

## Reading Instruction and School Librarians

Article

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Junko Yokota, director of the Center for Teaching through Children's Books at National-Louis University, recently presented the keynote address at the Biennial Congress of the International Research Society for Children's Literature (IRSCL). In this address given in August 2013, she spoke of her experiences with asking reading teachers and school librarians to evaluate e-picture books for newer readers. As an example, Yokota showed the Congress attendees a Tumblebooks version of *The Journey of Oliver K. Woodman*. She pointed out that in this version, readers can listen to the story's text being read aloud as the corresponding words in the text are highlighted on the screen. Teachers, Yokota said, praised how this particular feature reinforced word recognition and fluency development. Librarians, however, remarked that the manner in which the text was animated obscured significant portions of this picture book's images. She said that school librarians seemed to understand the importance of the whole text in the process of reading (Yokota 2013).

### TEACHING READING

As school librarians, we have many roles, such as program administrator and information specialist, but a key role many of us may overlook is as an instructional partner in teaching reading. School librarians may not have the expertise to teach young readers how to blend sound-spelling patterns to make sense of unfamiliar words, but reading is much more than phonics. Reading is about meaning making, and constructing meaning requires intellectual engagement with the full range of a text's symbolic expression, words, and images, both print and digital. Reading involves goals, strategies, dispositions, and motivations, along with specific skills. Yet, as school librarians, though we readily embrace the task of promoting reading, we sometimes distance ourselves from teaching reading, believing it to be the job of classroom teachers or reading specialists.

Perhaps we have some vestigial memory of our profession's past. In the first comprehensive textbook on school librarianship, Lucille Fargo wrote, "it is [not] the function of any librarian to teach the mechanics of reading as they are taught in the classroom. Such objectives are as distasteful to the present author as to the profession at large" (1930, 64). Yet that sentiment is more than eighty years old. In 2010, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) released a "Position Statement on Librarian's Role in Reading" which advocated—unlike Lucille Fargo—for the inclusion of school librarians as instructional partners in the teaching of reading. No more shirking! It is not enough for school librarians to collect materials helping readers learn how to access their intellectual contents.

### THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN'S ROLE IN THE TEACHING OF READING

The AASL position statement uses school librarians' more familiar roles, such as promoting information literacy and inquiry, collaborating with teachers, and managing collections, as starting points for reading instruction. For a student to become information literate, for instance, she must understand the text she reads (or views or hears), otherwise she will be unable to assess its quality, relate it to what she already understands, or determine what information she still requires to reach her goal. Understanding is comprehension, and AASL proposes that librarians have a legitimate role to play in teaching comprehension. Librarians cannot and should not act alone in teaching reading; as AASL acknowledges, "the responsibility for the successful implementation of reading promotion and instruction is shared by the entire school community" (2010, np). Yet school librarians can provide teachers and readers with meaningful texts, spur reading engagement, and collaborate with the school community, as well as assist in teaching reading comprehension.

### TEACHING COMPREHENSION

Comprehension is a key element of reading instruction, joining with phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary. Although readers must attend to all of these skill elements in order to be successful at making meaning (i.e., one needs a good working vocabulary and/or the ability to decipher unfamiliar words in order for anything to make sense), comprehension is more than the sum of those parts. As reading scholar P. David Pearson notes, reading comprehension is "the 'aha' that occurs when there is a 'meeting of the minds' between author and reader" (2009, 4). How and when that "aha" occurs is something we can observe only indirectly, yet it is the outcome we can promote through modeling and explicit strategy instruction.

Think about when you learned to drive a car. Early on, you had to be taught to check the review mirror. Then for a time, had to be reminded (or remind yourself) to check it, but after you gained experience, that practice became automatic. Learning how to make meaning from texts is much the same: less experienced readers need a model, direct instruction, reminders, and practice. Using our skills as more expert readers, we can model for students how we ask questions of texts, predict outcomes, and

connect new ideas to what we already know in order to create meaning. For experienced readers, these processes are automatic. Modeling requires us to be more aware of our own reading comprehension processes—what’s called metacognition, or thinking about thinking—and that takes practice. Along with modeling various strategies, we must provide guidance to less experienced readers on when, how, and why to use them—that’s the explicit instruction part.

Modeling and strategy instruction can take place in a one-to-many teaching format, but it can also easily be implemented in a one-to-one setting. As an example of the former, the school librarian could model for students who are beginning an inquiry project how she identifies important ideas in an encyclopedia entry. Then, she could provide students with a worksheet or verbal heuristic to aid them in their own work. In a one-to-one setting, a school librarian might work with a student to puzzle through making sense of a confusing infographic.

If these examples sound to you like information literacy or information skills instruction, they are! In some instances, reading comprehension instruction is really not so different from what school librarians are already doing. In the January 2013 issue of *School Library Monthly*, you can find a matrix prepared by former school librarian and current librarian educator Judi Moreillon that shows the alignment among inquiry, reading comprehension, Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and more (<http://schoollibrarymonthly.com/articles/pdf/Moreillon2013-v29n4p29.pdf>). Moreillon also has made the work of modeling and teaching reading comprehension easier with her two practically-focused books on the topic, one for elementary school librarians and the other for secondary school librarians (2012, 2013).

## **PROVIDING MEANINGFUL TEXTS**

As school librarians, we “get” the idea of collection development. In addition, part of our regular work with classroom teachers is helping them identify texts that meet particular curricular and instructional needs. Thus, working with teachers to ensure they have meaningful texts for reading instruction should be an easy part of school librarians’ jobs. Yet with the widespread adoption of the 2010 Common Core State Standards (CCSS), librarians must reconsider their approaches to this particular task. The CCSS defines meaningful texts in a way that goes beyond curricular relevance and demands that texts are appropriately complex. In Appendix A, the CCSS defines text complexity along three equally weighted dimensions: quantitative, qualitative, and reader/task.

