

“Reading Between the Lines”

An Exploration of What Reading  
Comprehension Entails in a Kindergarten  
Classroom

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Inquiry Conference: May 7, 2005

## **Abstract**

How can teachers teach and support reading comprehension for children as young as kindergarteners? This inquiry explores different activities that help children make connections to the texts. Through combining activities and read alouds students are able to show their understanding of the print in a variety of forms.

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*“It’s always good to be very excited about reading!”*

~five-year-old kindergartner (January 2005)

*“I love reading, especially with you, Miss Wei!”*

~five-year old kindergartener (March 2005)

**Background Information**

These two quotes brought a sense of accomplishment and warmth to my heart as a kindergarten teacher. It was such a great feeling when my kindergarteners talked about their excitement regarding my reading lessons. I have been working on an inquiry project where I researched and collected data on how reading comprehension can be measured for students as young as kindergarten and how teaching specific skills may enhance students’ reading understanding.

I am an intern teaching in the State College Area School District at Gray’s Woods Elementary School located in Port Matilda. My mentor teacher, paraprofessional and I teach in a kindergarten classroom with nineteen children. Like most classrooms, our class consists of children with different characteristics, strengths and challenges. Out of the nineteen children, I have two girls who read fluently on a second grade level; I have four boys and two girls who read at an early and middle first grade level, four boys and two girls reading at a strong kindergarten level, two boys reading with a lot of adult guidance and three girls who are still struggling with their alphabet and corresponding letter sounds. Two of the three girls who are struggling with their alphabet were adopted. Two boys who are reading at a strong kindergarten level have trouble sitting still in class and following directions. However, these boys are usually very calm and focused during reading time. Two of my students, one boy and one girl, see our

speech therapist every day for twenty-five minutes. Three boys and four girls spend time with our reading specialist each day for twenty minutes. Every child has different needs, wants, strengths, weaknesses and successes. I believe that it is important to treat each child as a special individual.

While deciding on an inquiry topic, my goal was to see what I could research and collect data on that would benefit all the students in my kindergarten class. It was also important to me that my inquiry would provide an opportunity for me to grow as a future classroom teacher. I brainstormed numerous ideas and my topic wavered many times, but I finally found an issue that I am truly passionate about and excited to learn more about. This topic evolved into reading comprehension.

I believe reading comprehension is crucial to students because it shows the students' understanding of books and it is the basis of all their other learning. It is simple for students to sit on the rug in class and listen to their teachers read a book aloud. However, the students' answers and responses to the questions the teachers ask are what make a difference in the students' learning. I wanted to try many different types of teaching strategies including small-similar ability grouping, small-mixed ability grouping, and whole group instruction. I wanted to observe and see which students were participating during the read alouds, which students were not participating and what were they doing instead.

I became intrigued about reading comprehension because I think it is important to consider students' understanding before they become fluent readers. I wanted to understand how the readers who struggle most might be able to decode and explain the plot, characters, problem and solution of the stories. By nurturing their reading comprehension skills, I believe teachers will be able to help students make sense of the story and identify the specific purposes of read

alouds. My inquiry was based on this belief and the hope that I could prove it and find evidence to support it.

My wonderings and questions evolved into the following list:

- How could I teach and evaluate reading comprehension for my kindergarten students?
- What different kinds of activities could I facilitate for my students to enhance their reading comprehension or allow them to better demonstrate their understandings?
- How would the children react to these different activities?
- How would placing the students in mixed group ability settings and same group ability settings change their comprehension?
- How would the lesson results differ between whole group instruction and small group instruction?

### **Literatures' and Experts' Guidance**

I was interested and excited to find out what I could do to help students improve and strengthen my students' reading comprehension. The resources I used included my mentor teacher, Professional Development Associate, school librarian, specific literature written by experts in the field and my own thinking. I used these sources to generate ideas and specific activities I could introduce and facilitate with my students to enhance their reading comprehension, helping them think more about the storyline.

Throughout my inquiry, I continuously sought out literature from experts in the field on reading comprehension. According to the book, Teaching for Comprehension in Reading: Grades K-2 by Gay Su Pinnell and Patricia L. Sharer, "When you read aloud, you are building up meaning and text resources that students can use throughout elementary school and beyond, perhaps throughout life," (2001, p. 35). I found this quote to be significant because it reveals the

importance of reading aloud to students. For some students', teacher read alouds may be the only time the students are being read aloud to; students may not receive the parental nurture and guidance through bedtime stories or read alouds at home. Therefore, it is important for teachers to expose students to numerous children's books in a read aloud form. In addition, by reading aloud to students, it shows the students that it is not their ability to read that is being evaluated. When the pressure is taken away from the students on whether or not they are able to read, the students are able to enjoy the books more and are also able to focus solely on the meaning of the text including the plot, setting, problems and solutions. "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is *reading aloud* to children," (Trelease, 1989, p.2).

After discovering how important read alouds are to children, I wanted to study related literature and consult with experts about what they thought of activities happening prior to and after the actual read alouds. According to the book, The New Kindergarten: Teaching Reading, Writing and More by Constance J. Leuenberger, combining read alouds and activities helps extend the children's understanding of the book (2003, p. 91). Wanting to take advantage of all the sources I am lucky to have within the State College Area School District, I decided to interview Gray's Woods librarian, Anne Bruce. I asked Mrs. Bruce how she assessed student comprehension after a read aloud. Mrs. Bruce informed me that she had many discussions with the students regarding the book. She would ask numerous questions to introduce the book, and to follow up with after the book. I proceeded to ask Mrs. Bruce how she chose the specific books that she read weekly to my kindergarteners. Mrs. Bruce chooses her books through the specific units and themes being taught in our class including holidays and seasons. I realized with such cooperation and interaction between the librarian and the classroom teacher, the

students are able to increase their ability to comprehend the stories because they are able to use existing connections and understandings.

