COMPLEX TEXT OR FRUSTRATION-LEVEL TEXT

Using Shared Reading to Bridge the Difference

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"Literacy, in as much as it has anything to do with life, wasn't meant to be easy. (Holdaway, 1982, p. 293)."

The Common Core Standards (2010) call for teachers to expose children to increasingly complex texts and to require increasing sophistication in reading comprehension across the elementary grades. Children in grades 2 and 4 are expected to read and comprehend third and fifth grade texts, respectively, with support. By the end of third grade and fifth grade, children are expected to read and comprehend grade-level texts independently and proficiently. Many teachers are wondering whether it is possible or ethical to expect children to read and comprehend texts that more traditional criteria categorize as frustration-level texts.

What Is the Instructional Level?

Historically, children have been assigned a reading level based on their ability to read text passages of particular readability levels that have been drawn from an informal reading inventory or assessment kit. According to the criteria established by Betts (1946), a student's instructional reading level is defined as the highest level at which a child can read an unrehearsed text with 95–98% accuracy and 75% comprehension. Children benefit from instructional support when reading instructional-level texts. However, it is important to keep in mind that Betts's scale was based on the typical instructional format at that time.

For many years, the Directed Reading Activity (DRA) was the preferred instructional protocol. The teacher provided general background information and vocabulary support before reading, children read the story aloud or silently with some intermittent questioning by the teacher, and discussion and skill activities followed the reading. However, the instructional level is elastic depending on the degree of instructional support

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provided. As a result, Clay (2006) and Fountas and Pinnell (2011) used a 90% accuracy rate as the cut-off for instructional level because Reading Recovery and Guided Reading provide high levels of scaffolding for beginning readers. Consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), children can work independently at low levels of difficulty but can still work productively with tasks at a higher level of difficulty by increasing the amount of support. In this article, I discuss some models of shared reading that have successfully supported children's reading of difficult text across the elementary grades.

Meeting Developmental Needs With Shared Reading

During shared reading, the teacher assumes responsibility for reading a text that is likely to be at the high end of the ZPD for the majority of children in the classroom. Put another way, the texts introduced during shared reading may be slightly beyond the traditional concept of the instructional reading level of many of the children in the class. These more challenging texts are often referred to as *stretch texts* or *heavy texts*. Although it is impossible

to determine the precise ZPD for each child, carefully monitoring student performance to determine that children are receiving enough support to successfully own the process over time can help teachers gauge the appropriate level of challenge for a group of students.

In kindergarten and early first grade, the use of big books supports the primary literacy goals. Most teachers associate shared reading with Don Holdaway's (1982) Shared Book Experience and the use of big books. Teachers and emergent readers gather around enlarged texts to jointly read predictable or repeated portions of the text, identify high-frequency vocabulary, and increase the awareness of print concepts such as capitalization, punctuation, and word boundaries. The instructional support provided by the teacher in the whole-class setting provides the bridge that enables a student to gain new insights that later allow him or her to successfully engage in the reading process independently.

After the Shared Book Experience, children are provided with opportunities to reread the text with a partner or independently. However, as children

develop and reading goals change, different kinds of text serve as better vehicles for those goals (see Table 1). By late first grade, most children have mastered important concepts about print, one-to-one matching, and other emergent literacy skills that are easily taught using an enlarged text.

To develop fluent, automatic reading, it is important for children to be exposed to a range of different texts and high volumes of words within meaningful contexts (Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, & Meisinger, 2010). Big books are unable to serve this function. Children at this level need their own copy of the text. Award-winning picture books with rich vocabulary, conceptual density, and high volumes of words become appropriate shared reading text choices for children in late first through early third grade.

Novice readers with instructional levels that tend to be limited by their decoding abilities are able to stretch into texts containing more words, richer vocabulary, and more sophisticated themes during shared reading. Similar books might be used for a teacher read-aloud. However, in shared reading, all children have their eyes on the text and are held accountable for participating in text reading and activities at some stage of the shared reading process (Holdaway, 1982; Kuhn et al., 2010; Schwanenflugel et al., 2009).

In the intermediate-grade levels, the developmental focus is comprehension and vocabulary. The conceptual density of content area texts also poses new

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Table 1   Meeting Developmental Needs With Shared Reading

Grade level	Instructional targets	Texts
K–1	Print concepts	Big books
	Phonemic awareness	Poetry charts
	High frequency vocabulary	Alphabet books
	Oral vocabulary	
Late grade 1–early grade 3	Fluency	Complex picture books (narrative and informational)
	Comprehension	
	Conceptual vocabulary	Poetry
Grade 3 and above	Comprehension	Complex texts
	High-level thinking and critical literacy	Current events
		Content materials
	Content acquisition	Poetry
	Conceptual vocabulary	Hypertext

demands for students and calls for the support of shared reading. Variations in the background knowledge of the reader, text genre, task, and instructional context make the concept of reading level more malleable in these grades than it is in the lower grades, where reading ability is constrained by word recognition skills.

O'Connor et al. (2002) determined that even struggling readers in grades 3 through 5 performed equally well on a posttest of general reading tasks regardless of whether the texts used during a reading intervention had been selected based on the students' grade level or reading level. Rather than eliminating challenging texts, shared reading allows older students to see reading strategies modeled, and it provides opportunities for students to read complex texts in a supportive setting before being required to employ strategies and critical thinking independently.

