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Exploring Trends in Early and Middle Years
English Language Arts**



Jumping Through the Hoops



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Jumping Through the Hoops by Eric Lowe

(welded steel sculpture rolled one and a quarter inch square tubing)

Jumping Through the Hoops is a visual artistic statement of how individuals must navigate hoops in their lives. The steel sculpture also depicts how sacred Indigenous hoops have been twisted by the effects of colonization. In First Nations cultures, hoops symbolize the circle of life with no beginning and no end. The Hoop Dance is a healing dance performed to music, with individual dancers using hoops to tell their stories. They rearrange the hoops (usually a minimum of 4 and maximum of 28) into shapes and patterns that reflect nature and human experiences. This sculpture was selected for the 120 Years of Fine Art at the Eagleridge One Gallery in Winnipeg. It also won the 2022 William J. Birtles Award for Sculpture during the Manitoba Society of Artists' open juried competition and exhibition (OJCE) June 1-30, 2022.

INTRODUCTION BY THE GUEST EDITORS

Joe Stouffer, Ph.D., and Shari Worsfold, Ph.D.

Welcome to the 33rd issue of the *BU Journal of Studies in Graduate Education*, devoted to rural, northern, and Aboriginal education.

For this special issue, the invited authors are among Brandon University graduate students who completed the 2021 Spring Term 02.740 *Trends in the Teaching of Early/Middle Years English Language Arts* (ELA) as an elective course toward their Master of Education degree. The course's intent was to explore and keep graduate students abreast of shifting trends and current topical issues in the teaching of ELA in kindergarten-grade 8 classrooms, such as:

- building early literacy skills,
- determining effective instructional strategies,
- increasing equity and opportunity for all learners,
- increasing professional learning and development opportunities for educators, and
- providing students access to high-quality, diverse books and content
(International Literacy Association, 2020)

In their final paper in the course, students were required to take up a position on a personally relevant trend in ELA. While the term *trend* implies a degree of capriciousness, our contributing authors delved into the research base supporting or challenging varying approaches to ELA instruction alongside consideration of curricula, particularly for Manitoba teachers the recently renewed English Language Arts Curriculum Framework (Manitoba Education, 2020). While the discipline historically has seen competing programs or philosophical orientations come and go (at times cyclically), capture the interest of media outlets (e.g., Hanford, 2019), or fluctuate in popularity in schools, in these special interest articles the authors endorse approaches from a research-informed perspective while considering their context for teaching ELA in rural, urban, or northern schools.



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An Effective Instructional Approach to Teaching Spelling: Word Study

Angela Caines

Abstract

Spelling programs in elementary school grades are a controversial topic among teachers, parents, and researchers in the field of best practices. Because spelling is a foundational skill of literacy, recent education publications continue to stir contention among teachers to resolve what is the best approaches to spelling instruction. Proficient spelling enhances the quality of writing and proficient reading, so a developmental word study approach is essential. In this article, the author presents a research-based case demonstrating how the instructional program Words Their Way is an effective method to assess and instruct spelling, which may be integrated in balanced literacy programs in preschool to secondary grades.

Teaching spelling has been a controversial topic for years (Graham & Santangelo, 2014; Pan et al., 2021). Spelling is a foundational skill of literacy (Alves et al., 2019) that empowers people to function in day-to-day activities (Alves et al., 2019; Nahari & Alfadda, 2016; Pan et al., 2021). It is also a skill that is judged by others; spelling errors can be perceived as lack of skill or education, and can negatively impact a person's confidence (Alves et al., 2019; International Literacy Association (ILA), 2019c; Nahari & Alfadda, 2016). Headlines such as "Does Spelling Still Matter – And If So, How Should It Be Taught?" (Pan et al., 2021), "Rethinking Assessment in Word Study" (Koutrakos, 2019), and "Does Spelling Instruction Make Students Better Spellers?" (Graham & Santangelo, 2014) in recent educational publications continue to stir contention among teachers to resolve what are the best approaches to spelling instruction.

What Research Says About Spelling

Researchers have explored how children learn to spell and the instructional approaches that are needed to support their learning. As new ideas developed around more effective approaches, the idea of word study was crafted (Bear et al., 2016), more recently with an emphasis on differentiating instruction (Mihalik, 2017).

According to Ehri (1987), a literate person must be able to read and spell words, which proficient readers do with ease. Research studies have explored how readers refine literacy skills as they develop mastery of letter knowledge, transfer, and letter-sound cues, and later become skilled at decoding and spelling (Ehri, 1987). Ample research findings have attested to the significance of spelling instruction as an important literacy skill (Alves et al., 2019; McNeill & Kirk, 2013; Mihalik, 2017).

Proficient spelling leads to quality writing and proficient reading and is a skill that demands attention (ILA, 2019c). It also enables a student to write clear messages, build writing stamina and fluency, and results in descriptive and an expansive word choice, adding voice to the writing (ILA, 2020). Students who lack spelling fluency often are often poor readers and writers (Robinson-Kooi & Hammond, 2020). Thus, the teaching of spelling skills should be considered an essential part of a balanced literacy program, including opportunities and quality instruction for students to read, write, and speak (Mihalik, 2017), signaling teachers to implement a spelling program that is developmental, explicit, and differentiated.

Spelling Is Developmental

In the 1970s, researchers began to examine how young students approached spelling, soon realizing there may be a developmental approach to how young children represented speech with print (Bear et al., 2016). Fifty years of research in literacy development has led us

to an understanding of how learners develop writing and spelling skills; learners move along the same continuum at varied rates (Bear et al., 2016; Masterson & Apel, 2010; Mihalik, 2017), and growth through these literacy stages is individual (Ehri, 1987; Mihalik, 2017; Pan et al., 2021). These stages enable teachers to develop a better understanding of student errors and guide them in a plan of instruction to best support individual students when they make spelling errors (Reed, 2012). Thus, students must be met with literacy instruction at their level to reach their optimal learning growth potential (Mihalik, 2017).

Developmental research encourages spelling instruction to follow a learner's natural detection of patterns, including phonology, morphology, and orthography (Alves et al, 2019; ILA, 2018). Proficient spelling is more than memorizing. Spelling instruction should be based on a developmental approach (Robinson-Kooi & Hammond, 2020) and examined carefully by teachers to gain intuitiveness into their errors and developmental level (ILA, 2019c). Despite the research that has been done in literacy instruction, child development, and student learning, teachers remain hesitant to replace spelling programs that memorize weekly spelling lists with research-supported word study approaches (Mihalik, 2017).

Phonology

Phonological awareness usually develops after the age of four and is a demanding task for some learners because they often attend to word meaning instead of the sounds (ILA, 2019b). Described as “a multilevel, oral language skill typically defined as the sensitivity to the sound (or phonological) structure of spoken words apart from their meanings” (ILA, 2019b, p. 2), phonological awareness is crucial as students learn to manipulate, segment, build, read, write, and spell words (Reed, 2012). Most spelling approaches rely on phonology, but this sole approach is not sufficient to develop vital skills in young students learning how to spell (ILA, 2019c).

Initially, teachers start with teaching students alphabetic letters and corresponding sounds. In other words, phonology is the starting point of spelling instruction. Students learn how the alphabet works and its connection to writing, building the foundation for further development in spelling and reading (ILA, 2018). Learners must understand that writing involves representing the phoneme with the correct letter(s) (Alves et al., 2019).

Morphology

The second stage in the development of writing is the learner's understanding of morphemes, “the smallest linguistic units that carry meaning” (Alves et al., 2019, p. 225). Research stresses the importance of teaching students how to spell, using a morphemic approach instead of a phonemic approach (Devonshire & Fluck, 2010). Attending to a morphemic instructional approach is advantageous when teaching students to spell, and it also improves reading and writing skills, especially among students in grades two to four, during the time they receive a lot of literacy instruction (Devonshire & Fluck, 2010). Students learn how to spell through instruction about prefixes, suffixes, and root words, and at the same time they learn rules for applying suffixes and making plural words. Explicit teaching of spelling has been successful in improving the spelling skills with students with dyslexia (Reed, 2012), helping students develop an awareness of word structure, which is pivotal in becoming a skilled and accurate speller (Alves et al., 2019), and aiding in vocabulary development (ILA, 2019c).

Orthography

Mihalik (2017) defined orthographic knowledge as “information stored in a student's memory that helps represent spoken language in writing. In spelling, orthographic knowledge includes hearing words orally and transferring to writing, such as a spelling test” (p. 32). In the

mid-1900s, an orthographic method was introduced, encouraging instruction to focus on a developmental approach, with the understanding that learners progress through these levels in a similar order but at a different rate (Mihalik, 2017). Learners develop an awareness of spelling predictability when they are immersed in literacy from an early age. They try to “make sense of words and how they are spelled” (Alves et al., 2019, p. 226). Orthography is important because it teaches students word patterns and rules (Alves et al., 2019), and helps reduce spelling errors (ILA, 2019c).

Explicit Instruction

In the context of a classroom, this instruction involves the teacher using scheduled time to explicitly teach spelling (Pan et al., 2021). Explicit instruction helps students strengthen spelling skills, because it uses the gradual release of responsibility model (Robinson-Kooi & Hammond, 2020). Explicit teaching of writing skills improves reading skills because both skills are the cornerstone of word study. This empowers a reader/writer to decode words while reading and apply this skill to build words when writing (ILA, 2020). In other words, it is a reciprocal relationship.

Graham and Santangelo (2014) published the results of a meta-analysis of 53 studies, concluding that spelling, reading, and writing skills are expanded with direct teacher instruction. In addition, Graham and Santangelo examined an additional 23 studies that explored the effect of teaching spelling and found that formal instruction was more effective than a natural spelling approach. They concluded that explicit teaching was exceptional and had a positive effect in almost 90% of the studies examined. Six additional studies concluded that explicit instruction of spelling produced academic gain in spelling accuracy when writing, and formal spelling instruction resulted in increased success that were sustained over time.

Mihalik (2017) provided evidence of growth when using explicit instruction to teach spelling, because it involves teacher modelling, guided practice, and timely feedback on practice work. The International Literacy Association (2019a, 2019b) concluded that active engagement in an appropriate word study, supplemented with explicit teaching, fosters success and skill.

Smith (2017) made three recommendations for spelling programs targeting students who struggle in literacy. First, explicit instruction is notably paramount for students who have a spelling disorder because effective interventions are pivotal to supporting their language development. Next, students who struggle need consistency in programming, word study practice, and an explicit approach to spelling, for the simple reason that they need these foundational skills to be successful writers. Finally, teachers must be reminded that when struggling students are learning to read, decode, and spell, the students must receive direct instruction practice in word blends and syllables, and sound segmenting. All three of these approaches should be a part of a solid intervention.

Approaches to Teaching Spelling

Memorization Approach

The memorization approach stresses the importance of developing spelling proficiency by using memorizing, drilling, and testing of routine words lists. As early as 1920, professors developed spelling textbooks for grades one to eight, to implement daily drill and practice in word work (Mihalik, 2017; Pan et al., 2021; Reed, 2012). Students learn to spell high frequency words, to help enhance reading and writing skills. This practice focuses on levels to be implemented across various grade levels (Mihalik, 2017).

Visualization Approach

The visualization approach teaches students to use their cognitive skills to link the memory of what they see (e.g., to picture the word) to spelling. This helps learners realize when a particular word *looks* right (Alves et al., 2019; Nahari & Alfadda, 2016). According to the International Literacy Association (2019c), visual understanding enables students to store word knowledge when students are actively engaged and exposed to lots of words. Research has shown (Nahari & Alfadda, 2016) that the use of multiple senses while playing games builds success, confidence, and engagement while learning. Nahari and Alfadda (2016) concluded that the visualization approach yields higher results, and that visualization may be the answer for spelling success because students who use this approach scored higher on their post-test, than students who were taught spelling using a traditional approach. They also found that students who were taught visual approaches had a more positive attitude toward spelling.

Word Study Approach

A recent study by the International Literacy Association (2020) suggests that methods to teach spelling should include teaching high frequency words and patterns while using word study approaches to sort and build words based on spelling patterns. This research-based approach considers student literacy development and best practices for literacy instruction, and focuses on “phonics, spelling patterns, and vocabulary through a differentiated and developmental approach that seeks to meet students at their instructional spelling levels and monitor progress through a range of assessments” (Mihalik, 2017, p. 46). That is, teachers instruct at the same level as the child, while maintaining student engagement and reducing frustration in student learning. This support enables the learner to make the greatest achievement gains (Bear et al., 2016).

The main goal of daily word study is to encourage learners to put into use their knowledge and understanding of spelling, while also reading as a support of fluent decoding and comprehension (Koutrakos, 2019). Word study improves awareness and understanding of how words can be broken down into smaller chunks of meaning (i.e., morphological awareness), and empowers the teacher to address the stages of spelling as students develop, ultimately improving academic success for all learners (Mihalik, 2017).

What Do I Recommend?

Published in 2000, *Words Their Way* (Bear et al.) is supported in research as an effective method to assess and instruct spelling and can be integrated in a balanced literacy program from preschool to secondary grades (Mihalik, 2017). This program follows a developmental approach (Bear et al., 2016; Mihalik, 2017; Zugel, 2005), enabling students to move through five levels from letters and sounds to more complex words (Bear et al., 2016; Mihalik, 2017). For example, early years students in grades K-1, would “benefit from sorting pictures associated with sounds as they first build automaticity with consonants, scaffolding their initial attempts to read and write” (Mihalik, 2017, p. 16). In the Within Word stages, usually around grades 1-3, students compare words, to help develop their vocabulary. In future stages, students develop knowledge and understanding of more complex words, more specifically, “prefixes, suffixes, and base words” (Mihalik, 2017, p. 16).

Words Their Way addresses a learner’s developmental level and differentiates the instruction. According to the International Literacy Association (2018), word study approaches use explicit instruction and differentiation, which enables students to build their spelling skills for accurate spelling while building confidence and writing fluency.

How Do You Apply Words Their Way in the Classroom?

In the context of the classroom, teachers begin this program by assessing the student's spelling level by administering a diagnostic spelling assessment. This diagnostic tool scores the students' ability to recognize initial and final consonants, vowels, digraphs, and their understanding of complex spelling patterns, permitting the teacher to determine the students' instructional level for differentiated instruction (Mihalik, 2017). In a typical grade 2 classroom, one teacher could have four or five groups of spelling levels to instruct.

In my classroom, I meet with each group on the first day of a new word sort for explicit instruction of new words. We read the words, discuss their meanings, and sort them. To begin, students actively sort the words into groups using personal rules, share their reasons for sorting, and then engage in a focused lesson (e.g., the sorting rule this week is doubling the consonant before adding *-ing* to a word). After the lesson, students return to their seats to engage in assigned word work. Teachers have autonomy in assigning word work activities, which may include daily quick sorting of the words by rule or pattern, using the words in context (writing a sentence, paragraph, or story), searching for similar words in the classroom that have the same sorting rule, completing the supplementary workbook page, and, if a teacher chooses, completing a word test at the end of the week.

While I facilitate a small group, the remaining students rotate through literacy centers: silent reading, writing, working on an integrated science or social studies lesson, buddy reading, or independent word work. I schedule my word work block at a time when I have a support teacher in the classroom to help work with the remaining groups. Once a routine is established, I meet with the word groups only on the first day of the new sort because guided reading/ writing groups are my focus on the remaining days.

I was first introduced to this program five years ago, when I moved to a new early years school. At that time, there was school-wide implementation of this program. I was given a copy of the program manual *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonic, Vocabulary, and Spelling Instruction*, 6th ed. (Bear et al., 2016). After reading the book, I collaborated with colleagues to obtain strategy ideas for effective ways to implement this program in my grade 3 classroom. I did not receive any further training, which at the time led to my finding the program overwhelming. However, once I learned how to establish routines, sustaining the program was effortless. It takes time and patience at the beginning of each year to frontload students with expectations. For me, the payoff of this approach is that everyone settles into a routine, and the students become quite independent in their weekly word work activities.

