

## *A Second Grade Teacher's Innovations toward Multimodal Literacies in an Urban Primary School*

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### *Abstract*

This study examined a second grade teacher's negotiation of Cognitive Strategy Instruction in a high performing urban primary school in Detroit. In spite of the school's high performing record, teachers were required to adhere closely to paced curriculum and exclusive use of curriculum materials. A teacher and researcher collaboration implemented supplemental texts and negotiated curricular innovations with a theme entitled *Fossils*. An examination of peer-led discussion groups, peer-led reading logs and the focal teacher's Interactive Whiteboard innovations demonstrated deeper comprehension and enhanced participation due to linkages across texts and with students' social worlds.

### *Introduction*

Welcome to Gladstone Elementary, a high performing Detroit Public School that sustains trust, enrollment, and highly qualified teachers. Teachers' attributes of taking the time to know and respect students and families are similar to those ascribed to caring teachers identified by Morris (2004). High achievement is indicated by state mandated criterion referenced tests, in which scores surpass state averages in Michigan.

Gladstone is a beat the odds school, situated in one of Detroit's highest poverty enclaves. Schools in Detroit's high poverty neighborhoods experience numerous challenges that underlie low student achievement and retention. Students are socially isolated from their teachers who live outside of the community (Wells & Crain, 1997). Although a few segregated schools sustain caring teachers and high achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Rose, 2001), several endure overcrowded classrooms, and unqualified, uncaring teachers who would prefer not to teach there. Many who teach there were hired under emergency credentials (Mirel, 1993). Moreover, residing in neighborhoods with high levels of joblessness, high residential mobility, and limited economic opportunity suggests uncontrollable drug activity and related violence, similar to a high poverty Chicago enclave described by Wilson (1996).

Detroit Public Schools are struggling to retain students and face school closure, as a result of low performance and population loss. In recent years, families have sought alternatives with charter schools and neighboring suburbs, reasoning that financial resources follow the suburbs (Irvine, 1990). 34 Detroit Public Schools closed during the 2005-06 school year (Walsh-Sarnecki & Mask, 2005). Since then, approximately 10 schools annually have been slated for closure for not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Effective March of 2010, population loss led to 45 schools slated for school closure, regardless of high or low performing status.

From the onset of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002 until the 2008-09 school year, Detroit Public School teachers of reading and language arts experienced challenges of meeting AYP under the threat of school closure. An indicator of AYP is a passing rate of at least 70 per cent on the state mandated criterion referenced test. Content on the statewide test in Michigan is informed by reading instruction situated in the Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCE), which calls for student relatable reading experiences and in-depth comprehension. Although Gladstone has consistently met AYP, Gladstone teachers experience high stakes criterion referenced testing pressures to preserve its high achieving status to attract and retain students. Therefore, reading and language arts curriculum is embedded in the application of literal comprehension, facilitated by locally mandated pacing guides and exclusive use of curriculum materials that are irrelevant to students. This trend occurs in spite of statewide GLCE and national IRA and NCTE standards (1996) that call for meaningful literacy experiences.

Similar trends have emerged in Canada, in which many teachers have responded to provincial accountability pressures by reducing the teaching of reading to pedagogies that will enhance test scores. Many teachers adjust the teaching of content to resemble what will be tested, while omitting curriculum content that will not appear on the test (Earl et al., 2003). As a consequence, authentic reading experiences are compromised, in favor of reading instruction that heavily emphasizes text-based comprehension strategies.

Amidst these challenges, this study will examine Allison, a second grade teacher who facilitated deeper comprehension with variations of teacher and peer-led discussion embedded in Cognitive Strategy Instruction and her use of Interactive Whiteboard. Allison's innovations occurred in a climate that calls for close adherence to skills outlined in the pacing guide (Valli & Buese, 2007) and limited support of meaningfully integrating the Interactive Whiteboard. Allison additionally wrestled with abandoning her read aloud of *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952) as a result of imposed time constraints. This research will document how a second grade teacher collaborated with a researcher to negotiate curricular innovations with existing practices and supplemental and authentic literature to better engage her students, similar to research documented by Kersten and Pardo (2007). As part of this process, she reclaimed *Charlotte's Web* and her teacher autonomy.