One of the main challenges of this inquiry project was seeing how I could assess students' reading comprehension prior to them being able to fluently read text. Curious to see how Mrs. Bruce addresses this challenge, I asked her for her thoughts. Mrs. Bruce told me that she believed that through listening to stories, students are able to work on reading comprehension even before they are able to read. Mrs. Bruce and Mrs. Dobash, my mentor teacher, work closely with one another and frequently communicate to see how they can help the children learn proficiently.

The State College Area School District's Writing Team wrote The Language Arts Continuum: Reading, Listening, Speaking and Research commonly known as the LAC. In the LAC, it emphasizes the importance of reading comprehension strategies, because they serve as a strong steppingstone to the students' goals of understanding text. These comprehension strategies called "The Great Eight", were a constant support for me throughout this inquiry project because it helped me find new activities for the students. Such techniques included monitoring, previewing, self-questioning, making connections, and summarizing.

"Reading is the construction of meaning," (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996, p. 156). Children are able to continuously make sense of the world during read alouds through the text. According to Guided Reading by Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, comprehension begins even before the story is read. Comprehension begins when children make predictions and anticipate what may happen in the story; children use their own personal experiences and prior knowledge to extend their reading comprehension.

Meaning of the text is constructed when children draw inferences from the text to develop conclusions, make critical judgments and create their own personal interpretation of the story. The way students make sense and perceive the book is what develops their understanding of the book's plot and characters. Students who comprehend the story create visual and sensory images from the text before, during and after reading. It is also a good indication of comprehension when the students are asking questions of the text that is being read (Miller, 2002, pg. 8).

Reading literature and talking to experts made me more eager to start this inquiry and find some answers.

### **Implementation of My Inquiry**

After finalizing my inquiry topic, I realized reading comprehension is an issue that both my mentor teacher and I always keep in the back of our minds when doing a read aloud with the students. Due to my inquiry project, this became my priority and constant goal for the next few months. When beginning my inquiry project I realized that I wanted to create a baseline for my research. I wanted specifically to watch carefully what my students' reactions, gestures and answers were during a read aloud. My baseline read aloud was I Love You So Much by Carol Norac (Appendix 1 – 2). I read this book aloud to the students in a traditional read aloud setting that we have been doing since the beginning of the school year. All nineteen children were gathered on the rug in a random order sitting on their own square of the rug. I sat on a trunk in front of my students; this is where my mentor teacher and I normally sit when giving directions or reading books. Before I started reading the book, I asked questions relating to the theme. For example, I showed the students the cover of the book and then proceeded to ask them to predict what the book was about. I asked questions throughout the story regarding the plot such as,

“Why is Lola upset?” and “Why didn’t Lola feel like saying her special words again?” When I was done reading the story, I asked the students what they thought of the book, if they liked the book, what were their favorite parts, and who were the important characters in the book.

My baseline lesson helped me consciously realize that there were students who consistently raised their hands and wanted to participate with the read aloud discussion, and there were other students who were more reserved and tended to blend in with the audience. I noticed that even amongst my high achievers, some of them were shy to answer questions or participate. I know these students knew the answers to the questions; perhaps they were too shy to contribute or maybe they just didn’t feel like participating at that moment for this particular read aloud. Therefore, this baseline increased my desire to see how these kindergarteners may act differently when placed in smaller group settings, and how these kindergarteners may act when given a different lesson format and extension of read alouds.

Throughout the two months that I collected and analyzed data, my kindergarten class studied three different units: emotions, nutrition, and animal habitats (Arctic/Antarctic, Desert and Ocean). I wanted to read books to my students that were related to the units in order for the students to get the most of the read alouds and the objectives of the lessons.

The first book I used for my inquiry project was When Sophie Gets Angry – Really Really Angry by Molly Bang. Similar to when I read I Love You So Much, I read When Sophie Gets Angry – Really Really Angry out loud to the entire class (Appendix 3 – 4). However, this time, I did not ask in depth questions regarding the story. I did a quick introduction on general emotions and then proceeded to read the book. After I read the book, I told my kindergarteners that during stations time we will be discussing the story more in small groups. Twenty minutes later immediately after the read aloud, when my mentor teacher and I dispersed the students into

the correct station, I took a group of students into the hallway to teach my lesson. Prior to the lesson, I had already prepared the groups the students were placed in; the students were in a group of four children who were amongst the same reading ability and comprehension as one another. I used markers, index cards and two huge circles to create a Venn Diagram. When my four students were situated I took out two index cards. On one index card I wrote, “Pandas” (that is what my kindergarten class is called), and on the other index card I wrote, “Sophie.” I then explained to the students that we were going to talk about what Sophie does when she is angry, what we do when we are angry, and what are some actions that we have in common. I was curious to see how my students would participate in this discussion because their ideas came straight from their own ideas. They were not relying on other students who may seem to have a higher reading comprehension as them. They were relying on their own merit to see what actions and ideas they could place in our Venn Diagram. We went around in a circle and each child was asked to give an idea to put in the Venn Diagram. When the idea was given, I wrote it on an index card and had the child place the index card in the correct place on the circle.

The Venn Diagram activity worked successfully for many of my students, and brought out a part of the students’ understanding in reading I had never seen before. The students were answering the questions succinctly and in a concise manner avoiding any off-the-wall and irrelevant answers. Students were less shy when I called on them for responses during the Venn Diagram activity. Students seemed to like the change in learning and discussion because of the props used for the Venn Diagram. Instead of having students raise their hands, I had the students sit in a circle, and respond one-by-one as we went around the circle. With this different approach, all the students became more involved, engaging and contributing more ideas and connections to their personal experiences; there were lesser responses such as “I forget,” and “I

don't know." Because of the achievement of this type of lesson, I used another Venn Diagram activity later on in my inquiry project.