This speaks to the effectiveness of the program: students are hands-on, engaged, and completing their assigned word work. Students are assessed three times a year (beginning, middle, and end) and I witness growth in all students, with some students climbing two to three levels over the year. Surprisingly, I noticed that my guided reading and word work groups do not automatically match. I sometimes have struggling readers in my average word work group or have a strong reader in my average group, which results in a struggle for center rotation, because my guided reading and spelling groups are not identical.

Linking Spelling Instruction to Word Study: Words Their Way

When taking a comprehensive look into these three approaches, a word approach such as *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2016) can be viewed as an effective spelling program. Research has shown that *Words Their Way* helps learners “to accurately spell words, decode words when reading, and expand the breadth and depth of their vocabulary” (Mihalik, 2017, p. 16). When students are involved in word study, they actively sort and classify words while applying thinking skills (Koutrakus, 2019). Likewise, when teachers model skills about word sounds, patterns, and meanings, students can make meaning as they read a variety of text. This explicit teaching in word study empowers students to build an understanding of the English language, knowledge of

word meanings, and how to spell them (Bear et al., 2016).

According to the International Literacy Association (2019c), diagnostic spelling tests give insight into students' spelling errors, and a class profile can be reviewed to determine common errors across numerous students. *Words Their Way* includes a diagnostic test that provides the teacher with the necessary information to determine a student's developmental level and spelling needs (Mihalik, 2017), giving this program an advantage over spelling approaches that do not address the challenge of students who are not at grade level and offers an entry point for all students in the classroom (Mihalik, 2017). Using *Words Their Way*, teachers can scaffold their literacy instruction to meet the literacy needs of their learners, which will result in a higher rate of spelling growth and student confidence (Dew, 2012). In addition, Zugel (2005) found this program to be effective in vocabulary development and comprehension, which in turn increased reading comprehension.

Bear et al. (2016) concluded that a word study program parallels reading behaviours and is the "synchrony of reading, writing, and spelling development" (p. 15). He further stated that students develop understanding of words while actively engaging in reading and writing, and through explicit teacher instruction. *Words Their Way* uses these two foundational beliefs to instruct students, so that they build deeper word knowledge. Students' acquisition of skills in word knowledge is based on their stages of development and students naturally learn by actively exploring words.

Mihalik (2017) conducted an 18-week transcendental phenomenological study on the "phenomenon of teacher implementation of word study spelling programs across elementary classrooms" (p. 27) to analyze prevailing themes in the spelling practices of six grade 2 classrooms. Mihalik explored the factors that influenced teachers: challenges in instructional methods, how those challenges are addressed, program feedback, and influences of professional development. Data collection consisted of a variety of formats, including interviews (administrators and teachers), classroom observations, teacher journals, and collections of student work. He chose a grade 2 classroom, because classrooms at this grade often include a wide range of spelling abilities and would cover the most levels in the *Words Their Way* program. Teachers in the study reflected on the efficacy of the program, stating that they "felt confident that word study provided valuable levels of differentiation ... and was a worthwhile approach to spelling" (Mihalik, 2017, p. 203), and "it is notable that a combined 95% of teachers [reportedly] had some level of success" (p. 119).

When looking at the overall effectiveness of this program, one may also consider Fisher et al.'s (2016) effect size, and how a word study program influences student academic success. This work considers influences that are 0.4 and above as having a significant positive effect on student success. Fisher's group concluded that the following influences have a positive influence on student learning: responses to intervention (1.07), vocabulary programs (0.67), direct instruction (0.59), phonics instruction (0.54), and small group learning (0.49). The word study program *Words Their Way* includes all of these components, which is evidence of its effectiveness as a spelling program.

In comparison, memorization and visualization approaches are less effective. The memorization approach, for example, which stresses the importance of developing spelling proficiency using memorizing, drilling, and testing of routine words lists, does so without any specific focus on word patterns or sounds (Mihalik, 2017, p. 38). Students learn to spell high frequency words to help enhance reading and writing skills (Mihalik, 2017), but this method does not account for any additional knowledge students need to understand about language and to become proficient spellers (Masterson & Apel, 2010).

The visualization approach serves students who are actively engaged and exposed to lots of words while playing games, leading to success, confidence, and engagement. However, this approach does not consider a developmental strategy, nor does the teacher explicitly teach them. According to Graham and Santangelo (2014), formal instruction in spelling improves performance and achievement in spelling, writing, phonological awareness, and reading skills.

Furthermore, Devonshire and Fluck (2010) concluded that explicit instruction in morphology yields positive results in spelling skills. They also concluded that the gains in these areas were maintained over long periods of time. Finally, Robinson-Kooi and Hammond performed a quantitative study in 2020, concluding that explicit teaching rules and formation patterns, inflection, derivation, and composition of word structure yield positive results. The visualization approach does not include explicit instruction when teaching spelling. Therefore, the visualization approach is not a singularly effective approach to spelling instruction.

Limitations of a Word Study Approach

When determining the effectiveness of the Words Their Way program, one should consider research evidence that identifies its limitations. In Mihalik's study (2017), an absence of guided writing instruction across the sample group was noted, which is a lost opportunity for teachers to facilitate a homogenous group of writers with a focus on guiding students who are at the same developmental writing stage. Mihalik provides evidence that parallels what current literature states, that students often do not transfer spelling and word study skills. There is a need to supplement or expand the word study instruction, to include meaningful literacy activities, such as integration into daily "reading, writing, and content area ... [activities, for] ... meaningful application of skills" (p. 204), because this will result in higher levels of retention and word transfer.

Zugel (2005) suggested taking the words from each sort, and using them in meaningful writing activities so that students focus on literacy skills in context. When Zugel (2005) used this program to supplement writing activities, he found it to be highly effective with low leveled students and it helped to increase their reading fluency. Adding to this evidence, Bear et al. (2016) concluded that some word approaches included explicit modelling of skills, but in isolation. In other words, students needed opportunities for engaging and purposeful literacy activities, to facilitate reading and writing these practice words in context.

Mihalik (2017) also observed scheduling conflicts that resulted in lower level readers receiving their scheduled reading intervention block at the same time their classmates had word study. This meant the lowest level students missed their word study, requiring effective scheduling. Some of the teachers in Mihalik's study found value in the program, although they found multiple groups challenging to manage. Learner support was most effective in organized schools, where school teams had students attend classroom instruction at their level, providing individual differentiation for students and fewer groups within the classroom.

A final limitation is a lack of professional development, which may cause some teachers to become hesitant to implement new programs due to a lack of understanding (ILA, 2019a; Mihalik, 2017). Likewise, McNeill and Kirk (2013) concluded that teachers found this developmental instructional method to be successful, but called for further professional development. These viewpoints were acknowledged by Smith (2017), who stated that students will reach their highest potential in reading and writing if there is a team approach to support student learning.

Conclusion

Classroom instruction must include spelling as an essential component to the successful development of literacy in young learners (Graham & Santangelo, 2014). Using a word study approach to teach spelling as a component of a balanced literacy program, teachers can assess, differentiate, and explicitly teach word sounds, patterns, and meanings. I recommend implementing Words Their Way with supportive professional learning as an effective word study approach, because this program incorporates best practices and research-based evidence to fully support all students' development of spelling, and ultimately leads to proficient readers and writers.

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Read-Aloud: A Middle Years Approach to Connecting and Learning From Literature

Kimberly J. D. Zelaya

Abstract

Read-aloud is a reading activity that occurs most often in the early years classroom. Research suggests that read-aloud continues to be of value in the upper grades. Read-aloud provides opportunity for middle grade students to engage and connect to a range of literature. It increases motivation and improves accessibility for the range of readers within the classroom. It is also an effective instructional strategy that can be used in all content areas to make gains in comprehension, vocabulary, and writing skills.

Teacher read-aloud has been described by the field as an imperative classroom activity to develop reading skills and knowledge (International Literacy Association, 2018). However, the vast majority of studies of read-aloud and supports of this practice pertain to early years classrooms (Ariail & Albright, 2005). Further, researchers have noted a decline in the use of read-aloud as students progress in grade levels (Albright & Ariail, 2005; International Literacy Association, 2018). While the reading needs of early years and middle years students may differ significantly, read-aloud can continue to be an essential activity to include in the middle years classroom. This paper seeks to justify read-aloud as a beneficial approach to develop or deepen a middle years student's connection to literature and an effective instructional strategy to teach and reinforce reading skills.

What Is Read-Aloud?

Research in the field does not always provide a clear definition of what read-aloud is. Studies demonstrate that it is understood and implemented by teachers in various ways (Albright & Ariail, 2005; Ariail & Albright, 2005). Read-aloud in the context of this paper will be defined as a "teaching structure that introduces students to the joy of constructing meaning from text" (Burkins & Yaris, 2016), whereby teachers simply read aloud from a text to their students. The focus area of middle years will refer to students in grades 5 to 8. Research has found that read-aloud is conducted for a variety of reasons (Ariail & Albright, 2005) and has the potential to provide many benefits when used strategically (Fisher et al., 2004). As an instructional activity, read-aloud may differ in its appearance and implementation, depending on the teacher, age, or grade level of the students, and its intended purpose.

Read-aloud generally consists of the teacher reading aloud from a text to the class. Research suggests various techniques that teachers could use to make read-aloud most effective. Some of these strategies include the use of expression, modelling fluent reading, asking questions, and actively interacting and engaging with students (Albright & Ariail, 2005; Fisher et al., 2004; Lane & Wright, 2007). Read-aloud may look different, depending on the subject area in which it is conducted. It could look like the teacher reading aloud to students from a variety of texts, teaching or reinforcing comprehension skills, teaching new vocabulary, or building context or background knowledge (International Literacy Association, 2018) on a topic that students will be learning more about.

During a successful read-aloud, students should demonstrate active listening skills, understand their expectations, participate in discussion, engage, and interact with the text and teacher (Fisher et al., 2004), or they might be following along in the text (Clark & Andreasen, 2014). Depending on the read-aloud's purpose, students might complete an activity to reflect or connect to what has been read (Fisher et al., 2004).

Literature Review

Researchers have identified a need for more information on read-aloud practices in the middle years (Albright & Ariail, 2005). Over the last twenty years, research has begun to emerge in support of read-aloud in the middle year's classroom. However, this field of research continues to need exploration.

In a survey of grades 5-8 teachers in Texas, Ariail and Albright (2005) sought to find whether middle years teachers were using read-aloud, what they were reading aloud, why they read aloud, and how they extended read-aloud activities. The results revealed that over 70% of teachers read aloud to their students. Most teachers read aloud to promote the love of reading and for comprehension purposes. Teachers most often read aloud from novels and extended read-aloud activities through whole-class discussion. This study brought forward that many teachers continued to use read-aloud in the middle years, but it was not always used purposefully as an instructional activity to improve students' reading skills.

Marchessault and Larwin's (2014) research focused on read-aloud as an instructional tool. Their study uncovered that middle years students who received read-aloud instruction had an increased score on their Diagnostic Online Reading Assessment (DORA). They also found that students, particularly males, who received read-aloud as a reading intervention demonstrated advances in their reading comprehension and vocabulary. Marchessault and Larwin's work supports the use of read-aloud as an effective instructional strategy.

Ivey and Broaddus (2001) were some of the first researchers to examine middle years read-aloud. They also contributed middle years students' perspectives of reading in school. In their survey of 1,765 grade 6 students, they found that read-aloud was one of the two favoured reading practices at school. Clark and Andreasen (2014) and Ledger and Merga (2018) incorporated children's perspectives into their research. While there were differences in how their studies were conducted, their findings concurred with Ivey and Broaddus' work: students enjoy being read to. Incorporating children's perspectives into the field of read-aloud enables researchers and teachers alike to identify common themes in how students describe and perceive read-aloud from participating in this classroom activity.

The effectiveness of read-aloud as an instructional reading strategy could be evaluated through students' progress in their reading skills and attitudes. While Clark and Andreasen (2014) used their study to see whether student reading attitude affected grade 6 students' perception and learning during read-aloud, this method could be approached in reverse to find whether the use of read-aloud affects students' reading attitudes and learning. Research has determined several benefits of read-aloud as an instructional approach, such as improvement in students' comprehension (Ledger & Merga, 2018; Marchessault & Larwin, 2014), increase in understanding and use of vocabulary (Marchessault & Larwin, 2014), background knowledge (International Literacy Association, 2018), student attitude, motivation, and connection to literature (Albright & Ariail, 2005), and interactions and participation during read-aloud activities (Lane & Wright, 2007). Teacher implementation of read-aloud also plays an important role in students' success (Layne, 2015). If teachers apply research-supported instructional strategies, it could increase the likelihood that their students will demonstrate growth.

There is a small amount of literature asserting that read-aloud may not be a useful tool in the classroom. Findings from Ariail and Albright's (2005) aforementioned teacher survey identified that not all teachers found read-aloud suitable to their area of instruction, some teachers did not acknowledge read-aloud as part of the curriculum, and others felt that they did not have time for it. This may indicate the lack of consistency in how read-aloud is defined and implemented or the limited research available that supports read-aloud as an instructional approach in the middle years. Swanson et al. (2011) argued that there was little evidence of the long-term effects of read-aloud as a reading intervention. In their meta-analysis of intervention strategies, they found that read-aloud was responsible for only a slight degree of variance, demonstrating that there were other factors of greater importance.

While the literature on read-aloud in middle years is still limited, I argue that our current understanding presents a plethora of benefits. Therefore, read-aloud is not just an approach to use in early years, but a strategy that should also be considered in middle years classrooms.

Connecting Middle Years Students to Literature Through Read-Aloud

As students progress into middle years grades, there are specific reading skills and attitudes required for proficient reading. These could be enhanced through the use of read-aloud. Developing a positive connection to literature in middle years students can promote future reading (Sanacore, 2000). Three strategies demonstrate potential to improve a connection with literature: access, motivation and enjoyment, and relating to readers' lives.

Access

Read-aloud is a strategy that can enable access to all levels of readers in the classroom. Research indicates that one of the main reasons teachers continue to read aloud in middle years is to increase access for students (Albright & Ariail, 2005; Ariail & Albright, 2005). Students come into middle years possessing a variety of reading skills and attitudes. We could assume that this is dependent on their previous experiences with reading. Teachers need to continue to be sensitive and responsive to all of their students' reading needs as students progress in the middle years. Marchessault and Larwin (2014) acknowledged that the expectation of student reading in middle years may be above the reader's ability and that eliminating read-aloud from instruction could cause student stress. Further research demonstrates that students who have challenges reading independently have greater comprehension when being read to (Ariail & Albright, 2005). Marchessault and Larwin (2014) suggested that instructional strategies (like read-aloud) that can reach all levels of readers in the classroom are approaches that should be used across grade levels. Thus, the use of read-aloud can continue to open the door for the range of readers within the middle years classroom.

Motivation and Enjoyment

One of the key components to developing a strong foundation in literacy is students finding joy in reading, which could affect their motivation to read. Sanacore (2000) professed, "Promoting the lifetime love of reading should be one of our most important goals in middle schools" (p. 157). Several researchers determined that the purpose of read-aloud in the classroom includes student enjoyment and to increase student motivation to read (Albright & Ariail, 2005; Ariail & Albright, 2005; Clark & Andreasen, 2014; Fisher et al., 2004; International Literacy Association, 2018; Lane & Wright, 2007; Ledger & Merga, 2018; Marchessault & Larwin, 2014; Sanacore, 2000). Ariail and Albright (2005) found that teachers most often reported including read-aloud to encourage a love for reading. There is a connection between students' enjoyment of listening to reading and motivation to read (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Read-aloud can also motivate aliterate students to learn to read (Ariail & Albright, 2005; Marchessault & Larwin, 2014).

