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Teacher flexibility and judgment: A multidynamic literacy theory

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Abstract In an age of restrictive standards and accountability measures, teachers often find themselves in a position where they have to struggle to keep play with language and literature as a focus of their early literacy instruction, as 'scientifically based' reading programs, phonics, or scripted instruction take center stage. In order to counter this trend, this article offers a 'multidynamic' theory for early literacy instruction that combines researched foundations of early reading success with sociocultural theories of language and literacy. Combining these two fields of thought creates a theoretical stance where reading skills and methods cannot stand on their own, but instead must be dynamically reinvented to fit specific sociocultural contexts. The study analyzes the texts of 'scientifically based' reading programs as compared to examples of children's literature as a way to explore three basic tenets of a multidynamic literacy theory: (1) that literacy is multifaceted; (2) that literacy is socially constructed; and (3) that literacy skills must be relevant within the lived worlds of children. The analysis overall (re)situates talk, play, and the instructional use of children's literature as essential components of early literacy programming. More importantly, a multidynamic literacy theory offers teachers the pedagogical basis to insist upon a great deal of flexibility and judgment in choosing the best materials and approaches to meet their students' early literacy needs as well as their sociocultural contexts for learning.

Keywords children's literature; early childhood literacy; sociocultural theory

Introduction

The word 'kindergarten' means 'children's garden,' and for years has conjured up an image of children playing with blocks, splashing at water tables, dressing up in costumes or playing house. Now, with an increased emphasis on academic achievement even in the earliest grades, playtime in kindergarten is giving way to worksheets, math drills and fill-in-the-bubble standardized tests. (Hemphill, 2006)

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At least in the USA, early childhood education (PK-2) has become a site of increasing accountability with the attempt to normalize instruction through programs, manuals, and materials aligned with a 'back to the basics' philosophy. As indicated in the quotation above, this 'back to the basics' philosophy has closed down play kitchens, dress-up corners, and building-block areas in kindergartens across various social classes, with special intensity in higher poverty schools to increase academic expectations and meet annual yearly progress (Hemphill, 2006). Morrow and Schickendanz (2006: 269) note, it is '[a]gainst this backdrop [that] there is good reason for the concerns of many early childhood educators and researchers that the role of play, including dramatic play, may be overlooked in our effort to ensure that children receive more explicit language and literacy instruction'. 'Scientifically based' reading programs and 'evidence-based' instruction limit the extent to which authentic, high-quality, language-rich children's literature can serve as a primary means for explicit literacy instruction, as the idea of playing with the language and concepts of books comes in second (at least) to scripted skills. As Berlak (2003:15) states: 'The most obvious consequence of using highly prescriptive reading packages is the loss of flexibility – the ability of classroom teachers and schools to use their own judgment in selecting teaching materials and methods that respond to children's learning differences as well as to differences in culture and language'.

Not too many years ago, Martinez and McGee (2000: 166) argued that 'young children's need for authentic literature will be recognized in beginning reading programs of the next millennium (Freppon and Dahl, 1998)', and they predicted that decodable texts would not be likely 'to move in the direction of the contrived linguistic readers of the 1960s'. Yet just the opposite is occurring, especially in the United States, as contrived and highly scripted commercial series are the types of reading programs funded through national legislation. Therefore, as Martinez and McGee (2000: 166) also indicated, 'what ultimately must be more fully developed is a theoretical rationale for why reading instruction *requires* literature'.

In order to counter this 'back to the basics' trend, which minimizes play with language and literature and basically places teachers on the level of deskilled technicians, this article provides a theoretical rationale for why early reading instruction *requires* literature, why early reading instruction *requires* play with language and with high-level concepts, but most importantly, why early reading instruction *requires* teacher flexibility and judgment in choosing the materials and approaches their students deserve. While it may seem as though teachers can and do choose materials that are best for their students – and indeed, most teachers work very hard to do so – my

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hope is that a clearly articulated theoretical position can enable teachers to counter the 'fill-in-the-bubble' mentality of restricted standards and accountability measures, so that they may take back their curricula and argue intelligently against federally-funded, highly-scripted literacy programs. For me, a strong theoretical foundation (re)situates teacher flexibility and wise teacher judgment at the center of curricular decisions.