- Quantitative dimensions of text complexity are essentially readability measures as determined through analysis of word count, sentence length, and text cohesion. Measures such as Accelerated Reader scores and Lexiles indicate complexity in this manner.
- Qualitative dimensions of text complexity take into consideration levels of meaning or purpose, text structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands. No formulas exist to determine this dimension, so librarians must use their knowledge of youth literature and text features in concert with close reading of the material in order to evaluate this dimension.
- Reader and task dimensions call on school librarians to use their knowledge of reader’s advisory technique alongside their skills in identifying just-right, culturally relevant texts to meet the needs of this dimension ([http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_A.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf)).

It will take practice for school librarians to apply these three dimensions consistently in recommending texts for classroom and reading instruction, but more than any other person in the school community, librarians have the skills and the tools to do this work effectively. Library educator Jean Donham offers some additional considerations for selecting CCSS-appropriate texts and building CCSS text sets in the March 2013 issue of *School Library Monthly*.

## **SPURRING ENGAGEMENT**

If the previous section was focused on the role of texts in classroom instructional settings, this section gives attention to promoting reading by spurring young people’s engagement with texts of all kinds. While they may not always enjoy the texts used in direct instruction, students must have access to personally meaningful texts in their school libraries for free voluntary reading. All facets of students’ reading abilities—but especially fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary—benefit from opportunities for practice with diverse texts. School librarians can provide students with free-choice access to text-rich environments, give them opportunities to share what they are reading with peers and adults, and offer them meaningful incentives for reading. For more ideas about how to ensure that young people want to read, see my article on reading engagement, “Reading Motivation and Engagement” in the December 2009 issue of *School Library Monthly*, pages 39-42.

## **COLLABORATING WITH THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY**

As both the AASL “Position Statement on the School Librarian’s Role in Reading” and the CCSS acknowledge, teaching reading is a collaborative, community responsibility. As important as it is for librarians to advocate for participation in teaching reading (the AASL *School Librarian’s Role in Reading Toolkit* offers some useful guidance), we must also be willing to understand the terrain where our classroom teachers are working. Whether it’s differentiated instruction, Response-to-Invention (RTI), leveled reading, or some other relevant practice, we should take time to learn about it. We should talk to teachers and administrators and find out what challenges they face.

We should consider the needs of parents and caregivers in the community too, perhaps finding ways to cooperate with public library counterparts to ensure that reading instruction and development extends beyond school walls. We can look for opportunities to attend non-librarian professional events such as conferences sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English (<http://www.ncte.org>). We can read beyond our own field's professional literature. Many of the reading/literacy/language arts titles published by Heinemann are good starting points (<http://www.heinemann.com>). *School Library Monthly* also has many good articles, such as the January 2009 piece by Liz Knowles, on differentiated instruction. Such articles can help identify how to make some of these external concepts relevant to the work of school librarians.

## MOVING FORWARD

School librarians can do more than promote reading. We can accept the role as instructional partners in teaching reading and thrive in performing it. This is not a role for only elementary school peers, middle and high school librarians should also be involved—students at all levels need guidance in becoming more proficient, engaged readers. The first time we witness a student's "aha" moment in making meaning from texts, will be the moment we are hooked.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

American Association of School Librarians (AASL). "Position Statement on the School Librarian's Role in Reading." 2010. <http://www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy/resources/position-statements/reading-role> (accessed August 23, 2013).; American Association of School Librarians (AASL). *School Librarian's Role in Reading Toolkit*. 2010. <http://www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy/tools/toolkits/role-reading> (accessed August 23, 2013).; Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSS). "Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards." [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_A.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf) (accessed September 16, 2013).; Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSS). 2010. <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards> (accessed August 23, 2013).; Donham, Jean. "Text Sets, Deep Learning, and the Common Core." *School Library Monthly* 29, no. 6 (March 2013): 5-7.; Fargo, Lucille. *The Library in the School*. American Library Association, 1930.; Knowles, Liz. "Differentiated Instruction in Reading: Easier than It Looks!" *School Library Media Activities Monthly* 25, no. 5 (January 2009): 26-28.; Moreillon, Judi. "A Matrix for School Librarians: Aligning Standards, Inquiry, Reading, and Instruction." *School Library Monthly* 26, no. 4 (January 2013): 29-32.; Moreillon, Judi. *Coteaching Reading Comprehension Strategies in Elementary School Libraries: Maximizing Your Impact*. ALA Editions, 2013.; Moreillon, Judi. *Coteaching Reading Comprehension Strategies in Secondary School Libraries: Maximizing Your Impact*. ALA Editions, 2012.; Pattison, Darcy. *The Journey of Oliver K. Woodman*. Tumblebooks, 2004.; Pearson, P. David. "The Roots of Reading Comprehension Instruction." In *Handbook of Research on Reading Comprehension*, edited by S. E. Israel and G. G. Duffy, 3-31. Routledge, 2009.; Tilley, Carol L. "Reading Motivation and Engagement." *School Library Monthly* 26, no. 4 (December 2009): 39-42.; Yokota, Junko. "What Works Well Where When? How Various Qualities of Digital and Print Picture Books Shape Reader Response." Keynote Address, Biennial Congress of the International Research Society for Children's Literature (IRSCL), Maastricht, Holland. August 2013.

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