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Message From the Editors

BY LINA SOARES AND CHRISTINE DRAPER

We often think of sunny spring days as a time of re-birth when the sun and flowers come out and make the world beautiful yet again. Education is very similar in that regard. When Christine was teaching fifth grade she received a lovely plaque from a student that stated “Teachers plant seeds of knowledge in the fall and harvest in the spring.” Unfortunately endless searching has not revealed who indeed wrote that quote, but its words still ring true and carry with her today. The rewards of teaching are not always evident in those early months, but in the spring we often see everything that we have planted into our students’ minds and hearts, just like those bleak and dreary winter days are often forgotten with the first blooms of spring flowers. It is a powerful awakening in every teacher to see how big of a difference they have made in their students’ lives.

We would like you to think of this spring’s journal as your personal re-awakening. Our authors have provided strategies, tools and insights that you can utilize in a wide variety of educational levels and settings. It is through these articles that you can add more to your personal teaching toolbox and find even more ways to help your learners continue to bloom and grow!

In the first article “The Cognitive Psychology of Multiple Text Comprehension: What Can Educators Garner from the Literature,” Tracy Linderholm’s research review addresses how reading and synthesizing ideas across texts are essential skills for secondary and post-secondary academic success and for success in the workplace.

Katie Stover’s article, “Middle School Literacy Coaches: Perceptions of Roles and Responsibilities,” describes a qualitative study she conducted to explore the daily roles and responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches and to compare them with the International Reading Association’s recommended standards literacy coaches (IRA, 2006). Her findings reveal some consistencies in roles such as building rapport and evaluation of literacy needs.

Janis Harmon, Lucretia Fraga, Elizabeth Martin, and Karen Wood talk to us about the importance of achieving language proficiency in their article, “Revitalizing Word Walls for High School English Learners: Conventional and Digital Opportunities for Learning New Words.” They address how older English learners face the challenge of simultaneously acquiring the academic language of school while building the vocabulary base of a mature readers and language users. They address one particularly useful classroom tool that helps to support vocabulary learning—the word wall. While this strategy is traditionally associated with primary and elementary classrooms, they bring to light how this resource may potentially aid the vocabulary development of English learners at the high school level.

In the article, “Literacy Gains through Digital Documentaries: A Photo Essay,” Jabari Cain, Brent Daigle, and Donna Lester Taylor walk us through the struggles of one teacher’s thematic unit planning with parameters created by her other team teachers. When asked about her concerns, she gave two compelling reasons: 1) As the teacher in a co-taught setting, several students in her class have exceptionalities that could present unique challenges to effectively carry out this project and 2) it did not seem like an engaging activity that would promote active learning and critical thinking. Out of this discussion came the idea to address the same content standards in a way that promoted digital literacy, student engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking. To accomplish this, the teacher explained to her students that they would research an animal and then write a script to eventually create a student-directed digital-based documentary.

Finally, in the article “DECAL: A Strategy for Collaborative Literature Discussions,” our own Lina Soares and doctoral student, April Newkirk, present an effective small group literature discussion technique that was implemented during one of her pre-service teacher’s field experience in a seventh grade Language Arts classroom. Based on the principles of social constructivism and transactional theory of reader response, her DECAL model is structured to allow students to better understand the complexity of literary elements and to stimulate lively discussions. DECAL provides teachers with the steps to promote active engagement and empower students to build their own knowledge within the constructed democracy of learning.

Please join us with this spring edition of the Georgia Journal of Reading in an educational and professional rebirth of knowledge, techniques, and effective research to promote literacy and understanding across all levels and content areas.
This has been an exciting and eventful year for the Georgia Reading Association. We hosted the 2012 Fall Forum on Monday, September 17, 2012 in Macon. This year’s theme was “Red Carpet Roll-Out ENCORE: Common Core Georgia Performance Standards.” Teachers, administrators, pre-service teachers, and higher education faculty attended the Fall Forum. The keynote speakers were Dr. Sharon Walpole, Dr. Mike McKenna, and Dr. Stephen Pruitt. This forum also included three concurrent sessions with presenters across Georgia, an exhibit hall, and the GRA membership booth. It was a wonderful professional development opportunity filled with helpful information about implementing the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards.

The Community Projects Committee, Martha Lee Child (Chair), Dana Lilly, Elizabeth Lilly, and Karen Davis, has done outstanding work on the Come Read with Georgia project. We are so honored that Governor Deal endorsed this project by signing the Come Read with Georgia Proclamation on September 26, 2012. October 2012 was declared Georgia’s First Annual Come Read with Georgia month. Please be sure to visit the GRA website and Facebook for more information about Come Read with Georgia and to share what you are doing to promote quality children’s literature in Georgia.

We will host the Annual Juanita B. Abernathy Awards Program and Reception in Atlanta, GA on March 23, 2013. Each year we recognize recipients of the following awards: Reader of the Year, Bob W. Jerrolds Reading Achievement Award, Lindy Lopez-Butner Award, Reading Leadership Award, Annette P. Hopson Service Award, Reading Teacher of the Year, Ola M. Brown Adult Education Award, and Undergraduate and Graduate Scholarships. More information about these awards and scholarships is available on the GRA website.

Membership in the Georgia Reading Association is a wonderful professional opportunity. From the publications such as the Georgia Journal of Reading and Focus newsletter to the professional development events such as the Fall Forum, membership in GRA is a great deal. Applications are available on the GRA website. Please share the application with friends and colleagues and invite them to join GRA.

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GRA Membership Application

Fill out the form below and mail it with a check for $15.00 ($7.50 for students and retirees), payable to Georgia Reading Association (GRA). Do not send cash.

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The Cognitive Psychology of Multiple Text Comprehension: What Can Educators Garner from the Literature?

by Tracey Linderholm

Abstract

The purpose of this brief literature review is to introduce journal readers to the cognitive psychology of multiple text comprehension. Relatively little is known about how advanced readers effectively synthesize and comprehend ideas when, for example, they must read multiple sources to prepare for a college exam. Both cognitive-psychological theory and empirical work that has been done on this topic is summarized. From this nascent literature base, recommendations are made to educators of secondary and post-secondary students regarding how to facilitate the integration and comprehension of information across multiple texts.

Reading and synthesizing ideas across texts is an essential skill for secondary and post-secondary academic success and for success in the workplace. For example, college-level students are often asked to do literature reviews of relevant empirical work prior to proposing a research project or they must study multiple sources to prepare for exams; individuals in the workplace frequently prepare reports that streamline larger sets of information in order to reach a conclusion. Mentally synthesizing text ideas from a variety of sources and then communicating this synthesis in writing is a skill that is not taught explicitly often or is perhaps extremely challenging to teach. It would certainly inform pedagogy if more were known about the underlying cognitive-psychological processes involved in performing such a task. From a theoretical perspective, there are limited accounts of the process of multiple text comprehension. From an empirical perspective, most of the research on how students process text information has been done on single texts and not on the process of synthesizing ideas from multiple texts. The purpose of this paper is to briefly review both the theoretical and empirical work that has been done on the cognitive psychology of the multiple text comprehension process and to make recommendations to educators about what can be garnered from this sparse literature base.

The most comprehensive theoretical framework to describe the product of reading multiple texts, that is, the consolidated representation of text information in long-term memory, offered to date is the theory of documents representation (Braten, Britt, Stromso, & Rouet, 2011; Perfetti, Rouet, & Britt, 1999). The model is compatible with a well-established theoretical account of the cognitive psychology of comprehension, the Construction-Integration model (Kintsch, 1998) that views the process of reading as being an iterative process where several layers of mental models are created. In the theory of documents representation, it is posited that readers create a documents model that contains both an intertext model and a situations model. The intertext model keeps the source, the validity of each source, and the basic contents of each source preserved, whereas the situations model is an integrated mental model of common themes, events or ideas across sources. Ostensibly, the documents model is the ideal mental model created after reading...
multiple texts because it allows the reader to track sources and integrate common themes across texts. One can imagine that good, synthesized writing of what is learned from multiple sources cannot happen without a properly formed documents model.

Recently, Rouet and Britt (2011) have offered an updated “task model”, the MD-TRACE model, that details the decisions readers must make to successfully meet their goals for reading multiple sources. Some of the decisions involve how to interpret the task at hand, how each text/source meets the instructions of the task, how relevant the text is for reaching the goal of the task, and then determining how to update the documents model as texts are read. Some interesting points that arise out of the description of this task model is what an explicit problem-solving process this type of reading is. This is interesting given debates of the past about the degree to which reading is an automatic versus a strategic, problem-solving process (see Kintsch, 1998), and multiple text comprehension almost necessarily involves both reading and writing as the majority of readers will, at the very least, produce notes as they read through each of their sources (also see Wiley & Voss, 1999) as a way to handle the complexity of the problem of synthesizing multiple sources. Another interesting point made, that would have a strong impact on pedagogy, is the clear need there is for readers to constantly monitor their comprehension, to assess how well they are meeting the overall goals of the assignment, and to evaluate how well each text is meeting their needs when reading multiple texts. Related to this, Rouet and Britt (2011) point out that accurate self-regulation and monitoring of comprehension is difficult prior to late adolescence, for developmental reasons, and that even college-level students are notoriously poor at monitoring how well they understand even single text information (e.g., Linderholm, Wang, Therriault, Zhao, & Jakiel, 2011; Linderholm & Wilde, 2010; Thiede, Anderson, & Therriault, 2003), and certainly how well readers are able to monitor their comprehension in light of the task instructions will be constrained by the cognitive resources (e.g., prior knowledge, working-memory capacity, general reading skills, etc.) of the individual reader. To summarize, the MD-TRACE model (Rouet & Britt, 2011) brings to light several characteristics of reading multiple texts that should inform instructional practice.

Leaving theory behind for a moment, what empirical evidence do we have about the cognitive psychology of comprehending multiple texts? Multiple text comprehension has been a topic of research for less than two decades, which is a fairly short life span for such a complex topic. Nonetheless, several themes emerge from this literature. One research theme has been focused on the cognitive benefits of multiple text comprehension. Researchers have found that readers write much more sophisticated summaries of text material, involving greater synthesis, when reading multiple sources (Gil, Braten, Vidal-Abarca, & Stromso, 2010; Wiley & Voss, 1996, 1999). It is proposed that reading multiple sources forces a more advanced reasoning and integration process that moves the reader away from verbatim recall (e.g., Britt & Aglinskas, 2002; Wiley & Voss, 1996, 1999). Others claim that reading multiple texts may also be a more motivating and engaging task, which could facilitate more advanced cognitive processing of text information than reading a singular source (Guthrie & Cox, 2001).

Another theme within this literature base is the difficulty readers generally have in forming a well-integrated documents model. It appears that advanced readers need specific task instructions, for example, to develop an argument or to summarize text information, when reading multiple texts in order to demonstrate solid recall and comprehension of common text themes (e.g., Britt & Aglinskas, 2002; Britt & Sommer, 2004; Gil et al., 2010; Wiley & Voss, 1999; Wolfe & Goldman, 2005). It is likely the case that particular instructions help to focus readers’ limited cognitive resources on a particular goal, making the task more manageable. Likewise, Wiley and Voss (1999) claim that instructions that require the reader to take on a particular point-of-view presented in texts may give readers the chance to personalize the material or to elaborate on text information, which allows readers to make the text information meaningful and more memorable to them.