The article proceeds in three phases. First, to provide a background for what early reading instruction actually *requires*, I review current research around early literacy in three parts:[1] 'scientifically based' reading research; the researched foundations for early literacy success; and sociocultural theories of language and literacy development.[2] Second, I propose a multi-dynamic literacy theory that combines research on early reading with sociocultural theories of language and literacy. I characterize this hybrid theory as 'multidynamic' to reflect the ways in which the findings from reading research (e.g. skills and approaches) must always be dynamically adapted and reinvented to fit the lived worlds of children and their multiple sociocultural contexts. I offer three basic tenets of a multidynamic literacy pedagogy, which views: (1) literacy as multifaceted; (2) literacy as constructed and socially practiced; and (3) literacy skills as relevant. Third, as a way to explore these three tenets, I analyze the texts of 'scientifically based' reading programs as compared to examples of children's literature. In the end, I argue that early literacy instruction requires a teacher's flexibility and judgment in choosing the materials, activities, and discussions of early literacy instruction, not only from a sociocultural perspective, but also for the very foundations of early reading success.

'Scientifically based' early reading research

'Scientifically based reading research' means positivist and empirical research that is conducted by assigning students randomly to either experimental groups or control groups, and measuring variables and outcomes in quantifiable terms. In the USA, scientifically based reading research drives the Reading First initiative of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which provides money to states for the teaching of reading if state-wide programs and approaches are based on experimental scientific findings (US Department of Education, 2002: 24). Elsewhere, nationwide indexes, such as the National Curriculum in England or the New Basics Curriculum in Australia, outline benchmarks for learning that drive the curriculum and form policy based on scientific evidence and assessment.

As one example, scientific research examined in the USA by the National Reading Panel (2000) and the National Research Council (1998, 1999)

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yielded five common elements of effective reading instruction. These five elements are listed by the US Department of Education (2002: 3) as: (1) phonemic awareness; (2) phonics; (3) vocabulary development; (4) reading fluency and oral reading skills; and (5) reading comprehension strategies.

Inarguably, these five components of effective reading instruction are indeed essential for the reading development of young children, and similar elements of early literacy instruction appear in national benchmarks across the globe. Yet, while these five elements can be taught in a number of ways using a number of different approaches, lessons, and materials – including play with language and literature – the programs and materials that are based on 'scientific research' are the ones that drive international benchmarks, and the only ones that can be federally funded in the USA (US Department of Education, 2002: 24). Examples of reading programs that are based on scientific research include the *Language Reader* series (Greene and Woods, 2000), leveled by decodable words, or scripted instruction programs such as *Open Court* or *Reading Mastery* (published by SRA/McGraw-Hill).

It is also important to note that these five elements are defined by the National Reading Panel (2000) and the US Department of Education (2002) in quite specific ways. For example, within the domain of vocabulary development, a distinction is made among listening, speaking, reading, and writing vocabularies (US Department of Education, 2002: 3, 42). This distinction is important, because it separates the vocabulary words children use for reading or writing from the vocabulary words they use when speaking or listening. Reading vocabulary is intentionally a different bank of words (leveled, decodable) from the words children use to speak and listen, falsely leading to the instructional assumption that children are better off learning to read with materials that are leveled and decodable, with words from their 'reading vocabularies', as opposed to words from their 'speaking' or 'listening' vocabularies.

For example, the Macmillan/McGraw-Hill Reading Series (2003b,c) for first grade includes lists of 'decodable' words and 'vocabulary' words found in the stories. But the vocabulary words are 'high-frequency words', such as *gives*, *likes*, *one*, or *this* (p. 120). This means that the 'vocabulary words' in the program are not necessarily new or higher level language from speaking or listening vocabularies, but are instead the high-frequency words of a reading vocabulary. This highlights skills for recognizing irregularly spelled English words, and sidesteps skills for learning rich vocabulary while reading. With good teacher support, however, children can of course read and write using high-level vocabulary words (McKeown and Beck, 2006).

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Yet under the metric of different vocabularies for different purposes, materials with 'speaking' or 'listening' vocabularies tend to be thought of as 'read-alouds', as opposed to materials that can be used for actual reading or writing instruction.