During the Arctic habitat unit, I did a two-part lesson on penguins with the students. I read the non-fiction book, Penguins by Gail Gibbons, to the entire class. I chose to read a non-fiction book because I wanted to see how students would respond to a book that does not necessarily have a structured beginning, middle and end. I was curious to see how I could make this book meaningful for each student.

After reading the book to the students, I worked with the students in a small mixed-ability grouping; I formulated the students into five different groups. At this time, I incorporated technology in our first part of the lesson. Working with a group of four students, I placed two students at each computer. I had the students take turns using the mouse. I watched, in particular, how the students interacted with one another and how their ideas helped each other reflect their new understandings of penguins. Each child remembered different parts of the Penguins read aloud, and therefore were able to remind and inform their classmates during the activity. When preparing for this lesson, I found an amazing website that is a part of the Goleta National History Museum (<http://www.air-and-space.com/200101%20Antarctica/Penguins.htm>). During this lesson, I had the students look at numerous pictures of penguins on the website. Then the students compared the penguins: noting the similarities and differences. Using headphones connected to the computer, students were also able to listen to what a penguin's voice sounds like.

After all my kindergarteners had the opportunity to use the computers, I gathered them together on the circle rug for the second part of this penguin lesson. I first reviewed what the students learned about penguins from the book Penguins and from the Goleta National History

Museum website. I asked each student what was his/her favorite penguin and we made a tally chart on the board. Then I read the book, Tacky the Penguin by Helen Lester, to the entire class. This book is a fictional book about penguins and the focus is on its main character, Tacky. Tacky is a goofy penguin that just cannot seem to fit in with his other penguin friends. The children thoroughly enjoyed this read aloud. This book was by far one their favorites. While bringing together the information the children learned about penguins, I also wanted to find a way to observe the students' reading comprehension in both books incorporated in this lesson. I believed the Venn Diagram was the best way. Therefore, I drew a sketch of a Venn Diagram with the students on butcher paper. One circle of the Venn Diagram was labeled Storybook Penguin and the other circle was labeled Real Penguin. I had the students sit on the rug in a circle, and called on each student to contribute to the Venn Diagram (Appendix 13). The students enjoyed comparing Tacky, the non-fiction penguin, to the real penguins because they were able to explain the goofy and funny parts of Tacky. I enjoyed teaching the lesson because this lesson allowed students to incorporate the comical parts of the story into a well-controlled manner.

Connecting to the habitat unit, I read the non-fiction book, Prairie Dogs by Celia Lottridge and Susan Horner, to introduce the desert. I did this read aloud lesson in a small mixed-group ability setting. Wanting to see what my students knew about prairie dogs, what they wanted to learn, and what they learned after hearing the story, I decided to record the children's ideas and answers through a KWL (K = what they know already, W = what they want to learn, L = what they have learned after the entire lesson) chart. In the past, I had never asked questions specifically in this KWL format; this technique was a new and different perspective of a read aloud for my students. Once again, similar to the Penguins lesson, I incorporated

technology into this lesson. I found a website called “DesertUSA: The Ultimate Desert Resource” ([http://www.desertusa.com/dec96/du\\_pdogs.html](http://www.desertusa.com/dec96/du_pdogs.html)). This time, I integrated the website and the book together at the same time. Prior to the students’ arrival at the computer station, I had already set up the prairie dog website on both computers. When I started teaching this lesson, I asked the students what kinds of animals they thought lived in the desert. Then I showed the students the cover of Prairie Dogs and asked them what kind of animal they thought we were going to read about. I also had the students turn their attention to the computers and look at the other numerous pictures of prairie dogs that were shown on the website. I proceeded to ask them what they knew about prairie dogs and what they wanted to learn about prairie dogs. I called on each student in the group in order to get an answer from everyone. Then I read the book to the students, stopping frequently to discuss the pictures or the content of the book. As I read the book, I had a printed copy of the website information on prairie dogs. Therefore, I combined both my book and website resources to give students the best data on these animals. I chose to switch back and forth between the book and the computers because it allowed students a change in the method of how they were being taught. The computer also added use of various senses (hearing, visual movement) including watching a short clip of a prairie dog in action, and hearing what a prairie dog sounds like.

After simultaneously reading the book and viewing website, we talked about what they learned from the story and website and what were their favorite concepts about prairie dogs. At this time, I filled in the students’ responses under the ‘L’ section of my KWL chart. To wrap up the lesson, I found a fun computer game called Pet the Prairie Dog. The KWL chart allowed me the opportunity to see what the students learned from the book. It is simple for a child to sit and look attentive during a read aloud; when I decided to record the information and ask specific

questions about what they learned, the students were now giving me more knowledge of what the students really grasped from the lesson.

I read the book No David! by David Shannon as a part of the emotions unit. This book helped assess the children's reading comprehension because the story is told solely through the pictures. The book continuously repeats, "No David!" and on each page there is a picture of David doing something that is naughty or dangerous. I introduced this book to the students by asking them if they had ever done something that they knew was probably not the right thing to do (Appendix 5 – 6). After asking that question, I showed the students the cover of No David! and asked them to explain what David was doing wrong in the illustration. Then I began to read the book, and throughout the story I asked my students what was wrong with the picture and what was David doing wrong. This book allowed for a lot of student interaction because they were telling the story in their own words by looking at the pictures. This book definitely supported the famous saying "A picture is worth a thousand words."