Yet another strand of research focuses on the philosophical orientation that readers have about the nature of learning and/or the purpose for reading and how that influences their ability to form a documents model. Specifically, several researchers have investigated the role of personal epistemology, that is, one’s theory about the purpose for reading and how it is best accomplished, on multiple text comprehension (e.g., Gil et al., 2010; Stromso, Braten, & Samuelstuen, 2008). Whether or not a reader believes that knowledge is a static entity where there is an expert source to be relied upon wholesale can affect one’s ability to synthesize and evaluate the credibility of multiple sources and created a unified documents model (see Braten, Gil, & Stromso, 2011), and a reader’s epistemological stance oftentimes interacts with the specific task instructions. Specifically, in some cases naïve theorists, those who view knowledge as static, respond better to integrating multiple sources when they are given instructions to summarize whereas sophisticated theorists, those who view knowledge as dynamic, tend to perform better when asked to make an argument for or against one side of a controversial issue (for a review, see Braten et al., 2011).
Unfortunately, the literature is still sparse on what happens during the act of reading for readers to develop a documents model. My colleagues and I have performed a few studies on the cognitive processing strategies that readers use during reading to comprehend multiple texts (Linderholm, Therriault, & Kwon, in press; Linderholm, Kwon & Therriault, in progress). In our first study, a correlational study (see Linderholm et al., in press), we asked readers to “think aloud” about their understanding of text ideas as they read three expository texts on the topic of electrical circuits. Their comments during reading were then categorized by two researchers, who reached an acceptable level of agreement, into several cognitive processing strategies. The strategies were then correlated with performance on a reading comprehension test covering common text themes and specific content. The strongest correlation between the cognitive processing strategies readers engaged in during reading and performance was the use of a self-explanation strategy. That is, readers who attempted to explain to themselves the ideas presented in the text and/or attempted to explain ideas based on their background knowledge had greater comprehension performance of the three science texts they read and showed at least some evidence of synthesizing ideas more readily across texts than readers who used other, more superficial memorization strategies.

In two follow up experiments (Study 2: Linderholm et al., in press; Linderholm et al., in progress) my collaborators and I provided pre-reading instructions to readers to self-explain, varying in degree of explicitness, as they read three expository texts on electrical circuits and we did so based on previous research that showed how important specific instructions are for successful multiple text comprehension (e.g., Britt & Argliskas, 2002; Britt & Sommer, 2004; Gil et al., 2010; Wiley & Voss, 1999; Wolfe & Goldman, 2005). Compared to control conditions where readers were simply instructed to comprehend the texts well, readers who were instructed to self-explain during reading had superior reading comprehension performance and/or more comprehensive written essays. So it appears that specific pre-reading instructions regarding how to process text information is important (see Wiley & Voss, 1999) but also asking readers to use a key cognitive processing strategy during the act of reading facilitates comprehension. The fact that self-explanations is a beneficial strategy for comprehending expository texts is not a new finding for single text comprehension (e.g., Ainsworth & Loizou, 2003; Ainsworth & Burcham, 2007; Ozuru, Briner, Best, & McNamara, 2010) but our studies are the first to highlight the importance of self-explaining when synthesizing ideas across multiple texts. Further research is needed to examine how to best teach the self-explanation strategy to readers (e.g., Linderholm, Wang, & Therriault, in progress).

Given the importance and ubiquitous nature of the task of synthesizing multiple sources in both academic and work life, what can educators of secondary and post-secondary students garner from the literature at this point in time? In the sections below, several suggestions are made based on both theory and research.

1. Multiple text processing and synthesis should be practiced in the classroom context as it advances higher order thinking about complex topics (see Wiley & Voss, 1996; 1999) such as the seriousness or veracity of global warming or controversial historical events. And there is evidence that multiple text comprehension is a teachable skill (Britt & Angliskas, 2002) and that students who practice this particular skill become more adept at it (Rouet, Favart, Britt, & Perfetti, 1997).

2. It is clear from the literature that readers need explicit pre-reading instructions to guide their reading in order to be successful at this task (e.g., Linderholm et al., in press; Wiley & Voss, 1999). However, there are complex interactions that exist between type of instructions and the individual characteristics of readers (for a complete review, see Braten et al., 2011). One fairly safe recommendation is that pre-reading instructions to take a stance or build an argument may be best reserved for students who have a solid base of prior knowledge about the topic whereas pre-reading instructions to summarize may be more successfully employed by students who have limited topic knowledge (Braten et al., 2011).

3. Encourage readers to use self-explanation during multiple text comprehension. This is a strategy that is helpful for personal elaboration of text material, which facilitates a deeper understanding of text information (e.g., Linderholm et al., in press; Linderholm et al., in progress; Wiley & Voss, 1999). Having a deeper understanding of each source allows the reader to better see themes across texts and to better evaluate the relevance of each text to meet their reading goals. Actively self-explaining during reading may also serve to enhance monitoring of text comprehension, which, again, is notoriously poor even in advanced readers (e.g., Linderholm et al., 2011).

4. Educators, at some point, must evaluate how well the complex task of multiple text processing has been executed. Use writing as a tool to determine whether or not synthesis has taken place (see Rouet & Britt, 2011) and/or create test questions that require a synthesis of ideas from each text in a series (e.g., Linderholm et al., 2012).

5. Explicitly encourage in both reading and writing exercises that the purpose of reading multiple texts is to create a synthesized understanding of the ideas, points, or counter points. Be explicit when
assigning such a task that readers/writers are not to develop a serial understanding of the points of each text and/or report on each source in an isolated manner. Explicit instruction should help to counteract naive theories of how to learn from texts. Some readers have naive theories of what “good reading” entails (see Gil et al., 2010) and may be tempted to recall verbatim the contents of each individual text source without evaluating themes or integrating ideas across texts.

Some future research directions that may better inform our instructional practices include developing a valid method for assessing the quality of documents models that readers form. Currently, many researchers use comprehension questions that force text integration and/or writing tasks that urge readers to synthesize ideas and this is currently the best option. What we do not always know from this method is for certain whether or not the synthesis was a result from reading the specific texts in the task at hand or did the reader draw from previous experiences/knowledge in some way. Another future research direction is that we need to make a clearer connection between the pre-reading instructions, cognitive processes employed during reading as a function of reader characteristics such as skill, and the documents model representations that advanced readers develop. As noted by Braten et al. (2011), the interactions between pre-reading instructions and reader characteristics are often so complex and vary from situation to situation that it is difficult to make concrete recommendations to educators. If further empirical work could simply some of these complex relationships, clearer pedagogical recommendations could be made. Regardless of the relative lack of empirical and theoretical work on this topic, educators are urged to use multiple text processing assignments with their students to build on their reading (and writing) skills to, at the very least, prepare them for the tasks that they will most certainly face in college courses and in the workplace.

References


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GEORGIA JOURNAL OF READING CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

As editors of the Georgia Journal of Reading, a refereed journal of the Georgia Reading Association, we invite those interested in improving reading and language arts instruction at all levels to submit manuscripts for publication in future issues. The Georgia Journal of Reading is published twice yearly in Spring and Fall.

We request articles that are grounded in current theory and research, book reviews, or creative teaching strategies that address all levels from elementary to college. Three types of manuscripts are currently being solicited.

Full-length Articles
These articles should deal with research, current issues, and recent trends in reading or literacy programs. Appropriate topics for the Journal include project descriptions, research or theoretical reports that address pedagogical implications or issues in reading education at the local, state or national level. Preference is given to articles focusing on topics that impact Georgia’s students.

Articles for the Exchange Column
Articles for this column should describe creative teaching ideas and strategies that can be implemented in the classroom. These articles are shorter than full-length and may or may not require references.

Book and Resource Reviews
Reviews should describe and critique children’s books, professional books, or reading resources that are appropriate for use by teachers and reading professionals. Complete bibliographic information, the address of the publisher, and the cost of the resource should be included.

Manuscript Guidelines
Manuscripts should be submitted electronically in Microsoft Word, double-spaced, and the format should conform to the guidelines presented in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th Ed.). Manuscripts should not exceed twenty double-spaced typed pages. The author’s name, full address, telephone number, email address, and school/affiliation, and a brief statement on professional experience should be submitted on a separate cover page. The author’s name or any reference that would enable a reviewer to know who the author is should not appear on the manuscript. Manuscripts will not be sent out for peer review until this information is provided. All manuscripts will undergo a blind review by at least two members of the editorial board. Decisions will be made within 8-12 weeks of publication of the journal for which the submission was made. Only electronic submissions will be accepted.

Please submit all manuscripts to the co-editors:
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Middle School Literacy Coaches: Perceptions of Roles and Responsibilities

by Katie Stover

Abstract
This article describes a qualitative study conducted to explore the daily roles and responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches and to compare them with the International Reading Association’s recommended standards for literacy coaches (IRA, 2006). Four middle school literacy coaches, all employed at different middle schools within the same district in the southeastern United States participated in this study. Findings reveal some consistencies in roles such as building rapport and evaluation of literacy needs.

Adolescent literacy is a cornerstone of students’ academic success (Wise, 2009). Students typically acquire basic skills that serve as the foundation for reading and writing in the elementary school years. In the middle grades however, students must build on those foundational skills to develop sophistication in their application of literacy strategies in order to comprehend a variety of texts across content areas. Concerns about adolescent literacy have been voiced consistently over the past two decades. Since 1992, periodic assessments of reading conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that the majority of U.S. students in grades 4 and 8 have scored at only a “basic” level of literacy. Similarly, researchers have found that one out of every four adolescents could not read well enough to identify the main idea in a passage or to comprehend informational text (Allington, 1994; Kamil, 2003).

initiatives have been undertaken to address adolescent literacy. In 2005, for example, the federal Striving Readers provided funding districts to raise reading achievement secondary students by improving of literacy instruction across the curriculum. Reading Next: A Vision and Research in Middle and High Literacy (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006) fifteen critical elements of effective adolescent literacy and literacy including professional development teachers that is long term and interdisciplinary teacher teams regularly to discuss student needs align instruction with those needs; leadership from both administrators faculty who have comprehensive of literacy teaching and learning.

in instructional coaches as part of the school literacy team, is one way schools seek to provide ongoing professional development and leadership. Current research on coaching supports the idea that, job-embedded professional development, literacy coaches can to improvements in the quality of instruction and student literacy (Bean & Eisenberg, 2009; Joyce & 2002). Professional organizations, as the International Reading Association, have compiled standards for reading professionals, with a focus on performance, suggested knowledge, and skills that these professional should possess. While some research has examined the role of literacy coaches at the elementary school level, little is known about the work of literacy coaches in middle school (Mraz, Algozzine, & Watson, 2008; Walpole & McKenna, 2004). This study sought to address that need by examining the roles and responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches and comparing those roles and responsibilities with the International Reading Association’s recommended standards for literacy coaches (IRA, 2006).

The inclusion of literacy specialists to provide guidance and support has been widely accepted for many years. The roles these educators fulfill, however, have changed in recent years (Mraz, Algozzine, & Kissel, 2009; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the primary responsibility
of reading specialists was to work with struggling readers in small groups or in pull-out programs, where students received specialized literacy instruction outside of their regular classrooms. Often, there was little collaboration between the classroom teacher and the reading specialist about the type of instruction a student received in the pull-out setting (Dole, 2004). Concerns about the effectiveness of these programs led to a shift toward in-class collaborative instruction between reading specialists and classroom teachers, the specialist’s role was expanded from working solely with students to shared leadership and coaching responsibilities to improve the quality of classroom instruction (Bean, 2004; Bean, Cassidy, Grumet, Shelton, & Wallis, 2002).