It is clear that for students to establish a love for reading, read-aloud needs to be a pleasurable experience. Layne (2015) stated, "Read-aloud time needs to be enjoyable" (p. 39). Researchers have recommend a variety of strategies to promote student engagement and enjoyment during the read-aloud experience. Sanacore (2000) suggested that reading aloud should occur daily, a variety of texts should be read, and teachers should incorporate students' interests. Layne (2015) concurred that students like having a consistent read-aloud time. Lane and Wright (2007) advised teachers to engage students in read-aloud through expression, voice, and gestures. They also encouraged student engagement by interacting with students or through "text talk" (p. 670), discussion, and learning vocabulary.

Research demonstrates that while often the teacher uses read-aloud to promote a love for literature, students also report enjoying read-aloud as a classroom activity (Clark & Andreasen, 2014; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Ledger & Merga, 2018). Activities that students enjoy and can learn from should be incorporated into all classrooms.

Reader Relation

In addition to providing access and enjoyment, the texts used for read-aloud have the potential to establish connections with students. This is what Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) referred to as books being mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (as cited by Johnson et al., 2017). Students need to see themselves, see the world, and gain perspectives from the books they read. Tatum (2014) determined, “Teachers need to foster students’ partnership with texts” (p. 4). In a survey about texts read, Tatum found that adolescents connected to texts in multiple ways, including their age range, ethnicity, gender, or personally. Sanacore (2000) expressed that texts can become “especially powerful” (p. 160) when they relate to students’ lives, inviting students to reflect and take action, just like sliding glass doors. Albright and Ariail (2005) ascertained that reading various forms of texts to students can strengthen the connection between learning and students’ lives. Therefore, an assumption could be made that regardless of the text read, students develop a relationship or connection with that text and that it is a teacher’s responsibility to select read-aloud texts that promote positive connections.

Another way for teachers to be responsive to students’ needs is through book choice. Classrooms can be filled with students of diverse backgrounds (Johnson et al., 2017). Teachers need to reflect, select, and share appropriate texts that are representative of various students’ backgrounds and life experiences. According to Sanacore (2000), students who are exposed to a variety of texts can become more knowledgeable citizens. Implementing read-aloud in the classroom provides an opportunity for teachers to be culturally responsive to students’ needs and enhance the connections that students can make with a variety of texts.

Research demonstrates that access, motivation, and enjoyment, and relating to students’ lives are a necessary trifecta in the development of the connection between students and texts.

Read-Aloud as an Instructional Strategy

Literature supports read-aloud as an effective instructional approach across grade levels. The International Literacy Association (2018) regards read-aloud in middle years as a “nonnegotiable instructional practice” (p. 3). Research demonstrates that when read-aloud is used as an instructional approach, considerations should be made about what it will be used to teach, and how the teacher will deliver their instruction.

What Should Be Taught?

Research indicates that the use of read-aloud in the classroom can be used to teach a variety of skills. Read-aloud can increase comprehension, thinking skills, reading fluency, background knowledge, enhance vocabulary development (International Literacy Association, 2018; Lane & Wright, 2007; Sanacore, 2000), and writing skills (Fisher et al., 2004). Clark and Andreasen (2014) recommended that teachers be direct and deliberate about the purpose of instruction during read-aloud, so that students are aware of what they are learning and increase their engagement.

Read-aloud can be used to teach or reinforce reading comprehension skills. As students progress in their grade levels the development of comprehension matures and requires higher level thinking. Layne (2015) claims that any text read aloud can be used to reinforce a reading skill, and every pause made is a teaching opportunity. Skills like visualization, inferencing, sequencing, and determining the main idea can be taught or reinforced through read-aloud.

Layne further suggested engaging students in their learning by acting out what they are visualizing and asking questions tied to specific reading skills. Read-aloud can be used to model thought processes that occur during reading. Marchessault and Larwin (2014) referred to this strategy as “think-aloud” (p. 189). Teachers can use think-aloud practices to show how they make connections to the text and ask questions (Albright & Ariail, 2005). Marchessault and Larwin (2014) articulated that the use of think-aloud during read-aloud can further deepen students’ comprehension skills.

Research has shown that read-aloud can also be an effective instructional approach in various content areas (International Literacy Association, 2018). Teachers can select and use texts that fit into units of study and curriculum content (Lane & Wright, 2007). The International Literacy Association (2018) suggested that teachers should also include expository texts in content areas to prepare students for future grades. Read-aloud in content areas can be used to develop and build student knowledge, acquire vocabulary, and establish thought processes related to selected topics. Lane and Wright (2007) indicated that instructional time can be saved when read-aloud is strategically used to cover multiple goals.

Researchers have found that vocabulary development and enrichment is another reason to include read-aloud across grade levels. In Layne’s (2015) discussion of read-aloud, Linda Gambrell contributed, “Our richest and most descriptive language is found in books” (p. 44). Gambrell explained that read-aloud is necessary to develop book language, because it differs vastly from how people speak. Marchessault and Larwin (2014) also demonstrated the importance of teachers modelling the use of context clues to understand new vocabulary. Fox (2013) described the natural way that students acquire language from read-aloud: first by listening and engaging in the story, then learning, and finally using the language.

In addition to advancements in reading and thinking skills, content area knowledge, and vocabulary, read-aloud has also proved to be a resourceful tool to teach writing. Teachers can expose students to a variety of writing genres, elements of the writer’s craft, and conventions, by reading aloud mentor texts. Mentor texts can also be referred to throughout the writing process. Mentor texts can be described as texts that writers can learn from (Laminack, 2017). Marchetti and O’Dell (2015) declared mentor texts as “the single most important element of your writing instruction” (p. 3). The use of mentor texts holds such importance because they demonstrate the *how* of writing (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2017). When students learn to write, it is often through imitation of modelled writing. Why is read-aloud a necessary step in the use of mentor texts for writing instruction? Dorfman and Cappelli explained that students need first to enjoy the text as readers. “We introduce them as read-alouds, appreciating and responding to them as readers. Then, we revisit them through the eyes of a writer” (p. 9). Laminack (2017) concurred with Dorfman and Cappelli, explaining that a text becomes a mentor text once it is familiar to the student. The author’s choices can be learned from only when a read/writer relationship has been created with the text. So why not have students independently read and choose their own mentor texts? Marchetti and O’Dell (2015) demonstrated this as a possibility in high school. However, reading aloud from a text creates access to the range of readers within the classroom. We also know the importance of text selection for an effective read-aloud, because they are selected to connect to the readers in the classroom and for specific teaching purposes. Like the cycle Fox (2013) described in language acquisition, providing access through read-aloud also begins a learning cycle. Access facilitates a connection between the student and text, which leads to learning and understanding the text, learning from the author’s choices in the text, and lastly applying those skills in students’ writing, which also strengthens the reading and writing connection.

Research demonstrates ample opportunities for read-aloud to be used as an instructional approach across subject areas to build a range of skills beneficial to middle years students and beyond.

A Teacher's Role in Read-Aloud

A teacher's role in read-aloud is imperative to its success. Marchessault and Larwin (2014) expressed, "The teacher is such an integral part of the learning process when using read-aloud" (p. 189). While the concept of read-aloud is simple, the teacher's role is complex.

There is more than one successful implementation method for read-aloud. The choice of implementation can affect its use as an instructional approach. A survey conducted by Fisher et al. (2004) examined 25 teachers who exemplified excellent read-aloud instruction. The researchers found seven components that were common among these teachers: selection of text, previewing and practising texts, establishing a purpose for read-aloud, modelled fluent reading, expression, text discussion, and the connection to reading and writing.

Layne (2015) demonstrated commonalities with Fisher et al.'s findings on components that make read-aloud successful. Layne indicated several planning considerations that are necessary to establish a successful read-aloud. These include the environment, previewing texts, planning teaching points, the book launch and closing, and text selection. Layne suggested that teachers make environmental considerations such as a seating plan to ensure that students are demonstrating their best learning during read-aloud time. Burkins and Yaris (2016) also emphasized text selection for a successful read-aloud. Text selection could determine the level of student engagement, development of connection, and learning that is accomplished. Layne (2015) described the beginning of a read-aloud or "book launch" (p. 28) as necessary not only to hook the readers but to prepare them for the genre or type of book they will be encountering. Layne demonstrated that teachers need to set a purpose for students' listening. This might happen before the read-aloud starts or change depending on the stopping points or what has happened in the book. Layne's recommendations urge teachers to be well planned for read-aloud to improve instruction, increase student engagement, and ensure the overall success of read-aloud time.

Teacher modelling can also play an important part in the success of a read-aloud. Marchessault and Larwin (2014) endorsed teacher modelling as an imperative part of effective read-aloud instruction. Read-aloud was previously acknowledged as a way to teach reading and thinking skills. Teachers can model their thought processes to reinforce reading comprehension, learning vocabulary, how to read various genres of text fluently, and the connections they are making to the texts (Marchessault & Larwin, 2014).

Another important part of a teacher's role during read-aloud is the teacher's interactions with students. Interactions and engagement of students can help students learn or reinforce their learning. Teachers can pause throughout their reading to instruct, share their thinking, and engage students in a discussion about the text (Layne, 2015). Discussion can be carried out in various ways and can demonstrate the comprehension that students have built from the reading (Albright & Ariail, 2005).

Research supports that planning, modelling, and interacting with students increases the effectiveness of read-aloud as an instructional approach.

Limitations and Further Recommendations

While the literature reflects many opportunities for the use of read-aloud in the middle years classroom, some limitations remain. The argument of building a connection between students and literature could be further strengthened by investigating the effect that read-aloud has on the development of the whole learner. An exploration of the effect of reading aloud on establishing classroom community, student identity, and connecting to students socially and emotionally could deepen students' connections to literature.

Studies that directly correlate read-aloud with its long-term effect on students' connection to literature and skills, such as writing, would also aid in proving the necessity for read-aloud in the middle years and strengthen this position. Further investigations are recommended and would

contribute to the rationale for including this activity into everyday practice in the middle years and beyond.

Research demonstrates that read-aloud is an effective approach to develop student connection to literature and instruction. Read-aloud can be used to establish or strengthen a student's connection to literature through accessibility, enjoyment, motivation, and relating reading to their lives. Read-aloud is an effective classroom approach when teachers utilize research-supported implementation practices. Read-aloud in the middle years can be used to instruct or reinforce reading and thinking skills such as comprehension, writing, vocabulary enrichment, model fluency, and content knowledge, and is most successful when there are planned teaching points, pauses during reading, and active interactions, discussions, and student engagement. While research in the field continues to be small when compared with research in the early years, the benefits of incorporating read-aloud into the middle years classroom outweigh its lack in study. Using read-aloud in the middle years classroom assists teachers to be responsive to students' needs and prepare them for future reading experiences.

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Formal Literacy Instruction and the Development of Oral Language in Manitoba French Immersion Early Years Classrooms

Kathryn Reuter

Abstract

French Immersion instruction has often focused on the development of oral language as the primary method of early literacy learning. Manitoba Education endorses this focus with its curricular emphasis on oral language acquisition before formal reading and writing instruction. This article examines the role of early years French immersion teachers in supporting both early years students' social-emotional development and early language development through supportive literacy practices. The author presents research that supports language acquisition alongside pedagogical methods that support kindergarten and grade 1 literacy development in a French Immersion environment.

Oral language is foundational to language learning. Oral language development emerges throughout a child's first years of life. The first cries and coos of babies are their primary way of communicating with their world. As babies develop into toddlers, their ability to communicate with more complex language structures enhances their interactions with the world and helps them to build meaning and connections to their environment. Literacy researcher Marie Clay (2004) wrote extensively on oral language development and its impact on children's literacy skills. As children enter school, their oral language forms the basis of their literacy learning (Clay, 2004, p.1). They learn how to communicate not only through spoken words but also through written work, as they reciprocally learn how to receive messages from text around them.

The French Immersion program in Manitoba (Manitoba Education, 2017) is built for students to develop French as an additional language through an immersive experience. French language develops as students are taught in French across subjects. Manitoba Education understands the importance of oral language underpinning the literacy process (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015), as any formal literacy instruction is delayed until the beginning of grade 2. Accordingly, kindergarten and grade 1 focus primarily on developing students' French oral language to support the forthcoming literacy instruction in later years.

Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning's (2015) curriculum support document for kindergarten teachers endorses a holistic play-based approach to early childhood development as the best practice for teachers. This document outlines in detail the need for experiential and inquiry learning through play during kindergarten.

Problem

Manitoba Education has tasked French Immersion teachers with developing the whole child through a holistic play-based approach while simultaneously developing French oral language competencies in their students. However, in my kindergarten classrooms, I have observed many students who have not developed a sufficient amount of French vocabulary or language structures to communicate in French during their experiential learning, which leads to non-immersive French experiences during play. While children may be developing in many other ways, their time in play has limited value for their French language learning. Teachers must find other teaching opportunities to develop students in their oral language and literacy knowledge.

Manitoba Education's (2017) French Immersion document outlines the literacy activities that should be occurring in the early years classroom. Activities such as reading wordless picture books, read alouds, echo reading, and choral reading are all recommended as good teaching practices. The document prioritizes the development of oral language: "During a

student's first two years in French Immersion, priority must be given to the development of French oral language" (Manitoba Education, p. 4).

French Immersion Early Years teachers are then tasked with a problem – how to create immersive French oral language opportunities while simultaneously basing their instruction on holistic play-based learning experiences. Two questions then emerge: What oral language activities will best support second language learning in the early years classroom? Are play-based learning opportunities sufficient to develop the oral competency that is required to support French literacy development? This paper contends that increasing formal literacy opportunities in the early years classroom will enhance oral language development. While acknowledging the merits and benefits of a holistic play-based and inquiry approach, I argue that while that approach may be a best practice in a monolingual classroom, it is not ideal for developing oral language competencies for second language learners.

Literature Review

Learning Through Play

It is a common understanding that children learn best through play. According to Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning (2015), best practices for kindergarten teachers are to use play as the main method for presenting learning: "Research by various child development experts has concluded that through play, children show; better verbalization, richer vocabulary, higher language comprehension, higher language level, better problem-solving strategies, more curiosity, higher intellectual competence" (p. 35).

Play is understood to be a vehicle in which teachers can present new vocabulary, oral structures, and phonemic awareness through games. Students are engaged in play as the teacher scaffolds the instruction to the developmentally appropriate level (Strauss et al., 2020). Research by Strauss' group has revealed the unique benefits of play-based learning in the development of sight word recognition and vocabulary development. One of the largest benefits is the child's engagement throughout the process. Strauss et al. (2020) also stressed the importance of teacher record keeping, scaffolding during learning, and modelling oral and written language as being key factors in the success of play-based learning (p. 7).

Teachers must be aware of developmentally appropriate practices that encompass literacy learning in kindergarten for second language learners. The practices for developing oral language include creating play-based learning environments that include linguistic curricular goals as well as modelling specific language structures when playing, providing opportunities for the child's repeated practice (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015, p. 41).

Play-based learning facilitates a potentially high number of rich conversations with children. Research by Browne et al. (2017) revealed a positive relationship between children's language development and the richness of their caregivers' language. When adults are engaged with children in interactive and responsive conversations in conversations led by a children's interests, the children are exposed to a higher variety of complex language structures.

Enhancing the classroom with a language rich environment supports the development of oral language. Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth's (2007) handbook outlines the expectations of a French Immersion environment. Linguistically rich décor that includes French vocabulary alongside pictures and objects covering the walls supports written language during play. Offering students easy access to assorted French books, videos, music, and games promotes the playful learning of the second language. The teacher's role is always to be speaking French while using gestures, mime, intonation, pictures, and objects to convey meaning to students.