After reading the book, I described the special lesson we would be doing. I separated the students into small mixed groups of five students. Each group of students was going to work in a team to create their own No David! story. This lesson required collaboration from one another because the students chose a joint name, whether their character was a boy or girl, what clothes their character was going to wear, and, at the end what kind of person will forgive the character for his/her wrong actions. The activity was a mixed-group lesson because I wanted to see how the students would interact with one another and how they would help each other think of funny ideas for their books whether they were strong or weak readers. Writing and spelling were not the importance of this lesson. I was observing how students worked together, and how students understood what was the purpose of the book they were writing: to draw pictures of their

character doing something wrong. After all my students had an opportunity to write and be a part of their No David! stories, I bound the books, and the students shared them to their classmates. It was so neat to see how proud the children were of their books (Appendix 14 – 20).

After studying and reading a book about penguins in Antarctica, I felt that reading a book about polar bears that live in the Arctic would help students develop the conception that not all cold animals live in the same place. I read a non-fiction book called Bears by Dagmar Fertl, Michelle Reddy, and Erik Stoops. In a non-fiction book, it is very important to find ways for the students to stay connected with the book and interact with the book because there is often times no clear beginning, middle and end, and there is not a clear problem or solution. In an effort to keep the students' attention, I decided to have the students participate through body movements during my read aloud. The eight different body movements showed that polar bears are the largest bear species, polar bears live north of the equator in the Arctic, young bears stand up while play-fighting, polar bears clean themselves by using water or rubbing themselves in snow, polar bears pant like a dog when they are too warm, polar bears have a thick coat, polar bears are great swimmers, and polar bear moms nurture their young. I thought of the body movements prior to the lesson so the students were able to become physically involved in the lesson. All my students willingly participated. The body movements also helped students use their kinesthetic ability to assist them in remembering the new bear facts (Appendix 7 – 8).

The second part of this bear lesson was having the students write a big book about polar bears together as a class. I passed out real photographs of bears describing specific characteristics, or doing specific actions from the informational book and had each student paired up with a partner. These partner groups were mostly same ability grouping, however, the class helped each other as a whole too. I created such a partnering atmosphere because I wanted the

students to feel all right if they were not positive what was being described about bears or what bear action was being portrayed in the picture. I wanted the students to realize that this activity was going to be a joint class effort. After the students got their photographs, I had them talk to their partners about what the picture was about. Then once again, I read Bears for the second time and when I got to a part where a photograph is used as illustration, I stopped and asked students who thought they had the specific photograph that matches the story at that moment. Once the students identified their pictures, I had them come up to the front of the class and hand me their pictures. Then I asked them how they thought that picture related to the matter we just talked about. Afterwards, the partners talked to one another and formed a sentence that explained what was going on in the picture. This sentence would be placed underneath the photograph. All nineteen of my students had a chance to work in groups, and come up with a sentence to place underneath a picture. At the end of the activity, my students had created a class big book. The children took a lot of pride in the big book and during stations time they made a cover page for the book. I got it bound and laminated and then left it in the classroom for the rest of the school year. Frequently, I saw the children going back to the story, reading the book and admiring their own work. This big book was a great success because it gave students the important sense of team effort. It also allowed me to see how my students could show their reading comprehension through more than just a simple question-answer discussion.

Near the end of February we were concluding our unit on emotions, and I ended with the book, Love You Forever by Robert Munsch. This book is about the circle of life and provided the students with a loving mother's perspective of how her child grows up from being a baby to a father himself. It shows the young boy doing many mischievous actions but every time by the end of the day, the mother looks at her child and smiles. I introduced this book to my students

by asking students what specific events have made them feel happy, mad, and sad because I wanted to make sure my students knew the clear differences between these emotions (Appendix 9 – 10). After introducing the book, I pulled out three different kinds of emotional faces drawn on paper plates: happy, sad and mad. I had seven paper plates of the happy faces, six paper plate of the sad faces, and six paper plates of the mad faces thus having one plate for each student (Appendix 21 – 23). I randomly handed out an equal amount of happy, sad, and mad faces to each kindergartener. Then I had the students sit together according to what kind of emotional face they got. Before handing out the paper plates, I made sure I explained the purpose of the activity; I did not want the students to become distracted by the materials. The students were instructed to simply raise their plates up in the air when they felt the mother was feeling the emotion portrayed on their plates. Then I began to read Love You Forever. Throughout the book I stopped and allowed students some time to think about the emotions generated. I also questioned the students and asked them why they thought their particular emotion was being portrayed. This lesson gave all students the opportunity to participate in the lesson without needing to participate in the typical hand-raising manner. It was nice to see *all* my students participate because they *all* were holding up a paper plate at some point in the story.

Our second unit following emotions was nutrition. My goal was to find a book incorporating many different types of foods. I read the book Mouse Mess by Linnea Riley to my students. Out of my many different read alouds and variety of reading comprehension lessons, this book was by far one of my most unique ideas (Appendix 11 – 12). When reading the book to the students I did not show them the illustrations of the book. Instead, I passed out two Ziploc bags to each student. One bag consisted of all the foods that were included in Mouse Mess, which were cornflakes, crackers, Oreo cookies, peanut butter and jelly crackers, and blocks of

cheese. The other Ziploc bag contained sugar. As I read the book, the students ate each food item when we arrived to that point in the story. I had the students sit in a circle for this read aloud. This was a unique seating arrangement and it allowed me the opportunity to see each child's face and expressions clearly. After the students finished eating the foods for the particular part in the story, I would ask students how they imagined the picture in the book and exactly how they envisioned the mouse playing with the food. The best part of this lesson was that there was no such thing as "a wrong answer," or "a right answer," and it also did not give the students a chance to say, "I forget," because there was nothing to forget. Everything came straight from their imaginations.

