration of steps or parts of something described in the text • Provides a simplified version of information
Labels	• Identifies a visual aid or parts of it
Captions	• Often accompany a photo, illustration, or diagram • Explain the visual aid • Add supplemental information to the text

informational texts features, since print concepts of both informational and narrative text are new to them. Therefore, particularly with the youngest readers, it

is essential that we explicitly teach students how to navigate the text features found in informational texts (Duke, 2004).

Shared Reading

Shared reading, one component of a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction, is often used to teach reading across grade levels (Frey & Fisher, 2007). This instructional technique is based on Holdaway's (1982) *Shared Book Experience*, which was first designed to emulate the one-on-one teaching that occurs between parent and child in the bedtime story. Simply put, shared reading is an instructional context where the teacher "reads with" students, using a big book or enlarged text so that all students are able to see the words and pictures. The teacher models reading strategies, inviting students to participate in reading specific portions of the text with him/her. This instructional approach is typically used in a whole group setting with a text that is just above the students' instructional reading level (Dougherty Stahl, 2012).

Typically, shared reading with emergent readers focuses on print concepts, phonemic awareness skills, high frequency words, and vocabulary instruction (Dougherty Stahl, 2012). However, shared reading is also a time when teachers can explicitly teach comprehension strategies, including how to navigate non-fiction text features. Because the text is enlarged, teachers can highlight and discuss specific text features so that all students have the opportunity to learn about these features with authentic texts in a scaffolded learning environment.

Text Selection

Text selection is important for effective lessons, including shared reading. Teachers may choose to use fiction or nonfiction (informational) texts materials to support instruction; note the focus of this article is the use of informational text. As with any instructional context, teachers should select books that are well-written and engaging (Lane & Wright, 2007). Further, given the high number of newly released books each year, Stead (2014) recommends working collaboratively with the school librarian and other teachers to find, locate and then use a variety of high quality materials that could be used for shared reading experiences.

It is important to understand that informational text, as with most texts read to and with emergent readers, will be above students' reading levels (Fisher & Frey, 2014). Selecting texts that are above students' reading levels is recommended for shared reading, since this allows the teacher to scaffold and support students as they interact with the text. This teacher guidance with the text keeps students engaged and motivated to read the words, while preventing frustration in reading.

In addition, the shared reading format allows teachers the opportunity to introduce or review specific text features through a think-aloud, modeling how to navigate informational texts, while the students follow along or practice the strategy. Further, when choosing a text that provides enough challenge, it is important to consider the length of the text. An emergent level shared reading lesson is often limited to 15 minutes in length. Short, focused lessons ensure maximum student engagement.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the selected text must be aligned with instructional goals (Layne & Wright, 2007). In this case, it is important to choose a text that contains grade level appropriate and required content, as well as the text features to be taught. When reading with emergent readers, it is particularly important to select texts that present the content in a clear, concise, and engaging manner. Hoffman et al. (2015) highlight the importance of "complex, yet accessible" language, accurate and current content, and clear visual information (p. 366). Since emergent readers are typically found in preschool, kindergarten, and grade 1, teachers should consult their content curricula for appropriate topics. Below is a summarized list of important points for consideration when selecting texts for shared reading:

- Aligned with instructional goals
- Engaging topic and presentation
- Short in length
- Accurate content
- Current content
- Above instructional reading level

Teaching Text Features

Shared reading is the perfect vehicle for demonstrating how to navigate the text features in informational text. The enlarged text required in shared reading allows the teacher to point to, name, and define specific text features. For example, Ms. Sawyer engaged her kindergarten students in a unit about ocean life. She used big books and enlarge projected texts about the ocean for all of her shared reading lessons throughout the unit. It was in this context that Ms. Sawyer introduced her students to the Table of Contents page. The following classroom snapshot illustrates how Ms. Sawyer introduced the lesson:

Ms. Sawyer (pointing to the heading on the page): Boys and girls, this says 'Table of Contents.' Can you read that with me?
The class (answering chorally): Table of Contents

Ms. Sawyer: Well done! Can anyone tell me why the author writes a table of contents?

Gabby: It tells what is in the book?

Ms. Sawyer: Yes, it does! The table of contents tells us readers what we can read about in this book, and which page to find the information we need. For example, if I want to read about shells (pointing to the word shells) I can turn to page 5 (moves her finger to the page number.) If I want to read about coral (points to the word coral), I need to turn to page 7 (points to the number 7).

In the conversation illustrated above, Ms. Sawyer explicitly explained the purpose and demonstrated the use of the text feature. In the several days following this lesson, Ms. Sawyer released responsibility to the learners. An example of one conversation follows:

Ms. Sawyer: Today we are going to read *Ocean Life* during shared reading. I'm so excited to learn about sea creatures! Let's start with the table of contents (opens to the page). Who can tell me which page has information about dolphins? (Several students volunteer by raising their hands. Finn?

Finn: Page 4!

Ms. Sawyer: How did you know?

Finn: Because the table of contents says Dolphins, dot-dot-dot, page 4!

Instead of re-explaining how to use the table of contents, Ms. Sawyer asked a student to demonstrate knowledge of how to use this text feature. This exchange provided an opportunity to informally assess the understanding of select students. Ms. Sawyer may conduct assessments with all of the children in small group or individual settings as well. She can also use this information to determine whether she needs to explicitly re-teach a specific text feature, or simply provide opportunities for the students to practice using text features throughout the day.

Over the course of the school year, Ms. Sawyer will use shared reading to explain how readers use the table of contents to locate information using a text, predict what they may read about, and even select appropriate texts based on the information. Once most of the children are able to identify and use the table of contents, Ms. Sawyer will introduce a new text feature (Table 1) during shared reading. While many children in the classroom may not be able to read all of the words in every shared reading text, they will begin to learn the function of the features commonly found in informational text. Because the instructional context is shared reading, Ms. Sawyer can read the words to and with the children.

Conclusion

Our purpose is to describe how teachers can explicitly introduce common features of informational text to emergent readers through shared reading. When planning for shared reading, teachers must be mindful of text selection and instructional focus. When introducing emergent readers to informational texts, we suggest that teachers explicitly focus on the unique features of these texts. Teachers of young children may use various resources, such as the school-based or community librarian, to locate and access informational texts. This ensures opportunities to provide rich examples of text features during shared reading lessons.

In addition to enhancing content knowledge through discussion and questioning, shared reading provides an excellent opportunity for students to interact with text features. Through shared reading, teachers can explicitly explain and demonstrate the purpose of various text features, while providing guided practice for students. Increased content comprehension, interest and curiosity in content, and engagement with informational materials are all goals of shared reading. Through multiple exposures, students should be able to apply what they learn during a shared reading experience to their independent reading.

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"Watch Me Grow!":
Engaging English Learners in Poetry

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Adolescents face many challenges as they pass from childhood to adulthood. There are issues related to physical development, stresses from home, demands from school as well as questions stemming from social-emotional and identity development (Woolfolk, 2015). Such questions include: who am I, what is important to me, what do I want to do with my life? Since adolescents spend more time in school than at home, it is teachers who many times help guide students to explore answers to these questions. The exploration is even more complicated for English language learners (ELs) who must adjust to a new culture as well as language and living circumstances while they are also defining themselves. It is important for teachers of ELs to use strategies that meet student needs in multiple areas of development (Ramirez & Jimenez, 2014). Many adolescent ELs come to high school at age 16, 17, or 18, but with little formal education and little English. They have limited time within which to explore self-definition while still mastering language and course content. They must try to meet all Virginia state requirements for graduation before they turn age 22. Lengthy texts found in novels are difficult to comprehend, so poetry, which still uses figurative language and literary devices but with less text are easier to process.

According to Ward (2013) English language instruction through poetry helps students explore emotions, connect to personal experiences, as well as to think critically through the analysis of words and the concepts they represent. Poetry is a means to achieve literacy development as it promotes student focus on word structure and choice without having to process long passages of text. Herrera, Perez and Escamilla (2015) note that secondary EL students have a need to learn the sound system, semantics, and syntax of English while making learning relevant. This could be accomplished through poetry activities that involve students' first language knowledge, English, and personal experiences.

There are multiple approaches to engaging students in poetry study. However, Ward (2013) suggests that students need models first to help them

understand what is expected of them. To begin this process, teachers should provide students with hard copy examples to clarify the difference between poetry and narrative writing. Through reading poetry aloud that reflects students' culture, language, and interests, teachers can help students understand how the focus on the patterns of word sounds, rhythm, and meter is important for poetry. Once students have explored the examples through listening and reading, they are ready to use specific guidance for writing their own poetry. Students can be especially successful when they are given structured writing activities that guide them in the use of specific poetic devices to include alliteration, rhyming, meter, and figurative language, knowledge that is required in English content classes. Many ELs not only are challenged to read and write in English but also struggle to read and write in their home language. Through interactions with teachers and peers, they begin to use enhanced inferential skills to share their experiences and thoughts in new ways in English (Ramirez & Jimenez, 2014; Ward, 2013).

Engaging ELs in beginning the writing process can be difficult, as the "blank page" looms large before them. An additional strategy to support EL writing may be needed. Adoniou (2013) explored the relationship between drawing and writing. Adoniou posited that drawing before beginning a writing task resulted in an improvement in the writing of informational text once students had participated in drawing the subject of their writing. Adoniou (2013) cites Vygotsky's (1978) belief that drawing is a pictorial language as support for the approach, and continues by noting that the drawing process can be a form of social communication. She suggested this is especially important for ELs as they must focus both on learning a new language and new content, a doubly challenging process. Since writing informational text involves more concrete experience than the ambiguity of self-definition, it would seem appropriate to consider the use of drawing to support writing about life's questions, "who am I and where am I going?," among other questions.

The relationship among drawing, writing, and thinking is found in other research. Visualization to support writing poetry was researched by Eva-Wood (2008) with eleventh graders. Her goal was to determine if student response to the emotion embedded in poetry would impact students' self-understanding, and would thereby improve student awareness and use of metacognitive comprehension strategies. It was posited that poetry instruction enhanced awareness of an adolescent's thoughts and feelings and interpretation of text. Using a think-and-feel aloud strategy, students consistently demonstrated the ability to respond to key words and phrases, visualize images using their senses, and relate text to personal experiences. Many adolescent ELs lack the skills to communicate in English, but

they do not lack life experience or creativity. Utilizing visualization skills helps students tap in on the background knowledge they bring to school.

Further support of visualization was described by Palmer et al. (2006/2007). A series of strategies were developed to support the understanding and use of figurative language for ELs. One of the strategies included enhancing the understanding and use of figurative language by helping students make connections between natural settings and the figurative language. It was recommended that teachers use student-created and concrete tools to build background knowledge such as through the use of art to help visualize connections. A study by Schulz and Honchell (2010) supported the importance of focusing explicitly on real-life experiences in order to teach language. They reiterated the need to build social interaction in an authentic manner, through shared and interactive writing. Ramirez and Jimenez (2014) strongly propose that constructive teacher-student interactions in a validating environment are needed to expand and reinforce learning. In this way, instruction can be individualized so that English language learners can be the most successful.

The "Watch Me Grow" Project

The Poetry & Rhyme spring project, "Watch Me Grow," (supported in part with a grant from the Greater Washington Reading Council) was conducted at a high school in Loudoun County, Virginia. It provided EL students with an opportunity to plant and observe the growth of seeds as a metaphor to explore their personal struggles and goals. A product of their observations and reflections was a cinquain poem, which they shared with other ELs in class and through the publication of a poetry anthology. Cinquain poetry was selected because it represents a controlled pattern of syllables, ideas, and length. Another product was the creation of an animated video that joined poetry reading with drawings students had made of their seeds' growth.