Instructional Practices

The variety of instructional practices that can be implemented within an early years classroom can be difficult to navigate. Most teachers' instructional practice moves between less formal student-led experiences and more teacher-directed formal practices. When focusing on the development of a second language, research suggests that formal teacher-directed practices provide a higher ratio of time for the child speaking the second language (Ewert & Straw, 2001). Practices that are less formal do not support new vocabulary and scaffold the conversation that is necessary for the children to build meaning and use the second language. The Manitoba K to 12 français curriculum for French Immersion outlines the expectations for reading instruction in French (Manitoba Education, 2017). In accordance with these learning expectations, students engage in informal reading instruction in kindergarten and grade 1, and in formal reading instruction beginning in grade 2.

Not all research supports sequence as the main teaching practice for developing a second language. According to Ewert and Straw (2001), formal literacy practices that include scaffolded and direct teaching support greater oral language development in students. While Ewert and Straw noted the complexity of language instruction, their research found that teacher expertise and knowledge in language acquisition is paramount to successful language acquisition. They also noted that oral language should not be developed solely through conversation but in tandem with formal literacy instruction such as writing and reading. "By using French to develop literacy, the children learned not only how to read and write, but also they developed their oracy. ... Oral language and written language supported one another" (Ewert and Straw, p. 195).

Browne et al. (2017) outlined the importance of experiential learning that encourages children to take ownership of the words they use to develop deeper meaning, skill use, and understanding of vocabulary, but they also qualified that type of instructional practice:

Recent evidence indicates that not all children are able to learn from implicit teaching: ... through exposure, particularly very young children and those with limited vocabularies. Experimental studies in the United States and Chile have shown that explicit instruction in word meanings, where a word is identified and information about meaning or usage provided, is more effective in teaching words than exposure to the words in books alone. (p. 9)

When learning a second language, there is an evident link between the importance of direct explicit instruction and the development of oral language. Because most children enter French Immersion schools with no exposure to the second language, they require explicit teaching of vocabulary to expand their very limited range of language.

Language Acquisition

Additional languages are acquired through the development of vocabulary, phonics, and oral competency (Reese et al., 2010). "Second language learning largely depends on vocabulary, as the building blocks from which learners start their second language (L2) acquisition. Hence, its significance lies inherently deep within the first states of the acquisition of any language" (Restrepo & Falcon, 2015, p. 158). The study by Restrepo and Falcon also revealed that engaging in formal literacy activities such as reading is more beneficial for low and intermediate learners, because it fosters a greater increase in vocabulary and lexical items. Additionally, engaging in listening activities was found to be a greater benefit to more advanced learners for retaining vocabulary.

The research by Restrepo and Falcon is further supported by Kovelman et al. (2015), whose research results demonstrated that children who acquire their language beyond the ages of birth to age two benefit the most from phonics instruction for both advanced and foundational

reading abilities (p. 9). While the policy of Manitoba Education (2017) is to begin formal literacy opportunities once students have a level of oral competency in the language of instruction, opposing research by Reading (2009) found that language acquisition is best supported by beginning formal literacy instruction at the earliest levels of schooling.

Droop and Verhoeven (2003) expanded on the importance of oral language development: “The results of the present study show oral proficiency in the target language to be of critical importance for the development of both first- and second-language reading” (p. 101). They also recommended interacting with language and vocabulary in as many ways as possible. Student interaction with vocabulary, through oral language and formal reading and writing activities, increases the acquisition and retention of meaning, which in turn increases a student’s ability to use the language acquired in multiple and flexible ways.

Description of Suggested Approach

Formal literacy practices best support oral language development (Reading, 2009). Practices such as reading, writing, and modelled oral language encourage teachers to responsively teach students new vocabulary and language structures.

Language acquisition is best achieved when literacy instruction has a balanced and equal emphasis on formal reading, formal writing, and oral language experiences (Ewart & Straw, 2001). The government of Alberta recognizes the importance of formal instruction on the development of oral language in French Immersion programming. Learn Alberta (2022) has recently undergone a review of their early years French Immersion curriculum and increased their classroom expectations for formal literacy instruction. The draft curriculum that has been proposed now includes a more balanced and formal approach to literacy acquisition in the early years, clearly outlining essential elements of language acquisition with reading and writing skills starting in kindergarten such as explicit vocabulary and phonics instruction. Early years classrooms that include this type of balanced approach to literacy can include playful opportunities for students to practise the language and vocabulary that has been taught through practices such as guided reading, guided writing, and teacher-directed shared experiences.

Many of the suggested activities in Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth’s (2007) French Immersion handbook can be integrated in this approach if the teachers maintain a balanced schedule in their day. A balanced classroom integrates research-supported language acquisition practices and may begin with whole-group formal writing, followed by small-group reading instruction as the other children spend time in writing activities based on their whole-group teaching. Teachers then provide playful learning experiences as outlined by Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning (2015), such as songs, poems, bingos, and games. These playful activities connect to the formal literacy instruction that is the current focus for the class. Students are supported in their expressive oral language as the teacher provides students with explicit teaching. The learning focus flows through the activities that are prepared by the teacher with the understanding of how all three practices support one another in language acquisition.

In order for teachers to be comfortable with this approach, they must have a level of competency in using formal literacy instruction practices such as guided reading, and modelled and shared writing. This type of learning is widely accessible through many different commercial programs and professional development. Establishing a balanced structure of formal literacy and playful learning opportunities can be difficult at first. However, finding the optimal balance will help children to use language in purposeful yet engaging ways.

The effects of this approach can be assessed as the students develop, by using various oral French assessments, reading level benchmarks, and writing continuums. Many school divisions have created or adopted assessment tools that can provide data to inform educators of the development of their students’ oral language proficiency. Undergoing this process, schools would begin to see whether students are demonstrating a higher degree of ease and confidence in their French use in formal and informal settings.

In Defense of a Balanced Approach

The position of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth (2007) is that oral language is best developed through playful learning in kindergarten. While Manitoba Education (2017) supports many research-based instructional approaches, they do not promote the use of formal French literacy instruction for French immersion students in kindergarten and grade 1. Instead, Manitoba Education promotes developing oral language competencies before expecting students to take on the work on formal reading and writing in grade 2. Not all research supports this position as being the most effective way to acquire competency in oral language:

Research suggests written literacy and oral literacy can be developed simultaneously, backstrapping each other to build a more meaningful and efficient scaffold for language acquisition. Oracy need not be taught to the exclusion of print-based literacy and in fact, instruction in print-based competency can enhance oral competency.

(Ewart & Straw, 2001, p. 196)

Teachers who spend the majority of learning time engaged in playful learning have students who do not develop their second language at the same rate as teachers who scaffold the learning with more formal practices (Restrepo & Falcon, 2015). When students are engaged in play-based learning, they are developing many important skills and competencies. However, students are not engaged in speaking a second language during play without having a skillful teacher beside them to support their language development. In a typical early year French immersion kindergarten classroom, it is not always possible to have a fluent adult beside each child or each group of learners. The students require more than occasional language support in their play settings.

Oral language develops when students are introduced to new vocabulary and language structures (Ewart & Straw, 2001). This language can be introduced in many playful yet formal and directed opportunities, such as guided reading, guided writing, big books, songs, and modelled and scaffolded conversations. These activities are not ones that can be directed by the students with limited oral language; they must be planned, initiated, directed, supported, and maintained by the teacher. The most efficient use of a teacher's time would then be supporting the highest ratio of students in their second language in either whole-group or small-group teacher-directed activities. If students were introduced to formal reading in kindergarten, they would interact more frequently with a broader variety of useful language structures. Students would be able to reinforce those language structures in writing opportunities, and in turn increase their confidence in using those language structures orally.

Conclusion

Manitoba Education (2017) promotes the development of oral language before formal literacy instruction. The research outlined in this paper supports using early formal literacy instruction to introduce and reinforce oral language development. Students who are not given a chance to read and write formally from the beginning of their school experience are limited in the vocabulary and language structures they encounter, in comparison to students who experience these formal types of learning opportunities from the onset of schooling.

While the merits of play-based learning are not in dispute, the question must be asked whether play-based learning is sufficient to develop oral language within a French immersion program. The research reviewed in this paper has outlined additional tools and instructional approaches that best support oral language development. Relying solely on play-based learning in the early years of a student's schooling may limit the progress that the student will be able to make within their second language. Play-based learning by itself can limit the important scaffolding and teacher-directed learning opportunities that research has demonstrated are

important for the acquisition of a second language. In reviewing the literature, formal literacy opportunities should not be limited to the beginning of grade 2 for French immersion students. Formal literacy opportunities, such as reading and writing instruction, expose children to a higher quantity of vocabulary and language structures, which supports the development of oral language. Integrating formal literacy practices into play-based situations requires a high level of skill that requires continuous professional learning. Teachers who understand the development of literacy are best equipped to undertake this challenge of teaching for a second language within a French immersion program.

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Leading in Literacy: The Growing Demand for Improvement

Bobbi Lynn Meyer

Abstract

The heart and soul of any successful organization is outstanding leadership. In education, school divisions are always striving to increase school achievement and as such hold school leaders accountable for this growth. Leaders require explicit leadership skills. This article shares a proposal in which school leaders participate in direct literacy leadership instruction required to be effective literacy leaders.

Each school day, students walk into classrooms with the intention of acquiring the education they need to be successful in life, trusting that the adults in charge will provide the best education possible. Marzano and Waters (2005) shared with us that “whether a school operates effectively or not increases or decreases a student’s chances of academic success” (p. 3). The data they shared (see Table 1) shows a sizeable difference in students’ expected test results in what Marzano and Waters deemed effective versus ineffective schools.

Table 1

Percentage of Students Expected to Pass or Fail a Test in Effective versus Ineffective Schools

<u>Effective School</u>	<u>Ineffective School</u>
Expected Passing Rate: 72%	Expected Passing Rate: 28%
Expected Failing Rate: 28%	Effective Failing Rate: 50%

The conclusion that Marzano and Waters (2005) offered “stands in sharp contrast to other research that suggests that school leadership has no direct effect on student achievement” (p. 7). Marzano and Waters examined 69 studies that had been conducted over a span of 35 years, involving 2,802 schools, 1.4 million students, and 14,000 teachers to identify a correlation between leadership behaviours of principals in the school and the average academic achievement rate. In their work, they could compute a correlation of 0.25. These findings strongly support that highly effective school leaders can and do influence academic achievement of students (Marzano & Waters, p. 10). With this in mind, the question arises – what do principals need to be leaders in literacy and bring about the positive changes needed to see achievement levels improve?

The heart and soul of any successful organization is outstanding leadership (Routman, 2014). It makes sense that effective principal leadership is essential to school success. It would also seem appropriate to think that strong literacy leadership is essential for excellent school-wide reading and writing practices, for healthy school culture, and for building and maintaining literacy achievement (Routman, 2014, p. 181). With an ever-growing demand to improve literacy achievement levels, it is more important than ever to ensure principals have what it takes to be effective literacy leaders. Routman (2014) shared from her research that not one solitary case of a school improving its student achievement record was done in the absence of talented leadership. She also spoke to the number-one influence on student achievement being effective classroom teaching, and therefore argued that effectiveness in literacy teaching and leading are inseparable and equally significant when talking about whole-school achievement.

Principals are essential in school improvement and student literacy achievement when they have the knowledge and understanding of the complexity involved in the process of teaching reading and writing, have a leadership style that lends itself to increased literacy

achievement, and qualities identified by literacy research known to foster engagement and ownership of literacy improvement goals. This leadership does not come naturally. Effective literacy leaders require professional training and a leadership style that promotes a school culture that works collaboratively with all stakeholders to increase literacy achievement for all students.

Literature Review

Distributed Literacy Leadership

There is an assumption that even when highly trained, principals are not able to run schools effectively and efficiently on their own. Bean and Ippolito (n.d.) shared that for this reason alone, principals must gain the knowledge and skills to lead in such a way that they involve all stakeholders in the goal setting, planning, implementation and analysis of reading achievement while making decisions on what is working and what needs further development. They need to distribute some of the literacy leadership responsibilities and empower teachers to actively and collaboratively participate in improving literacy teaching and learning in schools. The distributed perspective frames leadership practice in a way that focuses more on the interactions between people and situations (Spillane, 2005). The distributed leadership practice that results from interactions among leaders, followers and situations is important because distributed leadership often involves several leaders working together and views this leadership as not something done to people but done with people (Spillane, 2005, p. 145).

The key to success for distributed leaders is how the leadership is distributed (Spillane, 2005). With respect to increasing literacy achievement, distributed leaders work with many different school-based professionals and community stakeholders. School leaders are directly involved in making decisions about a school's literacy curriculum, instruction, and continued improvement. This model of leadership encourages principals and informal leaders to learn with and influence each other (Bean & Ippolito, n.d., para. 1). Bean and Ippolito (n.d.) wrote that "distributed leadership is effective in increasing literacy achievement because everyone works together to develop a mission and goals for growth, focus on instruction and develop a culture of trust and collaboration" (para. 3).

Fullan (2008) shared that leadership, when combined with training and a distributed leadership style, will create a culture that successfully brings about change and increased achievement and success. Literacy leadership is essential. Without it, there will not be growth in the achievement levels of students learning to read and write (Bean & Dagen, 2020). Given that literacy – one's ability to read, write, think, and communicate – is a critical key to future success, all school personnel need to understand how they can support students' literacy learning. "Literacy leaders to be effective need to have a vast amount of knowledge and understanding of what is important about literacy, and to set into action that improves literacy instruction" (Bean & Dagen, 2020, p. 9).

Principals as Literacy Leaders

Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) is a program that was initiated by the Australian Primary Principals Association and was developed by Edith Cowan, Griffith, and the Australian Catholic Universities for preparing principals to be literacy leaders. Through five different modules, the program was designed to ensure that principals' understanding about the connections between leadership and learning and their knowledge about the teaching of reading provided a foundation for how they would design, implement and evaluate literacy interventions in their own schools. As principals moved through the modules, they were expected to return to their schools and apply their learning in ways that implemented programming focused on student engagement and achievement in reading. Once programming was up and running,

school visits were conducted to gather data on leadership activity. Classroom observations, interviews with teachers, collection of student work samples, and student learning surveys were collected and interpreted to measure impact. Townsend (2017) found that the PALL program substantially impacted the leadership of principals in terms of their focus on literacy in their schools. Principals within the study reported that the PALL program assisted them in supporting and guiding their teachers, and that they had been proactive in changing teacher practice when it came to reading. They were excited to share that professional conversations about reading had become more focused and consistent. Townsend reported that the learning undertaken by principals during the PALL program's professional learning modules provided them with:

- Knowledge and skills to focus the school's efforts on the underlying moral purpose.
- The ability to provide every student with the best opportunity to learn.
- New materials and processes to share with staff in ways that will improve teaching and learning of reading.
- Strategies for identifying students need, based on data, and then developing and implementing a plan for specific interventions designed to improve reading.
- The encouragement to trust teachers to take leadership responsibility for supporting student reading improvements and to use teachers as partners in this process.
- Support for their own learning as leaders
- The encouragement to play an active role in the development of literacy learning strategies in partnership with teachers.

With this sharing, it is quite clear that the PALL program had a positive influence on principals and their ability to be literacy leaders. Townsend also found that the principals' focus on literacy had a positive impact on student attitudes toward reading and that it "enabled students to become more articulate about what and how they were learning to read" (Townsend, 2017, p. 46).