Policy initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), and the Common Core State Standards (2010) have prompted educators and researchers to examine both the preparation and continuing education of literacy teachers (Bean, 2004). Shifting the role of a reading specialist from teaching students to coaching teachers has been one initiative designed to improve reading instruction by providing ongoing, consistent, and relevant professional development to teachers (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). There is a growing recognition that literacy coaches offer guidance and support to help teachers refine their instructional practices.

Still, variation in the roles these literacy professionals fulfill remains vague. Some focus specifically on supporting classroom teachers in their daily implementation of the school’s literacy program (Guth & Pettengill, 2005; IRA, 2006). Others support teachers by working across subject areas or by providing general and specific professional development session (Dole, 2004). Yet others report that administrative tasks and paperwork consume much of their time (Dole & Donaldson, 2006). The occupational titles of those who do the work of literacy coaches are often as varied as the roles they fulfill. An International Reading Association survey found that over 89% are referred to as a “literacy coach” or a “reading coach” (IRA, 2006). Additional commonly used titles for professionals engaged in literacy coaching include specialist, facilitator, curriculum, instructional, reading specialist, literacy facilitator, or academic specialist. Other titles reference a place, such as a school building in which a literacy work works (e.g. middle school literacy specialist).

The roles of middle school literacy coaches share some commonalities with elementary and secondary coaches. Walpole and McKenna (2004) explain that coaching models should adapt to the needs of the setting. All coaches regardless of level act as instructional leaders, provide professional development and resources to teachers, collaborate with colleagues, and use assessment to drive instruction. However, the roles of the middle school literacy coach are unique in that specific knowledge of how to assist middle school teachers in building a better understanding of content area reading, using textbooks effectively, and applying literacy strategies across subject areas are essential (IRA, 2000).

The roles of the middle school literacy coach are multifaceted and complex. Sturtevant (2003) and Toll (2005) explain that literacy coaches in middle and high schools are seen as teacher leaders, and may be expected to do any combination of the following: mentor teachers, observe classes, work with teacher teams, advise administrators on school wide literacy issues administer and analyze literacy assessments, and work with parents or community groups. While the potential responsibilities for middle school literacy coaches can be overwhelming, the International Reading Association (2006) has established four broad standards for the role of the literacy coach: 1) Skillful collaborators: collaborate with the school literacy team; promote positive relationships among school staff; address family literacy needs; 2) Skillful job-embedded coaches: provide professional development for teachers; demonstrate lessons; engage in classroom coaching for individual teachers; support content area reading, differentiated instruction, and materials acquisition; 3) Skillful evaluators of literacy needs: analyze data and monitor student progress; conduct assessments for individual students or groups of students; 4) Skillful instructional strategists: know how reading and writing process relate within various content area disciplines.

The purpose of this study was an in-depth investigation of the roles and responsibilities of four middle school literacy coaches by addressing the following questions: 1) How do middle school literacy coaches define their roles and responsibilities? 2) How do the daily roles and responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches compare to the recommended standards defined by IRA for that role?

Statement of the Purpose
Although literacy coaches have been studied at the elementary level (Walpole & McKenna, 2004), little research has been conducted related to the role of literacy coaches at the middle school level. Professional organizations have provided guidelines for the work of middle school literacy coaches, however little is known about if and how these guidelines are put into practice. This study was conducted to examine the roles and
responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches and to compare those roles with the International Reading Association’s recommended standards for literacy coaches (IRA, 2006). The author was interested in middle school literacy coaches’ perspectives on the allocation of time, the definition of their roles and responsibilities, and how their daily roles and responsibilities compare with the recommended IRA standards for the role of the literacy coach at the middle school level. The following questions were examined from the perspectives of four middle school literacy coaches: How do middle school literacy coaches define their roles and responsibilities and how do the daily roles and responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches compare to the recommended IRA standards?

Methodology
Participants and Context
This study was conducted in a school district within the southeastern United States. The district served approximately 20,000 students representing a blend of urban, suburban, and rural regions. Four middle school literacy coaches participated in this study. Each participant was employed at a different middle school within the same district. All coaches had previously worked as middle school teachers teaching language arts, math, or science. Their transition to the role of the literacy coach had occurred within the previous one or two years, therefore, these participants were relatively new to the literacy coaching position.

Data Collection and Analysis
To better understand the roles and responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches, data was collected from multiple sources including survey data, semi-structured interviews, and documents, such as daily logs and schedules. The interviews sought to ascertain participants’ perspectives on their preparation for their position, their current roles and responsibilities, and the rewards and challenges of their work (see Appendix A).

A constant comparative method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the qualitative data collected in the study. The transcripts were read multiple times to initiate the data analysis process. Codes were assigned based on the patterns in the participants’ data. These codes were categorized into themes and labeled. To further investigate the roles and responsibilities of each participant, samples of weekly schedules and daily logs were requested from each participant. The use of triangulation of multiple data sources allowed the researchers to make comparisons among the findings.

Additionally, each participant completed a survey (see Appendix B) that listed specific behaviors within each of the four standards for literacy coaches recommended by the International Reading Association. Following a model similar to Cassidy and Cassidy’s “What’s Hot, What’s Not” survey (2008), participants were asked to rate whether each behavior was part of her current coaching role or not part of her current role. Each participant was also asked to indicate whether she believed that each behavior should be part of the coaching role or should not be part of the coaching role. The validity of the survey was grounded in the importance placed on each item by the International Reading Association’s Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches (2006).

Findings
Roles and Responsibilities
In response to the first research question, how do middle school literacy coaches define their roles and responsibilities, all four coaches reported that they fulfilled a variety of responsibilities influenced by the needs of teachers, the decisions of administration, and their own professional judgment. Three out of the four coaches reported consistencies in their daily roles and responsibilities in terms of spending time working with teachers in classrooms and providing professional development. As one coach stated in her interview, “I am a teacher, not an administrator.” Three coaches saw themselves as supportive figures that collaborate with teachers in a non-evaluative manner. They viewed themselves as equals, learned from the teachers, and shared their own expertise. Through building rapport with teachers, the three coaches purported that they were able to create trusting relationships and increase teacher buy-in and participation.

These three literacy coaches described their role as comprised of tasks such as helping teachers to plan effective lessons, sharing ideas and resources, and providing feedback to help teachers reflect and continue to grow professionally. One referred to her job as “hopping around” from class-to-class and subject-to-subject in order to model strategies and coach individual teachers. The work coaches did with teachers varied based on the needs of each individual teacher. For example, one coach stated that for a teacher who needs more support, she gradually released the modeling process throughout an entire day with that teacher. During first period, the coach taught the lesson while the classroom teacher observed. Following reflection and debriefing, the coach and the teacher co-taught the second period class in order to give the teacher more support before implementing the technique on her own. When the teacher was comfortable with the strategy, she then taught the lesson to another class while the literacy coach observed and provided feedback.
Three coaches reported that it was often necessary to conference with teachers in order to identify the teacher’s needs and desired areas for professional development. According to the coaches, these conversations were crucial in helping the literacy coach design effective and appropriate support. Coaches worked across subject areas with all classes to model strategies and provide a variety of literacy support. For example, the biology teacher was dissecting frogs and invited the literacy coach into her class to pre-teach the necessary vocabulary for this unit of study. This same literacy coach did a read aloud about Pythagorean Theorem to an algebra class to tap their prior knowledge of the subject and model fluent reading. Later in the week, the literacy coach came back to the same math class to show the students how to read the word problem to determine and highlight key words while the teacher explained the steps of problem solving and the mathematical equations to solve the problems. All three literacy coaches reported that acquiring and sharing resource materials with teachers was an ongoing part of their role as a coach. For instance, one literacy coach noted that if students struggled with the concept of figurative language, she provided the teacher with helpful resources to teach and reinforce this concept.

While three out of the four literacy coaches reported similar findings about the daily work they do at their schools, one coach shared somewhat different roles and responsibilities. Instead of working in classrooms with teachers, this coach spent the majority of her time analyzing standardized test data and scheduling remediation and enrichment groups. She also did more operational tasks such as testing, and planning family movie nights and Accelerated Reader parties. She explained that there was a need for someone to analyze the data for the teachers because they simply did not have time to do so. Due to the extended amount of time spent on data analysis, this literacy coach only taught lessons sporadically. As she stated in the interview, “I don’t have a lot of in-class time because teachers don’t ask.” Furthermore, she had no experience with planning and facilitating professional development for teachers. This literacy coach explained that she did not feel needed and, therefore, did not know what to do or how to allocate her time if the teachers did not explicitly ask for assistance.

**Time Allocation**

Data collected from the interviews provided some insight about the allocation of time for the middle school literacy coaches. Three of the literacy coaches reported spending approximately 75% of their time working in the classrooms with teachers, providing demonstration lessons, coaching, and debriefing. One coach spent little time working directly with teachers and spent more time behind the scenes organizing various programs and analyzing assessment data. The researcher planned to collect data in the form of a written daily log over the period of one month depicting how the literacy coaches’ time was allocated. However, only one of the literacy coaches provided this data and reported the allocation of her time as follows:

- 27 hours conducting, facilitating, or analyzing assessments
- 23 hours planning professional development
- 22 hours in classrooms
- 21½ hours in team meetings or discussions with teachers
- 15½ hours writing lesson plans
- 11½ hours conducting professional development
- 6½ hours in meetings such as staff meetings or literacy team meetings
- 4½ hours organizing and distributing materials to teachers
- 1 hour participating in professional development

**Challenges and Rewards**

In addition to providing information about roles, responsibilities, and time allocation, analysis of the interview data revealed the challenges and rewards that literacy coaches reported experiencing as part of their work. All four coaches interviewed reported concern about unclear role expectations, particularly in their first year. One coach, in her second year of coaching at the time of this study, reported that she remained uncertain about how she was expected to spend her time.

While the literacy coaches faced many challenges, they also reported experiencing rewards in their work. One coach found the ability to work with all students and to fulfill a variety of roles to be refreshing. She shared that she felt rejuvenated with her new position after 21 years of teaching and “enjoys learning from and helping teachers.” Additionally, three coaches expressed their belief that the opportunity to impact instruction and student achievement has the potential to create a broader impact across the school, not just within a single classroom. One coach stated that the eighth grade teachers closed the gap on the scores of their formative assessment and credited this success to the strategies the coach shared with them. Another coach reported, “I am passionate about the need to teach content area literacy strategies... if I was behind the door of my own language arts classroom, I would not be able to do that.”

**Alignment of Roles with the Standards**

The second research question addressed how the daily roles and responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches compared with the recommended IRA standards. Figure 1 summarizes the coaches...
responses to the survey that asked what standards were part of their current coaching role and what standards they believed should be part of their coaching role.

All four coaches noted that all aspects of Standard 1: Skillful Collaborator and Standard 2: Skill Job-Embedded Coaches were part of their role as a literacy coach and should be part of their role. They also reported that Standard 3: Examining Student Work to Analyze Trends and Results, and Conducting Assessment were part of their current role and should be part of their role. However, the coaches’ responses were not consistent with one aspect of Standard 3. Part of this standard includes interpretation of assessment to help faculty to understand different assessment tools and how to use them diagnostically to guide instruction and enhance teacher effectiveness. While all four literacy coaches believed this should be part of their jobs, only two coaches reported this as something they do on a regular basis.

Standard 4: Skillful Instructional Strategists is broken into two subsections. All four coaches reported that they have appropriate content area knowledge of how reading and writing relate to the content area and also felt that this was something that should be part of their role as literacy coach. However, there were inconsistencies about the other aspect of this standard. In terms of providing instruction to students, whether in a small group or individual setting, two coaches reported this was part of their job and should be, while the other two coaches reported that this was not part of their current role and should not be.