### *Research Questions*

In a high achieving high poverty Detroit Public School constrained by pacing guides, this study examines the following research questions:

- a) How does a second grade teacher collaborate with a researcher to negotiate curriculum constraints to implement cognitive strategy instruction?
- b) In what ways does collaboration support a classroom teacher's transition from didactic participation modes to more active participatory student interaction? How do the students respond?
- c) How does collaboration influence a classroom teacher's negotiation of the Interactive Whiteboard?

## *Theoretical Framework*

### *Cognitive Strategy Instruction*

Cognitive Strategy Instruction (CSI) is a form of comprehension instruction and discourse that is widely integrated into reading programs adopted by school districts, and consequently employed by classroom teachers (Handsfield & Jimenez, 2009). CSI pedagogies include making connections (e.g.: text-to-self, text, and text-to-world). Additional strategies include predicting, summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and inferencing, all grounded in traditional cognitive theories of reading (Handsfield & Jimenez, 2009). Cognitive theories of reading postulate that activating background knowledge, or schema, enhances reading comprehension (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; McVee, Dunsmore, and Gavelak, 2000) and that schema is essential to the process of inferencing (Spiro, 1980). CSI is additionally situated in social constructivism and draws from Vygotskian theory (1978). In that capacity, schema is informed by readers' experiences, shared by engaging in peer-led dialogue to facilitate meaning. Although reading programs and classroom practices intend to be grounded in cognitive theories of reading and social constructivism, a case study conducted by Handsfield & Jimenez (2009) chronicled comprehension strategies that were more skills oriented and teacher-led and on behalf of individual students than on constructing meaning in conjunction with peers.

### *Negotiating Curricular Innovations and High Stakes Testing Pressures: A Collaborative Effort*

Curricular innovations require a balancing act of satisfying curriculum requirements and promising practices. To address constraints manifest in high stakes testing pressures and satisfy state and national standards, Hollingworth (2011, 2007) recommended connecting existing reading units to real-world contexts, in which readers access real books and connect their home and school lives. Kersten & Pardo (2007), Certo (2011), Hill (2012), and Wall, Higgins & Smith (2005) demonstrated that curricular innovations are possible when facilitated through collaborative efforts.

Kersten and Pardo (2007) collaborated with teachers who devised literature-based instructional strategies, in which they negotiated paced curriculum while linking elements of their best practice and emphasizing supplemental authentic literature. Thus, the researchers and teachers collaborated and prioritized the needs and interests of the children, while preserving teachers' pedagogical beliefs and increasing student performance.

Certo (2011) documented elementary age students' transition from the Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (I-R-E) discourse pattern (Cazden, 2001) to peer-led literature-based discussions in an urban primary school constrained by high stakes testing pressures. Findings revealed patterns of students building on each other's ideas, contributing and responding to student-generated questions and acquiring rules for turn-taking. Participating teachers were mentored toward supporting their students' use of peer-led discussion groups to instill comprehension manifest in Cognitive Strategy Instruction.

In a pilot study at Gladstone, Hill (2012) mentored a first grade teacher's use of peer-led discussion groups with the Book Club curriculum (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, George, Hasty & Highfield, 2004). The commercial reading materials were supplemented with relatable literature and students demonstrated tenets of Cognitive Strategy

Instruction. Students developed and responded to each other's questions, vocalized and documented text-text and text-self connections, and demonstrated deeper, higher order comprehension.

Wall et al. (2005) facilitated teachers' innovative use of Interactive Whiteboards, intended to instill deeper comprehension situated in Cognitive Strategy Instruction. Student participants' attentiveness and motivation was enhanced within the realm of the following activities: (a) jotting work on the Interactive Whiteboard for peers to see; (b) volunteering and sharing ideas generated on the Interactive Whiteboard; and, (c) visually bridging ideas together. Teachers were more inventive, as they constructed embedded visuals that enhanced children's understanding and discussion of complex concepts.

### *Research Methodology*

#### *Setting and Participants*

Data were based on observations in one grade two classroom at Gladstone, a high performing Detroit Public School. The class comprised of 18 students. 17 students were African American; one student was European American. Nine students were girls, and nine students were boys. Most students participated as first graders in a pilot study I conducted during the previous academic year. Focal students were selected based on their compelling responses and reading log responses during instructional practices.