Likewise, fluency is defined as 'the ability to read text accurately and quickly' (US Department of Education, 2002: 3), and here, repeated readings of leveled texts are thought to be helpful in teaching fluency because children can easily 'say' the words (e.g. Macmillan/McGraw-Hill, 2003a: 6). In this way, a controlled 'reading vocabulary' is seen as preferable to challenges or substance in the books children read. Concurrently, while comprehension strategies are included as a core element of early reading instruction in scientific research, it is understood in many reading series as 'comprehension' of the limited reading vocabulary, characterized as a way to 'support' children as they learn (cf. *Language Readers*, published by Sopris West; or *Reading Mastery*, published by SRA/McGraw-Hill).

These particular definitions of the reading process are based, in part, on 'scientific research', but boiled down in program packaging. For example, Yatvin et al. (n.d.) (the first author herself a member of the National Reading Panel) state that the US Department of Education booklet, *Put Reading First*, which condenses the full National Reading Panel report, 'falsely claims that children must become aware of how the sounds in words work before they learn to read'. Yatvin et al. (n.d.) also caution that the National Reading Panel's findings were somewhat boiled down initially because they were based on a much smaller number of research studies than the public was led to believe (they analyzed 438 studies out of a proposed 100,000, with the conclusions of the phonics subgroup based on only 38 studies).

In addition, the very definition of 'scientific research' (rigorous, systematic, objective, randomly assigned, empirical) (e.g. US Department of Education, 2002: 3–4) takes any research done in natural settings out of the loop, thus limiting what can count as good reading instruction to methods that can be measured in experimental ways. In fact, one major criticism of the National Reading Panel's Report is that it excluded a large body of research, such as correlational and observational studies, conducted by, among others, reading researchers, linguists, and anthropologists, because it was not deemed 'scientific' (Berlak, 2003: 11–12; Yatvin et al., n.d.). These kinds of misunderstandings of 'scientific research' create a situation, as is true in England and Australia, where teachers struggle to meet national attainment targets that are based on cautionary 'science', often at the expense of pedagogy and curriculum breadth (see for example Alexander, 2004).

Early reading research and the foundations of early literacy success

Meanwhile, other areas of research (e.g. Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement [CIERA], 2002; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; National Early Literacy Panel, 2004) concur with the 'scientifically based' list of effective reading instruction, with a few additions and changes: (1) oral language development is included as an element of early literacy development, and phonemic awareness is often embedded within this oral language component; (2) basic early reading skills include book and print knowledge in addition to phonemic awareness and phonics; (3) vocabulary development includes words that can be heard and spoken, and not just decoded; (4) reading fluency involves more than decodable texts; and (5) reading comprehension involves complex thinking and problem-solving skills, or ways of making personal connections to books, above and beyond leveled readers with controlled vocabulary or simple subject matters. In addition, research on reading success includes three other important components: (6) writing; (7) engagement and interest in literacy; and (8) school-wide reading programs (see CIERA, 1998).

These 'additional' researched foundations of early reading success are directly related to the five essential components of reading instruction as outlined by 'scientifically based' reading research. For example, oral language (not included in the 'scientifically based' elements of early literacy instruction) is a prerequisite to phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension, which form the majority of various national indexes of success. Comprehension, as well, is more than being able to read words one knows and can decode, but instead, is about figuring out larger life meanings, messages that help us understand richer and deeper texts as we go on (Anderson and Pearson, 1984; Pressley, 2006). Furthermore, engagement and interest in literacy are the motivating factors behind 'sticking with it' in literacy instruction and in school itself (Pressley, 2006: 371–416). In other words, the elements that are fundamental to children's early reading success (in their entirety) work with (not against) the purported intent of evidence-based research policies, such as Reading First: to ensure that all children receive effective reading instruction in kindergarten through to third grade. We are, in many ways, all on the same page. It is a matter of interpretation and argument in terms of *how* we teach the foundations of early literacy success, including the roles of curriculum breadth, pedagogy, and teacher decision-making outside of 'scientifically based' reading programs.