Discussion

Previous research has found little consistency in the roles and responsibilities of literacy coaches (IRA, 2004). In 2000, the International Reading Association acknowledged that literacy coaches assume multiple roles depending on the needs of students and teachers with whom they work. Middle school literacy coaches’ responsibilities are often as varied as the myriad contexts in which they work. In fact, coaches, classroom teachers, and principals tend to have varying perceptions of the roles of responsibilities of the literacy coach (Mraz, Algozzine, & Watson, 2008; Quatroche, Bean, & Hamilton, 2001; Shaw, 2006). This study examined the roles and responsibilities of four middle school literacy coaches. While some uncertainty about the daily work of literacy coaches persisted, inconsistencies in terms of role expectations emerged, as the roles of three of the four study participants aligned with the recommended standards from the International Reading Association. Specifically, the importance of establishing rapport with teachers was one theme that consistently emerged from the data. Another common characteristic of the roles of the coaches in this study demonstrate that they all are involved with evaluating the literacy needs of students but to different extents.

As relatively new literacy coaches, the role itself was unclear. However, professional development offered to all coaches through a statewide initiative proved to be helpful. Three of the coaches discussed how the training was beneficial. They felt that they learned a lot and became stronger coaches as a result. One reported learning “new skills, websites, and information to share with teachers.” The state-level initiative also provided guidelines for the coach’s job description stating that 75% of coaches’ time should be spent working with teachers and students in classrooms. As suggested by one coach, this aligns with the IRA’s standards and prevents the coaches from being used as substitute teachers for example.

All coaches in this study assumed several roles as they worked in a variety of settings that were also identified in the review of the literature. Based on survey results, all four literacy coaches reported the following roles as part of their responsibilities: act as an instructional leader in the area of literacy, provide professional development and resources to help teachers develop effective instruction, demonstrate lessons and provide ongoing support, provide one on one coaching by observing teachers in a nonthreatening manner and providing feedback, facilitate assessment processes, and have effective communication skills.

As suggested by the state guidelines, the coaches spend much of their time supporting teachers in the classroom. All four coaches describe the importance of modeling strategies and coaching teachers to
become proficient on their own. One coach stated that she teaches sporadically and does more behind the scenes work such as data analysis because teachers do not request her assistance. The remaining coaches however describe getting to know teachers through coaching conversations where they ask questions to determine teachers’ needs and adjust their support based on teachers’ comfort levels and needs (Stover, Kissel, Haag, & Shoniker, 2011). These literacy coaches model effective literacy strategies until the teacher is ready to implement them effectively on their own. By spending time in classrooms modeling and providing support, the literacy coaches build trust with the teachers they support.

Overall, it is evident in the literature that, when literacy coaches have a thorough understanding of the diverse needs of adult learners, successful coaching techniques, knowledge of effective instructional practices, and clear roles and responsibilities, they have a greater potential to promote changes in classroom practice (IRA, 2004; Toll, 2005). Based on the data analysis in this study, building a rapport with teachers emerged as a central theme in contributing to an effective interaction between coach and teacher. IRA’s Standard 1: Skillful Collaborators includes promoting positive relationships among school staff. All four literacy coaches reported this as part of their role and all believed it should be part of their role. By establishing and emphasizing positive relationships, the coaches were able to position themselves as a supportive figure in the building instead of an evaluative one. For example, one participant explained that, in order to build rapport with the teachers, this literacy coach made a concerted effort to assume a supportive instead of an evaluative role. An example of this can be seen when the coach describes how she spent more time modeling for some teachers before she released them to implement the technique on their own and avoided observation before teachers felt comfortable with her presence in their classrooms. Her principal gave her feedback that indicated that the literacy coach was well received and that she positioned herself effectively as a supportive professional. Another coach established rapport by making it clear from the beginning that she was not the “know-all-expert” and that they will both learn together. She validated the positive techniques of teachers, particularly those who she is “not sure if they have bought into [her] yet.” To emphasize the value of collaboration, this coach approached teachers by asking if they were interested in co-teaching and sharing their collective knowledge. One teacher remarked, “I’d love if you could come in once a week because there is always something that I learn from you.” The literacy coach responded, “I always learn from [you] too.” This demonstrated the coach’s effort to build trusting, equal relationships with teachers. When literacy coaches worked together with teachers to build a learning community where teachers and coaches collaborated to establish goals and identify areas of needed professional development, coaches were able to better approximate the standards suggested by the International Reading Association for their role.

When trusting and mutually communicative relationships were established, coaches reported that teachers were less resistant. By positioning themselves as peers with teachers, the literacy coaches were able to show teachers that they were supportive and not evaluative authority figures.

Both similarities and differences are apparent in the coaches’ roles as skillful evaluators of literacy needs (IRA Standard 3). All coaches reported that they were involved with the administration of assessments for students. Additionally, they participated in data analysis and progress monitoring of students as part of their roles as a literacy coach. One literacy coach stated, “most of the work I do is with data... our system is 100% driven on data.” Another coach mentioned the use of a specific assessment to determine needs of students and differentiated instruction. However, survey results reveal that two out of the four literacy coaches did not engage in IRA’s Standard 3 as part of their roles and responsibilities but believe it should be part of their jobs. Standard three states that coaches’ roles should include leading faculty in understanding, selecting, and using multiple forms of assessment as diagnostic tools. Both similarities and differences in the work that each coach does at the school level reveal the need for more consistencies in roles and responsibilities for literacy coaches.

The interview data indicated that the role of the literacy coach is complex. All four literacy coaches reported challenges and rewards of their positions. Their roles were dependent on the needs of individual teachers, directives from administration, mandated state requirements, and day-to-day challenges such as maneuvering between a variety of content area classes. One literacy coach described the challenge of the literacy coaching role as walking a fine line with administration and teachers and requires the need to remain neutral.

When literacy coaches have a solid understanding of and respect for the diverse needs of adult learners, they can promote changes in classroom practice (Bean, Belcastro, Hathaway, Risko, Rosemary, & Roskos, 2008; IRA, 2004; Stover, et al., 2011; Toll, 2005). By providing consistent and responsive professional development that is centered on enhancing the quality of instruction, literacy coaches have the potential to
play an effective role as a member of the school's literacy team. Continued research in the area of literacy coaching is critical as we continue to refine the ways in which professional resources can be applied to improve teacher quality and enhance student achievement.

References
Allington, R. (1994). *The schools we have. The schools we need*. The Reading Teacher, 48(1), 14-29.


**Appendix A**
Semi-Structured Interview Guide
Middle Literacy Coaches: A Study of Roles and Responsibilities

**Establishing Rapport & Background Information**
1. Tell me a little about yourself and your teaching experience.
2. What is your current title? Who are your roles and responsibilities? Who determines these?
3. Discuss your preparation for your job. What are your areas of certification/licensure? What in-service preparation and/or support have you received? Do you feel this is sufficient? Why/why not?
4. How many years have you been in your current position? What did you do before that? Why did you change?

**Roles and Responsibilities**
5. Do your roles and responsibilities differ from what you anticipated that they would be before you took the position? Explain.
6. With whom do you work primarily? (e.g. teachers, students, administrators). Why do you think it is this way?
7. When you work with teachers and students, what are some of your main responsibilities/activities? (e.g. direct teaching, co-teaching, planning, mentoring, evaluating, subbing, non-instructional duties)
8. Do you work with other specialist such as special education teachers, ESL teachers, speech therapists, etc? Please describe your work with them.
9. What do you normally do in the course of a week? Does this differ across the year or stay about the same? Why?

**Rewards/Challenges**
10. What do you find rewarding about your job?
11. What dilemmas do you face in your job? How do you solve these?

**Conclusion**
12. What else would you like to share about your position as a literacy professional?

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**FOCUS NEWSLETTER**

*News from members of the GRA*

Focus is a format that shares information from and about members and councils across Georgia. This can be reviews of upcoming new books, dates of upcoming meetings, news or exciting happenings about a local council member. What a wonderful way to support the active people in our organization. This is a spot to publish interesting stories or poetry that a talented member or student has written. Send news to Loretta Vail. Deadlines for Focus are September 30, December 15, March 15 and June 15.

Send articles, thoughts, poems, etc. to:
Paula Keinert | 4327 LeHaven Circle | Tucker, GA 30084 | pkeinert@bellsouth.net
## Appendix B

**Middle School Literacy Coach Survey**

Adapted from *Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches* (IRA, 2006) and *What’s Hot, What’s Not* (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1– Part of my current coaching role and should be</th>
<th>2– Part of my current coaching role and should not be</th>
<th>3– Not part of my current coaching role but should be</th>
<th>4– Not part of my current coaching role and should not be</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### STANDARD 1: SKILLFUL COLLABORATORS

| **Collaborate with School Literacy Team** – collaborate with school level literacy team to determine school wide literacy strengths and needs, and develop and implement a literacy program | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| **Promote Positive Relationships Among School Staff** – establish and emphasize positive relationships in supportive, rather than an evaluative, manner | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| **Foundations of Literacy** – share with teachers a body of research about how students become successful readers, writers, and communicators. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| **Family Literacy** – serve as a resource to families (e.g., provide information to parents about how they can support their child’s reading development at home) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

### STANDARD 2: SKILLFUL JOB-EMBEDDED COACHES

| **Provide Professional Development** – share literacy strategies for effective reading and writing instruction | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| **Demo Lessons** – demonstrate instructional strategies and provide ongoing support to teachers as they try the strategies themselves | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| **Classroom Coaching (One-on-One)** – observe teachers in a nonthreatening manner in order to provide feedback through reflective dialogue | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| **Content Area Reading** – discuss/share strategies and ideas to enhance content area reading and writing | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| **Differentiated Instruction** – work with teachers to develop and implement differentiated instruction to meet the needs of individual learners | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| **Materials** – assist teachers in selection and analysis of content area text and instructional materials | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

### STANDARD 3: SKILLFUL EVALUATORS OF LITERACY NEEDS

| **Assessment** – lead faculty in understanding, selecting, and using multiple forms of assessment as diagnostic tools to guide instructional decision making and enhance both teacher and program effectiveness | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| **Analyze Data and Monitor Student Progress** – meet with teachers to examine student work and evaluate their success while analyzing trends and results | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| **Conduct Assessment** – for individuals or groups of students | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

### STANDARD 4: SKILLFUL INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGISTS

| **Content Area Knowledge** – know how reading and writing processes relate with the various disciplines (i.e. English language arts, math, science, and social studies) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| **Provide Instruction** – for individuals or small groups of students who are struggling readers (push-in, pull-out, or both settings) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
Abstract
To achieve language proficiency, older English learners face the challenge of simultaneously acquiring the academic language of school while building the vocabulary base of a mature readers and language users—that is, high frequency words found in a variety of texts and known by proficient readers. One particularly useful classroom tool that supports vocabulary learning is the word wall. While traditionally associated with primary and elementary classrooms, the word wall, if implemented appropriately, may potentially aid the vocabulary development of English learners. In this study, we compared the use of digital word walls to two research-based interactive word wall formats with high school English learners. While we found no differences in word-meaning acquisition, the level of engagement was higher when students participated in the digital word wall format where they developed vocabulary vodcasts using Photostory. All three interactive word wall instructional techniques are described in this article.