For the second part of the lesson, I had the students draw pictures of their favorite part of the book and how they pictured that part in their mind. This activity was an extension of the activity done on the rug; this time the students were asked to record what they pictured and use sound spelling to explain their pictures. It was awesome and interesting to see the big difference in the students' drawings. It was all about the students' own interpretation and comprehension of the story. This lesson demonstrated that children could comprehend any story, when given the opportunity to use their own imaginations and personal experiences.

My last three read alouds were all a part of our habitat unit: oceans. I took a very different teaching approach with two out of these three read alouds. I decided to incorporate a typical paper and pencil worksheet. I chose to use a worksheet to see if this type of lesson would help certain students whose strength is in visual learning. Worksheets allow children to record their own answers and ideas. I was nervous using worksheets for kindergarten aged children because up to this point, my students have not been exposed to worksheets. I created these worksheet lessons at the conclusion of my inquiry because I felt that if there was any time that

my students were prepared for this type of lesson, it would be later on in their kindergarten school year. I wanted to give as much time as possible for my students to mature.

I read the book Fish is Fish by Leo Lionni. This book was a great introductory book to the lifestyle of a fish, and was also a great read for students to understand the concept of fairness. I read the book to the students in small groups several times, and prepared a worksheet for the students to complete. The worksheet I had created was one where I soon realized I needed to change and adapt to the ability of my class (Appendix 24). I chose Garfield emotion faces, where for each question asked on the worksheet, the student got to circle the specific emotion they thought the fish was feeling. The emotion faces represented the equivalent to a five-point Likert scale ranging from extremely happy to very sad. After each question and Garfield emotions, I decided I would ask the students to sound spell and explain the reasoning to their answers. For example, specific questions included, “How did the fish feel when he and the tadpole were inseparable friends?” and “How did the fish feel when he found out that the tadpole was a frog?”

When I first wrote the worksheet, I assumed I would read the questions to my students, have them circle the specific emotion and then have them write their explanation of the question. I completed the worksheets with three students at a time; before long, I realized that this activity would work better with one-on-one interaction. One-on-one interaction would allow me the chance to pay closer attention to the students’ answers. If the students responded with, “I don’t know” or “I forget”, I would be able to probe them and ask them for more detail. Also when the students did the worksheet in the groups of three students, they began saying the exact same answers as each other. I had trouble assessing their understanding of the book because I did not know if they were really thinking of the same answers, or if they were just replicating their group

members' ideas. Therefore through one-on-one interaction, I proceeded to carry out this lesson by reading the questions to the student and asking them why they chose their specific emotions.

As I continued working on this worksheet with students, I realized that it was very hard for students to sound spell and think of their answers simultaneously. It became very evident that my students were becoming frustrated with the worksheet. Upon careful observation, I noticed the students had a lot to say and knew how to answer the questions. However, they were having trouble writing their responses down onto paper. There was nothing more exasperating for my students to know what they wanted to write, but because they could not write as fast as they thought, they consequently forgot their ideas. I finally stopped having the students write, and I had them tell me what their answers were as I scripted for them (Appendix 25). This allowed them the opportunity to think solely about their answers. Furthermore, I was able to assess the students' answers by hearing the students' reasons. I detected a big change between the beginning to the end of this lesson due to the many adaptations that happened throughout.

Another book I read aloud to my students was What's It Like to Be a Fish? by Wendy Pfeffer. This was a non-fiction book that allowed the students the chance to hear the important daily facts about fish. I read this book to the students in a whole group setting. To introduce the book I asked the students what they remembered from Fish is Fish and what they learned about real fish in that book. Transitioning to What's It Like to Be a Fish?, I asked students what they thought this book would be about. Then I proceeded to read the book to the students, stopping frequently to ask their ideas and opinions of the story. Once again, similar to Fish is Fish I had the students complete a worksheet. This time the worksheet was a True/False worksheet (Appendix 26). I did this activity in small same ability grouping as well as individual grouping. I decided to do small and individual groups because it enabled more one-on-one interaction

between the student and the teacher. When students arrived at my station, we first defined True/False together. Then I read the questions out loud to my students and asked them to mark a T for true or a F for false.

My final read aloud for this inquiry project was Swimmy by Leo Lionni. This book was such a great book to conclude my project and unit with because it incorporates the meaning of friendship, challenges, and specific facts about fish. I decided to do my lesson in a whole group instruction. However, this time, I had the students do a thorough prediction and picture walk through of the book before I read the book aloud to the students. I first questioned the students by asking them what they thought the book might be about, giving them just the clue of looking at the cover. Then I did a detailed picture walk through of the book by asking the students to tell the story in their own words before actually hearing the plot of the story.

Students participated in this read aloud by raising their hands or by me calling on them. What was unique about this prediction picture walk through was that the students' responses affected other students' responses because they were working together as a class to decode what Swimmy was about. For example, in the book the text says, "One bad day, a tuna fish, swift, fierce and very hungry, came darting through the waves. In one gulp he swallowed all the little red fish. Only Swimmy escaped," (Lionni, 1963, p.5). However, when solely looking at just the pictures, the occurrence could be interpreted differently. Since one of my students raised her hand and said, "I think the school of red fish got away from the big black fish. The school is now hiding from the black fish," the other students that participated afterwards based their prediction off of the girl's speculation. This activity helped students rely solely on their visual skills and their imagination. The children could take the story anywhere the pictures lead them. I received a lot of student interaction and participation because similar to Mouse Mess there was

no right or wrong answer for this lesson. The children were telling the story in their own words and ideas. After going through the entire book just looking at the pictures, I read the book aloud to the students. Then I had the students compare the actual story to the story we made up ourselves as a class. The students loved seeing the differences and similarities. This book also inspired many students to write and draw their own stories and to ask their classmates to guess what their story may be about.