I am a teacher educator from a university in close proximity to Gladstone. The first grade teacher I collaborated with during the pilot study referred me to Allison because of her expressed interest in cultivating peer-led discussion groups. I developed relationships with many of Allison's students during the previous year and was eager to continue working with them as second graders. When we initially met we decided that we would sustain a collegial and collaborative relationship. My aim was to mentor Allison's curricular innovations, within the parameters of her practice, and in a manner that was non-threatening. We developed a working relationship and collegial bond, as we conceptualized Allison's practices and discussed her students' reactions to them. The principal at Gladstone recommended me to both teachers and supported my collaboration with them. The relationship impacted data collection because my mentoring influenced instructional changes that likely would not have occurred. However, Allison incorporated changes into her on-going practice and was a teacher leader who additionally mentored her colleagues to implement similar innovations.

#### *Data Collection*

Data were gathered one day per week over a four-month period, from February to May 2009. As a participant observer, I interacted with the class during the morning literacy rotation, for approximately two hours and observed Allison's practices. Gathered data included audiotaping and transcribing classroom interaction and peer-led discussion surrounding *The Enormous Egg*, a novel the researcher read aloud that supplemented the theme on *Fossils* and *Charlotte's Web*, a novel Allison read aloud to the students. Data additionally included student reading log samples surrounding *The Enormous Egg*, along with in-the-moment fieldnote jottings of peer and teacher-led interactions. Allison and I engaged in on-going, informal interviews throughout the study that were documented in fieldnotes.

### *Data Analysis Procedures*

Data reduction corresponds with themes that emerged throughout the study. Integrated/Excerpt style (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) was implemented to analyze the data. Integrated documents include peer-led reading logs, selected as compelling written literature responses that reflect interaction during read aloud discussions of *The Enormous Egg*. In addition, fieldnotes convey innovative student interaction to read alouds of both novels and multiple perspectives. Fieldnotes additionally convey students' participation with the Interactive Whiteboard to document changes in Allison's practice from the beginning and end of the study.

Excerpts include informal teacher interviews to support Allison's perspectives of the curriculum and assertions about modifying pedagogy to incorporate multimodal literacies that embody varying discourse modes and Interactive Whiteboard. Excerpts include peer-led discussions to illustrate evidence of enhanced cognitive strategy instruction during varying participation discourse modes, situated in multimodal literacies. Reduction and coding of data were guided by students' participation in multimodal literacies, particularly their compelling linkages across curriculum and supplemental literature, their social worlds, and personal experiences.

### *Findings*

#### *Collaboration to negotiate CSI pedagogies*

During the onset of the study Allison and I collaborated to determine how she could negotiate rigid curriculum requirements and more meaningfully implement CSI pedagogies. During our initial meetings, she expressed both satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the reading series and its exclusive use by the district-sanctioned pacing guide. She appreciated components that corresponded with CSI, including predicting, summarizing and clarifying details. Having studied the reading series closely, she informed that materials in the reading program intended to provide opportunities for the students to engage in peer-led discussion and to make deep connections with students' experiences and supplemental texts. The district-sanctioned pacing guide, however, presented significant limitations and time constraints that hampered her ability to enact tenets that she would have preferred to implement.

An examination of her practices revealed an overemphasis on fulfilling skills oriented workbook pages. In her effort to garner student participation, she utilized the Interactive Whiteboard to display the worksheet page students were working on, while student volunteers read sentences and offered a vocabulary word to correctly complete the sentence. Although vocabulary activities were in the context of the selections students were reading, the interaction between Allison and her students were very similar to Handsfield and Jimenez's (2009) criticism of CSI instruction. Students provided the correct content related vocabulary to complete the cloze sentences and clarify details, but the activity provided minimal opportunities to more deeply interact and deliberate about how the vocabulary enriched the story or their knowledge about the content. Limitations with engaged interaction between Allison and her students was her source of frustration. Allison regularly noted that such procedures led to student fixation on identifying the correct answer. She was therefore eager to engage students in comprehension activities that allotted for more than one possibility for students to negotiate in order to encourage independent thinking.