As a teacher of English Language Learners (ELLs), I know that vocabulary development is critical to their academic success. Students enter my classroom from all over the world, with vastly different levels of English language abilities as well as different educational backgrounds. One thing they all have in common is the frustration they feel with their limited vocabularies. Often, ELLs have a clear understanding of a given concept but do not have the words to express this understanding in English. By providing ELLs with vocabulary strategies to create meaning from new and unfamiliar words, we are helping them to close this gap. Liz, high school ESL teacher
to teaching and learning vocabulary. Therefore, our research questions were the following:
What understandings do ESL high school students have about using iPods to learn vocabulary?
Is there a difference in vocabulary achievement of ESL high school students using conventional interactive word walls versus digital word walls?

We begin by providing a rationale for vocabulary learning, in particular with English learners as well as justification for using word walls. What follows next is a description of the study and subsequent results concerning high school English learners’ perceptions and use of mobile learning devices for word learning. We also share the findings that illustrate the variability and usability of interactive word walls as a vocabulary learning tool with older English learners. We then provide a description of the three instructional adaptations for using the word wall.

Importance of Vocabulary Learning and Teaching
We have known for a very long time about the importance of vocabulary in reading. Studies on vocabulary date back to the early 1900s and span subsequent decades resulting in a wealth of information to inform teaching and learning (Dale, 1931). Currently, vocabulary is one of the “hot” topics in the field of literacy and is recognized as one of the five pillars of literacy by the National Reading Panel (Cassidy, Valadez, & Garrett, 2010). As Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, and Watts-Taffe (2006) noted, the increased interest in vocabulary development has brought a renewed emphasis on our understanding about the complex relationship between word knowledge and comprehension, especially given the availability of new and varied digital and print text sources. With this changing face of vocabulary knowledge, it is not surprising that our nation’s children continue to be victims of what has been called the vocabulary gap (Biemiller & Boote, 2006) which, according to research (e.g., Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Chall & Jacobs, 2003; Hart & Risley, 1995), is largely due to a degree of privilege related to their socioeconomic status as well as their level of proficiency in learning the vocabulary of the English language.

Students who speak a language other than English do not fare as well as their English-speaking counterparts as noted in the Nation’s Report Card (2007) and by the National Center for Education Statistics (2010). While there are multiple factors that contribute to this gap, low vocabulary is a major contributor, especially in light of the academic demands placed upon older learners (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Fitzgerald, 1995; Jimenez et al., 1996; Klingner, & Vaughn, 2004; Nagy, 1997)—more so than even background knowledge about a topic (Garcia, 1991). As Pilgreen (2010) candidly pointed out, “Older students have more to achieve and [have] less time to do it” (p. 2). The English learners in middle school and high school face academic demands that become exceedingly more complex and more difficult with each successive grade level and such demands even continue into college (Gonzalez, 1999; Johnson & Steele, 1996). These students are frequently confronted with school-related tasks that require high-level thinking tasks, such as problem solving activities and inquiry-based projects found across subject-matter disciplines. To successfully complete these tasks, students need to possess a solid level of language proficiency.

Yet, to achieve language proficiency, older English learners face the challenge of simultaneously acquiring the academic language of school while building the vocabulary base of a mature language user. The words used by mature language users are described by Isabel Beck and her colleagues (2002) as high frequency words found in a variety of texts and known by proficient readers. To learn such words, students need opportunities to use newly acquired word meanings beyond a definitional level—that is, beyond eliciting the meaning of a word as evidence of understanding. They need to engage in activities that emphasize the application of word meanings in speaking, writing, reading, and listening. Furthermore, students need to develop independent word learning strategies to help them make viable connections for retaining word meanings, such as strategies that involve both personal associations for retention as well as understandings of appropriate contexts for using words.

While the National Reading Panel (2000) asserted that there is no single best method for teaching vocabulary, there are important, underlying instructional components necessary for promoting word learning with English learners. Nagy (1988) argued that for vocabulary instruction to be effective for all learners, three components are necessary and include the following: (1) targeted words need to be integrated with related, known words and concepts; (2) learners must have multiple opportunities to apply the words; and (3) these applications must reflect meaningful use. Other components evident in the literature especially for English learners include using visuals, contextualizing word use, and allowing for collaborative learning (Harper & de Jong, 2004; Jacobson, Lapp, & Flood, 2007; Palmer, Shackelford, Miller, & Leclere, 2006/2007). One particularly helpful classroom tool that can incorporate these components of effective vocabulary instruction is the word wall.

While word walls and their variations (Harmon, Hedrick, Wood, Vintinner & Willeford, 2009) have been
in use for decades, we know of only one other study that focused on digitalizing the word wall. This study by Yearta (2012) used a mixed methods design to determine the effects of a digital word wall with 43 fifth grade students studying Greek and Latin roots. While further research is needed, Yearta’s findings indicated that the digital word wall is a viable vocabulary instructional method. For sure, word walls are just one of many effective strategies that can and need to be adapted to the new literacies of the 21st century (International Reading Association, 2009; Leu, 2006).

**Word Walls**

The word wall, while traditionally associated with primary and elementary classrooms, is also an important artifact for creating a print-rich environment in middle school and high school classrooms. When implemented appropriately, the word wall can be used effectively in helping teachers provide sound vocabulary instruction. For example, in their investigation of the use of the interactive word wall instructional framework with seventh grade students, Harmon and her colleagues (2009) found that students who were engaged in the interactive word wall instruction acquired deeper understandings of word meanings and retained this knowledge over an extended period of time. Components of the interactive word wall instruction mirrored the features of effective vocabulary instruction mentioned previously—students engaged in multiple, meaningful use activities with the words where they made personal connections to real world applications in a variety of ways involving color, visuals, and written contexts. Furthermore, in their review of the research on vocabulary development of diverse learners, Wood and her colleagues (2011) similarly noted that effective instruction included the following: (1) active engagement in word learning that offered multiple exposures and meaningful use; (2) use of explicit, scaffolded instruction about the use of context clues and word level analysis; and (3) integration of technology as a useful, motivating tool for building a stronger word knowledge base.

**Interactive Word Wall Study**

In our study of word walls, we closely examined the use of iPods, a mobile learning device, for promoting vocabulary learning with high school English learners. As previously mentioned we asked two questions:

What understandings do ESL high school students have about using iPods to learn vocabulary?

Is there a difference in vocabulary achievement of ESL high school students using conventional interactive word walls versus digital word walls?

**Method**

Twenty-two high school students in grades 10, 11, and 12 participated in the six-week study. These students were enrolled in ESL classrooms taught by the same teacher in a Title I school located in South Central Texas. To answer the first research question concerning students’ understandings about using iPods to learn new words, we conducted individual interviews with the students both before and after the instructional interventions. We also examined student work developed from the word wall activities as well as the teacher’s reflective journal notes. To answer the second research question about differences in vocabulary achievement between the interactive word walls using standard bulletin boards versus the digital word walls, we administered teacher-developed vocabulary tests for measuring students’ knowledge of the targeted words in the lessons provided.

After administering the pre-interviews, we collected data from the three instructional interventions involving the word walls. The teacher-selected words for instruction came from the required readings of short stories and the novel *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz, 2000) that were part of the curriculum. The teacher used the three instructional models with different class sections. All three models were based upon what we know about effective vocabulary instruction—that is, the need for integrating or connecting words with other known words and ideas and the need for multiple exposures of using the words in meaningful ways (Nagy, 1988).

In one model the students taught specific words to their peers while they created an interactive word wall. The students used colors, symbols, and situations to connect to the word meanings (Harmon et al., 2009). For the second model, the teacher used an adaptation of the Frayer Model (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2006) which involved having students complete vocabulary cards containing the definition, synonym, a drawing, and a sentence containing the word. The last instructional model involved the use of iPods to create digital word walls. The students again taught their assigned words to the others. In this intervention the students created vodcasts for their words. Vodcasts are podcasts that include visual images. The students used Photostory, a free application that allows users to create the vodcasts. Once the vodcasts were completed, the students downloaded their work onto the iPods to use for reviewing the word meanings. A more detailed description of each instructional intervention is provided in a subsequent section of this article.

**Findings**

In their responses to the first interview question about using iPods for word learning, we found that all of the students except for one in the pre-interviews believed that iPods could be beneficial for promoting word learning. While students had positive perceptions about the iPod as an important tool for learning new words, their responses remained at a general level,
such as “It will help you learn.” Students also felt that teachers could use iPods in the classroom to help them build vocabulary as well as listen to stories and even listen to themselves speak in English. Only during the post interviews did students talk about how the visual aspect of the vodcasts (podcasts containing visual images) enabled them to understand the word meanings. Furthermore, students mentioned that hearing the pronunciation on the vodcasts was important; however, several noted that sometimes the pronunciation made by another student was not clear and led to confusion. In our tally of the frequency of responses, we found that the majority of the students (over 75%) valued the use of iPods as an important tool for learning in the classroom. All students had positive comments about using the iPod for word learning. These findings suggest that iPods may serve as an important instructional tool for helping English learners with vocabulary acquisition.

In regard to our second research question regarding achievement differences across the three word wall instructional variations, our statistical analysis revealed no significant differences in meaningful use of words in which students move beyond a definitional level to application of words. Overall, each technique afforded students the opportunity to actively engage in word learning tasks that focused on associations with the meanings of the words and actual applications of the words in meaningful contexts. The students, however, were more motivated in their interactions with the iPods as they created their own digital word walls. Their level of engagement was high as they created a multimedia presentation that required surfing the Internet to find visual images of their words, recording their explanations of words, and then synthesizing the information that would help others understand the words.

**Word Wall Variations**

In this section, we provide a detailed description of the three instructional frameworks we used in the study. The instructional frameworks are the Interactive Word Wall, Adaptation of the Frayer Model, and the Digital Word Wall. For each instructional framework, the teacher began the lesson by conducting a shared reading of short stories and a novel that were part of the reading curriculum. She read the texts aloud as the students followed along, stopping at strategic points to ask questions, clarify important points, and draw attention to targeted vocabulary words in an informal way. After each shared reading, the students then participated in the word wall instructional activities.

**Interactive Word Wall**

Students engaged in a variety of word learning tasks in the Interactive Word Wall instruction. These tasks included: use of instructional contexts for determining word meanings, associative activities using color and symbols, development of situations involving appropriate word use, a focus on word variations, and students’ presentations for teaching the words to others in the class. The teacher first of all selected several words from an assigned text students would be reading. For each word, the teacher began instruction by discussing the meaning of each targeted word and its use in both a carefully written instructional context as well as in the context of the short story. For example, the teacher selected the word *anguish* from the following context found in the book *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz, 2000): “Her smile faded, her chest tightened, and a heavy blanket of *anguish* smothered her smallest joy” (30). The teacher first presented an instructional context she developed to aid students as they used obvious context clues to figure out the meaning of *anguish*. The instructional context was “Gregory slid into third base and everyone in the crowd heard the snap as his ankle twisted and broke. We all knew how much it must have hurt when we saw the look of *anguish* spread across his face.” The meaning students inferred from the instructional context for *anguish* was then applied to the use of the word in the context of the story.

After this introductory discussion for the selected words, the teacher assigned student partners to complete an in-depth study of one word for display on the Interactive Word Wall and subsequent sharing with the class. Students first completed the planning sheet shown in Figure 1. Some tasks were designed to help the students retain word meanings through associational activities, such as assigning a color to the word meaning and drawing a symbol representing the word meaning. For example, for the word *anguish*, the students selected the color black to represent suffering and pain and used a hole to symbolize the idea of being trapped and feeling like “there is no way out.”

Another task that was part of the Interactive Word Wall included thinking of a situation in which the word could be used. In this example for the word *anguish*, students thought of the *anguish* children would feel if their parents were going through a divorce. The last task was to consider variations of the word to emphasize that while different functions of the word can change the spelling of the word, the meaning still remains the same. For the word *anguish*, students wrote *anguished* and *anguishing*.