Responsibilities of Effective Literacy Leaders

Bean and Oppolito (n.d.) wrote that effective literacy leaders can create a culture of shared ownership of all literacy teaching and learning work in a school. Principals need to understand the latest research about literacy and share that information with their school. Principals must also make time for teachers to meet on a regular basis to "reflect on student progress, examine system inequities and implement and align successful literacy practices across classroom" (Bean & Oppolito, para. 3). Principals who are literacy leaders understand, value, and respect the cultural and linguistic context of their school community, and work with faculty to create an inclusive and affirming school environment in which instruction reflects students' language, culture, and identities.

Routman (2014) viewed the responsibilities of effective principals to include the following:

- Develop a school climate in which the school is viewed as a place of learning for student and the adults who serve them.
- Foster a climate of collaboration by treating all faculty with respect, valuing their ideas, and empowering them to share their expertise.
- Establish a school base literacy leadership team that oversees long term planning, literacy goal setting, creating action plans to develop curriculum, selecting materials, and analyzing data to make on going decisions about planning and implementation of literacy programming.
- Maintain a strong focus on literacy instruction by visiting classrooms.
- Encourage teachers to share ideas and resources about literacy instruction and provide professional learning experiences including coaching to develop teacher

- expertise.
- Frame literacy teaching and learning work as one of the most powerful levers to increase access, opportunity, and equity for all students.
- Model high expectations and be hands on and directly involved in improving literacy instruction and learning for all.
- Guarantee a challenging and content-rich curriculum.
- Exhibit intellectual and emotional intelligence – “read” people and cultivate healthy relationships.
- Manage time well, prioritizes, and puts student learning first.
- Value high-quality professional development and works to embed it into the life of the school.

A Proposed Approach on the Development of Literacy Leaders

Researchers have shared that their work strongly points to effective leadership being a key to literacy achievement and that there is a strong need for principals to attain professional development that creates a strong literacy learning environment for themselves, their teachers, and their students. It seems appropriate that they acquire learning and development that helps them build a literacy leadership style that generates success. There are a lot of findings that speak to stronger leadership, but in isolation they do not constitute a plan for success (Marzano & Waters, 2005). A program that would seem appropriate in developing principals to be effective literacy leaders would combine components created by the PALL program (Townsend, 2017), Spillane (2005), and Marzano and Walters (2005), who through their work have identified findings regarding effective school leadership and the impact it has on student literacy achievement. The first component offered by the PALL program provides direct instruction on the complexity of teaching reading and writing, while the second component provides direct instruction of distributed leadership and how it lends itself to managing a school in a way that promotes and works to increase achievement in literacy (Spillane). Finally, the third component provides direct instruction of the 21 Responsibilities of Leadership (Marzano & Waters) and how they apply to literacy leadership. These three components would be delivered in a hands-on learning context and would lead to an immediate plan for implementation.

Component One: Informing Principals

The first component presented in this proposed approach is having principals receive formal instruction on the complexity of literacy. One program that has been reviewed and would meet the needs of this component is the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) program. This program has principals focusing on the ins and outs of learning to read and write, collecting and analyzing literacy data, and developing interventions that can be implemented to increase success. The program speaks to all the parts of reading and writing and how to implement them in ways that help students develop their reading and writing skills. This instruction would help leaders decide what types of intervention are required to meet the students’ needs and when to provide these interventions. It would help principals assess literacy data for making decisions on goals for a school and its students. The learning modules that principals would be working through in PALL would include the following:

Module 1 - Leadership for Literacy Learning Blueprint.

This module digs into the elements of leadership that supports all aspects of literacy.

Module 2 - What Leaders Need To Know About Learning To Read?

This module demonstrates the complexity of the reading process and identifies the “BIG 6” of reading. The BIG 6 includes understanding all

aspects of oral language, vocabulary, phonological awareness, letter/sound knowledge, comprehension, and fluency.

Module 3 - Leading Literacy Data Gathering and Analysis.

This module focuses on the importance of evidence planning and literacy decision making.

Module 4 - Designing, Implementing, and Monitoring Literacy Interventions.

This module defines intervention, reiterating the ultimate purpose of improving children's literacy learning and achievement through intervention.

Module 5 - Intervention, Evaluation, and Future Literacy Planning.

This module looks at the importance of developing school-based literacy evaluations of intervention. It digs into the purpose of evaluation, data gathering process and deciding how to data for collaborating with stakeholders on what is working and what needs further development.

(Dempster et al., 2012, pp. 6-8)

In between modules, principals would be expected to return to their schools to work through the problems by using the knowledge they have acquired in the modules. From there, they are expected to plan interventions that would focus on student engagement with learning and achievement in reading.

Component Two: Cultivating Principals' Leadership

While the PALL program does an excellent job of deepening principals' knowledge and understanding of literacy, it does not offer professional learning that speaks to leadership styles and qualities. For this reason, it will be important to combine PALL with a program proposed by Marzano and Waters (2005). In this second component, principals will participate in direct instruction on leadership styles important to leading change and increasing student literacy achievement. Marzano and Waters have proposed a learning plan that will help principals "articulate and realize the powerful vision for enhanced achievement of students" (p. 98). The five steps included in their plan follow:

1. Developing a strong school leadership team
 2. Distributing responsibility throughout the leadership team
 3. Selecting the right work
 4. Identifying the order of magnitude implied by the selected work
 5. Matching the management style to the order of magnitude of the change initiative
- (Marzano & Waters p. 98)

This component speaks very well to other research in the field that endorses one type of leadership – distributed leadership – as a component of school literacy improvement. "It is important for principals to distribute the leadership amongst all stakeholders to inspire and empower them to take ownership in the planning, instruction, and assessment of literacy in the school" (Spillane, 2005, p. 14).

Component Three: Defining Principals as Literacy Leaders

Lastly, principals will be required to dig deeper into the responsibilities of effective literacy leadership. The 21 responsibilities of school leaders that Marzano and Waters (2005) identified will be analyzed based on how they relate to literacy (see Table 2).

Table 2

The 21 Responsibilities of the School Leader and How They Apply to Increased Literacy Achievement

21 Principal Responsibilities	How They Relate to Literacy
Affirmation	The principal recognizes and celebrates literacy success and acknowledge failures.
Change Agent	The principal challenges the status quo and leads change to find better ways of teaching literacy.
Contingent Rewards	The principal recognizes and rewards literacy accomplishments.
Communication	The principal establishes strong lines of communication with and between teachers and other literacy leaders within the school.
Culture	The principal creates a culture within the school that is positive and safe and fosters shared literacy beliefs among the school community.
Discipline	The principal works to protect teachers from undue distractions, removes non-instructional issues out of the way so that they can stay focused on delivering rich literacy content and lessons in the classrooms.
Flexibility	The principal adapts their leadership behaviour to the needs of the current literacy situation.
Focus	The principal establishes clear literacy goals and keeps those goals in the forefront of the school's attention.
Ideals/Beliefs	The principal explains a literacy decision that has been made based on ideals and beliefs.
Input	The principal involves teachers in the design and implementation of important literacy decisions and policies.
Intellectual Stimulation	The school principal ensures that faculty and staff are aware of the most current literacy theories, and makes discussions of those theories and 32ractices a regular aspect of the school's culture.
Involvement in Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment	The principal is directly involved in the design and implementation of literacy curriculum, instruction, and assessment activities at the classroom level.
Knowledge of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	The principal is aware of best practices in literacy domains.
Monitoring/Evaluating	The principal monitors the effectiveness of school practices in terms of their impact on student literacy achievement.
Optimizer	The principal inspires others and is the driving force when implementing change.
Order	The principal sets clear boundaries and rules for both students and faculty.
Outreach	Principal's advocate and act a spokesperson for literacy programming.
Relationships	Principal demonstrates awareness of the personal lives and experiences of teachers and staff.
Resources	The principal provides teachers with literacy materials and professional development necessary for the successful execution of literacy instruction.
Situational Awareness	The principal is aware of the details and the undercurrents regarding the functioning of its literacy programming and addresses problems as they arise.
Visibility	The principal is in constant contact and interacts with teachers, students, and parents before, during and after instruction.

(Marzano & Waters, 2005, p. 41)

A program designed to incorporate these three components will be an asset to principals as they work to increase literacy leadership in their schools. Having these components addressed in one program will minimize the work that principals must do to acquire this important knowledge and skill. Creating a program that matches directly with the identified need in the field of literacy enables principals to show their accreditation to students, parents and staff, and identify themselves as literacy leaders in the community. This acknowledgement of training and learning shows a commitment to students, staff, and community that as a leader they are committed to the growth and success in literacy.

Why Literacy Leadership Preparation Matters

In their roles, principals are tasked with many duties and responsibilities. One example is that principals are expected to hold teachers accountable for instruction of reading and writing when they themselves do not necessarily have the knowledge and understanding of what it takes to teach reading and writing (Dagen & Bean, 2020). If policy makers are going to continue to expand the roles and responsibilities of principals to increase literacy achievement for students, they must also provide opportunities to acquire the knowledge and understanding to make educated and data-driven decisions on literacy. Currently, there are no formal leadership development systems, and any professional development a principal does receive with respect to literacy leadership has been done so through local institutions (Lending & Mrazek, 2014). When the demand for improved literacy achievement is strong but the leadership preparation is low, there are inherent barriers to change. Professional development must be created.

Conclusion

Principals enter the leadership role with success in mind. To achieve this, they will want to ensure that they have the proper training, deep understandings of the roles, responsibilities and styles required to bring about change and increased achievement. Fullan (2008) maintained that “effective leadership inspires more than it empowers, it connects more than it controls; it demonstrates more than it decides” (p. 16). The proposed approach speaks to this in a way that addresses principals’ needs. It provides learning on literacy, leadership, and responsibilities. It provides principals with action plans for success. Most importantly, it provides principals with connections to other principals in literacy leadership roles. Lending and Mrazek (2014) shared that “you don’t automatically know how to be an effective leader, you must be trained” (5:46). With this three-component approach, principals may be better equipped to be more effective literacy leaders and achieve the goals of the community.

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The Fountas and Pinnell Levelled Literacy Intervention as a Whole-Classroom Approach

Brad St Denis

Abstract

In this article, the author explores the Fountas & Pinnell Levelled Literacy Intervention efficacy as a tool to enhance both supplemental and whole-classroom instruction to support literacy gains for students. Exploring the efficacy of Levelled Literacy Intervention will also act as a vehicle to explore how school divisions can more proficiently support teachers in implementing resources and policies in schools.

During the 2019/2020 school year, at a division-based junior high school literacy meeting, the main topic of discussion was classroom-based interventions that could successfully address student needs with reading in the classroom. The Fountas & Pinnell Levelled Literacy Intervention System (LLI, Fountas & Pinnell, 2016) was introduced as a trusted, well-researched literacy-based program that would support our struggling readers in our junior high classrooms. LLI offers supplemental instruction to small groups at various literacy levels for K-12 students. The use of systematic assessment data allows students to work at instructional reading levels appropriate for their learning, and facilitates the formation of small groups with similar reading level needs. LLI supports instruction and learning in effectively processing words and word structures, phonemic awareness, phonics, and comprehension. Oral reading of fiction and non-fiction texts encourages student responses through writing, vocabulary, core word learning, and oral expression (Clear Creek Independent School District [CCISD], 2015; Fountas & Pinnell, 2016; Majewski, 2018). The LLI system was recommended at our literacy meeting as a whole-classroom approach despite being developed as supplement to regular classroom literacy instruction.

The use of LLI as a whole-classroom approach, as suggested by the division coordinator, was accompanied by the suggestion of creating ability levelled groups in the classroom based on literacy assessment, running records, reading comprehension, and the web-based literacy assessment Literably (2022). In addition to creating ability levelled groups, it was suggested that we form book studies so that when small group instruction was occurring with one group, the other small groups of students would have meaningful work to help with classroom management and provide the kind of focus and small-group attention that LLI requires. The junior high teachers participating in the divisional literacy meeting raised questions about implementation. Despite an initial skepticism and lack of support amongst teachers, the division purchased multiple LLI systems and delivered them to our division's largest school for implementation. A directive to implement LLI in 15 English language arts classes across grades seven to nine was provided to eight teachers. No guidance, training, or time beyond regular professional learning Fridays was provided to the teachers for implementing Fountas & Pinnell's LLI system. The directive to integrate LLI beyond LLI's intended scope of supplementary usage was not supported by the teachers involved. Exacerbated by the questions of classroom management and training, the teachers involved felt overwhelmed because one more thing was added to their work plate at the cost of the teachers' professional autonomy. A rationale from the division level was not provided to the teachers, just the directive to implement LLI.

Problem

While the suggestion to implement the LLI system was provided with the best intentions, it was offered as a whole-class approach that exceeded the scope of LLI's design for small-group

supplementary instruction. No support was provided for implementing LLI other than the purchase of three sets of LLI: the gold, purple, and teal systems, at an approximate cost of \$14,000. As a result, the collective teacher motivation to implement LLI systems was reduced and any attempt at administering LLI supports into the classroom within the trial school was likely not given a fair chance. By exploring the merits and limitations of Fountas and Pinnell's LLI system, the following question will be explored: Can LLI create effective and positive results when implemented as a whole-class approach?

Literature Review

LLI is touted as an efficient literacy system because of its approach to small-group instruction. LLI systems intertwine literacy instruction with the application of reading strategies such as word structure and comprehension and writing (CCISD, 2015; Fountas & Pinnell, 2016; Majewski, 2019). Ransford-Kaldon et al.'s (2012) empirical study on LLI further supports its merits because they found that students in LLI made broader gains in benchmark levels in reading (+1.5-5.5) as compared to the control group (+1-3). Another merit of the LLI system is that it is "based on evidence gained from systematic observation and ongoing assessment data and then teaches using a coherent set of evidence-based instructional practices in whole-class, small-group, and individual contexts" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2018, pp. 7-8). Additional researchers have agreed on the importance of an instructional approach responsive to student data to meet students' needs efficiently and have concluded that LLI's benchmarking system provides a means to meet literacy learners at their level (Flood & Anders, 2005; Fountas & Pinnell, 2018; International Literacy Association, 2019; Majewski, 2018; Peery, 2021).

Fountas and Pinnell's LLI system has many positive attributes, but there are issues with the time and support required to implement LLI successfully. In addition, the fact that LLI is a supplementary, small-group intervention system presents limitations to implementation due to the training and scheduling of staff. Lastly, Thomas and Dyches (2019) found that "LLI materials are likely to perpetuate an oppressive status quo. Strict adherence to the LLI lesson guide will not result in challenging dominant assumptions" (p. 611). An example would be using the LLI system to support literacy learning in youth. In that case, it should promote the individuality of the learners using the system by providing access to literature and texts that do not promote majoritarian narratives that may de-motivate literacy learners.

Description of LLI

LLI provides a series of flexibly structured lessons that provide intensive literacy intervention to small groups, intended to assist students to achieve accelerated progress and reach appropriate grade-level literacy achievement (CCISD, 2015; Fountas & Pinnell, 2016, 2018; Majewski, 2018; Ransford-Kaldon et al., 2012). Fountas and Pinnell recommended using their Benchmark Assessment System 2 (BAS 2) to determine the instructional reading levels for each student in a classroom (CCISD, 2015; Fountas & Pinnell, 2008, 2016, 2018). Once teachers have determined their students' reading levels, they can develop "flexible guided reading groups ... within the classroom setting, and using additional criteria, students are also placed into an LLI group" (CCISD, 2015, p. 8). The Teal LLI System provides 204 lessons for reading levels U-Z or expected reading levels spanning grades 5-8. The LLI system guides are comprehensive and provide text-based and online resources for teachers and students.