Allison was new to implementing the Interactive Whiteboard and wanted to acclimate herself in a manner that would enable her to facilitate deeper comprehension and interaction with her students. Along with that, she wanted to provide opportunities for her students to engage in peer-led discussion groups. Making these adjustments would foster a transition from teacher-led, didactic practices to more interactive teacher-led and peer-led interaction. I had no experience with the Interactive Whiteboard, so was eager to document her transition to illustrate her potential to enhance her interactive use of technology. At the same time, I anticipated that I could offer support within the realm of leading the students into peer-led groups because of my experiences as a classroom teacher.

Students were engaged in a theme entitled Fossils during the time of the study. Finding supplementary texts with an interesting plot line proved difficult. A trusted colleague of mine recommended Butterworth's (1957) *The Enormous Egg*. This novel is about a young boy, Nate Twitchell, who discovers an enormous egg that was laid by a hen on his family farm. What occurs is an unusual scientific phenomenon, for the family discovers, with the help of a paleontologist vacationing in the area, that the egg is actually a dinosaur egg. The family's life is forever changed as they nurture a dinosaur and eventually decide to send him to Washington D.C. where he can receive the care he needs. I was initially uneasy about this selection because of the 1950s rural context in a New Hampshire, European American family. At a first glance, I did not think the students would relate to this story. Upon engaging and trying on the text myself, I noticed similarities with a few of the selections in the reading series, particularly Hennessy's (1990) *The Dinosaur Who Lived in my Backyard*. This short story is about a dinosaur who lives in a modern day neighborhood. In addition, *The Enormous Egg* integrated numerous content area vocabulary terms that were prevalent across several stories, in addition to features of dinosaur eggs that were confirmed in the reading series.

When I shared the novel with Allison, she recognized several similarities with *Charlotte's Web* and was emphatic that the students would be interested. She began the school year reading the novel aloud, but the pacing guide pushed her to abandon it, along with many goals she sought to pursue. The next section will describe our collaboration with CSI pedagogies, situated in multimodal literacies. This transition inspired Allison to negotiate additional participation strategies with *Charlotte's Web* and the Interactive Whiteboard.

Our collaboration led to my role of reading aloud *The Enormous Egg* to nurture deeper comprehension and linkages with the theme. The plotline at the onset of the novel surrounded Nate Twitchell's discovery that the hen on the family farm laid an unusually large egg. As I engaged the students in a discussion of this phenomenon, John suggested the hen was like the TV character Fat Albert. Joclyn immediately responded this was off topic, which prompted me to ask John what he meant by his comment. When John offered the hen was really big, like Fat Albert, I added that comparing to TV shows could be considered on topic, especially if the comparison made sense. John's comment pushed Joclyn to rethink the idea of linking pop culture references to literature, thus an instance of multimodal literacies.

Upon further reading, the students were introduced to Dr. Ziemer, a paleontologist summering in the area who provided Nate and his family the guidance to confirm that the egg was a dinosaur egg and supported them toward providing conditions to ensure that

the egg would hatch out. During the read aloud students compared the length of time it takes for a duck to hatch and the dinosaur egg, five and six weeks, respectively. Many speculated that it was not possible for a dinosaur to exist in the present day, and that the dinosaur that eventually hatched must be a snake or lizard. Karen and Gregory were convinced that anything could be possible if it were a fantasy story and that the dinosaur might even fly.

Our initial collaboration cultivated deeper comprehension embedded in CSI pedagogies. Upon recognizing student engagement with the read aloud, we decided to collaborate to nurture more active, peer-led interaction, manifest in multimodal literacies.

#### *Collaboration to transition from didactic participation to participatory student interaction*

Allison and I conferred about varying ways the students could collaborate. We decided to try the possibility of whole group participation in orchestrating reading log posters. Group reading logs were implemented to illustrate discussion and collaboration. In addition to documenting peer-led collaboration, at least one group member could present the outcomes to the whole group, hence, an opportunity to encourage varied participation, situated in multimodal literacies.