The project was initiated in the spring of the school year. This allowed time for relationship building with the students through class instruction, group activities, individual conversations, and conferences regarding academic progress. The students involved in the project were all Level 2 (WIDA, 2012) ELs enrolled in a literacy class. Throughout the school year, an effort had been made to make class instruction relevant to students' lives outside the school environment and the project was an extension of that approach. The goal of the project was to encourage students to consider personal and career goals, and to explore how content taught in the academic setting would support their plans for the future.

The project began with a discussion of how each student had grown and changed during the school year. Students were encouraged to share their thoughts and then to connect to how the growth of seeds could reflect their own growth and the growth of others. The book, *If You Plant a Seed* (Nelson, 2015), was read aloud to begin the discussion of growth, peer support, and the future. Students then participated in planting cilantro and basil seeds in small starter cups, which were then placed within the school courtyard where sun and rain were available. The plan was to observe, photograph, and draw pictures of the growth of the seeds as they progressed. A particularly wet spring delayed sprouting and observing, which was discussed as reflecting circumstances of personal growth when life does not proceed as planned. However, the time lapse allowed greater study of poetry devices in preparation for reading and writing poetry.

The next phase of the project was to introduce students to analyzing syllabication, and the poetry devices of rhyme, alliteration, and meter. Students were given copies of short poems in English to choose to read. Authors included Shel Silverstein, Robert Frost, Langston Hughes, and Pat Mora. After reading the poems, students worked in small groups to identify examples of poetry devices, using worksheets with definitions written in plain English to guide them. Once students could consistently identify examples of the poetry devices used in the poems, they visited the school library and chose poetry books from which to read during the class period. Students were able to choose from a variety of poetic forms and different languages. There were a number of Spanish, Spanish/English, Urdu, and English poetry books, which enabled students to practice their home language as well as English. Several students returned to the library after school to check the books out to read at home.

Once the spring rains decreased, the seeds began to germinate and students were able to take pictures of the seed growth one-to-two times per week. They used the pictures to guide their drawing of seed progression. Students discussed the seed growth with their peers as they drew. Some had never planted and watched a seed grow before, even though they had lived in rural areas in their home countries. The teacher guided the students during this time to extend the discussion about the relationship between the seed growth and their own personal growth.

Once this routine was established, the third phase began. Students reread the example cinquain poems they had already been given to analyze. They then wrote their own cinquain poems to express their own experience of growth and future goals. They were given a format with lines to represent the syllable pattern for each line of the cinquain. In a sense, they were "filling in the blanks" with the words they chose for their poem. This enabled ELs to focus on the topic of their poem while staying true to the cinquain format. As they wrote, they shared verbally

what they wanted to write with the teacher and explored different word options that could fit the pattern while still conveying their ideas.

The culmination of the project took two parts. First, the poems were submitted for inclusion in the EL department's poetry anthology. All EL students' poems were included, and each student was given their own copy of the anthology. They eagerly looked for their own poem, and read those submitted by other students. Second, the drawings were reviewed by Poetry & Rhyme co-director, Matina Banks, for selection as part of the animation that she created. Selected students from the class were recorded reading their poetry. The recordings were matched to fit the animation of the drawings of the plant growth. Ms. Banks met with students to demonstrate the process of animation using *Adobe After Effects*. She also provided students with information related to careers in technology and especially in animation as some students had expressed interest in pursuing studies in technology after graduation.

The project resulted in many positive outcomes. First, the impact on student reflection of personal growth and exploration of career goals was great. Each student was able to put into their own words ideas about their future. Some were able to define career goals while others expressed values that were important to them. They were not yet ready to define goals, but their self-awareness had increased. Second, progress was shown in students' knowledge and use of poetry devices. At the beginning of the project, students struggled to break words down into syllables, and the poetry terminology was unknown to all but two students. Students were unfamiliar with different forms of poetry, and none had ever chosen poetry for leisure reading. Third, none of the students had ever seen their own work published for all to see. None had ever seen their drawings recognized, nor heard themselves reading aloud as they did for the animation video. These were all firsts for the EL students. Each outcome was exciting and reinforced student self-concept, their ability to learn and use English while their first language was acknowledged, as well as to expand their English content knowledge. All this from answering the question, "If you plant a seed…"

For More Information:

Poetry & Rhyme is an outreach project of Silent Fire Productions, LLC. To see this season's video, If you plant a seed…." (and the poetry students wrote) and other examples of videos created with adolescent English language learners, go to https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvRj-CZ0Y1wrofk3P4zCJyw.

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Connecting to Their Lives:
Young Adult Literature and Student Achievement

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I think it is safe to speculate that most anyone who joins the ranks of Reading and/or Language Arts teacher harbors that undying hope that *all* of his or her students will fall in love with reading. We dream of in depth discussions and passionate debates about the literature we have assigned and personally love. We believe that we *will* find that right book to give to that particular individual at the exact moment that he or she needs it, and that it will, subsequently, positively change the course of his or her life. We believe it because we have experienced it in some way, with one or many students, and we want that feeling again. We believe it because we know that it can be true. Why, then, is this experience, for many teachers, the exception rather than the rule? As a secondary English teacher for 12 years, it constantly surprised and saddened me when I would hear myself saying things like, "Ok. Please just be honest, close your eyes and raise your hand if you did last night's reading." This question usually was followed by me frantically modifying my lesson plans on the spot because, let's face it, it is impossible to have that powerful life-changing discussion over *The Scarlet Letter* when over two-thirds of the class has not completed the chapters.

At the same time, I worried about how my students interacted (or *didn't* interact) with one another. How could the literature I presented to my students help foster in them both a love of reading and an exploration of diversity, empathy, and acceptance? How could my students, through reading, come to see that their lived experience is valid, and that they are all special, worthwhile, and unique? Could it be that if I were to stray from the traditional textbook and instead choose high interest Young Adult (YA) literature that portrays diverse characters with unique experiences, both my students and I would begin to feel the power of reading, the love of literature, and an understanding of others for which I had so desperately sought? What about their test scores? How would text selection impact their performance on both classroom assessments and high-stakes tests?

Although it has long been acknowledged that personal connection to literature will yield improved learning in general and reading in particular (Dewey, 1913; Rosenblatt, 1938), limited quantitative research could be found to confirm this point, especially at the secondary level and with YA literature. In fact, in an analysis of close to 400 articles about YA literature published between 2000 and 2010, Hayn and Nolen (2011) found that "Only 36 articles were empirical studies focusing on the use of the text, rather than on the text itself" (p. 9). With limited research on the effectiveness of using YA in the classroom, teachers may be hesitant to include it into their curriculum. In conjunction with a lack of empirical evidence to support the inclusion of YA literature into the classroom is the fact that many literacy researchers and language arts classroom teachers feel that YA literature lacks literary merit, sophistication, and value as a key component of the curriculum (Gibbons, Dail, & Stallwork, 2006; Jago, 2000; Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2002). The lack of YA novels in the Common Core Standards (CCSS) Text Exemplar recommendations for grades 9-12 serves as further evidence that YA literature has not yet achieved wide acceptance as an appropriate teaching and learning tool.

Conversely, several scholars have written extensively on the benefits of incorporating YA literature into the language classroom. Not only may the YA novel be more interesting and applicable to students' own lives, resulting in increased motivation and enjoyment, but the reading task itself may often be simpler, which can stimulate increased fluency, comprehension, and analysis for its readers (Kaywell, 1995). Says Crowe (2001), "Good YA books can knock the reluctance out of reluctant readers, can provoke critical thinking in sophisticated readers, and can provide hours of pleasure for most all readers" (p. 146). The key is to first get students reading, and to then let the other pieces fall into place (Broz, 2011; Crowe, 2001; Ivey & Johnston, 2013). There is evidence to support the theory that if students feel validated through the literature that they read, if they enjoy reading, and they experience success with reading, then they are more likely to continue reading and improving their literacy skills (Alvermann, Phelps, & Gillis, 2010; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003; Vacca & Vacca, 2005). YA literature like the novels used in this study may serve as such a vehicle for adolescent readers and provide justification for teachers who want to include these texts in their curriculum. Though I am no longer in the K-12 classroom, my questions about the potential of YA literature to impact student achievement remain, and I have found that I am not alone in this questioning. I decided to partner with another university professor and a middle school reading teacher to search for an answer to this question.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of reading YA literature on middle school students' reading comprehension. The outcome of

interest was reading achievement as measured by curriculum-based measures and by state-developed benchmark assessments measuring the CCSS. In the intervention group, students read YA literature specifically chosen to represent their lives and interests, while students in the comparison group read selections from the traditional textbook. As such, we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How does reading achievement on CCSS Literacy assessments compare between students who read YA literature and students who read traditional textbook selections?
2. How does reading achievement on classroom reading assessments compare between students who read YA literature and students who read traditional textbook selections?
3. What is the student perception of YA literature text selections?

Review of Literature
Reading Achievement and Motivation/Engagement/Attitude

Tracing as far back as Dewey (1913), scholars have investigated the impact of interest and motivation on student learning and achievement. Several studies have found a positive relationship between reading achievement and motivation, looking specifically at aspects of reading comprehension, interest, and/or amount of reading a student does (e.g., Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003; Guerra, 2012; Guthrie, Van Meter, McCann, & Wigfield, 1996; Guthrie et al., 2007; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Krapp, 1999; Krashen, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1938; Schiefele, Schaffner, Moller, & Wigfield, 2012; Taboada, Tonks, Wigfield, & Guthrie, 2009; Unrau & Schlackman, 2006). Stanovich's (1986) Matthew Effect phenomenon explains how the more someone reads, the better a reader she or he will become. Conversely, when students fail to read, their achievement gap gets larger, negatively impacting all areas of the academic experience. Explains McKenna, Conradi, Lawrence, Jang, and Meyer (2012), "The relationship between attitude and achievement is complex and possibly reciprocal, with the frustration associated with poor reading contributing to worsening attitudes, which in turn inhibit voluntary reading, which consequently constrains growth in proficiency" (p. 287). This is arguably even more crucial at the secondary level, as research shows that by the time they reach high school, with regards to reading, students, "are less motivated, less engaged, and less likely to read in the future" (Fisher & Ivey, 2007, p. 495).

Furthermore, Kittle (2013) posits that less than a quarter of students read the books that are assigned to them in class, and studies have consistently revealed that student attitudes about reading get more negative as they progress through

school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Simultaneously, literacy researchers know that if students do not enjoy, make connections with, or worse yet, don't *do* the reading that is assigned to them in English class, a phenomenon Broz (2011) calls "The 800-pound mockingbird in the classroom," then their reading most likely will not improve. However, numerous forces reify textbooks and classics as the preferred vehicle for teaching and learning critical reading skills, rather than YA literature, with which adolescents can identify.

When students do not see characters like themselves represented in their learning materials, it can not only affect their enjoyment and engagement with the material, but can also affect their self-esteem, self-concept, identity, and sense of agency (Blasingame, 2007; Bordieu, 1986; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Explains Guerra (2012) "The research is consistent: When youths 'see' themselves in terms of race, culture, and lived experiences in the literature they read, they benefit academically, personally and socially" (p. 388). Using YA novels that reflect the lives and interests of the readers to teach the CCSS may be one way to reverse the Matthew Effect for readers who have a history of struggling with reading in school. YA literature may have the capacity to impact student motivation and engagement with the text that can, in turn, improve students' classroom performance, specifically their comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary development.

In addition, the more time students spend in engaged reading, the better their comprehension (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Enjoyment and connection to reading materials may yield more engaged reading, which could yield not only improved comprehension but also improved performance in the classroom. Improved performance on classroom assessments coupled with enjoyment of the class materials could yield further motivation and development into strong lifelong readers and learners (Stanovich, 1986).