The system provides a prompting guide for oral reading, early writing, comprehension-based teaching about thinking, talking, and writing, professional development, and an online data management system with tutorials (Fountas & Pinnell, 2022). As teachers and students use the system, the numerous lessons provide a variety of entry and access points so that students can be met where their learning needs are while also considering their strengths (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016, 2018). Each level in the LLI Teal system provides 30 lessons at each

reading level: U, V, W, X, Y, and Z. Each level has a recommended instructional time of six weeks, with a 45-minute lesson daily for five days a week. This time is intended to supplement regular classroom literacy instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016, 2018). When a teacher deems a student ready to exit the intervention because the student is reading well at an expected level, then a running record can be used as an indicator of the student's abilities (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016, 2018). Due to the built-in BAS 2 assessments, running record use, oral reading, writing, and discussion-based sharing involved with the system, a plethora of evidence of student learning is accessible to determine the program's success, most notably via students' growth across reading levels.

Applying the LLI system with fidelity requires research, training, and support at multiple levels: division office, school administration, literacy support teachers, classroom teachers, education assistants, parents, and students. This multifaceted team can provide the support needed to optimize the successful application of LLI, but creating and sustaining this support team may prove overwhelming within a school (Ransford-Kaldon et al., 2012). Also, Ransford-Kaldon et al. (2012) noted that even though the LLI program is flexible and responsive to students' success, strengths and needs, the high requirement of training and long-term dedication required at all levels (60-plus lessons, 30 to 45 minutes each per reading level) could prove to be a limitation.

In hindsight, my school division's choice to implement the LLI system within a school without training or support provided to teachers did not produce the successful application of the LLI program. LLI was not implemented with fidelity with Fountas & Pinnell's (2008, 2016, 2018, 2022) intended application of supplementary, small group instruction, nor was it applied to whole-classroom instruction as the division planned. The perceived reason for this failure is that the planning, training, and implementation were left to the already overburdened English language arts teachers at the school, with no leadership or support to assist with implementation. This experience showcases that professional learning and training must be provided to teachers before and during future implementations of the LLI program, in order to support teachers in the delivery of the various strategies, techniques, and assessments.

LLI's Merits for the Whole Classroom

"Many good ideas flounder and fail because of haphazard implementation, conflicts, unintended consequences, an inability to sustain effort, and a simple lack of communication" (Fountas & Pinnel, 2018, p. 7). Without appropriate professional development and training, teachers will not be knowledgeable enough to incorporate LLI's strategies and techniques into their classrooms. As Peery (2021) stated, "We must excise ineffective practices and zero in on what works" (para. 7). One ineffective practice that may occur at the division level is the desire to implement initiative after initiative to solve a perceived issue. However, because these initiatives are proposed as band-aid types of solutions, there are no investments in the program's permanence. As a result, training, support, and the longevity of a program that could provide positive student results can fail before it even begins – much like the implementation of LLI in the division discussed previously.

Another limitation presented by Thomas & Dyches (2019) is the idea that the "curriculum conveys messages about the world, how people are expected to engage with one another, and the positioning of individuals and groups of people within the broader social context" (p. 601). The LLI Teal system uses text choices that may support majoritarian narratives in a way that socializes students to accept certain societal imbalances and inequities. As a result, not identifying with the text, or having their ethnic or cultural identities perceived as unfavourable, can negatively impact students' identity and motivation to learn. "Students learn much through the stories shared in schools and how those stories are discussed; they learn whose stories are valued and celebrated, and whose stories are ignored and distorted" (Thomas & Dyches, 2019, p. 611). Thomas and Dyches (2019) found that LLI materials will not challenge dominant

assumptions within North American culture and that the materials as prescribed may perpetuate a status quo that many minorities may find oppressive. For example, the 20 books prescribed in the LLI Teal system present stories that celebrate white characters while demeaning characters of colour or regulating ethnic characters to the margins of the stories. As education moves forward with inclusive education and other initiatives such as the Truth and Reconciliation of First Peoples in Canada, it is even more critical that the stories we share in our classrooms are responsive and reflective of the identities of the populations we teach.

Despite the limitations of the LLI Teal system, it still has many merits regarding literacy instruction and professional development. In his research on Reading Recovery,¹ Stouffer (2016) found that classroom teachers' "Incorporating procedures, language, knowledge, and the beliefs developed in Reading Recovery training made them feel more 'effective' as literacy instructors (e.g., 'My students are far more successful in reading and writing than they were before I was trained.' (Grade 1 teacher, urban Manitoba)" (p. 31). Like Stouffer's findings with the Reading Recovery program, LLI may provide teachers procedures, language, knowledge, and structure for literacy instruction in the classroom. The skills teachers may learn by being trained in LLI and applying LLI with small groups could be transferable to literacy with the whole class. Teachers who experience training in a specific teaching method, whether it is LLI or Reading Recovery as presented by Stouffer, have the potential to increase the efficacy of teachers' literacy instruction in the classroom (Ransford-Kaldon et al., 2012).

Another merit of the LLI system is that it is data-driven. Students are grouped by ability to certain literacy levels, and when they display efficiency at their level they may move on to the next level. The pre- and post-assessments help teachers monitor not only student growth with literacy learning but also the efficacy of the program. The assessments and use of running records illustrate student progress and the program's efficacy (CCISD, 2015; Fountas & Pinnell, 2016; Majewski, 2018). By adjusting the instruction within LLI or literacy teaching in the classroom, teachers are more able to teach according to the strengths and needs of students, based on data collected from formative assessments. This process engenders instruction that considers and adapts to what students understand, can accomplish, and will need to learn next (International Literacy Association, 2019). The LLI program leads students to explore these three phases of their learning both orally through reading and discussion and with writing practice and communication.

Finally, the use of oral-based reading and discussion and writing in the LLI program provides a complementary overlap of literacy skills that can accelerate the learning process for reading and writing. Interrelating reading and writing to teach literacy instruction facilitates a double exposure to learning these skills, increasing the potential for skill-building and comprehension of texts, personal understanding, and literacy skills (Flood & Anders, 2005; International Literacy Association, 2019; Peery, 2021; Stouffer, 2016). The International Literacy Association (2019) identified the following areas of learning as critical to reading development: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, writing, listening and speaking. The LLI system addresses these aspects in their lessons. It provides a structure for educators to learn how to incorporate lessons on these different aspects, not only in small-group instruction (as LLI is intended) but also in the whole-class instruction, because teachers who become comfortable with the application of LLI in small groups can build literacy instruction skills and confidence that is transferable to whole-class instruction as well.

¹ Reading Recovery is a trademarked program administered in Canada by the Canadian Institute of Reading Recovery established in 1993 (<https://rrcanada.org/>).

Conclusion

When the LLI system was “implemented” at my school, it was not truly implemented. The lack of training, support, and planning for implementation prevented English language arts teachers within the building from adequately implementing the LLI system. In answer to the question “Can LLI create effective and positive results when used as a whole-class approach?” yes, the LLI system could be implemented as a resource that teachers could use to enhance their literacy instruction in the classroom. However, there is a significant requirement of support and cooperation throughout the division, school, and school community to effectively implement a program like LLI. Despite the limitations of LLI being intended for small-group instruction and the texts possibly presenting majoritarian narratives, the LLI system may be transferable to whole-class instruction. The structures and skills teachers learn could be carried with them from small-group instruction into their classroom instruction, providing a more extensive knowledge base for literacy instruction. The texts do not need to be used as presented in the LLI system. Literacy support and classroom teachers can select more diverse literature to resonate with individual students’ backgrounds and cultural experiences so as to provide equitable stories that do not perpetuate majoritarian narratives or an unintended hidden curriculum such as Thomas and Dyches (2019) presented. My colleagues and I failed to implement the LLI system in our classrooms. However, under different circumstances, if time or professional development, training, and ongoing support were provided to implement LLI, I believe both staff and students would have benefited.

In summation, the LLI system has demonstrated merit in enhancing student literacy learning as intended in supplementary small-group lessons, and has potential benefits for the whole classroom. In addition, teachers’ professional knowledge base and confidence levels with literacy instruction may be increased through the LLI system, with the major caveat that time and support be provided at the division and school level to assist with appropriate training and application.

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Professional Learning Communities as a Model for Effective English Language Arts Curriculum Implementation

Tanya Polasek

Abstract

Successful implementation of the current English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum invites a new approach to teacher professional learning (PL). A focus on establishing and renewing relationships must play a role in developing the collaboration necessary for curriculum implementation. This article presents a research-based argument that effective and sustainable teacher professional development, structured to build teachers' capacity and improve student learning outcomes, would support the implementation of the Manitoba ELA curriculum.

A shift in the direction of the Manitoba ELA curriculum document (2020) from the previous model warrants a shift in professional development to support the implementation. The 1999 iteration provided additional support documents labeled as Foundations for Implementation (Manitoba Education and Training, 1999). These were designed to provide “teachers with theory, recent research findings, classroom strategies, and practical suggestions for implementing curricula” (Sections 1-3). The new Manitoba ELA curriculum framework is layered with new conceptualizations, architectures, practices, and philosophies. These are complex, abstract ideas that require time, thought, discussion, and action to unpack and explore. The writers acknowledged this challenge:

Shifts in curriculum design and growing knowledge related to changing educator practice require shifts in implementation models. Current processes must represent networked, connected, and emergent processes that engage educators deeply and in sustained ways in conversation, reflection, and action.

(Manitoba Education, 2020, p. 2)

Because research and evaluation of professional learning's (PL's) effect on student outcomes is sparse, little is known about its impact on student outcomes (Baird & Clark, 2018). While Hattie (2012) listed professional development as having an effect size of 0.51, he also recognized that teachers must embrace quality teaching and assist other teachers “in a collaborative manner to attain excellence” (p. 37). However, Fitzgerald and Theilheimer (2013) noted that research on PL has not focused on teachers as part of a team.

While many PL models exist, teachers' integration of new policies or ideas in current practice is rare (Goodyear et al., 2017). Nevertheless, when departments roll out new curriculum, it is the teachers who are expected to make changes to their practices in the classroom (Borko, 2004). Without deep understanding, however, the application of the innovations is usually feeble, inconsistent, and incoherent (Fullan, 2008). Leaders and educators often rush to the next solution without examining possible significant effects (Fullan, 2008). Educational systems seem “caught in a cycle of innovation upon innovation with schools expected to continuously embed new approaches, policies, methods, and ideas” (Goodyear et al., 2017, p. 325). Therefore, the “lack of transformative and yet sustainable curriculum change” (Goodyear et al., 2017, p. 326) is an ever-present problem in education.

At the outset of a curriculum renewal in Australia, researchers asked teachers, “What would be the most helpful support for you?” (Albright et al., 2013, p. 117), and the most common response from teachers in K-12 centered on the need for professional development. Teachers in this study completed an in-depth, online survey answering closed- and open-ended questions. Teachers recognized that PL must help them dig in and unpack the new curriculum, and afford them with chances to merge these new understandings with current practices.

The quality of teachers has a profound effect on student learning (Breakspear, 2021), and schools need to create a community of learners who are willing to do the challenging work because they are driven to improve student learning outcomes. Curriculum changes, such as those embedded in the Manitoba ELA curriculum, will require guidance and support of teacher learning (Borko, 2004). Creating a climate where a curriculum is used daily requires all educators and leaders to put the curriculum at the centre of their discussions, planning, and instructional design (National Institute for Excellence in Teaching [NIET], 2020). Curriculum implementation requires professional development for teachers who use the principles of inquiry through the model of professional learning communities (PLCs).

Literature Review

Challenges of Learning-Centered Curriculum Implementation

Learning-centered curricula are often not fully implemented as intended because of the complexities and variations that exist in school structures and teaching practices (Hubball et al., 2007). Schools are more successful when they adjust their focus away from curriculum content and toward process (Hamilton et al., 2013). In Hamilton et al.'s (2013) study of key competencies in five secondary schools in New Zealand that were implementing new curriculum, the interviews revealed four themes for early implementation success: pedagogy, the ability to merge new curriculum with existing curriculum, deep understanding and support of new philosophy, and continuous monitoring of the process. The successful schools in Hamilton et al.'s study included "iterative explorations" (p. 47) in their implementation plans, whereby teachers and school leaders came together to learn about the new competencies and then plan how to incorporate these ideas into their practice.

Process – The Professional Learning Community

PLCs have operated and been written about under various labels, but they are generally defined as "people working together (either in real or virtual time/space) to collaboratively and critically reflect on their practices, to learn together and to plan for improvement" (Edwards, 2012, p. 26). Teachers work together using supportive structures and processes to reflect on the specific strengths and challenges of their students, and then they work together to design lessons and materials to support student improvement. These teams function through iterative cycles of collaborative inquiry that resemble the action research model. They shift the focus from individual teachers functioning in isolation toward teams collaborating on tasks, grappling with challenges, and sharing ideas.

While this sounds promising, it is not an easy task. Not all teams are successful, and not all success is lasting. Edwards' (2012) documentation of a project in New Zealand identified three phases of these communities: "establishing, converging and diverging" (p. 36). These phases point to the importance of establishing and renewing investment in relationships to sustain the learning communities.

Importance of Relationship

If recurring collaboration is important to successful curriculum implementation, then working to create this culture of collaboration and the necessary structure to sustain it must be prioritized. Lipton and Wellman (2012) recognized that "collaborative inquiry requires vulnerability to learn in public, be patient with process, and suspend self-interest to serve a larger purpose" (p. 5). Being vulnerable requires a high degree of trust among team members. For learning to occur, a healthy community must be established through relationships built on

respect and trust contributing to an improved sense of belonging and collective ownership (Edwards, 2012).

Time spent on relationship and community construction is often overlooked, undervalued, or dismissed as “warm and fuzzy” and therefore a waste of time. Where these attitudes stem from is beyond the scope of this paper, but an attempt will be made to argue why a focus on establishing and renewing relationships must play a role in developing the collaboration necessary for curriculum implementation.

Hargreaves and Elhawary's (2019) qualitative study on experienced teachers' introduction to collaborative learning in six Egyptian schools identified the power of relationships in fostering teacher efficacy. In an environment characterized by competitive and traditionally hierarchical relationships, the researchers identified significant shifts in improved feelings of self-worth and in the manifestation of self-enhancement. Self-improvement and a willingness to take risks and explore from a position of curiosity all stemmed from the root of supportive relationships, whereby “teachers felt valued and authoritative” (p. 56).

Following their qualitative study about how professional development could support teamwork, Fitzgerald and Theilheimer (2013) concluded that a “climate of trust, respect, open communication and clear organization emerged as important for risk-taking necessary for teachers to learn together” (p.103). Teachers in the study reported that team building was the most important benefit from the professional development.

Being part of a team does not mean that members simply seek to get along. To truly do the work, successful groups prize diversity over getting along, thereby increasing creativity and rich learning experiences (Edwards, 2012). When members are open to learning and willing to be critical of their own practices, relationships quickly form. Forming a high functioning team is not an easy task and some resistance is likely. Creating task groups intentionally can help to broaden perspectives and promote relationships (Lipton & Wellman, 2011). The language participants use to discuss how they work with others may reveal their attitudes toward collaboration: word choice (e.g., “deal with” vs. “collaborate with” (Fitzgerald & Theilheimer, 2013, p. 107)) and body language. Frequent, clear, two-way communication that includes all members is central to effective teamwork (Fitzgerald & Theilheimer, 2013). There are many examples where being polite and avoiding challenge has stood in the way of any meaningful gains (Timperley et al., 2008). It is important to assess team effectiveness by examining the link between teaching and improved student learning (Timperley et al., 2008). To preserve the focus on improving student outcomes, groups can use student artifacts to center discussion and planning. Establishing relationships prompts teachers to challenge their own practices and critically reflect on how those practices support student improvement.