Students orchestrated group reading logs during a time in the novel when the farm got too small and cold to accommodate the growing dinosaur, lovingly named Uncle Beasley. As a result, Dr. Ziemer, accompanied by Nate, relocated the dinosaur to Washington, D.C. and placed him at the National Zoo to live in the elephant house where he could be cared for. But politicians wanted to do away with him because he was too costly and inefficient. The students, Allison and I engaged in discussion about how this occurrence played out in Charlotte's Web because Wilbur was threatened for the slaughter for being the runt of the litter, which prompted Gregory and Joy to add that Uncle Beasley's life was threatened for being too big. The students pondered over whether or not Uncle Beasley would be spared. Jeremy was convinced that Uncle Beasley would not be spared and claimed "That's life", in reference to Charlotte's Web. I added that we can want something, but sometimes there are not enough resources to keep things going and that we need to learn how to say good bye. In the moment, I was pushed to mention the closure of Belle Isle Aquarium, a place in Detroit that was dear to many families and children. In spite of advocates fighting to keep it open, the lack of resources could not keep it open. Because the aquarium was not within their living memory, Kareem volunteered that Tiger Stadium was going to be torn down and his uncle was on the wrecking crew. He knew there were a lot of efforts to keep it open. A final example we talked about was their own school that managed to stay open on several occasions because the teachers and administration managed whatever possible to keep its doors open. The read aloud discussion provided text-text and self connections, as intended by CSI instruction.

The readings and discussion prompted the following pertinent group reading log, on behalf of Joy, Jennifer, Brandon and Dwayne (Figure 1):





believe any of this was possible, but the story concluded with an assurance that you could go to the National Zoo in Washington, DC and find Uncle Beasley there.

The reading of the end of the book and whole group discussion that followed influenced the following reading log on behalf of the same group members noted in the aforementioned reading log (Figure 2):



**Figure 2.** Peer-led reading log: This story reminds me of Charlotte's Web because they wanted to kill the pig because he was a runt; what if Nate didn't even want to say the speech?

This group reading log provided an opportunity to navigate between both texts and illustrated their awareness of Wilbur and Uncle Beasley's potential fate. The what if question exudes the possibility of a negative outcome for Uncle Beasley, had Nate been unable to advocate for him. The use of text-text inquiry and questioning embodied tenets of CSI instruction. Upon completion of their collaboration, one member of each group presented their poster to the whole group to demonstrate deeper comprehension and big ideas conveyed in their posters.

#### *Collaboration toward a classroom teacher's negotiation of the Interactive Whiteboard*

Our collaboration with *The Enormous Egg* and *Charlotte's Web* encouraged Allison to devise comprehension strategies she had been longing to fulfill, but was unable to manage. She fulfilled pacing guide requirements prior to the end of the school year, which afforded her more time and flexibility for enhancing her use of multimodal literacies within the realm of the Interactive Whiteboard.

Allison designed a template for the students to examine the setting, characters, and complication in the story. In addition, she designed a template that prompted students to explore vocabulary in a manner that illustrated vocabulary words Charlotte employed to save Wilbur from being slaughtered. Lastly, Allison integrated a reading log template to facilitate the whole group's connection between *Charlotte's Web* and *The*

*Enormous Egg*. These strategies were Allison's effort to facilitate deeper comprehension among her students, in tandem with implementing Interactive Whiteboard.

When Allison presented the story grammar template, the students were excited to contribute to a large colorful image of the farm, along with images of the main characters in *Charlotte's Web* (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Setting, plot and complication. Myra featured jotting Wilbur next to his image

Allison began the lesson by prompting for the setting of the book. Jackson volunteered and responded by saying that the setting was the farm. Allison requested a bit more elaboration by asking if this was just any farm. Joy added that the setting was the Zuckerman farm. When Allison asked about where most of the action occurred, they offered that the action occurred with Wilbur and Charlotte in the barn. Next, Allison invited students to write the characters on the Interactive Whiteboard. Joclyn wrote Fern next to a picture of a girl, followed by Karen who wrote Templeton's name next to the picture of a mouse. Joy wrote Charlotte's name next to the picture of the spider, while Myra wrote Wilbur next to the picture of the pig. After all major characters were identified, Allison elicited for the complication in the story. Joy offered that Wilbur was a runt, to which Allison replied that Arable wanted to kill Wilbur because of it.