Beyond the Big Book: Shared Reading in the Primary Grades

Between 1989 and 1993, most basal readers shifted from using a DRA approach to a shared reading approach to text reading. Round robin reading (RRR; student turn-taking of unrehearsed oral reading) in small ability-based groups was a popular reading format before this transition. Eldredge, Reutzel, and Hollingsworth (1996) compared the two formats in second grade classrooms. They determined that children in the shared reading group outperformed the RRR group on measures of vocabulary acquisition, word analysis, word recognition, words correct per minute (WCPM) fluency, and reading comprehension. The model of fluent reading by the teacher and the amount of time that students spent actively reading the text seemed to contribute to the performance differences between the two groups. Teacher support enabled children to focus on the meaning of text and enabled them to be more successful when they later read the text independently.

Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction (FORI) is a shared reading protocol that has been extensively researched in second-grade classrooms, but is also likely to work effectively from late first grade through early third grade (Kuhn et al., 2010; Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2006; Schwanenflugel et al., 2009; S.A. Stahl & Heubach, 2005). It was developed in response to a district mandate that required all children to read grade-level texts regardless of their reading level.

FORI provided high levels of instructional support for second graders who were required to read stretch texts with 400–500 words, rich vocabulary, and complex themes. S. A. Stahl and Heubach (2005) reported 1.77 and 1.88 years' average growth on an informal reading inventory during each year of their study. Children who entered second grade reading above the preprimer level made the strongest gains. Across a week, students improved their reading rate of 78 WCPM to 121 WCPM on the instructed text (Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2006).

Table 2   FORI and Wide Reading FORI Lesson Plan

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
FORI	Prereading activities	Teacher and students echo read the text	Choral reading	Partner reading	Extension activities
Wide Reading FORI	Teacher reads the text as class follows along Discussion of the big ideas and text themes	Ongoing comprehension discussion and word work coaching	Extension activities and written responses to text	Teachers and students echo read a second text selection Comprehension Activities	Teachers and students echo read a third text selection Comprehension Activities

Adapted from Schwanenflugel, P.J., Kuhn, M.R., Morris, R.D., Morrow, L.M., Meisinger, E.B., Woo, D.G., et al. (2009). Insights into fluency instruction: Short- and long-term effects of two reading programs. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, *48*(4), 318–336.

FORI and Wide Reading FORI (see Table 2) can be used to provide children with scaffolding as they read a wide range of texts. Repeated reading of the same text *or* supported reading of multiple texts can be used to promote gains in fluency and comprehension. Echo reading, choral reading, and partner reading are good ways to support students' reading of challenging texts.

FORI or Wide Reading FORI requires approximately 30 minutes of shared reading each day. It should not replace small instructional-level reading groups or independent reading. Providing struggling readers with support as they read texts with a high volume of words and conceptual density enables a reduction in the learning gaps caused by a diet of short, simple books typically read by low-proficiency novice readers. Reading and discussing complex texts with compelling issues, novice readers begin to identify as members of a literacy community and become more aware of the purposes of reading than when reading easier instructional level texts (Schwanenflugel et al., 2009; K.A.D. Stahl, 2009).

Shared Reading in the Intermediate Grades

In the intermediate grades, shared reading continues to be a means of providing students with access to difficult texts. Because of the increased demands placed on readers at this level and the wider range of student ability levels, there is a broader range of instructional possibilities that fall under the umbrella of shared reading. Teachers in the intermediate grades can choose from a wide range of texts, instructional purposes, and instructional contexts in planning a shared reading lesson. Novels, short stories, fictional or informational text excerpts, primary source documents, poetry, speeches, current events, hypertext, and textbooks should all be incorporated across the year and across the curriculum. Again, the students need to have their eyes on their own copies of the text, PowerPoint slides, or overhead transparencies.

Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2008) determined that comprehension, vocabulary, text structures, and text features were commonly addressed by expert teachers during shared reading lessons in the intermediate grades. In all classrooms, students followed along using personal copies of the text as the teacher read aloud. Teachers modeled thinking and encouraged students to ask questions, discuss ideas with a partner, and write responses to the text.

Rather than explicitly teaching single strategies, these teachers used think-alouds to model flexible use of multiple strategies to overcome hurdles in meaning making. As teachers encountered particular text features and text structures, they modeled how they applied the feature or structure as a functional comprehension cue. Similarly, teachers modeled how they determined the meaning of unknown words. In these classrooms, shared reading averaged 10–14 minutes and was followed by opportunities for

students to apply the skills in small groups or independently.

Difficult ≠ Frustration

Bringing a classroom of children together for shared reading creates a literacy community around a common text and a common purpose. Variations in shared reading provide the means for teachers to make complex, compelling texts accessible to their students while increasing student engagement and confidence.

Regardless of the grade level, text genre, curriculum area, or the students' level of ability, difficult text does not have to be frustrating for students. In addition, teachers need not present all challenging texts as teacher read-alouds or resort to calling on individual students to read short sections of the text aloud while others listen. Using shared reading to fortify instruction can expand the range of texts that students can read successfully while stretching them developmentally.

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