Sociocultural theories of language and literacy development

Another branch of early literacy scholarship stems from sociocultural theories of language and literacy (e.g. Gee, 1992, 1996; Heath, 1983, 1986; Pérez, 1998; Street, 1984). These theories provide an important way of thinking about the 'reader' in relation to the text and the context of reading, and they help us think outside the box of a skills-only approach. Paradigmatically, sociocultural theories shift us away from cognitive-psychological frameworks of literacy, where reading is thought to happen in the 'head', to a view of literacy as deeply embedded and inseparable from specific contexts, contents, and purposes for reading (Cazden, 1988; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gee, 1992; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984).

Derived in part from Vygotskian (1978, 1986) theories that emphasize the social worlds of children, interactive learning, and zones of proximal development, the classroom is seen as one of the cultural contexts in which meaning and understanding can be constructed, socially and together. 'Construction' is a key term here, because reading is seen as the active construction of meaning for a particular social purpose from within a particular cultural group (see also Weaver, 1994). Derived also in part from Bruner (1996: 20), the 'reader' in sociocultural theories is one who uses cultural tools, symbols, texts, and ways of thinking in an active process of 'meaning making and reality construction' (see also Pérez, 1998: 5). Readers construct meaning by drawing on and using knowledge resources (e.g. background knowledge, knowledge of skills) as well as identity resources (e.g. cultural identity, cultural practices, cultural tools, perceived significance of the activity).

Some theories of play can be associated with sociocultural theories of literacy as well. For example, Morrow and Schickendanz (2006: 270) note that '[i]t was Vygotsky's (1967, 1978) theory of cognitive development that gave a central role in play to a partner who tutors'. Unlike psychoanalytic theories of play, where pretending and playing were thought to occur in the child's mind alone and where adults were not necessarily to interfere (see Johnson et al., 1987), post-Piagetian theories not only take a cognitive view of the role of play in children's literacy and language development, but also a social one (Morrow and Schickendanz, 2006: 270–1). The active construction of meaning through play can be done alone and independently; but the construction of meaning that is 'interactive' – derived from conversations and interactions with others – is more in line with sociocultural theories of literacy (Au, 1990, 1993). It is this sense of play that I would like to maintain throughout this article: the social context where playing occurs is just as important as the play itself, and adult or peer

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interactions provide the sociocultural context in which learning through play occurs.

In terms of explicit instruction in early literacy skills, the activities, texts, and expectations of a lesson provide the background circumstances for learning, thus shaping the sociocultural context of the classroom. However, the overall sociocultural context for learning is also shaped by the students' identities and background as learners (Hammerberg [Hassett], 2004). Therefore, a sociocultural perspective means that 'literacy' is viewed as more than just reading or writing – more than decoding or encoding – because sociocultural theories acknowledge that children bring experiences with the world to the texts they are reading, as well as a knowledge of the skills to use with the text, as they interpret a meaning from the text in a particular social circumstance (Erickson, 1984; Ferdman, 1991; Gee, 1992; Heath, 1986; McLaughlin, 1989; Moll, 1992; Pérez, 1998). Decoding and encoding, then, are incredibly helpful tools, but to view literacy in a sociocultural sense means that we see the tools of reading and writing as just that – tools for constructing meaning from within a larger sociocultural context (Hammerberg [Hassett], 2004). In classroom practice, we can draw on sociocultural theory by overtly recognizing that learning does not always take place alone (e.g. practicing isolated skills), and instead requires wide opportunities for conversations and interactions with others. The role (i.e. flexibility) of the teacher in designing such possibilities is paramount, and includes opportunities to play and interact with language and literature.

Theoretical framework: A multidynamic approach

As a guiding framework for understanding why early literacy programming requires a great amount of flexibility and wise teacher judgment in the selection of materials and methods, I propose a theoretical approach that combines the best of what we know from early reading research with sociocultural theories of language and literacy development. I call this combined hybrid theory 'multidynamic' for several reasons, some etymological and some pedagogical, but all with a hope for the future of literacy education.