Methods

For this study, the achievement of students from two eighth grade reading classes in the Pacific Northwest were compared. This rural/suburban middle school has approximately 800 students grades six through eight. 82% of students in the middle school receive free or reduced meal services, and 9% of students in the school are in the migrant program. Teachers in this middle school have an average of 8.2 years' teaching experience, and 50% of the teachers have a Master's degree. The reading classes in this middle school were designed to provide support for students who tested a year or more below grade level in reading, with eligible students randomly assigned to one of the two conditions (YA literature versus traditional textbook). Ninety percent of the students in this study self-identified as Hispanic or

Latino. The two reading teachers involved in the study worked collaboratively in previous years, have similar backgrounds and educational experiences (both males, trained at the same University, with Masters' degrees), jointly chose the district-approved curriculum, and had 3 years' experience implementing it. The teachers were chosen because they are the only reading teachers in the school, and they expressed both interest in this research question and willingness to participate in the study.

There were 25 students in the intervention group and 17 students in the comparison group. The composition of the two groups was compared with regard to student reading achievement, as measured by the previous year's state test and a nationwide test of basic skills, using independent samples t-tests. The number of students with available scores varied somewhat for the two tests. The group means on the state Reading test were determined to be statistically non-significant, $t(37) = 1.38$, $p = 0.18$. Scores were available for 22 students and 17 students in the intervention and comparison groups, respectively. Similarly, the group means on the spring Reading scores on the Measures of Academic Progress were determined to have no statistically significant difference, $t(36) = -0.19$, $p = 0.85$. Scores were available for 22 students in the intervention group and 16 students in the comparison group. In both instances, the assumptions of normality and equality of variances were satisfied.

The comparison group followed the general reading curriculum adopted by the school district and approved by the school's Board of Education, which entailed reading selections from the traditional textbook, The Jamestown Critical Reading Series, a series students had also used in both 6th and 7th grade. The selections read for this study were from the "Heroes" text and included the following: *Frank Serpico: An Honest Cop, Animals to the Rescue: Caring Creatures, Florence Nightingale: A Mission for Life*, and *Mother Teresa: Serving the Poorest of the Poor.* After each of the four units, students in the comparison group responded to the assessment prompts provided in the textbook. All assessments in the textbook followed the same format (Finding the Main Idea, Recalling Facts, Making Inferences, and Using Words Precisely).

The intervention group read two YA texts written by and with protagonists who are Mexican American – *The Circuit* by Francisco Jimenez and *The Tequila Worm* by Viola Canales. These particular texts were chosen for multiple reasons. First, both titles had equivalent Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) reading levels as the textbook selections, so comparisons of the reading experience could be assumed to be fairly equivalent. Also, the novels chosen were similar to the textbook selections in that the chapters could be read as stand-alone vignettes. Additionally, the reading teacher, who had worked with many of the students in prior years, had

knowledge regarding what titles and topics would be interesting to the students based on their past reading responses. These particular YA texts were predicted to be of interest and relevant to the students' lives because of the protagonists' ages, cultures, and work, family, and life experiences. Because 90 percent of the students self-identified as Hispanic or Latino and had previously expressed concern that they did not have opportunities to read books about characters like them, these titles were also specifically chosen to fill that need.

Like the textbook selections, the novels were taught in four units of study. Following each unit, students responded to assessment prompts parallel in structure and focus (Finding the Main Idea, Recalling Facts, Making Inferences, and Using Words Precisely) to those provided in the traditional textbook. These classroom assessments were created jointly by one of the classroom teachers and researchers, and then were reviewed by the other classroom teacher and researcher. Every effort was made to create questions that were equivalent in complexity and mirrored the textbook assessments in format, including aspects such as the wording of the directions, spacing, and font size and style.

The reading teachers mailed copies of the assessments (with names removed) to the researcher. Student surveys regarding their opinions of the novels they read were also mailed to the researcher. Because the school was identified as needing improvement by federal accountability measures, state-developed benchmark assessments aligned to the CCSS were given through the year prior to the state standardized test in the spring. When results were available, the scores were also sent to the researcher. Students who did not finish the school year were removed from the study. Three research questions were addressed in this quantitative study.

Research Question 1: How does reading achievement on CCSS Literacy assessments compare between students who read YA literature and students who read traditional textbook selections?

To address this question, intervention and comparison group scores on state-developed reading benchmark assessments were compared with an independent-samples t-test. A benchmark assessment was given mid-way through the study, after two of the four units had been completed. Another benchmark assessment was given after the study was completed. Both benchmark assessments measured mastery of CCSS for reading literature and reading informational text. The dependent variable in the t-test was the average score from both the mid-study and post-study benchmark assessments. For students missing one of the scores, their available score was used. Test scores were not available for three students in the intervention group and for two students in the comparison group. Standardized

tests were used both because of their widespread use in public school and also because they provided an objective reference point for this experimental research design comparing two curricula.

Research Question 2: How does reading achievement on classroom reading assessments compare between students who read YA literature and students who read traditional textbook selections?

To address this question, intervention and comparison group scores on curriculum-based reading comprehension assessments were compared with another independent-samples *t*-test. Student performance on the curriculum-based tests was reported as an average of the reading comprehension section of 4 unit tests. For students missing scores on 1 or 2 of the unit tests, their available test scores were averaged and included. Scores from at least two of the tests were available for all the students in both groups. In each group, one student was missing scores on the last two tests. Three students in the comparison group were missing 1 test score; each of these students missed a different test. One student in the intervention group was missing one test score.

Because this study utilized two independent-samples *t*-test, the Bonferroni adjustment was applied and results were evaluated at □= 0.025. Prior to conducting either independent-samples *t*-test, data were screened for outliers and normality of subgroups. Equality of variance was verified on both tests.

Research Question 3: What is the student perception of YA literature text selections?

To address this question, students in the intervention group responded to a questionnaire after completing each of the two books. The questionnaire consisted of Likert-type items and a space for comments. The questions were developed by the teacher and researcher as they sought to provide requested evidence for the administrators at the school. Descriptive statistics were performed on the Likert items, and a qualitative content analysis was performed on the students' open-ended responses, tracking patterns and themes that emerged.

Results

Research Question 1

Scores were available for 22 students in the intervention group and 15 students in the comparison group. No statistically significant differences were found between the intervention group mean (M = 53, SD = 11, N = 22) and the comparison

group mean (M = 58, SD =7, N = 15) on the benchmark assessments, $t(35)$= -1.59, p = 0.12. Therefore, YA literature and traditional curriculum led to similar results on standardized reading achievement tests.

Research Question 2

Scores were available for all students in both groups. Classroom measures of reading comprehension were higher for the group who read YA literature (M = 83, SD = 6, N = 25) than for the group who used the traditional curriculum (M = 76, SD = 6, N = 17). This difference was statistically significant, $t(40)$ = 3.1, p = 0.003.

Research Question 3

Overall, students in the intervention group enjoyed the YA literature that they read and were able to make personal connections to the texts, as evidenced by their responses to the questionnaire (see Table 1) and their comments in the open-ended section.

Table 1. *Student response to Young Adult literature selections*

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Response to *The Circuit* n=24	1. I enjoyed reading *The Circuit*.	54%	29%	17%	0%
	2. I think *The Circuit* is one of the most interesting books I have ever read	33%	33%	29%	4%
	3. I would like to read other books similar to *The Circuit*.	46%	21%	29%	4%
	4. I was able to make personal connections to the story in *The Circuit*.	13%	29%	33%	25%
	5. I think more books like *The Circuit* should be taught in my city's schools.	38%	38%	17%	8%
Response to *The Tequila Worm* n=24	1. I enjoyed reading *The Tequila Worm*.	54%	42%	4%	0%
	2. I think *The Tequila Worm* is one of the most interesting books I have ever read	33%	29%	29%	8%
	3. I would like to read other books similar to *The Tequila Worm*.	38%	38%	21%	4%
	4. I was able to make personal connections to the story in *The Tequila Worm*.	8%	63%	21%	8%
	5. I think more books like *The Tequila Worm* should be taught in my city's schools.	29%	46%	17%	8%

Note: Students completed each questionnaire after finishing the curriculum assessments for each book.

As Table 1 shows, 83% of the intervention group reported enjoying the first book and 96% the second. These enjoyment ratings were very high for students in a course designed to support readers who have historically performed below grade level. Forty-two percent of this group reported being able to make personal connections to *The Circuit*, while 71% were able to make connections to *The Tequila Worm*.

When students' responses on the open-ended section were analyzed, recurring comments fell into three major categories: enjoying the book, being able to connect the book to their own lives, and wanting to read the second book (*The Circuit)* or a similar book in the future. For example, of the 38 total combined comments, 27 (71%) comments indicated that the book was "good," "inspiring," "awesome," or that the reader "liked" or "loved" it. Five comments (13%) indicated specific connections between the book and the student's own life. For example, one student wrote, "I think *The Tequila Worm* is interesting because I could make real life connections of someone being a comadre," and another commented, "I can connect to this story because my family celebrates Christmas and we always put up casa de nacimiento." Finally, four comments (11%) mentioned that the student wanted to read the second book in the series, or another similar novel in the future.

Limitations

Conducting an experimental research design in a school setting is limited by structural constraints. While we made every attempt to control for variability, this study did compare different students, who had different teachers, and who took different classroom tests. This is a relatively small sample size, and there are multiple factors that could explain student achievement on both classroom and standards-based assessments. Students who read the textbook selections were not given the survey to measure their enjoyment of the text selections. While both teachers shared that students often complained about the textbook, having survey data would quantify students' individual opinions. Furthermore, it is possible that the novelty of having new books (instead of the textbook) contributed to student motivation. Unfortunately, as the teacher has since moved to a new position, it will be challenging to track the long-term reading achievement and motivation of these students. However, despite its limitations, we feel that the results of this study are compelling, and that they contribute to the limited existing empirical evidence to support the use of YA literature as a vehicle for developing student reading skills. Further research on the impact of using YA and other relevant texts should be conducted to add to this gap in the literature.

Discussion

Reading and Language Arts teachers have long known that performance improves when students are excited about and engaged in the works they are reading. The results of this study indicate that for this particular group of students, reading YA texts resulted in improved performance on classroom assessments and overall enjoyment of the reading itself. Moreover, reading these YA texts did not negatively impact their standardized assessment performance. As multiple studies have identified that YA literature is at or near the top of students' preferred reading lists (Becnel & Moeller, 2015; Guerra, 2012; Wilhelm & Smith, 2014/2015) it seems logical that teachers should use those texts to promote growth in their students, particularly for their students who may be reluctant readers. In this study it is worthy to note that most students who read YA literature enjoyed reading these books. All of the students were required to take a reading class because they had scored one or more grade levels below Proficient on standardized reading assessments, and there was evidence through discussions and written work that reading was not something the students as a whole enjoyed or spent time doing. Therefore, the fact that 83% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed reading *The Circuit* and 96% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed reading *The Tequila Worm* is meaningful in and of itself. Likewise, students were largely able to make personal connections to *The Tequila Worm,* and, while only 42% of the students indicated that they could make personal connections to *the Circuit* (which takes place in the 1940's), 76% of students agreed that, "more books like this should be taught in my city's school."

In addition to survey results, anecdotally, the teacher relayed that students were excited about the books they were reading. For example, the teacher shared, "When I passed out the book, (the student) looked at the picture on the cover and exclaimed, "Holy sh*t! This kid looks just like me!" Additionally, the school librarian shared that upon finishing *The Circuit,* many students rushed to the library to request the next book in the series. While these anecdotes relayed were not a formal part of this research study, they are integral in illuminating the power of particular texts to affect students' engagement. This excitement about reading cannot be dismissed as insignificant, as it follows that if students continue reading, their skills will continue to improve (Stanovich, 1986). Moreover, the students who read the YA texts did perform statistically significantly better on their classroom assessments when compared to the students who read from their textbook. Again, success begets success, and one can speculate that finding success on classroom assessments will boost students' confidence and motivate them to continue reading

and putting time and effort into developing their literacy skills (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003; Guerra, 2012; Guthrie et al., 1996; Guthrie et al., 2007; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Krapp, 1999; Krashen, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1938; Schiefele, et.al., 2012; Taboada et al., 2009; Unrau & Schlackman, 2006). Finally, given that there was no difference in achievement on standardized assessments whether or not students read the traditional textbook, and given that the students reported making personal connections to the YA novels and wishing they could read similar titles in school, teachers would be justified to choose the latter.