To create the Interactive Word Wall, student partners wrote their targeted word on a flash card. Next to the word on the flash card, they drew a square and filled in this space with the color they selected for their word. Next to the color, students wrote the word variations.
Then on two index cards, the students drew the word symbol on one and the situation on the other. Both cards were then placed next to the flash card on the Interactive Word Wall. In their presentation to the class, the students made references to the word wall as they explained their thinking about the designated word. Two snapshots of the interactive word wall are in Figure 2.

Instruction using the modified version of the Frayer Model (Frayer et al., 1969) for a word wall also provided students opportunities to engage in meaningful word learning tasks. The original Frayer Model is a four-square graphic organizer designed to extend conceptual understanding by having students differentiate between important and unimportant characteristics that represent a concept as well as distinguishing between examples and nonexamples of the concept. While intended for use with informational topics, the section of the Frayer Model pertaining to examples worked well with the narrative texts used in this word wall instructional plan. While maintaining the purpose of the Frayer Model for helping students think more deeply, the teacher altered the categories to include definitions and visual representations.

After the shared reading of a short story, the teacher first displayed a list of the vocabulary words encountered in the short story. Students each selected one word to create a graphic organizer for the word wall. The graphic organizers or word cards consisted of sheets of construction paper on which the students drew four squares with a circle in the middle for the word. To gain a sense of the word’s meaning, students initially revisited the text using available context clues to determine at least an approximation of the meaning.
Once they formulated an idea of the word’s meaning, students had the option to confirm their understanding by using a dictionary, asking peers, or even asking the teacher. Students then wrote their word in the center of the graphic organizer and the confirmed meaning in their own words in one of the squares. For example, for the word *squinted* one student wrote “to peer with eyes partly closed.” For the word *proximity* another student wrote “nearness; close to something.”

After establishing a definition, the students then used one of the squares to create a visual representation of the word. The student working on the word *squinted* drew a pair of eyes that look closed and the student who selected the word *proximity* drew a school and his house indicate that his house was close to the school. Both illustrations demonstrate that the students understood the word meanings well enough to provide such drawings.

Students used the third square to include an example of a situation which applied to the word. For example, for the word *squinted*, the student wrote “I squinted my eyes when I can’t see,” probably referring to times perhaps when the sun is too bright or objects are too far away. For the word *proximity* the student referred to his picture of the school and his house and simply wrote “I live near the school.” Another student who worked on the word *descend* used an example of a plane descending for landing.

In the fourth category, students had the choice of either providing a nonexample of the word or writing a sentence. While students had these choices, they mainly wrote sentences with the words. For example, one student wrote “When I *squinted*, I could see past the end of the block.” Another wrote “He watched my fingers *greedily* push big chunks of pie down my throat.” The nonexamples were discussed verbally and mainly consisted of antonyms. Once the word cards were complete, the students would then share with the rest of the class and post the cards on the word wall (See figure 3.) The word wall served as a reference when students encountered the words in other contexts and as a classroom tool for reinforcing word meanings.

Digital Word Wall

The digital word wall was modeled after the interactive word wall. The tasks that were completed were similar to the interactive word wall. The digital word wall instruction began the same way. The teacher selected words from short stories and proceeded with instruction in the same manner. In other words, the teacher discussed the meaning using written context and context from the short story. Then the teacher divided the students into pairs to complete an in-depth word study as they did with the interactive word wall.

The major difference in the digital word wall was the students used Microsoft Photostory to create short vodcasts for each word instead of using paper and pencil to create flash cards. For example, part of the in-depth word study included completing a planning sheet, assigning a color to the word, drawing a symbol, thinking of a situation and writing variations of the word. In the digital word wall, the students created their planning sheet in the form of a storyboard (See Figure 4). A storyboard is a document that helps the user plan each slide for the vodcast. Similar to the planning sheet for the interactive word wall, the story board used for the digital word wall helped students plan their vodcasts. The first box of the storyboard contained the word and each successive box contained the color, symbol, situation, and variations of the word.

Once the storyboard was completed, the students then used Netbook computers to find the images online that
coincide with the storyboard. Once the images were found, the students used Photostory to put their digital word wall vodcast together. Since Photostory enables users to include narrations, each slide for the vodcast contained some audio recording of the student. For example, the student who worked on the word *deliberate*, narrated the first slide containing the word by saying, “My word is deliberate and it means to do something on purpose.” In the next slide, the students depicted a color to represent the word’s meaning and also provided an explanation for selecting that particular color. The following slide contained a picture of a symbol selected to represent the word’s meaning accompanied by the student’s narration explaining the connection to the word. The symbol could have been a drawing made by the student or an image found online. If the student drew the symbol, a picture was taken with a digital camera and then uploaded to the vodcast. As noted in Figure 4, this student found a photograph of a light bulb to include in the vodcast. The next slide contained an image of a situation with an explanation, such as a girl deliberately turning off the light switch. Finally, the student narrated a sentence using the word for the last slide in the vodcast. In this example, the student’s sentence of “The purpose of light is deliberate.” represents her attempt to explain that we are deliberate in our actions when we turn on a light switch.

Students shared their vodcast with all the students in the class via iPod Nanos. The teacher uploaded each vodcast to iTunes and then synced each Nano so the students would have access to all digital word wall vodcasts. Each student was provided an iPod Nano to review all of the vocabulary words for the week. Students had the option to take the iPods home to study the words or to use the iPods during class time.

**Concluding Statements**

Students are encountering more vocabulary words than ever before from the increasingly varied forms of text content available to them. As teachers, we can take advantage of the variety of ways in which word walls can engage students in word learning. All three word wall approaches described here (i.e., interactive word wall, adaptation of the Frayer model, and digital word wall) reflect the four goals of effective vocabulary instruction espoused by Fisher, Blachowicz, and Watts-Taffe (2011): 1) rich and varied language experiences; 2) instruction in individual words; 3) instruction in strategies for independent word learning, and 4) fostering word consciousness. We found that using iPods as a vehicle for learning new vocabulary to be another successful means of increasing students’ interest, understanding, and motivation. Moreover, the new technologies of today and tomorrow will continue to provide teachers with alternative instructional formats that emphasize student expression and explanation beyond traditional pencil and paper tasks to help students broaden and deepen their word knowledge.

**References**


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You live to read. You can hardly wait to get cozy in your favorite spot and crack the pages of a good book. You’re also an educator. Why not curl up with a good group, too? Membership in the Georgia Reading Association will connect you to others like you who inspire and teach others about reading.

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So, from one reading enthusiast to another, we invite you to join the GRA and curl up with a good group.


“The greatest part about this is that we didn’t have to write, because I don’t like to write”
– Fourth-Grade Study Participant

Background of the Study
In the spring of 2011, I met with an elementary teacher who described the challenges she faced when meeting the curriculum pacing guidelines set by her school district. She explained how she felt a great deal of pressure to address a wide range of content standards within a relatively short period of time due mostly to constraints of high-stakes testing. She then mentioned a possible solution to this dilemma. Her idea became the basis for this study.

To address these same curriculum expectations, her grade level team members had collectively agreed to carry out a thematic unit in which students would research and write a descriptive report about an animal. The grade level (i.e., lead) teacher set the parameters for the team: a) the unit would address English Language Arts content standards that pertain to writing and research, and Science standards that address animal habitat and adaptations; b) the teacher would choose the animal for each student (to ensure that multiple students did not research the same animal; and c) students would write (in booklet form that includes pictures) a report on their animal to be displayed to parents and eventually placed in their writing portfolio as evidence of meeting a wide range of fourth-grade content standards.

The teacher in this study explained how she could not agree to carry out a thematic unit with the parameters agreed upon by the other teachers. When asked why, she gave two compelling reasons: 1) As the teacher in a co-taught setting, several students in her class have exceptionalities that could present unique challenges to effectively carry out this project and 2) it did not seem like an engaging activity that would promote active learning and critical thinking. To be more specific, “…it didn’t sound fun. I mean, seriously, what fourth-grade student wants to write a nine page research report on an animal they didn’t even choose?”(Field notes, March 16, 2011).

Out of this discussion came the idea to address the same content standards in a way that promoted digital literacy, student engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking. To accomplish this, the teacher explained to her students that they would research an animal and then write a script to eventually create a student-directed digital-based documentary. Also, the teacher allowed students the choice of what animal to research.

I, Brent Daigle, was fortunate to observe this process from the initial stages to the completion of each student-created video. Donna Lester Taylor and Jabari Cain agreed to help with the documentation and analysis of data from this project. Donna has a comprehensive background in research-based literacy approaches, particularly for students in at-risk populations. Jabari has an extensive background in educational technology and instructional design, especially within the context of classroom use and student engagement.

All of the necessary permissions to display images of students and the videos they created were obtained prior to the study. Additionally, permission was sought and granted by the Institutional Review Board from both the school district and Mercer University prior to the investigation.

The following images and descriptions provide an overview of each stage in this literacy-based thematic unit. All of the student videos can be seen at: http://vimeo.com/channels/animalproject.
Step 1: Student Choice and Gathering Information

Students were given the objectives of the unit: to research an animal of their choice for the eventual creation of a digital documentary about their animal. Students were then given time to decide upon an animal to research (their choice often came after student collaboration and teacher-directed classroom discussion).

Pictured here, students found resources and information about their animal. Some students chose to work independently on this task, while others collaborated with each other to help organize and discuss the relevance of their findings for their respective animal.

Step 2: Technology

Students had access to Apple computer products throughout the duration of this project. Jabari Cain, designated in 2011 as an Apple Distinguished Educator, offered his assistance to help meet the technology demands of this thematic unit. Although students had access to current technology, it should be noted that any classroom computer with standard moviemaking software (e.g., Moviemaker, iMovie) can be used to carry out this activity. The specific technology used in this study was: A) Apple iPod Touch 4th Generation; B) Apple iPad 3g; C) Apple iPad 2; D) MacBook Air; E) MacBook Pro; F) iMovie.
After choosing their animal, students began to research and organize information about their animal. They used the iPod to organize the information they found from their research. Eventually, this information was reorganized into “chapters” for later inclusion into their script. Students worked with the teacher and collaboratively with one another to decide upon chapter headings to include for their narrative. Many students had similar chapter headings (e.g., habitat, characteristics), while others created additional chapters unique to their animal (e.g., silly facts).

Pictured here are early versions of pre-writing drafts from two separate students. Notice that in the example on the left, the student took a straightforward, facts-based approach to tell about the animal. In the example on the right, the student presented information about the animal within the framework of a newscast. Ultimately, it was the decision of each student to determine chapter headings and information to include in their final draft and eventually into their documentary.

Step 4: Creating the Digital Documentary

After writing the script, students began to create their digital documentary. First, they recorded their script into an MP3 format. Next, they searched the Internet for images and videos about their animal. The last step of the process included importing the recording of the script and the images into iMovie. Students aligned their recording with images and videos of their animal. Students
had complete control over the movie making process. The teacher and researchers offered assistance only when the technology presented a challenge (i.e., too advanced for their skills).

Pictured on the previous page, students organized the images, voice recording, and animal videos for their digital documentary. On the left, a student shows Dr. Taylor where the images will appear in relation to her script. In the middle, a student found similar images and is deciding which one to include in his documentary. On the right, a student works with Dr. Cain to create a special effect that he wanted to place in the middle of his documentary.