Alternative Models

Just because a program is popular does not necessarily mean it is having a positive effect on student outcomes (Timperley et al., 2008). When such programs have been developed devoid of real teaching/learning contexts, their value is further diminished. While prescriptive models are thought to be an answer to implementation variability, the gains (if any) appear not to last long (Fullan, 2008). In addition, curriculum implementation as top-down, bottom-up, or through partnerships has not been helpful (Goodyear et al., 2017).

In a qualitative study of a model using critical discourse analysis, Crowley (2017) found that “publishers of commercially produced curriculum materials and programs position teachers as technicians in need of procedural knowledge” (p. 478). Approaches that offer “predetermined sets of instructional routines and implement specific technical strategies” (Crowley, p. 483) are about asserting control and often limit “efforts to decolonize the curriculum” (Crowley, p. 478). Crowley concluded that this style of professional development is being used to try to solve management problems and that pedagogy is being contorted to fit a mythical, singular “best practice” (p. 483). Teachers must remember that they are often the experts of their own

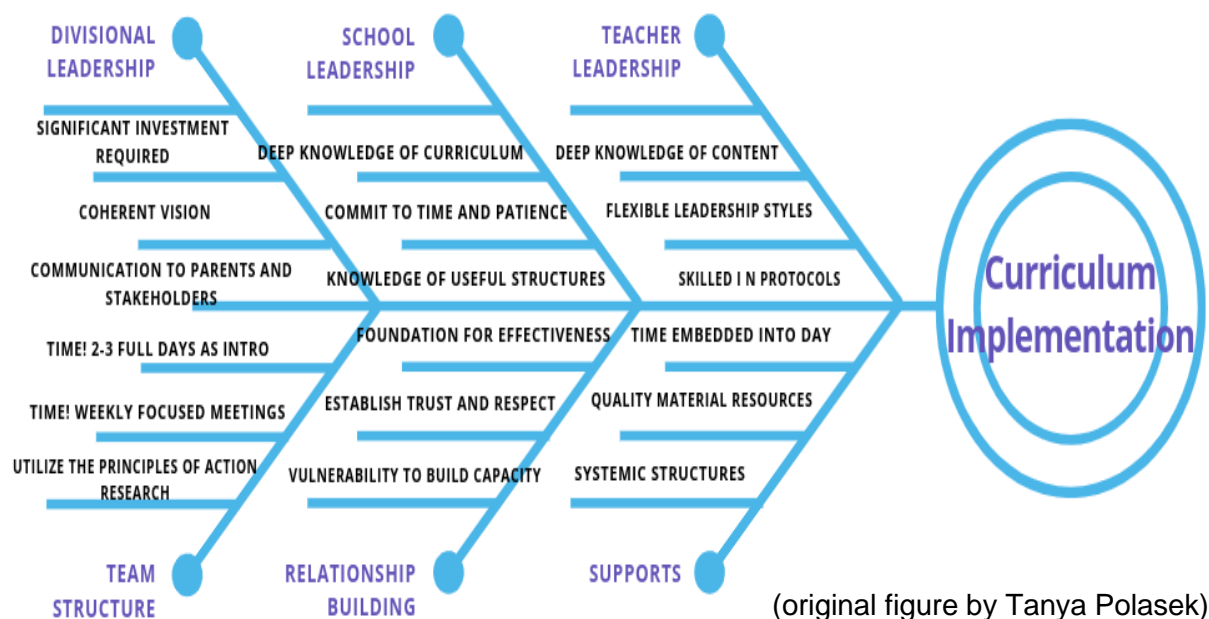
contexts. However, they need to be challenged to enhance their knowledge and methods to improve student outcomes based on their unique contexts and evolving research. Training to follow scripted and prescribed programs is far from the inquiry-based model aimed at student improvement through the growth of a reflective practitioner.

The Proposed Model

Successful curriculum implementation relies on effective and sustainable teacher professional development to support capacity building and improved student outcomes. The proposed model can be seen in Figure 1, where the top section of the fishbone diagram delineates the three key leadership roles (divisional, school, teacher) and the bottom section identifies the key components (team structure, relationship building, supports) of a successful PL model to enable and sustain curriculum implementation.

Figure 1

Professional Learning Model to Support and Sustain Curriculum Implementation



Importance of Quality Professional Development

School improvement needs progressive and innovative ways of reorganizing and reconceptualizing the work that teachers do (Lipton & Wellman, 2012). Recent models of PL focus on how to harness the power of teacher learning to drive student achievement. How this is accomplished is crucial because teachers are often reluctant to change. This is understandable because to abandon an old practice means admitting its ineffectiveness (Walpole et al., 2019). To help teachers make the shift, new learning must be understood within the circumstances of their old learning (Baird & Clark, 2018). Quality PL relies on teachers' willingness and opportunity to discuss and develop personally relevant and meaningful understandings (Timperley et al., 2008). Without effort to learn the current understanding of individual teachers and collective teams, teachers may view professional development as irrelevant to their job (Fitzgerald & Theilheimer, 2013, p. 111). NIET (2020) insisted that "the most effective professional learning blend support for 'what' is being taught with 'how' it is being taught" (p. 5).

In Manitoba, teachers have at least five days of PL allotted by collective agreements and provincial law. This is in addition to other days that teachers can access or time embedded in their day for growth. According to Walpole et al. (2019), “teachers deserve PL that is designed to motivate them, is intellectually engaging, and provides meaningful support for their everyday work” (p. 431). To achieve this, schools need a comprehensive system that can coherently integrate many complex structures and programs, and ensure that everyone has the common goal of improving the learning of adults to positively affect student growth (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017).

Why the PLC Model Is Useful for Curriculum Implementation

According to the Manitoba Education website their “goal in English language arts is to support PL to help build local capacity that sustains school divisions and schools as learning organizations and enhances classroom practices” (Government of Manitoba, n.d., para. 1). The structure and protocols of the PLC are ideal as a system by which the Manitoba ELA curriculum can be implemented to create and sustain student outcome improvement. PLC’s big ideas of “(1) a focus on learning, (2) a collaborative culture, and (3) a results orientation” (Buffum et al., 2018, p. 11) align with the support encouraged by Manitoba Education.

When implementing new curriculum, teachers need a collaborative PL model to support their own learning in order to ensure successful improvement in student outcomes. Teachers need support to become expert educators, and combining curriculum with collaborative PL creates a comprehensive approach to support this effort (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017). When these are combined in a logical way, it is easier for teachers to make sense of them (NIET, 2020). Implementing and sustaining curriculum relies on the three Ps: personalization, precision, and professional learning (Fullan, 2008). If teachers are to understand how their practice needs to change to reflect a new curriculum, they will need continuous learning embedded within their job (NIET, 2020). PLCs are ideal for new curriculum implementation because they harness the power of collaboration to make knowledge from information (Edwards, 2012).

By using protocols, members build capacity to facilitate group work (Lipton & Wellman, 2011, p. ix). Breakspear’s (2021) introduction of Teaching Sprints provides useful structures and protocols for teams:

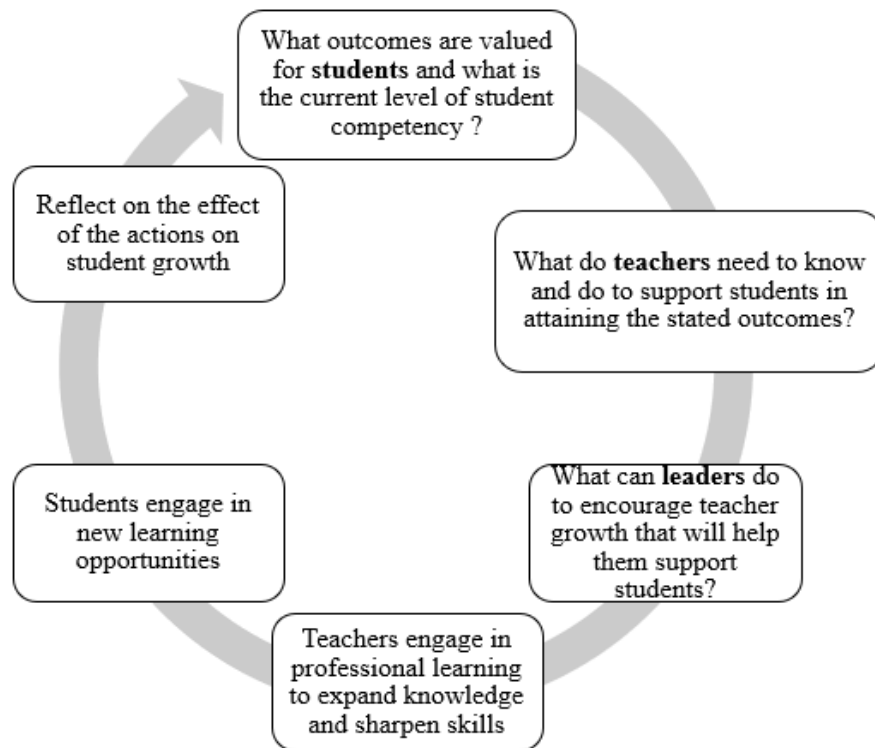
The process supports teacher teams to define highly specific areas of student learning to improve, design evidence-informed strategies, and to collect evidence to check their impact. Through engaging in these focused, manageable and energizing Sprints, teachers have an authentic opportunity to improve their practice while lifting student outcomes. (para. 2)

PLCs are flexible, fluid, enable collaboration, develop capacity of schools/teachers, and influence teaching practice and self-efficacy (Edwards, 2012; Walpole et al., 2019). Departments of education spend copious amounts of money and time developing quality curriculum materials, but the materials alone are not enough (Albright et al., 2013). PLCs provide schools and teachers with the structures and supports they need to successfully implement new curriculum.

What This Looks Like in Action

Participating in a PLC where educators are focused on students offers teachers the chance to work through new content without forgetting the target: student improvement (Timperley et al., 2008). A cycle such as Figure 2 would serve as an ideal model to implement the Manitoba ELA curriculum.

Figure 2
Teacher Inquiry and Knowledge-Building Cycles



(adapted from Timperley et al., 2008)

Such a cycle requires knowledge-building through teacher inquiry cycles with the goal of improved student outcomes.

To establish a PLC, teachers need immersive training at the beginning to build knowledge and then several occasions throughout the year to come together and learn (NIET, 2020). Using the PLC model creates opportunities for teachers to engage in challenging and complex work in a supportive and collaborative way. Following the initial training, groups might practise analyzing and working with exemplars of student work to form instructional plans, practise those within the group, and then use them with their own students in the classroom (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017). Teachers would then return to the group with new student samples and use these to guide further instruction. This approach (led by collaborating teachers using a non-evaluative method) “created dramatically higher trust and ownership among teachers” (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017, p. 10).

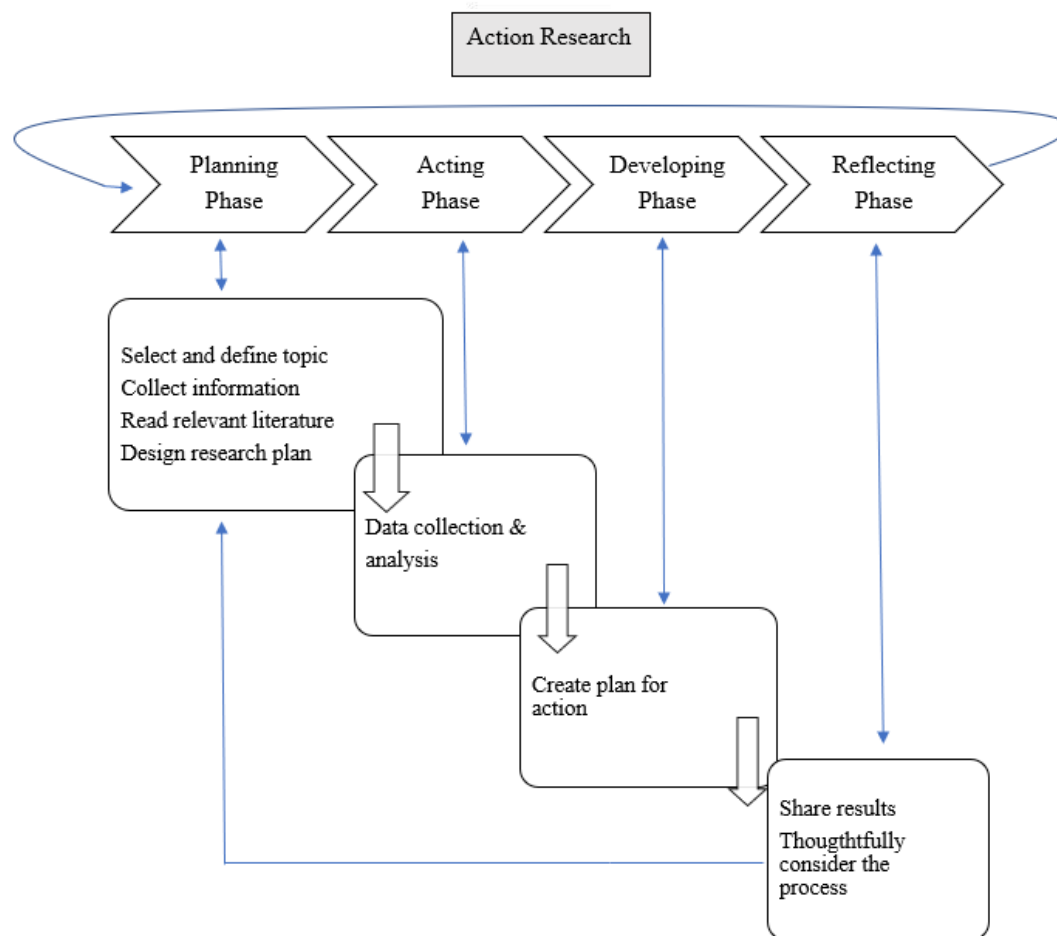
Unlike the previous curriculum, the new Manitoba curriculum framework does not state the targeted student outcomes. As Timperley et al. (2008) stressed, student outcomes “must be clear to the teachers engaging in professional learning experiences” (p. 8). Teachers will need expert guidance and support to ensure they have a solid understanding of the concepts and practices encased within the curriculum. For successful implementation, it is essential that the discussion and collaboration continue throughout the year (NIET, 2020).

Action Research To Promote Student Growth and Equity

Action research cycles can be used as a structure to support educational change in practice. It can offer “a process by which *current* educational practice can be changed to *better*

practice” (Mertler, 2019, p. 13). The process involves planning, acting, developing, and reflecting as described in Figure 3.

Figure 3
The Process of Action Research



(adapted from Mertler, 2019)

Action research provides teachers with a straightforward and iterative structure to support their learning and implementation of the ELA curriculum. In the architecture of the PLC, teachers can attend to artifacts, develop respect, trust, and empathy for others, commit to individual and collective learning and efficacy, and be vulnerable in making mistakes and learning from them (Walpole et al., 2019). This process also works to ensure equity for students because good ideas are not held by any one individual teacher, but instead are shared and used by the community (Hirsh, 2018; Wiener & Pimentel, 2017).

Divisional Leadership

Schools need leaders to project a vision of PLCs, build capacity at all levels, and support teachers and school leaders in realizing this vision. Divisional systems for PL are not often connected to training on curriculum (NIET, 2020). However, schools and teachers need ongoing investment to meet the demands of successful implementation.

The process of change can be supported by divisional leaders through the following steps:

- Build capacity (Edwards, 2012; NIET, 2020).
- Understand their own communities and contexts so they are better able to make decisions about which strategies will have the biggest impact (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017).
- Recognize and respect “the artistry and skill required to teach students for deep comprehension” (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017, p. 15), and support teachers by aligning systems to reach the intended goal.
- Communicate with parents to bring them up to date with new curriculum expectations so that they can strengthen teachers’ efforts by supporting learning at home (NIET, 2020).
- Leaders should employ the same model of professional learning to help them monitor their progress and make continued improvements (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017).