These are the many different read alouds and lessons that I integrated throughout my inquiry research project. I have seen how these activities have increased students' excitement and understanding of reading.

### **Data Collection and Analysis of the Data**

Throughout all of these lessons, I have collected my data in a variety of ways. I created a checklist of my students' names and next to each student's name I placed their individual responses and comments to the questions. I was able to compare the students' ideas and responses to one another when the responses were placed in this checklist. For example when I was assessing the students' comprehension of Fish is Fish I had five sheets of the checklist placed in front of me; each checklist was for one question on the worksheet. Whenever I talked to each student, I placed down their response next to their name on the checklist (Appendix 30 – 34). I was also able to compare and contrast the individual's responses throughout all the read aloud lessons.

I brought in a tape recorder to school to record some of my inquiry lessons. Most of the time I brought in a tape recorder during lessons where the students verbally communicated their thoughts and ideas a lot. Listening to the tapes when I got home, allowed me more time to reflect on the students' answers and analyze their understandings. I listened carefully to how the

students' answered the questions and how other students' participation and responses affected others' comments.

Many times I wrote journals on my lessons. I liked to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses on how my lesson went. I wrote a journal after my first reading lesson with When Sophie Gets Angry – Really Really Angry because I wanted to reflect on the impact and changes that I was noticing (Appendix 35 – 36). Another journal I wrote was on my reading lesson Mouse Mess (Appendix 37 – 38). This lesson was an unique and effective activity. In my journal, I talked about how the students were engaged throughout the lesson and what I thought was in the lesson that captured their attention.

I also wrote numerous anecdotal records on the students, recording even their simple discussions they have before and after the lessons. Many times this is where I really had a chance to hear what the students really thought of the lessons. While teaching in a kindergarten class, I have learned that kindergarteners tend to be very honest. They always say what is on their minds, and usually blurt out what they are thinking. These anecdotal records became very crucial while I analyzed the data for my inquiry because it truly showed what the students really enjoyed and what they did not enjoy as much.

I created bar and circle graphs, to get statistical analysis on the students' enjoyment of the lessons. Having a specific percentage allowed me to observe the successes and weaknesses of the lessons, my teaching, and the students' engagement (Appendix 39 – 40).

Following each read aloud and lesson, I constantly asked myself how I personally could assess the students' reading comprehension from the books. I reviewed the data I collected, and saw how students contributed their ideas by using other materials and how students enthusiastically participated through other means of communication besides the typical question

and answer response. At the conclusion of my inquiry project's implementation, I compiled a list of the books I have read aloud to the students over the period of my inquiry project (Appendix 40). Then I made up a reading survey asking my students numerous questions regarding the past months (Appendix 41). This reading survey felt like a personal interview with each student. Such questions included, "What were two of your favorite reading activities? Do you think you learn from read alouds?" My supervisor, Mr. Cole Reilly, assisted me in delivering this evaluation so the students would not have a biased opinion to the questions. My kindergarteners like to please my mentor teacher and me, and I figured it would be best for my students to be asked these questions by a neutral party. When my students were asked "How do you feel when Miss Wei reads a book aloud to you?" 50% of the students marked the very happy Garfield faces, and 50% percent of the students marked the happy Garfield faces. No one marked the sad Garfield face. This survey was a big help to my research, because after consulting the experts, as well as my students, I was able to assess my students' reactions, ideas, and knowledge related to the read aloud lessons.

Using the data I collected from the reading survey, I created bar and circle graphs, to get statistical analysis on the students' enjoyment of the lessons. Having a specific percentage allowed me to observe the successes and weaknesses of the lessons, my teaching, and the students' engagement (Appendix 39 – 40).

## Claims and Evidence

### Claim #1

*The value of an activity is not inherent only in the activity itself, but in the students' reception of that activity.*

During my inquiry project I managed twelve different read alouds, with eight completely different reading activities. In the book The New Kindergarten: Teaching Reading, Writing and More, author Constance J. Leunberger mentions how collaborating read alouds and activities improve and enhance students' reading comprehension (2003, p.91). I agree wholeheartedly with the author because with a combination of both, I was able to assess my students' learning, understanding and enjoyment of the lessons. Looking at the statistics presented in Appendix 41, it is apparent that the students enjoyed the lessons. In fact, out of my kindergarten class, 18% of the students said, "I liked them all!" regarding the reading activities. Even though there are low percentages for drawing pictures, answering questions and face cards, these activities still made a difference for some students. In another words, all activities were liked by at least one student already proving that the activities were meaningful. When teaching children, the teacher's goal should be how to effectively teach the material in an interesting manner for the children. It is important to incorporate various kinds of activities because students enjoy doing diverse lessons for their own different reasons. Please look at Appendix 42 to see statistics regarding the students feeling about read alouds. Sixty-one percent of the kindergarteners enjoyed the activities the most from these past months.

