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WHAT WORKS? Research into Practice

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Research Monograph # 40

How can we engage students at various reading levels in shared literacy experiences?

Using Multilevel Texts

Supporting Literacy in the Inclusive Classroom

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When students are engaged in reading, their motivation to read increases, their understanding is enhanced and they are more likely to persist when they encounter challenges.[1,2] There are multiple reasons for students' lack of engagement with text, but one of the primary reasons is that the text is either too easy or too difficult. What can teachers do to ensure that all readers are able to meaningfully engage with texts and experience the pleasure and benefits that come from shared literacy experiences?

Multilevel texts allow students at all ability levels to engage in reading together. The use of multilevel texts accompanied by the differentiation of instruction and assessment promotes higher-level thinking through focused, whole-class discussions in which all students can participate.[3,4]

Research Tells Us

- Engagement with text increases motivation to read and enhances understanding.
- A key reason for lack of engagement with text is it is either too difficult or too easy.
- Multilevel texts allow students of all ability levels to engage in reading together.
- When combined with differentiation, multivel texts are a powerful strategy to support shared literacy experiences in an inclusive classroom setting.

A Case for Using Multilevel Texts

Multilevel texts are distinct from "levelled" texts in that they are are written at two or more levels of complexity and are suitable for two or more levels of reading; levelled texts, on the other hand, control vocabulary according to reading level. Also, multilevel texts often contain multiple points of view or types of information and use different formating to emphasize "voice" or information type.

For instance, a multilevel fiction text may feature multiple, distinct stand-alone storylines which reinforce each other and are written at different levels of complexity. Multilevel fiction may also employ multiple genres and modalities to communicate information. Such is the case with *Why Why Why Were the Pyramids Built?* (Chambers, 2005), in which the author uses prose, cartoons, labelled pictures and directional task boxes to engage students at various reading levels. Some texts integrate fiction and non-fiction, such as *One Leaf Rides the Wind* (Mannis, 2002), which incorporates both poetry and informational text to describe a child's view of a Japanese garden.

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What is differentiation?

... "[it's] a process through which teachers enhance learning by matching student characteristics to instruction and assessment."[7]

How does it support students?

... "[it} allows all students to access the same classroom curriculum by providing entry points, learning tasks and outcomes that are tailored to students' needs."[8]

What does planning for differentiation involve?

(1) content (what the student is going to learn)

(2) process (activities that engage students in learning)

(3) product (student demonstrations)

(4) assessment (tools used to evaluate student learning)[9]

In short, multilevel texts:

- include more than one stand-alone storyline or type of information, written at different reading levels
- may use multiple formats or genres to tell a story or convey information
- may include additional information in the end matter
- allow authors to communicate with multiple audiences without requiring the use of controlled vocabulary.

Research of "read-aloud" practices has shown motivation to be an important predictor of reader engagement.[5] Multilevel texts entice and motivate students with different interests or ability levels to engage with reading activities and allow teachers to employ differentiated instruction to accommodate cross-ability groupings of readers. The nature of multilevel texts encourages flexible groupings – from small groups to whole classes – and affords the opportunity to provide differentiated instruction on the basis of content and process.[6] The use of multilevel texts promotes readability and engagement for all readers in a comfortable, accepting community of learners.

An Action Research Study: Using Multilevel Texts within a Differentiated Model

We sought to answer the following question through an action research study of a Grade 2/3 Ottawa Carleton District School Board classroom: *Will use of multilevel texts engage students and enable all children, regardless of reading ability, to become true participants in shared reading experiences?* Children in the study were reading from PM Benchmark levels of 18 to 30+. Six out of twenty-one students had special needs that challenged their reading potentials. Instead of presenting these six students with separate texts and teaching approaches, researchers yearned to design literacy experiences to meet all students' needs, so the entire class could have a shared reading experience. We felt that this would improve the weaker readers' sense of self-worth, a goal that closely aligned with the school board's philosophy of inclusion and differentiation.

In the first stages of the study, students were introduced to multilevel texts through class read-alouds. Next, pairs of reading buddies – selected by teachers and composed of students with varying needs, interests and reading levels – participated in a shared reading of a new multilevel text. The students' abilities to comprehend the ideas in these texts, and to organize and communicate these ideas, was observed through demonstration. Students were asked to participate in both oral and written story retells and to develop a shape poem inspired by the storyline of their favourite multilevel text. Finally, we studied the students' abilities to generalize their new reading analysis skills. Students were asked to use their newly developed skills to analyze poems of different levels of complexity. Students wrote in their journals, noting details and opinions and making connections. They were delighted to share their thoughts with the class, thus contributing to shared understanding of the poems and demonstrating their improved comprehension skills.