First, etymologically speaking, 'multidynamic' uses the prefix, *multi-*, to mean *many* or *various*, and the root word *dynamic*, which is based on the Greek word *dynamis*, meaning *power* or *potential*. Here, I draw on Dwight and Garrison's (2003) critique of western metaphysics, and their use of John Dewey to move beyond the logic that curriculum and instruction ought to impose external goals and objectives. '*Dynamis*', they write, 'refers to something's latent potential or power for change; it is the capacity for something to become other than what it is' (Dwight and Garrison, 2003: 710). For

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Dewey (1915/1979), 'potentialities [*dynamis*] must be thought of in terms of consequences of interactions with other things' (cited in Dwight and Garrison, 2003: 712). In terms of combining two fields of thought (reading research and sociocultural theories), 'multidynamic' expresses a 'transactive space' (Dwight and Garrison, 2003: 713) where various theories and research can engage in an interplay, informing and reinventing each other in multiple and innovative ways. When early reading research and sociocultural theories of literacy coalesce into a hybrid approach, the potential dynamic is the capacity for early reading instruction to become something it is not.

Second, pedagogically speaking, the term 'multidynamic' reflects the ways in which early literacy methods and theories must always be dynamically reinvented and adapted to specific classroom contexts and the lived worlds of children. As McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004: 54–5) point out, 'no technique that promotes critical literacy can be exported to another setting without adapting it to that context'. A multidynamic literacy theory holds that there are no specific standards or sequences of objectives that could possibly hold true for all cultural spaces, children, or social instances. Rather, early literacy learning involves a dynamic process of interpretation, choice, and free play – on both the teacher's and the students' parts (e.g. the teacher interprets her students' interests and needs, and offers choices for playing with literacy; the students interpret their roles as literate meaning-makers through the choices they make and the play that ensues). This requires that we think of potentials (or dynamics) of learning in terms of multiple and ongoing interactions with each other and with various texts within the learning environment.

In terms of a hope for the future of literacy education, a theoretical stance is especially important in an age when federal definitions of 'science', 'reading', and 'literacy' impose restrictive standards and early literacy benchmarks that are seemingly resistant to critique (Hassett, 2006b). However, with a strong theoretical framework, teachers can wisely choose activities and materials to help them recruit their students' knowledge and identity resources (from sociocultural theories) in order to meet early literacy standards (from reading research). Here, the term 'multidynamic' suggests a theoretical stance that is not stuck in an impervious holding pattern, but instead, is open to the ongoing changes and potentials that are characteristic of our times and our students.

The multidynamic literacy theory that I am proposing has three basic tenets: (1) literacy is multifaceted, with *both* individual (skills-based) and social (context-based) dimensions; (2) literacy is constructed and socially practiced, where the meaning of a text is negotiated through *both*

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knowledge resources (from reading research) and identity resources (through sociocultural theories); and (3) literacy skills (from reading research) are usable when they are made relevant to the students in the context of their lived experiences (from situated sociocultural learning theory).

Each of these tenets will be explored in depth in the remainder of this article, as I analyze various types of texts that can be used in early reading instruction, comparing the language and concepts found in 'scientifically based' reading series with the language and concepts found in high-quality children's literature. I define 'high-quality children's literature' as books that offer children opportunities to hear and engage with authentic language and literary elements.[3] They are 'authentic', in that they are written to tell a story, to explore a character, for a real sense of meaning; and they are 'language-rich', in that the vocabulary is not controlled toward a sense of developmental reading levels, as is typical in many commercial programs. The particular children's books that I cite in this article have all received the Charlotte Zolotow Award, which recognizes outstanding *writing* in picture books for children from birth to age seven, and thus provides a body of children's literature that teachers may draw upon as they focus on the importance of high-quality, language-rich writing for children (Schliesman, 2002). However, I do not wish to imply that all high-quality children's literature receives awards or can be itemized on a list. Instead, I wish to offer a general framework for thinking about the quality level of children's books, and I leave it to the teacher to decide whether a book is 'high-quality' enough for her students. This in its essence is teacher flexibility and judgment.

Although teachers often use a mixture of commercial programs and children's literature, my purpose is to tease out how different materials speak to (or do not speak to) research on early reading success as well as sociocultural theories of language and literacy development. The study is organized into three sections, one for each tenet of a multidynamic literacy theory: (1) literacy as multifaceted, where I explore the research on oral language development and early reading skills; (2) literacy as constructed and socially practiced, where I examine research on comprehension and complex thinking skills; and (3) literacy skills as relevant, where I examine the role of engagement and interest in reading and writing.