Revisiting the setting, characters, and complication was an enactment of CSI instruction that established students' enthusiasm to move forward with the vocabulary web that followed (Figure 4).



**Figure 4:** Vocabulary web enactment

The interaction surrounding the vocabulary web provided a more in-depth discussion of Charlotte's role as Wilbur's savior. During this process, students were invited to write words Charlotte wove in the web in her effort to spare him the slaughterhouse. Each participant was required to describe the significance of their selected word in relation to Wilbur's character. To illustrate, Jeremy offered "humble". When Allison asked him to elaborate on what this meant for Wilbur, he stated that one is not supposed to tease someone if they did not win a medal. Allison affirmed Jeremy by commenting that one is not boastful when they win, but congratulates that person. Additional words for discussion included radiant, terrific, and some pig. Of all words, Jeremy suggested that humble was the most fitting. When Allison prompted for whether or not "humble" saved Wilbur, Jeremy offered that Wilbur won a medal. Allison affirmed Jeremy by commenting that the medal kept him safe. In this regard, the children were able to elaborate on the nature of Wilbur's character. This enactment provided more depth and exploration than the cloze strategy documented at the onset of the study.

Allison imported the reading log template from the peer-led posters into the Interactive Whiteboard. She invited participants to write in their favorite part. Joy jotted "when Fern saved Wilbur's life" and John wrote "When Wilbur saved Charlotte's egg sac". John's contribution led to a whole group discussion about leaving Charlotte's legacy, especially when her eggs hatched. When the children were invited to contribute what the story reminded them of, Jeremy wrote "The Enormous Egg". Jeremy's contribution led to revisiting the idea of saving Uncle Beasley. The children wrote in several questions in the question segment of the log that revisited the notion of leaving a legacy on the farm, including Joclyn who wanted to know if Wilbur might have babies. When Gerald suggested this was not possible, Allison suggested he could have a family. She referred to Templeton, the rat on the farm who had a family. Consequent discussion about life and death among characters led to Allison affirming "That's life" on the farm. Ultimately, facilitating multimodal literacies that encapsulated tenets of CSI and enabled Allison to reclaim her teacher autonomy. Her innovations enabled her students to participate in a discourse community and deepen their understanding of text in myriad ways.

### *Conclusion*

Allison provided systematic access to skills-based instruction, as mandated by the locally mandated curriculum and pacing guide, which rendered exclusive use of the anthology as a result of high stakes testing pressures. This occurred, in spite of state and national standards calling for more meaningful and relevant comprehension strategies. To that end, she indicated that students were struggling with the literal comprehension focus mandated by the anthology and that most selections were not relevant to the students.

We collaborated to implement Allison's use of CSI pedagogies one morning per week, while required skills-based instruction and literal comprehension embedded in the anthology were enacted during the remainder of the week. I engaged students in read alouds of supplemental theme-based literature. We collaboratively selected literature in accordance with student interest and facilitated students' collaboration and jottings in their peer-led reading logs. Upon completing reading logs we supported students' transition into debriefing the outcomes of their posters. These interactions enhanced their comprehension and speaking skills. Students constructed multiple interpretations,

made personal connections, and provided critical questions and responses to the literature. Student participation was manifest in Cognitive Strategy Instruction (Handsfield & Jimenez, 2009). Allison became more active with her pedagogical Interactive Whiteboard applications, consistent with Wall et al. (2005). Students eagerly contributed and shared ideas on the templates. Ultimately, participation led to enhanced peer-led discourse and comprehension inspired by asking questions and considering multiple perspectives that were not outlined in the local pacing guide. Student responses prompted Allison to consider ways in which she could integrate multimodal literacies into the curriculum in a more cohesive fashion the following year.

Low performing and aspiring schools alike can benefit from this study, for it illustrates a teacher's willingness to negotiate scripted curriculum and provide youngsters access to innovative practices that allot for in-depth comprehension. Allison's high expectations for her students, regardless of their circumstances, are indicative of the school climate that is committed to academic success. Although this is a local study on a small scale, there is potential to disseminate findings of this research to additional classrooms at Gladstone, along with low performing and aspiring schools desiring to negotiate rigid paced curriculum.

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