Conclusion

This is one more study to build upon existing research on what we teachers already know to be true. If students enjoy what they are reading, they are more likely to be engaged, are more likely to perform better on classroom assessments, and are more likely to read the next book we offer them. Future studies like this one, performed by both researchers and currently practicing teachers, can help to build this body evidence. Whether it is the traditional textbook, YA novels, comics, or digital stories, teachers of reading and language arts need to continue to trust themselves in selecting texts that meet the diverse learning needs and interests of all their students—texts that not only connect to their lives, but also connect them to one another, and to the world.

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Writing Workshop Professional Development: A Necessary Tool towards Developing our Future Writers

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Before becoming a reading teacher, I aspired to be a writer. I completed manuscripts for several classes at Georgetown University's adult education program and at the Bethesda Writer's Center. I attended conferences and joined a writer's group. *Highlights* magazine held one of my poems for possible publication (it didn't happen) and several publishers read my murder mystery, and sent encouragement along with rejections letters. I finally got a story published in *Washington Women*, my swan song. Ultimately, I decided the writer's life was not for me, at least not full time, and I became an educator.

Flash forward several years and I am a reading specialist at a diverse school in Reston, Virginia. Nearly 40% of our students live in poverty. Students come from dozens of countries around the world. Our staff is warm and open, full of talented teachers. As every teacher in Virginia knows, all elementary school teachers teach writing, both as a craft and throughout the day in the content areas. However, when I surveyed the staff of 50 teachers and specialists, I discovered that most colleges and universities do not prepare future educators to teach the craft of writing. To survey the staff, I simply sent out an email asking them to answer the question, "Did you take a class in Writing of any kind in college or graduate school?" Every teacher queried responded. Only one had taken a class specifically in Writing, a special education teacher in graduate school. My experience was different. I had taken a Composition class in college and a Writing Workshop class in graduate school for my Reading Specialist degree. The Writing Workshop class taught students to *be* writers and inspired my decision to create a professional development class at my school in the same way.

The need is clear. Unless they attend professional development classes at the school or county/division level, most teachers do not know how, and some are not aware, that writing should be taught as a craft. While teachers expect students to

write, many focus solely on mechanics, including capitalizing, spelling, and sentence structure. Without direct instruction and experience as writers, they have little else in their toolboxes to share with students.

This situation is a serious concern. According to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2004) Guideline, "People learn to write by writing… This means actual writing, not merely listening to lectures about writing, doing grammar drills, or discussing writing." The guideline indicate that students must have extended experience writing in and out of class. School staff should be supporting students in developing "writing lives, habits, and preferences for life outside school."

According to *The Neglected R: A Report of The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges* by The College Board (2003), the teaching of writing is often shortchanged in America's school system, despite the fact that through writing students cement and connect their knowledge in other subject areas. The authors state, "Common expectations about writing should be developed across disciplines through in-service workshops designed to help teachers understand good writing and develop as writers themselves" (p. 5).

O'Donnell-Allen (2012) authored an article in *The Atlantic* entitled, *The Best Writing Teachers Are Writers Themselves,* bemoaning the five paragraph essay, and the assign-respond-grade "closed circuit" teaching she endured as a student. She makes the case that indeed, "The best writing teachers are writers themselves…because we know the writing process inside out, we can support our students' work in authentic ways" (para 11).

In her text *When Writers Read*, University of Virginia professor Jane Hansen states,

> It has taken us years to realize that the most important act of a writer is to write, and setting aside time in school for it is paramount. We value writing, and to show our value system, we set aside time for the classroom of writers – including ourselves – to write. We honor this act. But how can teachers honor this act if they don't write?

As Hansen and multitudes of other writing professionals have said, you are a writer if you write. It is that simple, and that complicated, for in this day of emails and tweets, very few people write other than for basic communication.

By offering professional development classes in writing workshop, reading specialists are in a unique position to help teachers understand how being a writer helps them to be more effective as writing teachers. Teachers develop their skills as writers in order to teach writing. If their writing practice is limited to emails and lessons plans, teachers will be limited in their ability to develop the writers in their

classrooms. Offering writing classes through professional development affords teachers a way to develop as writers.

In their recent article, *Growing Extraordinary Writers: Leadership Decisions to Raise the Level of Writing Across a School and a District,* Calkins and Ehrenworth (2016) speak to the importance of district support for teachers to improve their writing skills through professional development. "Professional development can transform the teaching of writing in your building. Professional development will be the heartbeat of your school. It should be intense, collaborative, collegial, and practical…Good professional development creates lasting communities of practice" (p. 13). Additionally, Katie Wood Ray and Lester Laminack (2001) explain the following in *The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts (And They're All Hard Parts)*:

> In the best writing workshops I have ever seen, the student can tell you all about their teacher as a writer…the tone of the teaching in a room where the students know their teachers as people will always be different than the tone in rooms where the students know their teachers as people who ask them to do something that they don't actually do themselves.

At my elementary school in Reston, Virginia, I asked the principal if I could teach a class in writing workshop for our teachers before the school day began. Teachers would give up planning time in order to participate. I proposed a six class series over six consecutive weeks. She readily agreed and offered recertification points for those who completed the class. I had presented other series of professional development on writing over the past few years, usually focusing on how to initiate a writing workshop in the classroom, including viewing of videos of workshop lessons, conferring sessions, etc. This time I wanted to "soft sell" the workshop and ratchet up the engagement by making the teachers student writers.

They would *be* the writers working on their own snapshot stories, sharing their work with colleagues, conferring with me when they felt the need, and getting feedback from tablemates as well. Occasionally, I commented on how to translate the concepts and practices we discussed and used in the workshop to their classrooms. However, the primary focus was on writing for its sake alone. The classes were held for 45 minutes on consecutive Thursday mornings before school, ending a half hour before school officially began so that teachers still had time for morning prep and for specialists to make it to morning duty. Teachers came in before contract hours and gave up planning time to participate. The class was offered to all 50 teachers and staff at my school, Terraset Elementary, including those who teach art, music, and PE. Thirty teachers signed up for the class, including classroom teachers in grades one through six, special education teachers, an Instructional Assistant, and the school librarian. A few teachers dropped the

class because of scheduling conflicts. The majority attended all six workshops. The School-Based Technology Specialist set up the class in MyPLT, Fairfax County's official site to sign up for academies and other school-based classes. The class was called "The Basics: Writing Workshop," and was advertised via email to staff.

The writing workshops followed a structured pattern. Each class was focused on a specific step in the writing process. Using PowerPoint, I projected a clear statement of the teaching point followed by a slide enumerating the why, the how, and the when in the writing process that it is used. To bolster the utility of the teaching point, and for inspiration, I included quotations from renowned published authors about their writing process. The last segment of the mini-lesson consisted of guided practice, using the teaching point using an example from my own writing or a mentor text. For example, I used my writing for the lessons on sifting through memory for writing topics and both my writing and mentor texts for lessons on revision. While the teachers wrote, I left the enumerated steps projected for reference and conferred with anyone who requested a conference or looked like they needed help.

Each 45-minute class included a five to 10-minute mini-lesson, 25 to 30 minutes of writing and five to 10 minutes of sharing or reflection. Sharing was optional, and could be done in small table groups, with one partner, or to the whole class. Teachers were able take their direct experiences in the class and use them in their own classrooms.

The lesson topics/mini-lessons included:

- **Class One:** Gather ideas for snapshot stories from childhood or anytime in your life using heart maps, hand maps (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007) and lists.
- **Class Two:** First revision strategy – Cut out the unnecessary words to sharpen your writing (Heard, 2002).
- **Class Three:** Rewrite your lead three different ways to consider which one best serves your story (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998).
- **Class Four:** Use mentor texts to aid your own writing. Choose a narrative that feels like something you could write. Analyze the lead and the details the writer used for ideas for your own writing.
- **Class Five:** Second revision strategy – Expand an important part to uncover details of the memory (Hansen, 2007).
- **Class Six:** Endings: Write or revise your ending to leave the reader with the feeling you want them to walk away with after reading your story (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998).

Inspirational quotations from writers that related to my teaching points added weight to those points. I deliberately selected a range of authors to demonstrate the universality of their advice on writing, including Anne Lamott,

Flannery O'Conner, Ernest Hemingway, Roald Dahl, and David Sedaris. In the second class on revision, I used a quotation from Road Dahl:

> By the time I'm nearing the end of a story, the first part will have been reread, and altered, and corrected at least one hundred and fifty times. I'm suspicious of facility and speed. Good writing is essentially rewriting. I'm positive of this.

As a popular children's author, Dahl's quote was especially valuable for teachers to share with students when encouraging them to revise.

Mentor texts were valuable resources to demonstrate teaching points in nearly all the lessons. Some of the mentor texts I used included *Washington Post Magazine*'s column "Mine, What Small Thing Holds Meaning for You?", An article from *Girls* creator Lena Dunham, another from David Sedaris, and a third from Kate DiCamillo writing in *The Washington Post* about one of her favorite children's book authors, Beverly Cleary.

Once the class ended, I sent out a Google survey to the participants with both yes, no, somewhat, and free response questions. The survey began with this statement:

> I would appreciate your valuable input on the writing workshop professional development class we had this winter. I'd like to know whether it was valuable, whether it influenced anything about your teaching of writing, and to have your input on whether you would like me to teach other writing classes or classes on other topics. I'd also appreciate any constructive criticism.

Ten participants took the survey. All of the survey respondents checked "yes" to the first four questions below for which they could check "yes," "no," or "somewhat." The fifth question received nine "yeses" and one "somewhat."

1. Was the class an effective use of your time?
2. Did participating in the class make you feel more confident in your teaching of writing?
3. Did you find the mini-lessons and power points to be effective?
4. Would you take another class with me? (participant could check specific topics)
5. Did participating in the class help you by developing your own writing?

Free response questions and participant's answers include:

- "What was the best part of the class for you?"
  - *The class caused me to reflect on my individual style as a writer and who was my target audience. It was a bit revealing and personal. I enjoyed it.*

- o *A great opportunity for personal development along with relationship development with colleagues.*
- o *Realizing/remembering that sometimes we can't think of anything to write about so I could remind my students of this! And empathize.*
- "What constructive criticism can you give me?
  - o *Make us participate verbally*
  - o *I wish there were more mentor texts and examples.*
  - o *You are always well prepared and approachable in your presentations! Thank you!*
- "Please write any comment you would like to make:
  - o *By taking this class it has renewed my hunger for daily journal. Although I am not fond of sharing my writing. I still enjoy just getting things down and going back to them later. It has come to be a sense of "therapy" for me.*

The success of the class in developing teachers as writers was reflected by the fact that teachers submitted their stories to our school's literary magazine for the first time since its inception. Additionally, I sent an email to participants at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year asking them to reply with a note about whether the class helped you with teaching writing this year with a specific example of how. Responses include:

- *When I went to write in the classroom setting with other people, it reminded me of how hard it can be to come up with a topic…As an adult…Which made me realize how hard this can be for children. After taking your workshop, I made sure to remind students of this experience I had so they know that it IS hard to come up with something to write about, whether you are a child or adult…I felt that you made writing a safe place where all of us in class felt comfortable writing down personal stories- knowing that they were our own and we didn't necessarily have to share. I make sure to try to make my class as comfortable and safe as possible…This year I had a student write about her grandfather who passed away. Her story was pretty moving and I first made sure to ask if I could read it. She said I could but said she wanted to keep the story private and not share out in a small or whole group. Since there is no pressure, people are more likely to write things that are meaningful to them without fear of judgement.*
- *I look forward to another class with you! One of my huge take aways from the last class is "uninterrupted" writing. By me just letting them write, I am getting great writing pieces and when we conference together, they look at their writing with "new eyes." Another take away is not always telling them*

> *what to write about, again…just letting them write. Giving my students more choice is producing better, more in-depth writings.*

- *There were many takeaways for me, as simple as my hand got tired and as important as the value of talking about my stories. I have spent more time allowing kids sharing time each writing block.*

Reflecting back, I feel the class was effective for the following reasons. Teachers do care about developing their skills as teachers of writing. The course was short enough both in class time and duration that the commitment did not feel overwhelming. While the teachers were the students, they could easily see how they could turn around and develop similar lessons for their students because the structure of the lessons mirrored the structure of the writing workshop for students in elementary school. The teachers appreciated having the time to write and experiencing the writing process as a student, which was evidenced by their responses in the survey. The awarding of recertification points for attending the lessons was likely an additional incentive for participation.