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Literacy as multifaceted: Oral language development and early reading skills

'Sam! Sam!'
'Fat cat! Fat cat!'
Sam.
A fat cat.
Sam sat at a mat.
A fat cat sat at a mat. (Greene and Woods, 2000: 4–7)

From research on oral language and its connection to early reading, we know that children come to school knowing a great deal about how language works (Snow and Tabors, 1993), including an oral language vocabulary that ranges between 3000 and 5000 words (Gibson and Levin, 1975). Oral language is fundamental to children's reading success for several reasons (Sulzby, 1996): a knowledge of oral language helps children connect the words and sounds of their known language with print; a knowledge of oral language is the basis for further vocabulary development; and oral language is the means by which children discuss and expand their understandings (Dickinson et al., 2002; Goldenberg, 1992–3; MacGillivray and Hawes, 1994). The influence of home literacy environments on school-based literacy learning has been well researched, including the extent to which parent–child book reading contributes to oral language development (e.g. Chomsky, 1972; Longian et al., 1996; Raz and Bryant, 1990; Sénéchal et al., 1998; Wells, 1985; Whitehurst et al., 1987). There is further evidence of the long-term effects of early book reading experiences on overall literacy abilities through to fourth grade (DeTemple, 2001; Tabors et al., 2001). Thus, in school, home-based oral language provides the starting point for school-based literacy growth, and this growth is supported and enhanced by wide reading of books with rich language.

The basic philosophy of early reading series such as *Language Readers* (which opened this section) is not necessarily to engage children with rich oral language. Instead, the principle is to teach children certain reading skills until they have mastered those skills, and then to move them on to the next level. In line with 'evidence-based' legislation, programs like *Language Readers* are 'based on the principle that it is not practical to teach using words and sentences that children cannot yet read; rather, by giving students stories they *can* decode and comprehend, students and teachers get a much deserved taste of success, motivating them to do more' (Sopris West Publishing, n.d.: 1). Thus, we have language such as, 'Sam! Fat cat! Fat cat! Sam sat at a mat' – and we are 'motivated to do more'.

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To understand literacy as multifaceted (the first tenet of a multidynamic pedagogy) means that, as teachers, we see decoding as one piece of literacy learning, but we recognize how children *are* able to do more in a socio-cultural sense. For instance, children already have a great understanding of oral language, and learning to read is a matter of drawing on that language, above and beyond decoding. This recognition (that children *are* able to do more than *Sam sat at a mat*) is based in sociocultural theories (acknowledging children's social and cultural positioning including language backgrounds), but it is also a recognition of early reading research that highlights the importance of authentic and rich oral language for early literacy success (Dickinson, 2001).

The language of '*Sam! Fat Cat!*' is not necessarily authentic or rich, but that is because it is designed for a strict instructional purpose. The text is designed to learn the short *ă* sound, a one-dimensional view of literacy and of oral language: When would you ever say 'Sam sat *at* a mat' instead of 'Sam sat *on* a mat' unless you were learning the short *ă* sound? However, when and if the instructional purpose of learning short *ă* sounds overshadows pedagogy that focuses on rich and complex materials, then we are leaving children behind in the most basic sense, because they are focusing all too heavily on the 'basics' of discrete phonics skills at the expense of playing with the sounds of richer, more authentic, language.

Meanwhile – interestingly enough – discrete phonics sounds like vowels (and all kinds of other early literacy skills) are actually embedded within authentic language. Within a multidynamic pedagogy that views literacy as multifaceted, teachers can choose materials that not only emphasize the sounds of words, but also recruit children's knowledge of themselves and the worlds around them. Take, for example, this excerpt from Janet Wong's (2001) book, *Grump*:

> Look how tired this Mommy is/Tired and frumpy/Grouchy chumpy /
> Oh, what a grump!
> Look at Baby/Smart, good Baby/Happy Baby/Making gravy
> Applesauce and ketchup gravy/Not too lumpy/Not too bumpy
> Squish squish/DUMP!

Viewing literacy as multifaceted means that, pedagogically, teachers understand the basics of early literacy success (oral language, phonemic awareness, phonics) while also understanding the importance of creating a context where these basic skills can be used. Choosing a book like *Grump*, which encourages play with language and specific attention to how words sound, not only respects what we know about oral language development in terms of phonemic awareness and phonics, but also respects children

for being capable of understanding grumpy mommies or babies making gravy.