When I surveyed my students and asked them "What makes reading fun?" many of them said that they really liked Mouse Mess because I did not show them the pictures and they had a chance to use their own minds. All children said they liked Mouse Mess because they liked

eating the foods. There were other students who thoroughly enjoyed making their own No David! books because their own personal books were something they were so proud of at the end. One of my few students who liked the answering questions activity in both Fish is Fish (Appendix 24 –25) and What’s It Like to Be a Fish? (Appendix 26) was a student who was very quiet in class and reserved. He was the type of student that always paid attention in class, but remained very shy in voluntarily raising his hand compared to his other classmates. He explained that what made these reading activities fun for him was learning about real information and the facts. The worksheets for What’s It Like to Be A Fish? involved true and false questions regarding the non-fictional information throughout the book. Another student of mine said he enjoyed reading when he was able to read his books by himself. This boy took great pride in his No David! book (Appendix 14 – 20) and the big book we created from Bears. Being the author or co-author for both books, he could read these books so fluently which then reinforced his confidence in reading and reading with understanding. In fact, this student asked me if he could bring his group’s No David! book home for one night to show his family. I was beyond thrilled.

Each student gets something different out of a read aloud and lesson. For example, one of my students said he loved when we read Swimmy because he remembered the jellyfish that was in the book. Another student said she loved No David! because David did so many funny things in the book. Another student remembered Tacky the Penguin because she loved the funny jokes in the book. Some students said they liked the read alouds because of the pictures. They enjoyed seeing how the pictures related to the book. Other students said that they liked read alouds because the teacher used funny faces and funny voices for the characters.

It is important for the teacher to get to know his/her classroom and to see what types of activities and lessons work best for the students in grasping the comprehension of the reading.

**Claim #2**

***Group size and dynamic has a significant impact on instruction and assessment.***

Throughout my inquiry I worked with all different size groups ranging from groups of one-on-one with student and teacher, small groups of four to six students, and whole group instruction with the entire class. Using different group sizes allowed me the chance to see how children benefit from the advantages. My baseline was I Love You So Much. I read this book and asked pre-questions, questions throughout the book, and follow up questions to the entire class (Appendix 9 – 10). At this time, the same students were the ones consistently raising their hands, as the other students remained quiet. Through small sized groups, I was able to give students more attention and encourage them more to speak their answers. I noticed that during whole group instruction, children may not be raising their hands or offering their answers because they were shy; it did not mean they necessarily did not know the answers. Therefore, small groups allowed students to share their ideas with a smaller number of students and the children felt less pressured.

After reading When Sophie Gets Angry – Really Really Angry to my students, I separated them into small groups when working on the Venn Diagram activity. Students participated more in this small group because they were not as overwhelmed in a large group situation. One of my highest readers and achievers in my class was very shy in whole-group participation. I remember during I Love You So Much this girl did not raise her hand once when I asked many general and comprehension questions. I am certain this girl knew the answers to the story because I read with her in her small reading group with another student. This girl is

reading and understanding on a second grade level. When I worked with small groups during When Sophie Gets Angry - Really Really Angry this girl's participation blossomed. She had elaborate responses that directly answered the questions. I had the students sit in a circle and when I asked questions we went around the circle and each student contributed their ideas to the Venn Diagram. I made sure that we did not pass any of the students. The students did a wonderful job relating their own personal feelings to Sophie's feelings. The small groups also allowed me the opportunity to give each student more time to think of their answers. In the small groups, I was able to assess the students' understanding in more detail because I looked at the students as individuals instead of an entire kindergarten class. I focused on each child when he/she spoke to observe if he/she understood the story plot and the directions to the lesson.

Please see Appendix 27 and Appendix 28 for evidence as to how students benefited from small grouped writing. These examples are students' works of their pictures they drew for Mouse Mess. Appendix 27 is a sample from a student who had a great deal of trouble sitting still or focusing during a whole group instruction. However, when given the chance to work in a small group setting, I was able to encourage him to draw a lot of details in his picture and write carefully as he sound spelled his story. Appendix 28 is a sample from a student who struggled with sharing ideas relevant to the read alouds. She willingly participated in whole group. However, when called upon in class, she often replied with, "I forget." Giving her small group instructional time to work on this assignment, she was able to talk through her ideas and tell me specifically how the mouse spread the peanut butter. I was absolutely delighted to see how she was able to draw her picture, write her ideas on paper, and sound spell all at the same time.

There are other situations when whole group instruction works best for students. The students thoroughly enjoyed reading Bears together as a class. The class worked as a team to

make their classroom book and they were so proud of their results. This lesson helped students build upon team learning. I was able to assess the students through their display of their classroom book. When I was reading aloud, Love You Forever by Robert Munsch, the students enjoyed sitting in their different groups of happy face plates, sad face plates, and angry face plates (Appendix 21 – 23). With the class separated into three groups, the students relied on one another in their groups to see if their classmates felt that the mother was feeling the same emotion as what they thought. It was good to place the students in a whole-group instruction for this lesson because they supported each other's ideas about the emotions. There was a feeling of team pride and joint understanding within the groups.

I planned many different sized grouped lessons to see how students respond to the change. It depends on the lesson and how each student works.

### **Claim #3**

*Depending on the lesson both, same ability grouping and different ability grouping, are effective for student learning.*

When working in small groups, I placed the students in two different types of grouping: mixed-ability and same-ability. Similar to my first claim, I realize that students benefit from the different types of grouping depending on the lesson. When I had the students work on their No David! books, I placed them in mixed ability small groups because I wanted my students with strong writing skills to help my students with weaker writing skills. I also noticed that within the mixed groups, students had different ideas of what the character should look like, what the character would wear, and what the character's name should be. I had the students working in small-mixed ability grouping during the lesson with the book, Penguins. With this lesson, the students were working with the computers, and I placed two students at each computer. I

realized that within these mixed ability groups, ability did not play a crucial role on the usage of the computer. All students had a grasp of the mouse and knew how to move it. When we were discussing the content of the Goleta Museum website, it was amazing and astonishing to see how the students communicated with each other. They would talk about the penguins and their new favorite information they learned about the penguins. The partners began to have wonderful discussions about the penguins, and I saw how their ideas bounced off of one another.