Based on my experience having teachers become the writers, I encourage my colleagues, reading and literacy specialists, to offer a series of writing workshop lessons such as these at their schools. While it may seem unorthodox to ask teachers to become the students in this mode of professional development, the energy and excitement in the room each week, and the way individuals expressed satisfaction and even relief at the opportunity to express themselves, get feedback, and understand the writing process, proved it to be a worthwhile experiment. For reading specialists and literacy leaders who are interested in running writing workshop professional development at their schools, as a first step, begin by seeking the approval of the administrator and request that he or she grant recertification points to participants. Next, assess the writing needs of those in your building, either by surveying teachers, querying teachers during collaborative learning teams, or by observing writing lessons in your school. Then, using the assessment of writing needs, decide on the teaching points you wish to cover, create a blurb describing the class, and advertise the class within your building.

Helping teachers become more familiar and comfortable with the writing process, and facilitating their empowerment as teachers of writing was a strong first step towards improving the level of writing instruction at Terraset Elementary. I plan to offer additional series at my school, focusing on topics such as poetry or informational writing. I am also considering whether this model of professional development might be adapted for the teaching of reading strategies, word study, and other fundamentals of teaching reading and writing. Learning in a new way can replace memories of outdated methods of teaching from our childhoods.

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Reading to Learn in Social Studies: The R2-3E Strategy

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For decades, middle and high school content-specific teachers have been encouraged to integrate reading strategies into their pedagogical practices, yet many are reluctant to do so. This situation suggests that content area teachers believe it is someone else's responsibility or that they lack the ability and/or training to teach literacy (Hall, 2005). According to research, teachers also consider lack of instructional time and increasing pressure to cover content as obstacles to literacy instruction (Deshler et. al, 2001; Obrien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995). These are, however, unproductive arguments because many adolescents do not possess the necessary skills to navigate the specialized vocabulary and expository text associated with middle and high school content-specific classes. Furthermore, this reluctance offers a fruitless path for teachers.

In an era where high-stakes testing has the potential to significantly impact teacher accountability, teachers need to accept the challenge of supporting literacy skill development within content instruction. The R2-3E strategy described in this article is a simple means of supporting literacy in the content areas, and is an especially powerful tool for helping students to recognize important or key information in nonfiction text and to develop summarizing skills.

Why Does It Matter?

The middle grades in elementary school are generally considered the time when students transition from learning to read to reading to learn (Chall & Jacobs, 2003). At the same time, they are making this transition, however, reading strategy instruction generally decreases (Giles, Wang, Smith, & Johnson, 2013). Scholars doubt the voracity of the "vaccination" concept of teaching, where students receive enhanced literacy instruction in the early grades with the idea that this will result in continued literacy advancement (Shanahan & Barr, 1995). Even when a child demonstrates strong reading skills in the early grades, these strengths may not automatically translate into the more complex skills needed to navigate the specialized and sophisticated content-specific reading in later grades (Perle, Grigg,

& Donahue, 2005). According to Ness (2009), the nearly eight million students in grades 4-12 who read below grade level are likely to struggle as they encounter the difficult content presented in texts they will be required to read, and, of those struggling secondary readers, nearly 70% struggle with reading comprehension (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006).

Content area reading requires different reading strategies than what is taught in the developmental years (Baer & Nourie, 1993). Social studies texts, for example, present complex vocabulary within unfamiliar text structures, and can present unique challenges to middle school readers (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). The complexity of the texts with its jargon, technical terms, multisyllabic words, and a variety of text structures, requires reading skills that middle grade students may not possess or know how to apply (Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Graetz, 2003). Further evidence suggests that reading instruction in specific content areas such as social studies can improve student understanding and learning (Mosborg, 2002). It, therefore, seems reasonable that we should expect that teachers who are tasked with delivering this content to also be equipped to provide the literacy scaffolds that may be necessary for their students to master the content.

R2-3E Strategy

R2-3E, read twice, extract, explain, and extend, is an instructional strategy developed as a result of utilizing note pages rather than a social studies textbook in a middle school social studies classroom. The strategy provides a platform to model expert reading and meaningful literacy strategies through a sustained collaboration between the teacher and students. Few materials are needed – print copies of text, highlighters, pens/pencils, interactive whiteboard – making it an accessible strategy for most teachers.

The R2-3E strategy can be used with any nonfiction text, including note pages or pages from a textbook. It is important, however, that students have a copy of the text that they can write on. It is also essential for the teacher to provide explicit instruction, modeling expert reading and demonstrating the process on an interactive whiteboard. Students need plenty of opportunities for guided practice until they becomes comfortable with the process. This is particularly true when they are learning to determine which words or short phrases qualify as key words or important information.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of this instructional strategy is that it provides an opportunity for students to learn to summarize informational text. Generally, when a student is asked to summarize, he or she tends to write too much and copy complete sentences from the text, or they write too little and omit

important details. The desired outcome of R2-3E is for students to be able to pull out main ideas of the text by focusing on key details, words, and phrases.

Before using this strategy, teachers should prepare students with a discussion of what makes a word in a sentence or a paragraph a key or important word. The ultimate goal is for students to be able to distinguish between what is important information and what may be interesting, but not necessary for understanding. Questions teachers can ask students to facilitate this understanding include:

- Which words or short phrases relate to the title?
- Which words or short phrases best describe the topic?
- Which words or short phrases help you to understand the topic?
- Which words or short phrases best describe bolded words?
- Which words or information will you likely have to know for a test?
- Which words or information unlocks the door that can lead to useful information?

Determining main ideas and key details does not come easily for many students and providing ample guided practice of this process is essential.

The R2-3E Process

The R2-3E strategy examines one paragraph of text at a time. Teachers may ask students to draw a line across the page under each paragraph. This provides a visual divider and helps students to focus on one chunk—a paragraph or a section—of text at a time. It may even be beneficial for some students, especially those who become overwhelmed when they encounter lengthy nonfiction text, to use a piece of paper to cover all but the paragraph they are working on. See table 1 for a summary of the strategy process, which can be used in whole or small group instruction.

Table 1. *R2-3E Strategy*

Read	**Teacher** reads the paragraph; students listen
Read	**Teacher** reads the same paragraph again; **students** highlight key or important words and circle new or unfamiliar words
Extract	**Teacher** asks **students** to share circled words Teacher asks students to share highlighted words
Explain	**Teacher** and **students** – define circled words, analyze paragraph by discussing highlighted words to determine important information

Extend | **Students** – create a dictionary, word wall, summarize paragraphs; summarize entire passage

The first step of R2-3E beings the process of direct instruction, where the teacher reads the first paragraph while the students listen. The more students are exposed to this strategy, the more eager they are to skip this step and begin highlighting as soon as reading begins, but it is essential to remind students that they cannot determine what is important until they have heard the paragraph in its entirety and have a sense of what it is about.

Moving on to the next step, the teacher reads the same paragraph a second time. This time, students highlight key or important words and short phrases and circle new or unfamiliar words. The tendency when first introducing this strategy is for students to highlight nearly every word in the paragraph. Teachers should plan on repeated modeling of this step. It takes practice for students to master this, and teachers will likely find themselves repeating questions such as, "Do you think that is information that you will be tested on?" or "Are those words important for understanding what the passage is about?"

During the extract and explain phases, the teacher asks the class to share all of the words that were circled. In the beginning, students may be reluctant to share because they do not want their peers to know that they do not know the meaning of a word. Generally, if teachers take the lead and circle a few words, the students will chime in with words of their own, providing a perfect opportunity to explain new or unfamiliar vocabulary and to discuss strategies such as using context clues or looking for the root or base word to help determine meaning. The students should also take turns looking the words up in the dictionary and as a class discuss how well the dictionary definition matches the definition that was determined together using context clues or word origins. All students should then draw a line from the circled word to the margin of the page where they write a brief, agreed upon definition.

Asking a student volunteer to share the words they highlighted is also part of the extract and explain phases. Again, teaching students to extract key words and short phrases requires a great deal of modeling. One technique that has been useful is to tell the students that they have to use all of the words they highlighted in one complete sentence. They quickly realize that generally less (words) is better if they are going to be able to do this. When too many words are highlighted, it can be nearly impossible for the student to write a well-structured sentence. This process is then repeated for each paragraph in the passage.

The final step is to have students extend their learning. Students can create a personal written or visual dictionary from the circled words and these can also be

added to a student created and maintained word wall. Students can create graphic organizers or write "test" questions based on the important words or short phrases.

An important outcome of using R2-3E is for students to acquire summarizing skills. Because this is often difficult for students to learn, one technique to accelerate the acquisition of this skill is to give students one-sentence summary frames (Santa, Havens, & Valdes, 2004). Sentence frames provide a scaffold for constructing sentences from newly acquired vocabulary and content, but need to be modeled before students are asked to complete them on their own. Not only do these frames help students to summarize new content, but they also provide a clear model of appropriate sentence structure. Table 2 provides several general examples:

Table 2. *Summary Sentence Frames*

Description -	A _____ is _____ that _____.
Compare/Contrast	_____ and _____ are similar because both _____, but different because _____.
Sequence	_____ begins with _____, continues with _____, and ends with _____.
Problem/Solution	_____ wanted _____, but _____, so _____.
Cause/Effect	_____ happens because _____ or _____ causes _____

Eventually, students should be able to write a summary sentence for each paragraph and then combine those sentences into a paragraph that summarizes the entire passage.

Conclusion

R2-3E, read twice, extract, explain, extend, is a strategy for reading nonfiction that is easy to incorporate at any grade level and with any content area. The focus is on helping students define unfamiliar words, to extract important information, and then to be able to summarize their new learning. Like most strategies, it requires repeated modeling on the part of the teacher, but it is a worthwhile endeavor. The more students are exposed, the more competent they become in extricating and summarizing important information on their own.

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RICU: The Reading Intensive Care Unit

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It's the end of the second quarter, and a first grade team is meeting to reflect on the reading progress their students have made in the first half of the school year. The mood is somber.

"I don't understand why there's so little progress."
"I know. Johnny barely moved up one reading level, from level 1 to level 2. That's from having one word on each page to two words on a page."
"I don't know what more we can do. We're teaching our hearts out as it is!"
"Yeah, and all these kids who aren't progressing get two reading sessions most days."
"Well, they never read at home, that's the problem. They never complete their reading logs and never read a single book at home. Ever."
"Yeah, that's a problem."
"They just wander the room during reading workshop. They never read."
"There's no more time in the day to add in more reading time."
"I know. What more can we do?"
"It's so frustrating. I feel like we're doing all the right things and still no progress."
"Maybe something's wrong with them."
"It's beyond just helping now. These kids need to go to intensive care!"