We found that the use of multilevel texts allowed all students to engage with text and focus on tasks at their own reading levels while sharing in rich literacy experiences. Further, working with multilevel texts taught them to analyze text and to transfer this knowledge into their writing, again at their own ability levels. An increase in reading and writing skills was exhibited by all, regardless of special needs or reading potential. For example, a student with attention issues was able to stay on task and complete his work on time while a student with a behavioural learning disability displayed keen interest and an impressive ability to make connections. A student with expressive language skills was proud to receive an A+ on his shape poem. The use of multilevel texts enabled all students

to take pleasure and pride in their work, while participating in a whole-class, shared reading experience.

What We Learned

Multilevel texts can be used to:

- differentiate language and literacy instruction
- provide a platform for flexible grouping
- expose students to aspects of critical language related to vocabulary, comprehension and structure
- help close the performance gaps for students with special education needs
- improve students' comprehension of, and engagement with, texts

As teachers we need to:

- critically analyze texts to determine if they meet the multilevel criteria
- pre-teach key skills students will need to work with particular text formats
- understand students' reading levels and learning styles, in order to plan appropriate differentiation
- differentiate content and process (through use of multilevel texts) as well as product or assessment

Implications for Classroom Practice

- **Use the various text presentations and reading levels of multilevel texts to entice all students to read the same text.** For example, *Don't Read This Book (Lewis, 2009), The Extinct Files: My Science Project* (Edwards, 2006) and *What Really Happened to Humpty Dumpty* (Ransom, 2009) are texts that will motivate and intrigue students at different reading levels.
- **Use thoughtfully selected reading partners, pairing more skilled and less skilled readers.** More advanced readers can model reading and thinking and less skilled readers can contribute additional information and perspective offered by the text.
- **Create heterogeneous guided-reading groups[10] to challenge readers and promote shared construction of meaning.** Using *Meerkat Mail* (Gravett, 2006), for example, students may read the main story, postcards, newspaper articles or end matter, which are written at different reading levels. This allows all students to participate in constructing the whole story.
- **Expose students to various formats to expand their knowledge of the structure of texts.** The storyline in the non-fiction text *Walk With a Wolf* (Howker, 1997) is written in a simple poetry format as well as in a more sophisticated narrative format. It is also accompanied by a CD, thus offering the reader three formats and two modalities in which to learn about wolves.
- **Use multilevel texts to provide scaffolding.** In mixed-ability groups, less skilled readers can listen to a more sophisticated storyline while working with text at their own level. In this way, more texts will become accessible, offering students the opportunity to extend their knowledge base. In Who *Built the Pyramid?* (Hooper, 2001), for example, struggling readers may read the bold print while listening to more advanced readers read the characters' opinions.
- **Allow students to present their responses to texts in a variety of ways, both written and oral.** Just as students read multilevel texts in a differentiated fashion, so, too, they may need to present their responses to these texts in a variety of ways, both written and oral. Thus, the reader's engagement with the multilevel texts provides a springboard for the creation of differentiated products and assessment. After reading *Chester* (Watt, 2007), for example, students may retell the story by using a "story glove"[11] or creating comic

Other Multilevel Texts to Try

Cornin, D. (2000). *Click, clack moo: Cows that type*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Ehlert, L. (1991). *Red leaf, yellow leaf*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Macaulay, D. (1990). *Black and white*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Warnes, T. (2008). *Chalk and cheese*. Toronto, ON: Simon & Schuster.

Wiesner, D. (2001). *The three pigs*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

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book cells. Or when working with *Help Me, Mr. Mutt!* (Stevens & Crummel, 2008), some students may describe the dog's journey by creating a map that includes the places he travelled and the people he met along the way; others may become journalists who interview Mr. Mutt and write a newspaper article or produce a videorecording of the interview.

- **Enable students to address character, voice, detail and text representation while focusing on the text at their own comfort levels.** In *Chester*'s Back (Watt, 2008), Chester adds his own dialogue and pictures, disrupting the visual images, narrative, and main ideas of the author's text. Students can read the author's version or Chester's version of the story.
- **Use props or visual aids to engage students.** Provide reading buddies with large magnifying glasses to aid their detective search, as they read different storylines and complete a graphic organizer. Make "story gloves," for example, to help students frame and order the sequence of events during storyretells. Using paints or markers, decorate the fingers of gardening gloves with visual cue to guide the students' talk. Common icons include a face (for character), a house (for setting), a cloud (for conflict) and a sun (for resolution).

In Summary

Using multilevel texts is an effective way to help improve reader engagement and to differentiate instruction and assessment in an inclusive environment. Through multilevel texts, students of varying reading levels are able to engage with the same texts, gain an understanding of the author's purpose and make connections to self, text and the world, at both concrete and abstract levels. The greatest pleasure of all is to see the students confidently sharing and enjoying literacy experiences together.

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