In-School Leadership

In-school leaders need a strong base of understanding to support curriculum implementation, and while this is crucial it is also rare (NIET, 2020). The leader must set the stage and ensure that the climate is right for teachers to learn (Timperley et al., 2008). Extraneous demands must be reduced, and other ongoing initiatives must align with the overall vision. In creating this vision, school leaders need to be intentional and work to develop a supportive architecture rooted in the philosophy of the curriculum: “Implementing changes also requires simultaneous, coordinated transformation of multiple aspects including practice, thinking, systems, behaviour and beliefs throughout the school” (Hamilton et al., 2013, p. 47).

It is important for leaders to remember that in order to do this work, teachers need to feel safe. If teachers fear negative repercussions from inquiry that reveals anything less than top quality performance, they will not participate in a worthwhile way (Timperley et al., 2008).

Value and Importance of Teacher Leaders

PLCs function best when facilitated by content experts (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017). Teacher leaders are ideally suited for this role in curriculum implementation because of their content knowledge (NIET, 2020, p. 10). Teacher leaders must be effective, and the meetings must be structured and useful for teachers (NIET, 2020). These leaders are responsible for creating a trusting and respectful learning climate in their PLCs (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017). Schools and groups need to harness the power of these leaders to do the hard work of taking the first step (NIET, 2020). Once this occurs, leaders can then begin to shift their leadership style from instigator to a more distributive style that invites an organic uptake of the ideas (Edwards, 2012). Successful teams take ownership of the structure, decisions, and results, leading to a collective knowing of these structures and processes (Lipton & Wellman, 2011). The PLC model offers an ideal structure to build the capacity and encourage this organic leadership growth through iterative cycles.

Supporting Teachers

Teachers need to *be supported* and to *feel supported* in order to do the challenging and complex work of curriculum implementation. Discussing the strengths and philosophies of the new curriculum can be a useful strategy to support teachers (NIET, 2020). Repeatedly, the research insists that teachers need time, space, and structures to collaborate while they dig into

a new curriculum. There needs to be a balance of challenge to their current practice and support for taking new risks (Timperley et al., 2008). This is not something done overnight. Remaining engaged with an idea for an extended period of years, not months, is needed to move from old practice to new practice (Fullan, 2008; Timperley et al., 2008). Because learning develops in a cycle rather than in a straight line (Timperley et al., 2008), PLCs are ideal for supporting this growth in teachers.

PL is more successful when there is a combination of theoretics and practical applications (Timperley et al., 2008). Much of the new Manitoba ELA curriculum functions as a theoretical framework with few readily available practical exemplars. Using the cyclical model, embedded in the PLC design to support teachers' implementation, seems ideal to address this. In addition, the act of "designing learning activities is useful for consolidating teachers' understanding of learning goals, encouraging both reflective and active practice" (Hamilton et al., 2013, p. 50).

Approaching PL from an inquiry stance can be a useful support for teachers. This will open a door for teachers to view their responsibility in educating themselves in ways that can improve student outcomes. Highly developed assessment skills will assist teachers in better understanding what their students are able to do and what learning the teachers need to help their students (Timperley et al., 2008).

Being self-reflective and self-regulatory are attributes that support growth for teachers. One way for teachers to monitor their progress effectively is by identifying objectives and signposts toward them (Timperley et al., 2008). PL needs to take different approaches, depending on the content and the beliefs and skills of the participant. For teachers to learn new skills or accept new philosophies, their current understandings and assumptions need to be activated.

Conclusion

A shift in the direction and philosophy of the 2020 Manitoba English Language Arts Curriculum from its previous document requires a change in professional development to support the implementation. However, curriculum change that is both transformative and sustainable is an ongoing dilemma in education (Goodyear et al., 2017). Successful curriculum implementation relies on quality teacher professional development to support capacity building and improved student outcomes. The research supports teachers' need for time, space, and structures to collaborate while they work to implement a new curriculum (NIET, 2020). The structure and protocols of professional learning communities, including the use of action research inquiry cycles, would support the implementation of the Manitoba ELA curriculum to create and sustain student outcome improvement.

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Using Picture Books for Implicit and Explicit Teaching of Vocabulary, Comprehension, and Literacy Skills

Kathleen Slashinsky

Abstract

Memorizing spelling lists and looking up words in the dictionary and then using the words in a sentence is a traditional strategy used for vocabulary acquisition. However, because the students do not learn words in context, their application of knowledge and understanding from this method is uneven. Because picture books may be used for pleasure reading and instructional purposes, picture book instruction may be a valuable instructional tool for the explicit and implicit teaching of vocabulary, comprehension, and other literacy skills. In this paper, the author asserts that picture book instruction may assist vocabulary development, meaning making, and knowledge acquisition.

Understanding, analyzing, and synthesizing words, sentences, and ideas are components of comprehension. Since the early 1900s, memorization of spellings of words and their meanings has been the preferred instructional method for teaching vocabulary, rather than teaching words in context. Because students do not learn words in context, they often are not able to apply their knowledge in other situations (Fresch, 2007). Using picture books for explicit and implicit teaching of vocabulary comprehension and literacy skills is an instructional approach that develops critical visual literacy, meaning making, and knowledge acquisition. Students can apply their learned vocabulary to various learning experiences (Cooper et al., 2020; Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2011).

Studies show that vocabulary comprehension and literacy skill acquisition increases while using picture books for vocabulary comprehension instruction as part of a balanced literacy program (Button & Johnson, 1997). The pictures, design, and words tell the story. Readers often look at the pictures and words to make meaning of the story. The combinations of these two features help readers remember and retain information (Al Khaiyali, 2014; Stoltz & Strittmatter, 2017). "Picture books offer the possibility of presenting pictures and text at the same time, which allows students to process the information through the visual and the verbal channel" (Larragueta & Ceballos-Viro, 2018, p. 81). Read-alouds, text talk, shared reading, and instruction help students build on their background knowledge, make connections, and transfer their vocabulary comprehension to other situations.

A Traditional Approach to Vocabulary Instruction

The traditional vocabulary instruction approach of getting a word list, looking up the word in a dictionary, and then using the word in a sentence does not include continued practice of the word in context; therefore, minimal retention or comprehension of the words occurs (Cobb & Blachowicz, 2014). Many words have more than one definition which makes it difficult to use some words in context correctly. With this approach, the prior knowledge of students is not taken into consideration, making it difficult for students to make the necessary connections. Meaningful opportunities for using new words are required to develop vocabulary and comprehension (Cobb & Blachowicz, 2014).

Critical Visual Literacy

Critical visual literacy is how the text and images interact and how ideas are conveyed on the page (Papen, 2020). The way the author and illustrator convey the message brings the reader's attention to the pictures and in turn make connections with the text. Critical visual

literacy enables students “to make meaning from images that is an essential twenty-first century skill” (Moreuillon, 2017, p. 18). “The illustrations in picturebooks often contain the details regarding setting, tone, characters and so children need to be able to use the visual elements as well as the literacy elements to create meaning and analyze a text” (Moreuillon, 2017, p. 18).

Picture books are used for pleasure reading and instructional purposes in literacy and curricular concepts. In content areas, picture book instruction often enhances the text and gives accurate knowledge based around a theme (Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2011). A preservice teacher study noticed the following when using math content picture books during instruction: quality picture books “enhance instruction and build positive and meaningful connections that enable students to visualize and engage in mathematics” (Cooper et al., 2020, p. 111). The discussion from the picture books promoted oral language skills, mathematical vocabulary, and enhanced students’ mathematical communicative skills.

Preservice and experienced teachers require instruction and modelling on using picture books. Over time, picture books have become more complex. Teachers require textual knowledge of picture books to provide explicit instructions for scaffolding concepts for students as they interact with picture books (Martinez & Harmon, 2015). It is important for teachers to understand the features and purposes of various genres for literacy skill development of students, because picture books of different genres serve different purposes and have different features (Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2011). Additionally, O’Neil (2011) commented on teachers’ use of picture books:

They want to guide us in how to feel, and they use a number of pictorial elements including size, color, shape, and line as well as varying media and artistic styles to enhance the feeling. From the very first look at a book, you get a message about its content. (p. 214)

The evolving complexity of picture books “requires greater attention by the reader to picture-text relationships and the intended meaning of the picture book creator” (Martinez & Harmon, 2015, p. 302).

It is suggested that the basic design elements in illustrations be explicitly taught to students so that they gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between text and pictures (i.e., visual literacy). There are four basic types of picture and text interactions: reinforcing, description, reciprocal, and establishing (O’Neil, 2011). The reinforcing interaction is how the pictures support the text, prompting recall of new vocabulary or decoding skills. Description pictures further inform the reader about the text. Reciprocal interaction is how the pictures add to the story; without the pictures, the story would lack meaning for the reader. Establishing interaction occurs when the pictures and the story have minimal text. Because a breadth of knowledge is required on the part of the student to make connections from the text and pictures, explicit instruction is needed to give students a deeper meaning and understanding (Button & Johnson, 1997). Shared readings, read-alouds, and text talks are three instructional approaches to incorporate implicit and explicit vocabulary comprehension and literacy skills.

Shared Reading

Teachers model literacy strategies to groups of students during shared reading for pleasure or curricular instruction. In 1994, an early literacy framework was devised by Pennell and McCarrier (Button & Johnson, 1997). Shared reading was one part of the framework. Shared reading supports the development of knowledge acquisition and meaning making skills and is part of a balanced literacy program (Button & Johnson, 1997). “Explicitly teaching word meanings within the context of shared storybook reading is an effective method for increasing the vocabulary of young children at risk of experiencing reading difficulties” (Kesler, 2010, p.

272). Students understand that there is a relationship between text and pictures (Martinez & Harmon, 2015).

In content areas, students' prior knowledge connects to the pictures and the text. Through explicit instruction and strategic processes, the text and pictures help students identify key concepts, synthesize and summarize information, and make inferences and predictions (Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2011). Through text-embedded dialogue, teachers can scaffold learning strategies for students and monitor students' understanding, giving prompts and strategies as the lesson is occurring.

When choosing picture books for shared reading, the books should be large print or enlarged so all can see. They should contain repetitive text and clear pictures, and have relevancy for the students. Many concepts and strategies can be explicitly taught through the shared reading process. Through implicit and directive teaching practices, readers are guided to discover that pictures align with text, directionality of reading, predicting, questioning, and letter-sound linkages. A study by the New Zealand Department of Education in 1985 showed that the purpose of shared reading was to introduce students to "the riches of book language, and be given shared reading opportunities to develop the strategies of sampling, predicting, confirming, and self-correcting for future independent use" (Button & Johnson, 1997, p. 266). Teachable moments arise out of shared reading, and a teacher needs to adapt instruction to take full advantage of those teaching moments.

Read-Alouds

Read-alouds are purposely planned by the teacher to promote and encourage discussion and active thinking for students. As teachers read picture books, their gestures and intonation, along with the illustrations, aid in their students' understanding the meaning of the text. Teachers need to ensure the picture book is understandable and meaningful to the students, in turn increasing the interest and motivation of students (Larragueta & Ceballos-Viro, 2018). With implicit and explicit instruction, students develop strategies to increase vocabulary, understand the general meaning of the text, predict what may happen next, and hypothesize why events occurred as they did.

An objective of a read-aloud is to build word knowledge without detracting from the story. Explicit instruction should occur before, during, and after reading the story. Prior to reading the story, setting the purpose for the story and introducing new or difficult words will help students understand the story. After reading the story, the teacher should have a discussion regarding the topic with questions from students and teacher to ensure comprehension. During the reading, incidental vocabulary learning occurs when the teachers give a synonym or brief definition as they continue reading (Kindle, 2009).

A study completed with preservice teachers demonstrated a "strong correlation between comprehension and vocabulary knowledge" (Holmes & Thompson, 2014, p. 39). The focus of the study was on vocabulary learning. Students were read books that had rich vocabulary and a variety of genres. They followed a process of pre-, during-, and post-reading. Prior to reading the book, the teachers discussed words that students may not have known but were needed to understand the story. During the reading, the teachers gave brief definitions as needed. After the reading, discussions and activities around the story occurred. Short picture books with rich vocabulary were the preferred text.

Text Talk

Text talks are based on open-ended questions posed by the teacher during reading, which aids in guiding students to make connections and find meaning from the text. Text talks have two main objectives, to advance students' vocabulary and enhance their comprehension. Text talks are usually used with picture books in the primary grades. When choosing a book for a text

talk, a teacher needs to consider “links to background knowledge and the pictures as sources of information to enhance comprehension” (Conrad et al., 2004, p. 188). The text should make connections to students’ lives and background knowledge. Prior to reading, teachers define stopping points to ask initiating questions that will deepen students’ vocabulary and comprehension. The teacher then chooses vocabulary words to discuss after the story is read, highlighting how the words are used in the story and explaining the meaning. Conrad et al.’s (2004) study determined that illustrations promoted students’ vocabulary comprehension.

At the junior high level, a text talk instructional sequence was adapted from the primary format. The following was the instructional sequence: read the story, contextualize words within the story, have students say the word, provide a student-friendly explanation of the word, present examples of the word used in context, plan activities to interact with the word, and say the word. Explicit vocabulary instruction followed the reading of the picture book, making real-life connections. Students had a deeper understanding of the concepts and were introduced to relevant vocabulary (Linder, 2014). Explicit instruction and modelling are important for meaningful dialogue and for students’ understanding of critical visual literacy. Linder (2014) found that with explicit teaching using the adapted form of text talk, picture books expanded vocabulary, fostered an examination of literary elements, supported knowledge acquisition, and developed literacy skills of the students.

Limitations

There are some limitations to using picture books for vocabulary comprehension and literacy instruction. A wide variety of materials is needed to provide rich learning opportunities for students. Limited budgets will determine the quantity and quality of picture books and training available to teachers. Teachers require professional development and time to learn how to incorporate the instructional approaches that use picture books into their literacy program, and how to determine programming. They also need time to determine which picture books are the most relevant for their students.

A study completed in the United States compared literal and interpretive responses of students to picture book instruction. The study was a qualitative, interpretivist study completed in a grade 3 classroom with 18 students over a three-week time span. Three picture books were used for the study. Final analysis showed that 79% of responses to the questions tallied were literal responses and 21% were interpretive responses. “A primary concern raised by our analysis of students’ responses to the picture books was the relatively small percentage of interpretive responses when compared with the literal responses” (Serafini & Ladd, 2008, p. 16). Teachers tend to ask factual questions. Serafini and Ladd (2008) added, “In order for classroom teachers to support students’ development of ‘metalinguage’ to understand multi-modal texts, they must first be able to read, analyze and comprehend these texts on a more sophisticated level themselves” (p. 17).

When using picture books, readers may sometimes look at the picture to determine a word. Readers may guess at the word without making connections to the printed text. An example is the difference between rabbit and bunny. “The complete lack of visual similarities between rabbit and bunny implies that the reader guessed the word by only looking at the picture” (Stouffer, 2021, p. 772). Using appropriate strategies, such as redirecting the student to look at the word rather than only guess at what makes sense, is one strategy to redirect the student to first look at the word.

Concluding Thoughts

Choosing the right picture books for explicit and implicit teaching of vocabulary comprehension and literary elements increases students’ vocabulary comprehension and development of literacy skills. However, teachers require professional development to choose

relevant picture books, and teaching strategies and techniques to incorporate picture books into their balanced literacy program. By incorporating authentic materials and researched practices such as shared reading, read-alouds, and text talks, teachers can help build students' vocabulary in order to connect students' prior knowledge and help them make meaning, building on their background knowledge toward better understanding.

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