No, there wasn't something wrong with the students but there was something wrong with the instruction. The students in question had just spent five months in first grade yet had not learned to read beyond an emergent level of B in the Fountas and Pinnell (F&P) leveling system or a level 2 in the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) leveling system. The average first graders were reading in level F (F&P) or level 10 (DRA) books by that time. The first grade teachers consistently met with all reading groups daily for 20-minute sessions. The students who were not progressing also read with the ESL teacher and/or the reading teacher several

days each week. Clearly this model was not working, so instead of doing more of what was not working, the team decided to do something different. The reading teacher proposed creating an intensive care instructional setting for these students and RICU began; the Reading Intensive Care Unit.

Because the low-progress students never read at home and because they also did very little reading during the day at school, they were rapidly falling behind their peers in the number of minutes spent reading in text. As the readers read better, the nonreaders read more poorly. The fewer minutes they spent in reading texts, the harder the texts were each time they tried to read so they chose not to try and began avoiding reading as much as they could. No wonder! Any new skill is hard without daily practice. These students needed to be in an intense instructional environment where as much time as possible would be spent in reading and rereading text. As their reading skills improved, reading would become more rewarding and they would begin to read more.

The Reading Intensive Care Unit is a model or a framework for an intensive short-term reading intervention. It's designed to increase students' reading skills and levels to grade level expectations in six-eight weeks at which time the students will return to their classrooms and resume the usual reading workshop routine. RICU is part of a delivery model for synchronizing intervention and literacy instruction in first grade classrooms. The six first grade teachers taught guided reading using guided reading plans by Jan Richardson (2009) from *The Next Step in Guided Reading: Focused Assessments and Targeted Lessons for Helping Every Student Become a Better Reader*. These guided reading lessons are two day plans for 20 minutes each day. The first day involves starting with reviewing sight words, then introducing and reading a new instructional level text followed by a discussion of the text. Next, a new sight word is taught followed by a word study activity. Day 2 begins with a sight word review followed by rereading the text from the previous day and rereading other previously read texts. Students again discuss or retell the previous day's text and then are led in a guided writing activity where students write sentences about the instructional level text.

The first grade team realized how much more effective guided reading instruction in all of the first grade classrooms would be if they all followed the Next Steps model because the consistency and common language would be in place. The team also thought that keeping a similar instructional model for RICU intervention would increase the effectiveness of the intervention instruction and possibly transfer back to the classroom setting more easily. The daily guided reading lesson is a 20-minute lesson with four components. It was decided that RICU would follow the same lesson format but would expand and intensify each component during a 20 minute station. Students would rotate through all three stations (the sight words

and guided writing components were combined into one station) each day to experience the full balanced lesson. RICU supports 9 students (3 students at each station). Students rotate through all 3 stations daily for 6-8 weeks. Each daily session is for 80 minutes.

Here's how it works. Three teachers teach in RICU. There should be one reading teacher, but the other two can be instructional assistants, ESL teachers, resource teachers, or special education teachers—whoever is available during the RICU time. Each teacher directs one station for 20 minutes, and then students rotate to the next station for another 20 minutes and finally to the last station for another 20 minutes. Each student works at each station each day. Students rotate and teachers stay put.
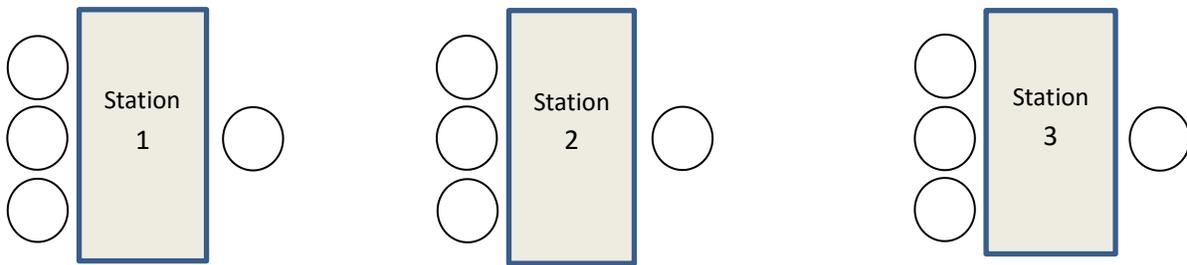
RICU followed *The Next Step in Guided Reading* early lesson plan for readers in levels D (F&P) or 4 (DRA) through levels I (F&P) or 16 (DRA). The reading teacher's station introduces the new book, introduces vocabulary or words that students would not be able to figure out on their own, directs the picture walk, and coaches students on strategic problem solving as they read the new text. There are three students at the station. While students whisper read the new text, the teacher confers with each student, prompting students and teaching word solving strategies. A running record is completed on one student each day. After students have read the text, the reading teacher chooses a teaching point based on the individual conferences and the running record information. The teaching points may include monitor for meaning, monitor for letters and sounds, strategies for problem solving unknown words, or reading more fluently. Students are given a copy of the book read that day to take back to class and to take home to reread with their teacher and family.

The second teacher's station does word work and guided writing. These are two separate components in the Early Lesson Plan in *The Next Step in Guided Reading* that have been combined for this station. The teacher reviews previously taught sight words with students by asking them to write the sight words on a white board. Next, she introduces new sight words using the What's Missing?, Mix

and Fix, Table Writing, and Whiteboard Write and Retrieve activities. The teacher writes the sight word on a white board and tells the student the word. She erases one letter and asks students what's missing? She repeats the procedure several more times by erasing letters at the beginning, middle, or end of the word. Students are given magnetic letters to make the new sight word themselves. Once the word is made, they're asked to mix it and fix it. Students are asked to use their finger to write the sight word on the table and last they are given a marker and a white board and asked to write the word on the white board. The final task at this station involves guided writing. Students discuss a familiar text with teacher prompting for an event from the beginning, middle, and end of the story. When three sentences have been orally crafted by the group, the teacher writes the key words for each part of the story on a white board. Students use the key words as the teacher dictates the sentences for students to write down in a notebook.

The third teacher leads word study activities at the third station. Explicit activities are used to look closely at spelling patterns such as initial and final blends, short vowels, and digraphs. Students use magnetic letters, picture or word sorting, whiteboards, letter tiles, and sound boxes to manipulate and break apart words. The lesson is followed by students reading a decodable text that highlights the word study feature they just worked with.

The final 10 minutes of each daily session of RICU is spent on choral reading of poems or songs. Selections are chosen from the *Fluency First Grade 1 Student Book* by Timothy Rasinski and Nancy Pedak (2005). The choral reading and rereading is to improve fluency and improve automatic word recognition. It turns out, it also improves enthusiasm and a love for reading. Students leave RICU humming or singing and in a happy mood. Students have a RICU bag and a take-home copy of the book they read with the reading teacher is added each day. Once they return to their classrooms, they join the centers in progress and will receive another 10-minute session with their classroom teacher who will listen to them reread and work on retelling and comprehension of the book they brought from RICU.

RICU began functioning in February 2013. Since then several changes have been made as the model was fine-tuned and improved upon. The first three years of RICU included four teachers running four stations with three students at each station and 12 students total. The fourth teacher would work on comprehension skills such as retelling a story, identifying story elements, or problems and solutions. The RICU teachers noticed that by the fourth rotation, the students were tiring and losing stamina and focus. Last year, the model was changed to three teachers and nine students who rotate through three stations and spend the final 10 minutes reciting or singing. The reciting and singing has an energizing effect so

when students return to their classrooms they still have the stamina to participate in more reading activities.

The selection process for students to participate in RICU has also undergone changes. In the initial years of RICU, facilitators selected students who had the lowest reading scores across the grade level each quarter. The students made slow progress and tended to occupy the RICU slots throughout much of the year. Last year and this year, the first-grade team took a different approach to selecting the RICU students. At the very beginning of the year and at the end of each quarter, students are tested and have benchmarks for reading level expectations for those times. Rather than take the lowest scoring students, the team looked at students who were one-two reading levels below the benchmark for that quarter. The minimal reading level expectations for the year are as follows:

Beginning of the year	End of quarter 1	End of quarter 2	End of quarter 3	End of the year
Level D (F&P) Level 4 (DRA)	Level E (F&P) Level 6 (DRA)	Level F (F&P) Level 10 (DRA)	Level H (F&P) Level 14 (DRA)	Level I (F&P) Level 16 (DRA)

Last year, for the first round of RICU at the beginning of the year, nine students who tested in levels B (F&P) or level 2 (DRA) and level C (F&P) or level 3 (DRA) were selected. After eight weeks, the RICU students were tested and seven had progressed to levels E (F&P) or level 6 (DRA) and E (F&P) or level 8 (DRA). They returned to their classrooms to join the usual reading workshop activities. The two students who did not progress remained in RICU for the second round. Seven more students were selected who tested in levels C (F&P) or level 3 (DRA)-D (F&P) or level 4 (DRA). At the end of the eight weeks all nine of the students tested in level F (F&P) or level 10 (DRA) and were sent back to their classrooms for the reading block and different round of nine students was selected for the next RICU. Students who had scored in reading levels E (F&P) or level 6-8 (DRA) at the end of the second quarter were selected for the next round. The new selection process has resulted in greater success for the RICU students. The students selected for the third quarter started the year as emergent readers and as immature readers. They needed the time during the first six months of the year to mature and progress in their reading skills beyond the emergent level. By the time they began reading in RICU in late February, however, they also had developed habits such as reading a text by looking at pictures and guessing words and "reading the pictures" instead of actively word solving. These habits required a little extra time to replace with word solving strategies and for this reason, the final round of RICU students remained in RICU for 10-12 weeks.

Q1:DRA 2-3 and *WA scores
170s

Q2:DRA 3-4

Q3:
DRA
6-8
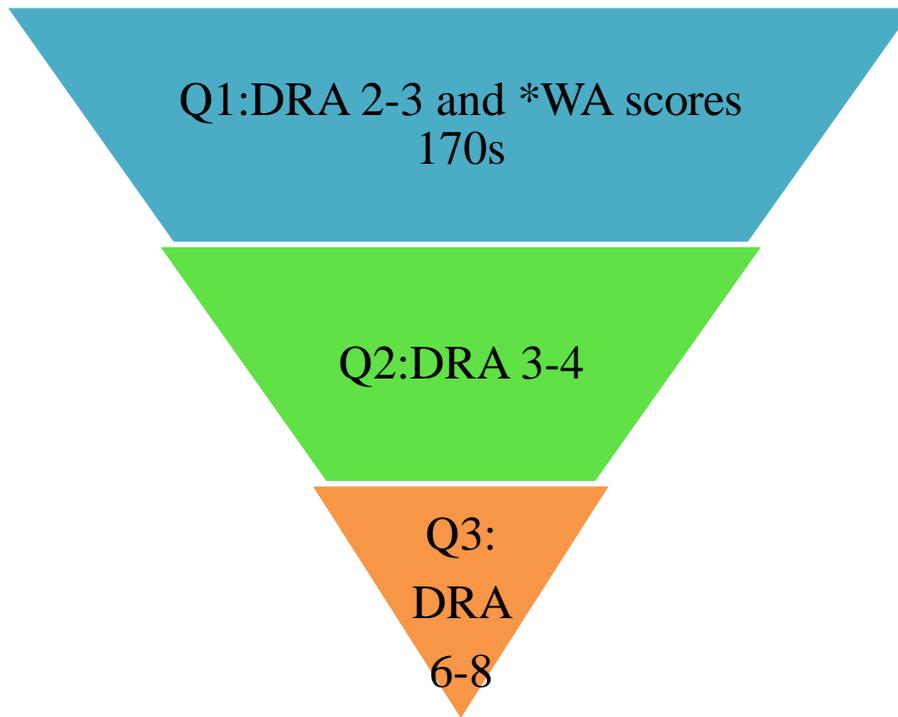
In all by the end of last year, 33 first-grade students had been instructed in RICU and 25 out of the 33, or 76%, were reading on or above the end of year grade level benchmark of level I (F&P) or level 16 (DRA). The eight students who did not meet the end of the year benchmark level were the students served in the final twelve weeks of RICU.