Conclusion
For the students in this study, the digital documentary thematic unit seemed to improve student achievement in the areas of social interactions, writing efficacy, and learning outcomes. Four underlying themes seemed to emerge throughout this investigation: 1) student satisfaction, 2) intrinsic motivation, 3) student self-efficacy, and 4) technology engagement.

Students who participated in this study were all in the fourth grade and represented a wide range of abilities. The group consisted of five boys and three girls. Of the eight students:
- 2 are in gifted programs.
- 2 receive special education services for learning disabilities.
- 1 receives special education services for Autism.
- 1 receives special education services for Other Health Impairment.
- 2 are in the general fourth grade student population.

Interviews with the teacher and students report a high level of satisfaction throughout the three week unit. The teacher stated, “this time of year, we would have sometimes have unexpected changes to our schedule. After we began this unit, the students soon began to ask each morning ‘are we having reading groups today’ … they were very disappointed on the days that I told them we would not be able to meet” (Field notes, March 29, 2011).

Students also enjoyed this activity because “[we] didn’t have to write” (Field notes, April 4, 2011). Many students did not connect the embedded literacy tasks within this activity to the larger goals of the thematic unit. Student motivation remained high throughout this project because of the daily technology use and social interactions. Student reports indicate that literacy outcomes were secondary to these other factors (Field notes, April 4, 2011).

Students felt empowered to conduct their research in this project without the burden that a lack of skill with pen and paper can create. One of the participants, a student who receives special education services because of a learning disability, explained “Words come hard for me,” but then indicated that the computer helped him because “it makes suggestions for words…when I was writing I learned more juicy words” (Field notes, March 29, 2011). Another student indicated that she struggles with grammar but did not have to worry about the grammar part while she was writing her script because it wouldn’t be seen. A third student commented about how much his friend in the class enjoyed this activity because, “he can type faster than he can write with a pencil” [so he doesn’t lose his thoughts]. (Field notes, March 29, 2011). The students were proud of their work when it was done and seemed to feel a strong sense of empowerment in their ability to conduct research. As one participant stated, “When I watched it, it was good…yeah, I was proud” (Field notes, March 29, 2011).

This approach to a thematic unit meets the curriculum goals set by the school district and seems to improve overall student outcomes. In addition to meeting English Language Arts and Science standards, the teacher was also able to address fourth-grade technology standards within the context of this activity. Student choice, teacher guidance, and ongoing student collaboration were essential components to the success of this project. With clearly defined expectations, sufficient time to allow student involvement, and use of existing classroom (or school lab) computers, this project can be adapted into an existing literacy activity or across multiple content areas.

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Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.
—Frederick Douglass
Abstract
This article addresses a small group literature discussion technique that was implemented during one pre-service teacher’s field experience in a seventh grade Language Arts classroom. Based on the principles of social constructivism and transactional theory of reader response, the DECAL model is structured to allow students to better understand the complexity of literary elements and to stimulate lively discussions. DECAL stands for Design, Extensions, Connections, Author’s Structure, and Language. It is a variation of collaborative literacy in which group processes are a part of the individual learning activity. DECAL provides teachers with the steps to promote active engagement and empower students to build their own knowledge within the constructed democracy of learning. The small group literature discussion technique presented in this article is applicable to teacher educators who wish to address the important role of collaborative book discussion for young adolescent readers in middle grade pre-service teacher education.

In This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents (2003), the National Middle School Association (NMSA) (now called the Association of Middle Level Educators) offered that curriculum, instruction, and assessment for young adolescent learners should be specifically crafted for their unique needs. NMSA (2003) states, “The distinct learning characteristics of young adolescents provide the foundation for selecting learning and teaching strategies, just as they do for designing curriculum” (p. 2).

With the tenets of this position as our rationale, our focus with undergraduate middle grade education majors is to continually emphasize the important need to recognize the developmental characteristics of learners between the of ages ten to fifteen when designing middle level instruction (NMSA, 2003).

Accordingly, we teach our developing teachers that instruction is appropriately aligned to meet the unique needs of this age group that include the cognitive, physical, and psychological developmental characteristics of young adolescent learners, as well as their social developmental needs. In our work, we emphasize that active participation in learning is a necessity as middle grade students are inquisitive, eager to make sense of their lives and environment, and have a preoccupation with social peers (Brown & Knowles, 2007; Manning, 2002). Because young adolescents are social by their very nature, we take seriously the role that small group collaborative book discussions can play in student learning.

The primary purpose of this article is to present an innovative strategy to enable middle grade students to better understand the complexity of literary traits and to stimulate lively discussions during collaborative book talks while making meaning as a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991). To do so, we present one pre-service middle grade teacher’s journey to plan and implement collaborative literacy during her Language Arts methods’ practicum field experience featuring DECAL. DECAL is a small group instructional strategy that serves as a springboard to engage students in interactive discussions while reading and responding to literature.

We begin with a discussion of our initial conference meetings with our pre-service teacher to lay the foundation for DECAL as a collaborative literacy strategy. We then describe the meaning and learning components of DECAL and provide the steps and instructional materials to initiate DECAL in the classroom. In addition, we examine the concept of collaborative literacy, as well as an account of what the literature has found to be the positive benefits when small groups of students come together to share their thinking through collaborative book discussions. We conclude with a discussion on the implications for using DECAL as a collaborative literacy strategy for young adolescent readers.

The Background
A few weeks before Jess (a pseudonym) taught her Language Arts unit for her practicum field experience, she confided in us her fears of using collaborative group work in a middle grade classroom. First, she
was worried she would not be able to manage the group, and secondly, she was worried about student accountability in an era of high-stakes testing. With little experience teaching, we—the professor and the field supervisor—understood her concerns, but we were eager for Jess to recognize the social developmental needs of the young adolescent learner and to plan instruction that would appropriately engage her students in active participation through collaborative interaction (Brown & Knowles, 2007). Accordingly, we wanted her to understand the power of group work to build knowledge when students are given opportunities to connect their life’s experiences to texts and build communities of learners (Heron-Hruby, Hagood, & Alvermann, 2008).

With the additional pressure to meet benchmarks for student achievement, the three of us began planning the unit in spring 2012 by first integrating the state and national Language Arts’ standards for the seventh grade classroom where she was placed for her practicum experience. Jess was assigned to teach *Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008); therefore, we turned our attention to plan instruction that would permit small groups of students to read and discuss the book while working collectively to negotiate meaning. With these tenets in mind, we turned our focus to a group strategy that we believed would enable her seventh grade students to better understand the complexity of literary elements and to stimulate lively discussions. The small group literature discussion strategy we chose and the supporting questions for discussion were created by the first author with input from the second author. The strategy is a variation of the popular method of literature circles (Daniels, 1994, 2002) called DECApL that Jess had learned in my methods class for Language Arts.

**DECApL: The Construct**

While DECApL is an extension of collaborative literacy, it is designed to permit middle grade students to delve more deeply into the complexity of literary traits under the guidance of strategic categories and questions to foster learning. The acronym DECApL represents five facets of learning in regard to literary text. DECApL stands for Design, Extensions, Connections, Author’s Structure, and Language. It is a variation of collaborative literacy in which group processes are a part of the individual learning activity. In this process, individual and collective activities rely on each other. Collaborative literacy encompasses a variety of titles and varying interpretations that focus on developing comprehension and an appreciation for literature. Harris and Hodges (1995) posit that collaborative literacy promotes individual knowledge when students work in small groups with a common goal or purpose. In conjunction, Wood, Roser, and Martinez (2001) articulate that collaborative literacy is a construct in which students work together to read and discuss literature in a context that promotes acceptance. In fact, research has shown that collaborative book discussions provide the opportunity to develop literacy skills that lead to thoughtful, competent, and critical readers (Sandman & Gruhler, 2007). Other studies have shown student engagement in discussions about texts have improved reading comprehension, higher-level thinking skills (Kucan & Beck, 2003), and increased motivation (Almasi, McGeeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997; Gambrell & Almasi, 1996). Additionally, research has revealed that literature discussions provide opportunities for students to ponder confusing aspects of text and to “gain not only a deeper understanding and appreciation of text ideas, but also a deeper understanding of what it means to think about those ideas” (Kucan & Beck, 2003, p. 3). Correspondingly, Hill, Johnson, and Noe (1995) contend that as students engage in discussion, the act of studying, pondering, and thinking carefully leads students to be more thoughtful and evaluative of their own responses. Research has further shown that students, who once felt marginalized in whole class discussions, learn to discover their voices and become competent participants (Johnson, 2000; Sandman & Gruhler, 2007) in small group literature discussions. In essence, students realize the power of the written word and in turn, they begin to value participation in the democracy of learning (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007).

Conceptually, DECApL is framed by two theoretical traditions that provide a set of coherent ideas for understanding how the strategy shapes literacy practices in a collaborative environment. Specifically, conceptual support for DECApL is framed by social constructivism and transactional theory of reader response. In a social constructivist classroom, learning is constructed in a social setting as students share knowledge to negotiate meaning (Vygotsky, 1878; Wells, 2004). The theory that reading is transactional has been described by Sisk (2003) as “the process of reading as a carefully orchestrated relationship between the reader and the text in a social situation” (p. 11). Rosenblatt’s (1978) transactional theory of reader response describes the process of reading engagement as a reader construction of the text, and student response as a personal event. Therefore, as readers interact personally with the words on the page, multiple meanings can develop as these interactions between the reader and text are personal and relate to each individual reader’s experiences. Accordingly, a social constructivist perspective and the transactional theory of reader response provide a meaningful conceptual framework for DECApL because the strategy permits young adolescents to connect prior experiences and knowledge and then offer
personal responses while engaging in collaborative discussions.

Planning for DECAL
Jess was very interested to implement DECAL in her instructional unit, but she was unsure of how to begin. As an undergraduate middle grade education major, she worried how to form the groups for reading and how to assess individual and group learning. Jess’s seventh grade class consisted of twenty-nine students (thirteen males and sixteen females) of mixed reading abilities. According to the results of the 2011 state-mandated reading test, 75% of the students in her class were reading on grade level, 5% of her students were reading below grade level, and the remaining 20% were determined to be reading above the seventh grade reading level. The students attended a Title I middle school in a rural community approximately 40 miles from a mid-size city in the Southeastern region of the United States. The ethnic make-up of her class consisted of the following: White students (48%), Black students, (41%), Hispanic students (8%), and Asian students (3%). All but five of the students participated in the free and/or reduced school lunch program. The five students who did not qualify for free and/or reduced lunch ranged from medium to prosperous socioeconomic status.

Based on her concerns, one of the first tasks in planning was to determine how the groups would be formed and our advice was to avoid self-selected groups; a procedure that frequently allows friends to be with friends and negates new and different perspectives. Jess then proposed ability grouping as she thought this would be a time where she could do more hands-on guided instruction with less capable readers. We welcomed her interest in guided instruction, but we asked Jess to reflect on the best instructional practices for middle grade students she had learned in my Language Arts methods course. In our discussion, we pointed to research that supports how heterogeneous grouping provides opportunities for equal access to participation, allows for all voices to be heard, and requires active assistance among participants involved in meaning-making activities (Burris, Wiley, Welner, & Murphy, 2008). In this view, less capable members appropriate knowledge through interaction with more capable peers and is what Vygotsky (1978) termed in his seminal explanation of learning as the zone of proximal development. We emphasized that she would be one of the more capable members as she moved among the groups to facilitate discussion and scaffold learning; a procedure that would allow her to monitor, manage, and assess each group’s collaborative interaction. Jess agreed to use heterogeneous groups and acknowledged that this method would be best for her diverse seventh grade students. As a caution, we did prepare her for the possibility of what Kapur (2008) has termed as productive failure; the processes whereby students initially fail at a new task but overcome and learn from their missteps. In our final preparation meeting, we emphasized that assessment is an on-going occurrence in small group discussion (Frey, Fisher, & Everlove, 2009) and would require that she, the group, and individual members evaluate the learning experience to give her students a venue to share their knowledge and reflect on their roles as participants.