When I taught lessons using worksheets, I carried them out in same ability small groups. This worked well for the beginning. However, I soon began to see a routine where students would repeat the answers from the other students sitting around them. Therefore, for both read alouds Fish is Fish and What's It Like to Be A Fish, I soon switched over to one-on-one interaction with the students. This allowed students to truly think about what they believed the answer to the questions were and why they think their answers were appropriate.

Therefore, I truly believe that ability grouping is something that needs to consistently change to adapt for the lessons; teachers need to incorporate mixed ability settings and same ability settings in order for students to benefit from both situations.

#### **Claim #4**

*Teachers cannot effectively ascertain students' comprehension in just one way; teachers need to find various ways for children to share their understandings.*

This inquiry has proved to me that reading comprehension can be seen through numerous ways and not just the typical question answer responses. From my baseline, I observed that the same students were consistently raising their hands as the other students just sat quietly on the rug. I wanted to see how I could get students' to show their understanding and to get the students to contribute their ideas. I wanted to find a way to see the students' comprehension

through the different activities. It is so important for teachers to allow students to participate through other means of interaction and communication. Students who were not raising their hands during my baseline lesson probably knew the answers to the questions too. Maybe they were shy; maybe the students did not like contributing their answers in a speaking or verbal manner. That is why I used different types of activities throughout my inquiry. I wanted to apply physical, cognitive, visual, and auditory activities; this allowed students to use various senses including touch and taste to learn and show their learning. Students were retaining information from the read alouds as well; this reinforced the fact that students are all different kinds of learners. They could be visual, auditory or kinesthetic learners. This is why it is so important to incorporate a variety of these types of lessons. Students began to participate more throughout the different lessons because their answers and responses were shown through different applications; not just through discussion.

Children show their understanding of reading through different means. Depending on the student, the child's comprehension may shine or may phase out during a specific lesson. As the teacher, it is important to see what type of lesson brings out the comprehension in a child. Because a child is not participating during class discussion, because a child is not drawing clear pictures of the book, because the child got all the questions on a worksheet wrong, does not mean this child did not comprehend the book. The teacher needs to continuously do different lessons and try to get the most out of the child's understanding of the book.

When I read Mouse Mess to my students and they ate the foods, they remained quiet and attentive throughout my lesson. I have one student in my class that continues to struggle with her letters of the alphabet and the numbers one through ten. In the beginning of the school year, it was very hard to understand this child when she was speaking because she tended to slur her

speech. Her English language was very shaky and new because she was just adopted from India. Nevertheless, this kindergartener consistently tried to participate in class. When I did the Mouse Mess, I expected to probe her and repeat myself numerous times about how she needed to use her imagination for the picture. Ironically, this kindergartener looked at me, looked at her paper and began to draw (Appendix 29). In the beginning of the Mouse Mess book, it talks about how the mouse waits till the people family goes upstairs to sleep and then the mouse came down to eat. My student drew a mouse, a bed, and a block of cheese on her paper. Then she drew a box around the cheese. After she was done, she looked at me and began her elaborate story, “Miss Wei, Miss Wei! This is the mouse. The mouse come downstairs to eat. He was in his bed first with his covers. Then he came downstairs after the people came upstairs. He eat the cheese. But wait, the cheese was in the refrigerator. He open the refrigerator, take cheese out, and eat the cheese,” as she motions exactly how the mouse ate the cheese with it between its paws with her own hands, “then he puts the cheese back in the refrigerator, goes upstairs, climbs back in bed. Oh but wait, he had to pull covers over his head, so he is warm. Then mouse went back to sleep.” Then the kindergartener looked my eyes and I had this enormous grin on my face from the beginning of her story. She looked back at me, smiled and began to laugh. This moment was both a teaching and learning moment for me. I will never forget how excited I was with her response. Her imagination soared beyond belief.

This elaborate response given by this student was a response that I would have never gotten in a full group setting or in a typical read aloud lesson. Because I tried an unique lesson and a different way of approaching the students’ understanding, I was able to detect and decode my students’ understanding through their imaginations and drawings. This is clear evidence that

it is important for teachers to give a variety of opportunities during assessment to evaluate the students' comprehension.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

After spending months working on successful activities to increase students' reading comprehension, I have learned that it is most important for teachers to recognize their students' techniques of learning. The teacher needs to reach out to the students and see what type of learner the students are and in what circumstances do the students learn best. When it is apparent that only the same students participate in a certain activity regarding reading comprehension, it is the teacher's job to find other ways and other activities to include all students. These activities need to make students feel comfortable in order for them to express and show their true understanding, and in order for teachers to truly assess the students correctly. Children's active participation is a great way to show whether or not they really are involved and engaged in the lesson. However, the teacher needs to adapt her teaching to each student and each student's own individual learning abilities.

### **Further Wonderings**

As I conclude this inquiry project, I wonder what more research I could collect:

- Would the activities be as effective in another classroom?
- Does age have any factor in teaching for reading comprehension?
- Do my students participate more during class discussion time now that the inquiry is over?

### **Future Directions**

This inquiry project has opened my eyes to the meaning of reading comprehension and the behaviors that show understanding. In my future practice as a teacher, I hope to incorporate

many different activities similar to the activities I carried out with my kindergarten class. I plan on observing my students, and getting to know my students well. After I understand how my students learn best, I will be able to teach them in that manner; then the students will get the most out of the lessons. Reading is a complicated subject. It is not a subject that can simply be touched upon and expected to guide its own course. Reading is something that takes time, patience and energy to see what works best for both teacher and student. Every student in the class is important. They are each their own individual person, and they each need to be given the opportunity to learn in their best way.

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