This current school year's second grade has only 8 former RICU students in Tier 2 interventions and none in Tier 3. Those eight students began working in RICU on the second week of school this year. Currently, after five weeks in RICU intervention in second grade, all eight have passed reading levels I (F&P) or level 16 (DRA) and are working in level J (F&P) or level 18 (DRA). They will return to their classroom for guided reading instruction but will receive twice weekly fluency support with the Read Naturally program, *Read Naturally Rational & Research*, 2005-2009 Read Naturally, Inc.

RICU, or the Reading Intensive Care Unit, has proven to be a cost effective and instructionally effective reading intervention model for first grade students. Restructuring available resources during the first grade reading block was what our school needed to move low achieving readers to grade level reading success. No additional personnel or instructional materials are required to implement this intervention.

*WA- the Developmental Reading Assessment Word Analysis is the assessment given to our kindergarten students throughout the year. The test

measures phonological awareness skills, alphabet letters and sound knowledge, sight word knowledge, and concept of word. A perfect score is 193. It is similar to the PALS-K assessment.

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Interactive Read-Alouds:
A Vehicle for Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

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Knowledge and understanding of vocabulary is an essential component of critical thinking, reading comprehension and literacy development (Byrnes & Wasik, 2009; Biemiller & Boote, 2006). Vocabulary can be defined as a student's knowledge of word meanings in either their receptive language (words students hear or read) or their expressive language (words students use in their speaking and writing). Research indicates that by the age of three, children living in poverty are exposed to 30 million fewer spoken words thank children in higher socio-economic homes (Hart & Risley, 2003). If children do not have access to rich spoken vocabulary, chances of developing sophisticated expressive vocabulary or a well-developed reading vocabulary are limited.

It is noted that people with more sophisticated vocabulary are often perceived as more intellectually capable by others; this may further influence socio-economic opportunities (Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, & Gee, 1996; Duke, 2000). Therefore, one's cultural capital, power, and wealth may be influenced by language and vocabulary use (Cazden et al., 1996; Ream & Palardy, 2008). One way to enhance students' vocabulary use is through carefully planned explicit teaching opportunities.

Literature Review
Vocabulary Development

Understanding word meanings is a powerful indicator of reading comprehension and literacy development (Biemiller & Boote, 2006). In fact, the amount of vocabulary learned in first grade is a strong predictor of reading comprehension in eleventh grade (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). However, students enter school with a varied amount of background knowledge. By age six, average children may have approximately 10,000 words acquired in their vocabulary repertoire (Byrnes & Wasik, 2009). Still, as Hart and Risley (2003)

demonstrated, many students who begin school may not have developed such a large vocabulary. It is essential for teachers to provide explicit vocabulary instruction for all children in order to bridge this gap and to deepen all students' vocabulary knowledge.

Penno, Wilkinson, and Moore (2002) demonstrated that students who entered school with a large cadre of known words increased their vocabularies through reading (without instruction) more easily than children who did not possess extensive vocabulary knowledge. It seems that increased vocabulary knowledge through explicit teaching may lead to continued self-learning. This supports the importance of building knowledge of how to learn new words independently through effective vocabulary instruction (Scott & Nagy, 2009).

Research also demonstrates a strong correlation between vocabulary and comprehension. Students who have a large repertoire of vocabulary words generally comprehend text more effectively, and this, in turn, builds more vocabulary knowledge (Jalongo & Sobolak, 2011). The understanding of vocabulary has strong implications for all children's literacy success. Therefore, it is essential for children who enter early childhood classrooms to engage in rich and varied experiences designed to enhance robust vocabulary.

Interactive Read-Alouds

A growing body of research suggests that daily interactive read-alouds (IRAs) may positively affect literacy development (Beck & McKeown, 2001; McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). Interactive read-alouds can be defined as an instructional context in which teachers read aloud to students, strategically pausing at planned locations to encourage students to engage in peer conversations (Meller, Richardson, & Hatch, 2009; Santoro, Chard, Howard, & Baker, 2008). Increased vocabulary (Kindle, 2009; Roberts, 2008), improved comprehension (Hoffman, 2011; Smolkin & Donovan, 2003), and enhanced oral language (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Pantaleo, 2007) are all demonstrated benefits of IRAs.

Fisher et al. (2004) identified behaviors that teachers engage in when planning and conducting effective IRAs. These behaviors include careful and intentional text selection, previewing and practicing the reading, establishing a clear purpose for the lesson, providing a model of fluent reading with animation and expression, embedded text discussion, and opportunities for independent reading and writing. These components are important for teachers to consider when planning for an effective interactive read-aloud.

Teaching Vocabulary through the IRA

A comprehensive approach to vocabulary instruction requires teachers to select appropriate words for instruction, pre-assess students' knowledge of the selected words, provide child-friendly explanations for each word, and engage students in multiple, repeated experiences in both reading and writing (Blachowicz et al., 2006). This can all be accomplished in conjunction with daily IRAs. Figure 1 offers a model of effective vocabulary instruction.

Figure 1. *Comprehensive Approach to Vocabulary Instruction*
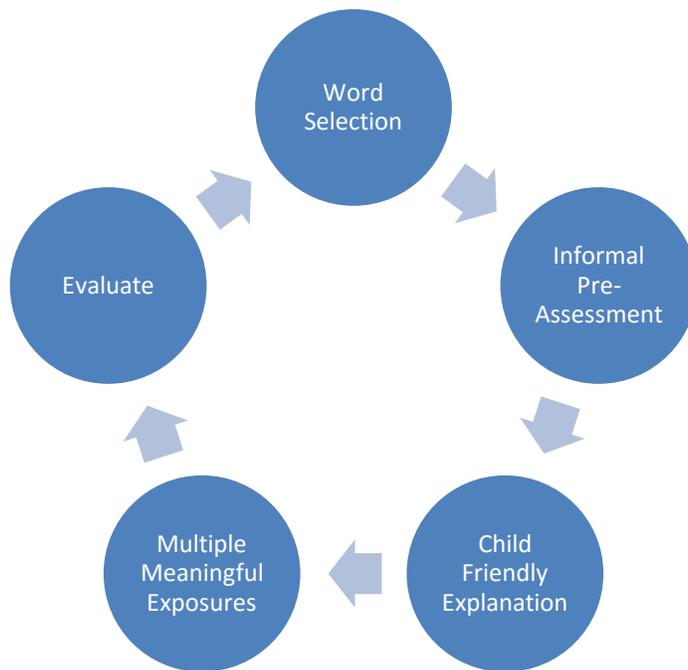
Word Selection

It is important to choose robust, high-utility words for vocabulary instruction (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). Beck and her colleagues (2002) identified three levels, or tiers, of vocabulary words. Tier One words are those that are generally picked up in conversation and are of less mature language such as *dog, cat,* and *door.* Tier Two words are high utility, interesting words that exemplify more mature language such as *strewn, colossal,* and *scowl.* Tier Three words, such as *crater, polygon,* and *community*, are related to content areas and are generally not used outside of those areas. While these content words are important for comprehending informational text, they are not words that are commonly used in conversations.

Tier Two words expand a child's robust vocabulary knowledge, and therefore should be targeted for literacy instruction (Beck et al., 2002; Santoro, Chard, Howard, & Baker, 2008).

In addition to selecting specific words to teach, it is important to limit the number of new words presented to children at one time. It is better to teach fewer words well than to require children to memorize a list of words for a test, leaving little expectation for the transfer of the learning to speaking, listening, reading and writing. Jenkins (2005) describes the short term memorization of word lists as giving students permission to forget, since the result is a low net gain of vocabulary words. Children must be able to apply the word in their speaking and writing to demonstrate the understanding of deep knowledge of the word (Cunningham, 2009). Researchers agree that explicit instruction of 5-8 words per week facilitates deep word learning and transfer (Nagy & Anderson, 1984; Neuman & Roskos, 2012). Therefore, explicitly teaching children three to five words in one week may be sufficient for early readers or students who are considered to be academically at-risk (Bromley, 2010).

Once the words are selected, they can become the primary teaching focus of the IRA. For example, the teacher may pause the reading to discuss each vocabulary word as it appears in the text. At this point, the teacher may ask students to discuss the word with a peer. This is designed to help children understand what they heard during the reading—in this case, the new vocabulary—and relate it to their experiences. Picture books are often used during IRAs because they offer ample opportunities to engage with high level vocabulary in an accessible context.

Assessment

As noted earlier, the choice of appropriate high utility words is the initial step to effective vocabulary instruction. Once the teacher selects the words, s/he may conduct a brief informal assessment, often through a whole class discussion, to determine whether or not students are familiar with any of the words. For example, the teacher might write each selected vocabulary word on a sentence strip and include a picture to help build background knowledge of the word. The addition of the picture may help English language learners or beginning readers. As s/he displays the word card, the teacher asks students to define and discuss the word with a partner or small group. While students talk, the teacher can listen in on the conversations and record anecdotal notes to informally assess depth of word knowledge; alternatively s/he may ask volunteers to share definitions or examples of how the word might be used.

If it appears that the majority of the students are familiar with a word, and can use the word appropriately in conversation, the teacher may choose not to explicitly teach that word throughout the week. However, opportunities may exist for incidental word learning (i.e., students "picking up" the word in their vocabulary repertoire) throughout the IRA. However, since the teacher will select Tier Two words, it is unlikely that children will know many of these words well enough to apply them without explicit instruction.

Child-Friendly Explanations

When most students in the class only possess limited or partial knowledge of specific words, or a complete lack of understanding of the words, whole-class explicit instruction is necessary. To begin, the teacher should provide a child-friendly explanation of each word. This means that the teacher explains the word meaning using simple language so students can understand the terminology (Beck et al., 2002). The explanation is presented in connected language, not short phrases; in addition, adding the words "you" or "someone" adds context to the explanation, making it easier for the learner to understand. Oftentimes, this explanation will contain a synonym (Kindle, 2009). For example, a teacher may introduce the term *colossal* by explaining that *something that is colossal is very large or huge, like an elephant or a mansion.* Here the teacher provides a description, the synonym *big,* and a real-life example. One resource that may help teachers provide child-friendly explanations is the English Cobuild Dictionary, which can be accessed at http://dictionary.reverso.net/english-cobuild/.

Multiple Meaningful Exposures through Engaging Activities

Vocabulary instruction should provide children with the knowledge to understand word meanings, connect concepts, and build the skills needed for comprehending different texts (Neuman & Dwyer, 2009). Once the words and explanations have been presented to the students, it is important for the teacher to provide multiple opportunities for students to interact with the words in text and oral language (Maynard, Pullen, & Coyne, 2010). It is equally essential to require students to transfer the newly learned words to their independent reading and writing. This will deepen children's understanding of word meanings (Kindle, 2009) and provide students the opportunity to read, hear, use, and talk about the newly learned words (Blachowicz et al., 2006) both in and out of school.

Planning and implementing daily engaging vocabulary activities will increase students' robust vocabulary knowledge. One method is to model the use of context clues in order for readers to understand novel words. For example, the teacher could

project a sentence (taken from a picture book used during the IRA) for all students to see; the vocabulary word should be highlighted in the text. By thinking aloud, the teacher can demonstrate how the text or pictures provides clues for word meanings. To illustrate, if the word in the read aloud is *strewn,* the sentence from the text along with the corresponding picture may show toys arranged randomly on a bedroom floor. This could be projected on a classroom screen. The teacher would lead a discussion explaining how the toys are *strewn* across the floor.

Beck et al. (2002) suggest several engaging activities that require students to apply knowledge of new vocabulary; this application deepens understanding. One activity, called "Have You Ever?" requires students to put themselves into a context with the words. For example, the teacher might ask the class, "Have you ever seen a *colossal* animal? Turn and tell a friend what kind of animal it was, where you saw it, and what it looked like." Another idea is to ask students to act out key vocabulary words. For example, the teacher might say, "Show me how you might take a *colossal* step toward the door."