Jess Puts DECAL in Action
To initiate DECAL in the classroom, Jess implemented the following procedures, having been previously advised that the time allotted for her seventh grade students to fully grasp each step would best be determined by the needs of her students. For purposes of this article, the procedures we provided Jess are purposely separated by whole class and small group instruction to provide a gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Subsequently, this procedure allows for teachers to move from teacher-centered discussions, in which they control the flow of activity, to shared stances, in which responsibility is more equally shared, to more student-centered stances in which students take primary responsibility. In addition, the significant terms for each component of DECAL may be adjusted for purposes of state-mandated learning objectives and grade level requirements. To illustrate DECAL in action, we have provided excerpts of Jess’s interactions with her students that were captured during our observation visits. All students’ names from Jess’s classroom are pseudonyms.

Whole Class Instruction
Step one. Jess began the instructional unit by providing each student with a handout of materials. Focusing on the Strategy Guide of Key Concepts in their handouts, Jess displayed the guide (see Table 1) for her students to view using the available technology in the classroom. She then introduced the strategy by first discussing the meaning of each letter in the word DECAL and then followed with an explanation of the components that comprise the strategy. To assist her seventh grade students, Jess used the following descriptions in order for them to understand the components of DECAL: D represents Design which signifies the textual foundation the author has created to tell the story; E represents Extensions and involves processes that require students to expand their knowledge and explore the text further; C represents Connections as readers make associations with the text; A represents Author’s Structure and focuses on authors’ elements; and L represents language and is an examination of the many functions of language.
Following this initial overview of DECAL, Jess discussed the significant terms associated with each component in learnable parts. She then clearly described each term and provided an appropriate context to bring meaning to the terms. In doing so, she used the familiar story *The Breadwinner* for DECAL. As Jess began this step, she directly instructed her students in the following manner:

*Class, under the word *design*, you will see the word purpose. Remember, in our previous literature discussions, we have defined author’s purpose as the main idea. Since we have just finished reading *The Breadwinner*, I will use this book since you are familiar with it. I would say that the purpose of the book was to teach readers about the horrors from oppression that people in Afghanistan faced under the Taliban rule, especially women and girls. I think the author’s purpose for telling this story was to tell readers about the loss of freedom.*

Prior to beginning this first step, Jess had been advised that this step may involve both pre-teaching and re-teaching each term based on her students’ prior knowledge and may take several Language Arts instructional periods to model each component of DECAL. We make the same recommendation for teachers in the classroom.

Step two. This step required Jess to use explicit teacher instruction and involved several instructional periods. Jess began this stage by referring her students to the *Guiding Questions for DECAL* in their handouts while she displayed the questions (see Table 2) for her students to view using the available technology. Once again, she used *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000) as her literature example to read the questions aloud and to model the appropriate responses for each component.

As she verbalized the questions and responses, she paused and modeled how to think aloud what was being asked to help her middle grade students make meaningful cognitive connections between the types of questions and the component of DECAL. By doing so, she taught her students how to self-monitor their learning by utilizing metacognitive strategies—thinking about thinking (Fountas & Pinnell, 2000). In other words, Jess specifically modeled an important method for her students to begin to process information. To illustrate, Jess modeled how to think aloud in the following manner:

*Class, I want you to follow along with me while I read a category question aloud. Please refer to your *Guiding Questions for DECAL* and I will demonstrate how to think about what the question is asking me. I will use *The Breadwinner* since you know this book. Please look under the word design and look at the second question while I read it out loud. The question is: What special message or theme is the author trying to convey through the writing? Now, when I read the words theme and special message, I stop and think (Jess models out loud), this is the big idea or a topic the author wants us to explore. For *The Breadwinner*, I think the author wants us to think about all the obstacles the Afghan people faced, such as disease, homelessness, starvation, and oppression. Now when I think about these obstacles, I think a good theme might be survival.*

Jess continued to model how to think aloud as she addressed the guiding questions for each category. This was also a valuable time for her to assess her students’ prior knowledge of the significant terms from the previous step. As her students tapped into their knowledge of DECAL’s components, Jess engaged in
a reiterative process to make sure the students had grasped the important words.

Step three. For purposes of this article, this step combines the teaching materials from the students’ handout packet in a whole class setting. This phase permits time to scaffold learning while acting as a coach and to gradually move from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning. Jess began this step by instructing her students to return to the Strategy Guide for Key Components. She then displayed the guide once again using the available classroom technology and referred her students to the Guiding Questions for DECAL in their handout packet. As she led her students during this stage, she demonstrated how to address one component of DECAL at a time and to use the strategy questions to address each term within a component. Jess then allowed time for guided instruction as she and student volunteers combined examples of the key components with their corresponding questions. The following exchange between Jess and her students were captured during our teaching observations:

Jess: I am going to use the category author’s structure. Nick, why don’t you choose one of the terms for us?
Nick: Okay, I will pick point-of-view.
Jess: Good choice. Now look at your handout for guiding questions and read the question that goes with point-of-view.
Nick: The story or text is written from whose point-of-view?
Jess: Okay good. The question is asking you to tell us the character who is telling the story. It might even be the author.
Nick: Okay, I get it. I think the author is telling the story.
Sam: But, I think it might be Parvana.
Nick: I mean the author is speaking through Parvana so it is Parvana’s point-of-view because she is experiencing the meanness of the Taliban and she is sharing her life with us.

Jess: Good job you two! I would agree that it is Parvana’s point-of-view as told through the author.

Jess continued to engage student volunteers in this process as a means to monitor and informally assess her students’ understanding. As her students began to understand how the questions worked in conjunction with each term, Jess allowed independent time for student pairs to complete the strategy guide.

Step four. During this stage, Jess allotted time for her students to share their responses to the significant terms on the strategy guide, analyze and evaluate responses, make changes, and clarify any questions or concerns the seventh graders had. This step marked the conclusion of whole group instruction as her middle grade students prepared to assume full responsibility for their literacy activity during their collaborative meetings.

Small Group Instruction
Step five. For purposes of this article, this stage highlights the beginning of small group assignments and group discussions. Classroom teachers can use their own grouping methods based on the book to be read; however, we suggest students be assigned to pre-determined heterogeneous groups consisting of four to five students. In Jess’s classroom, this task was accomplished by assigning students to a character in The Hunger Games (Collins, 2008). The students then met up with other students who had been given the same character to form their group. Because Jess had twenty-nine seventh grade students, she formed five groups of five students and one group of four students. She instructed the group with only four members that the category of extensions in DECAL would be addressed by the group in a final activity. Once the groups were in place, Jess established clear parameters for effective communication. While middle grade students need the opportunity to talk and ask questions during their group meetings, she knew that her students must be taught rules on how to listen respectfully, ask appropriate questions, and give constructive feedback so that structure is in place during group interaction.

The students then met to create a schedule for reading and determined how much to read before the next meeting. Each member was allocated a component of the DECAL model and regularly rotated responsibilities among group participants. The reading was completed individually and the students prepared for their collaborative reading discussion using the guiding questions within their DECAL component. In Jess’s classroom, regularly scheduled discussions occurred within the classroom setting until the text reading was complete.

On a weekly basis, Jess met with each group to evaluate their learning experience and record student responses. During this time, Jess reported she used a variety of questions to probe, such as (1) How do you view your membership in a literary community as an active participant?, (2) How does the participation in a collaborative community enhance your comprehension of the reading?, and (3) How does the participation in a collaborative literacy community create a feeling of self-accomplishment? The students were then given the opportunity to voice their individual reflections through journal writing. As a culminating task, each group planned a literature showcase, such as a reader’s theater, enacted scenes, rewrote scenes, or created a video using digital technology for class enjoyment. It was during this time that the group of four students seized the opportunity to elaborate on the Extensions dimension of DECAL.

Jess’s Findings
Vacca and Vacca (1999) explicate, “Through the power of talk . . . students are able to transcend the information encountered in text; and in doing so, they are in a better position to transform knowledge and make it their own” (p. 212). Jess’s efforts to involve her middle level readers in a small group literature discussion provided an experience that thrilled all three of us in terms of the students’ textual engagement and their enjoyment for learning where words such as “cool,” “helpful,” and “more fun” were heard time and again. For example, Jess told us her students liked discussing stories in small groups and several of her students felt their ideas were listened to for the first time. Jess also shared that many of her students believed they learned more by discussing the reading in collaboration with their group versus reading on their own for comprehension.

Jess discovered that DECAL endorsed an environment that was conducive for her young adolescents to build a sense of community as they grappled to understand the complexities of literary analysis. She found that her student-centered approach was engaging for her students to make connections to their personal lives and inviting for students to learn through collaborative and social opportunities. For example, during group meetings, Jess captured how the issue of prejudice became front and center in each of the collaborative literacy meetings while discussing The Hunger Games (Collins, 2008). Most of the students readily acknowledged that issues of social justice in literature were relevant to today’s problems as the students...
connected to racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and political prejudice. Jess shared that words such as “bias,” “discrimination,” and “picked on for being poor” were repeatedly heard. Additionally, some students often spoke from personal, sometimes painful experiences that illustrated the strong connections they had for this piece of literature. For instance, Jess explained that one student wrote in his dialogue journal about his personal experiences with prejudice by offering that he was tired of being judged because of the clothes he wore, where he lived, and the color of his skin.

Jess further found the DECal strategy provided her young adolescents a venue to engage in in-depth discussions as the students collaborated to understand the inner workings of texts and the interpretive possibilities. For example, Jess shared that as the students began to grapple with the significant terms of controversies and dilemmas, the students began to recognize the social inequities in the reading and grew outraged at the political and cultural dominance in the social group in place of her younger sister and drew upon her inner admiration for the main character who chose to fight, to kill, and to win. In this instance, the students constructed meaning while reading responding to literature, made connections to their lives, and developed a sense of enjoyment and belonging. To state succinctly, DECal was a smart strategy for Jess to bring her seventh grade students together to talk about a book they had read.

Implications for Using DECal to Build Collaborative Literacy
In 1993, Mercer (1993) asserted that learning is talk; learning is enhanced when students have opportunities to talk about the ideas and to respond to the ideas of others. Today, Mercer’s words still hold true. To reach all young adolescent readers, middle grade teachers need to recognize that for students to gradually take responsibility for reading and comprehending at higher complex levels of thought, then students must be involved in the exchange and exploration of ideas which are central elements to the understanding and creation of competent readers. This requires middle grade teachers to plan opportunities for their students to share developing thoughts, pose questions to each other, and to collaborate while making meaning of the texts and their own life’s experiences. Accordingly, the use of collaborative literacy is an effective method of social interaction because the collective thinking of the group helps each individual group member’s thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). As students interact, they realize their prior knowledge, the knowledge they are acquiring, and the skills they are learning in order to acquire future knowledge are all tied together. When middle grade teachers emphasize a community of learners through collaborative literature discussions (Lave & Wenger, 1991), they understand that by providing a safe environment for groups’ social and emotional needs, they are giving their students a sense of belonging and enabling them to feel connected to others. Using DECal in a collaborative literature context endorses an attitude that is conducive for young adolescents to work together and support one another throughout the reading process.
References


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