Another opportunity for applying vocabulary knowledge exists during literacy center time. As students write vocabulary words displayed around the room, they record objects they find that exemplify the words. In the previous example of *colossal,* students may find a large object in the room, draw it on their paper, and explain why this item could be described as *colossal*.

Students in literacy centers may also engage in a vocabulary scavenger hunt. Students work with a partner or small group to find pictures that represent teacher selected vocabulary words. Pictures may be found in magazines, on the internet, or any other available resources. The pictures could be displayed on poster board and used as an anchor chart to reference during an interactive read aloud. Figure Two provides an example of the vocabulary scavenger hunt.

Each engaging activity is designed to be short in duration, yet require students to apply their understandings of each words meaning. The short duration ensures sustained engagement, and also makes it easy for busy teachers to provide time for multiple exposures to words throughout the week. Further, since the students are required to apply their knowledge of words, and not simply define them, deeper learning is likely to result.

Figure 2. *Vocabulary Scavenger Hunt*

Evaluation

After several days of engagement with the new vocabulary words, it is important to evaluate student learning in a meaningful way. Multiple choice tests and fill-in-the-blank quizzes will not accomplish this goal. Instead, students should be asked to apply their knowledge of the vocabulary words. The challenge with evaluation is to provide opportunities for application that can be completed by individual students in a relatively short period of time.

One popular activity, known as Examples and Non-Examples (Stahl, 1999) may serve as evaluative quiz after words have been taught and practiced. The activity requires students to determine which of two descriptors adequately explains a word. The descriptors are close in wording and meaning, so the student must know the word deeply enough to select the accurate explanation. Figure 3 provides an example of an Examples and Non-Examples quiz.

Figure 3. *Examples and Non-Examples Quiz*

Circle the best description for each word.		
A sad face is a scowl.	*scowl*	*A scowl is an angry expression on somebody's face.*

When things are strewn it means they are lying on the floor.	*strewn*	*When things are strewn around, it means they are scattered all over the place.*
If something is colossal it is very large or huge.	*colossal*	*When something is colossal it is big.*

Conclusion

Early childhood educators are charged with the responsibility of increasing students' vocabulary acquisition. Developing students' vocabulary instruction in all subject areas is critical for comprehension (Cunningham, 2009) and reading proficiencies. It is also noted that vocabulary knowledge may also affect perceptions of intelligence and potentially impact socioeconomic opportunities. It is clear that depth and breadth of word learning is more important than quantity in vocabulary instruction. Therefore, educators must carefully choose high-utility words for instruction. Through explicit vocabulary instruction provided during the IRA, children can gain deep understanding of sophisticated vocabulary words. Thus, it is important for teachers to implement daily IRAs as part of their literacy routine.

You Try It

1. Choose your favorite picture book.
2. Select five Tier Two vocabulary words to teach from the book.
3. Write child-friendly explanations for each word.
4. Explain the child-friendly definition to the students.
5. Provide students with opportunities to practice using the words with engaging activities.
6. Evaluate student learning though a meaningful activity, such as Examples and Non-Examples.

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Hey, Can We Read that Book? It Sounds Interesting!

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The practice of book talking has a long history with librarians, teachers, and students engaging in these talks (Fischbach, 2004; Wozniak, 2011; York, 2008). The benefits of book talks can be seen on two levels: those for the individual student and those for the community. Some of the benefits for individual students are improved attitudes toward reading and lower achieving students reading more (Beard & Antrim, 2010). There is a great deal of research that suggests outside-of-school, independent reading is highly related to reading achievement (Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2007; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2013) and that volume of reading is an important piece of overall literacy skill development (NCES, 2010). Successful reading experiences, with appropriate level and interesting content, has been shown to increase motivation to read (Allington, 2009).

On a community level, book talks allow readers to form what Donalyn Miller (2013) refers to as, a "network of other readers" who can support each other in choosing and discussing books. Students can find book talks to be a natural outlet for book responses, similar to book clubs. "Readers enjoy talking about books almost as much as they like reading" (Miller, 2013, p. xxiv). To this end, book talks can help increase the amount of voluntary reading by building motivation to read. Book talks that allow students to make their own choices of books may increase voluntary reading and therefore reading levels (Hunter, 2001).

A book talk is a quick and simple way to "hook" kids on books. Often the book talks follow a format similar to a movie trailer, catching kid's interest and then providing a cliffhanger so that students are left wanting to know more and thus may be more likely to read the book. Typically book talks are not reviews, nor do they summarize the book, but they are an implied recommendation from the book talker.

The major benefit of a book talk is that students are exposed to a wider variety of tiles, genres and authors than if they just perused the book shelves in your classroom (York, 2008). This is especially important for the students in your

classroom who typically pick out the same authors or genres. We know that several features of texts can help encourage voluntary reading, including genre, topic, length, and perceived difficulty level (Guthrie & Humenick 2004). When children are familiar with different authors and genres, it can help promote voluntary reading. In addition, book talks can support young children who are making the transition from beginning readers to chapter books by scaffolding understanding of comprehension strategies, such as inferences, while conducting a book talk (Jacobson, 2003). The authors have found other benefits in creating book talks in the classroom. Book talk creation can be a group or solo activity. They can also be created by partnerships of students in different grade levels. Book talks can be an exciting technology integration activity where the outcome is a project student's can be proud of and share with others.

General Book Talk Tips

It is essential to choose quality literature to discuss during a book talk (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Maloch, Zapata & Roser, 2012). Students will be able to talk from their hearts if they can relate to the character, the character's journey, or the topic. Often placing books in juxtaposition also invites talk. Choosing two books by the same author or two versions of the same story allows students to talk through the vantage point of comparison (Short, 2011). We must not forget about nonfiction texts, which students tend to connect with if the information is thick, accurate, and richly illustrated. Nonfiction texts offer students an opportunity to engage in a different kind of talk. Instead of overwhelming students with options, studies indicate that the most effective teachers help students find interesting, good fit books (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2013). They may do this by showcasing a few (3-5) options they think will appeal to the reader.

Digital Book Talk Tips and Examples

Recently, digital forms of book talking have gathered interest such as book trailers or short videos (Chance & Lesesne, 2012; Gunter & Kenney, 2008). Digital book talks provide an easy, personalized approach to supporting students' reading. Teachers may record book talks and make them available on the class website or through emails to parents of children for whom these books would be a particularly good fit. That is, those books whose authors, topics, genres, and difficulty levels are aligned with the student. Next, we share some images and book talk scripts created by elementary school teachers using digital tools.

Figure 1. Example of Tellagami book talk of *Words with Wings* created by A. Rutherford in Waynesboro City Schools.

Transcript: Have you ever had that feeling that others just don't understand? Grown-ups, other kids, your parents want to help, but they just don't get it. Words with Wings by Nikki Grimes tells the story of a girl coping with her reputation of being the "weird new girl" at school just after her parent's separation. The author's word choice and poetry format make the words flow smoothly. It is quick and easy read yet powerful and relatable. Individual words ignite Gabby's mind into daydream fantasies like the weightless adventure of flying through space as a comet or memories of better days like the simple comfort of swaying on great grandma's porch swing. The tone is so comfortable as if your best friend is lounging on the couch with you sharing all of her inner thoughts. Similar to many young girls, Gabby's mind jumps from emotion to emotion trying to make sense of it all. Add the book, join the life of this day-dreamer as she starts to figure things out. Stop by our school library and check out Words with Wings by Nikki Grimes today.

Figure 2. Example of Chatterpix book talk of *The Watermelon Seed* created by L. Leone in Waynesboro City Schools.

Transcript: Have you ever swallowed a seed? Or wondered what might happen if you did? Well, in this super, funny story called The Watermelon Seed by Greg Pizzoli, an alligator shares how much he loves watermelon, but then he accidentally swallows a seed. He starts wondering what might happen to him and he comes up with some very silly ideas. If you like Fly Guy or Elephant and Piggy books you'd love this one! Read to find out just what happens to the alligator!

When teachers create digital book talks, they are modeling the next step in taking book talks digital, having students create their own animated book talks on iPads in the classroom. Digital book talks can be differentiated for all ages, using different levels of books from picture to chapter books. Younger students may be helped by using a template for the script, but more mature readers may enjoy having the chance to write out their script and practice persuasive or descriptive writing. The students also enjoy working in grade level pairs or across different grade levels to make a shared book talk. These are all ways that book talks can be differentiated to meet students' needs.

Next, we share some other helpful tips. First, encourage students to pick a book they love and are excited to share with others. Take a picture of the book to use as the background of the book talk. The cover is a great choice, or a picture of

their favorite page. Next, pick out and personalize the character (if applicable) and think about how animating the character could enhance the script. Keep the book talk short. Thirty seconds can be enough time to say what is needed. Some of the apps may have time limits. If more time is needed for the book talk, upgrading the app might be required.

Additionally, it is important to create an engaging script so viewers will be interested in watching the book talk, and then be excited to go read the book themselves. We have developed some tips for creating engaging book talk scripts. First, think about what you want to say before you begin recording the book talk. Entice the audience to want to read the book and hook them right away perhaps by saying things, such as "Do you like suspenseful stories?" or "I've never been so drawn into a book's world so quickly…" Or "If you like books by Mo Willems, you'll love this one!" After the introduction, briefly describe the plot of the book while avoiding spoilers. You may choose to describe how you felt reading the book or highlight a particular moment or image in the book that encapsulates why you loved it. Wrap up the book talk by enthusiastically encouraging the audience to go read the book, right now. When the book talk is finished, it can be shared with other students, parents, on a class blog, or online for others to enjoy.

Resources for Digital Book Talks

When considering which iPad apps to choose for book talks, keep in mind several criteria: access, cost, and ease of use. The apps we highlight in this article are already used in many local schools and are free. In addition, most of the selected apps offer inexpensive paid versions with more features and recording time. Ease of use is an important consideration so teachers do not have to spend much time, if any, training the students on using each app. This allows the book talk creator to focus on making book talks instead of worrying about learning and troubleshooting the technology. Each of the apps we discuss next, Tellagami, Puppet Pals, and Chatterpix Kids not only fit the above criteria but they also allow for easy sharing and exporting of videos. Each app is summarized below.

- Tellagami https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/tellagami/id572737805?mt=8 (free, in-app purchases available). This app features a customizable animated character, a customizable background, and voiceover. The creator can take a picture of the book with the iPad camera and use this as the background of the video. The creator uses his or her own voice to do the voiceover. The character's mouth animates along with the dialogue. Free version users are limited to 30 second videos. In-app purchases offer unlimited video length and additional character choices.

- Puppet Pals HD https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/puppet-pals-hd/id342076546?mt=8 (free, $4.99 upgrade to Director's pass recommended). This app uses a picture of a character, which can be customized in the paid version to a cut-out character from any image. The background can be a picture of the book, taken using the iPad camera. The creator records a voiceover while moving the character around the background with their finger to animate the video. Multiple scenes are possible with the paid version.
- ChatterPix Kids https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/chatterpix-kids-by-duck-duck/id734046126?mt=8 (free). This app allows the creator to take a picture with the iPad camera, edit the image to include fun things like accessories and filters, and then record a voiceover. This app animates a moving mouth on top of the picture to make it look like the picture is narrating your voiceover.

Conclusion

In reading/writing communities, learners share responsibility in a collaborative social context (Smith & Bixler, 2009). By encouraging students and teachers to share the responsibility of creating book talks, teachers are making time and creating a place for discussion which is key to reflective and critical reading (Miller, 2013). This is essential due to the current classroom emphasis in the United States on test-taking and scripted approaches to language arts and reading comprehension. Through book talks, teachers share their own love of reading and inspire students to be readers (Ward & Day, 2016). We have demonstrated in this article the importance of book talks but more importantly how easy it is for teachers and students to turn traditional book talks into digital creations. We hope that you are inspired to try one of the iPads apps we described or better yet, have your students create their next book talk using one of them.

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