While the sounds of language are 'covered' in both programmed reading series and children's literature (*frumpy, chumpy, grump* – *stomping, chomping* – *baby, gravy* – are rhyming vowel patterns in the same way as – *Sam, fat cat, mat, sat at*), children's literature is especially well-suited for oral language development, not only on the level of hearing sounds, but also on the level of social interaction through play with the words and real understanding of a real situation. These books can be acted out, held, repeated, and sung. As such, with a teacher's support and laughter, they provide a basis for seeing the sounds of language as important within a playful social and cultural context.

In contrast, 'Story 108', from *Reading Mastery I* (Engelmann and Bruner, 1988), minimizes a multifaceted sense of literacy into isolated skills, decontextualized from playful or real life experiences:

> thē ōld gōat had an ōld cōat. thē ōld gōat said, 'I will ēat this ōld cōat.' Sō shē did. 'that was fun,' shē said. 'I āte thē ōld cōat. and now I am cōld.'

This story is meant to help the child know how to sound out the word – note the marks in the passages. However, it is a far cry from authentic language – or authentic reading.

From a sociocultural perspective, understanding why mommy is grumpy in *Grump* is a little closer to life experiences than understanding why an old goat would eat an old coat. In addition, the word choices in *Grump* are creative and playful, meant to set a scene, whereas the old goat is about long ō sounds, and nothing more.

Other programmed reading series use language as a crutch for teaching specific decoding skills even if explicit vowel markers (e.g. ō) are not used, and even if the plot is loosely intriguing. For example, the story *The Cat Sat* in the Houghton Mifflin (2003a: 17–25) series reads: '*The cat sat on the basket. / Go, cat! / The cat sat on the table. / Go, cat! / The cat sat on the TV. / Go, cat! / The cat sat on Pam*'.

In this story, the vocabulary is controlled so that students can decode it (they have practiced these words before), and this is meant to help them with fluency and understanding. This type of 'evidence-based' approach boils the multidimensional aspects of language down to easily decodable words at the expense of larger social meanings. Even when the cat sat on Pam, the plot was necessarily secondary to the controlled vocabulary, which was necessarily secondary to rich oral language. Far from seeing literacy as a complex social phenomenon, we have to view literacy as simple to engage with the above examples, and this not only disregards sociocultural theories

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of language and literacy development, but it also reduces early reading research to a controlled vocabulary.

A multifaceted sense of literacy, on the other hand, encompasses *both* skills *and* specific sociocultural contexts for understanding the story. For example, *Circle Dogs*, by Kevin Henkes (1998), explores the sights and sounds of two dogs with words printed colorfully in various fonts that indicate meaning – *stomp*, *whoosh*, *growl*. The font itself encourages a social context for reading the words with expression – we can growl or make *whooshing* sounds in our reading. This artistic representation of the words on the page not only encourages decoding skills, but also provides new cues for playful oral reading: noticing how words look (in what color, in what size, in what font) helps us to notice how they might sound and feel on the mouth when they are read (Hammerberg [Hassett], 2001). Thus, the representation of language in stories such as *Circle Dogs* or *Grump!* enables teachers and students to play with sounds (phonemic awareness) and see their representation in print (phonics and decoding), through a more meaningful context (situated sociocultural understandings).

It is difficult to imagine setting up social contexts in the classroom that would enable children to play further with the language of stories such as *Old Goat* or *The Cat Sat*. With children's literature, on the other hand, a teacher can bridge the language of the book to other classroom situations by setting up imaginary play centers that incorporate the themes and language from various books. For example, William Steig's (1998) book, *Pete's a Pizza*, is about a dad who pretends to make his son into a pizza to cheer him up. Teachers can encourage further play with the book – and with the rich language – by dressing up a play kitchen area as a pizzeria in the classroom, where children can play out the book and talk with each other in a kind of retelling, using the rich language of the book in combination with their rich and playful imaginations.

Instead of limiting the vocabulary children encounter in their early reading experiences, high-quality children's literature assumes young children can say, use and learn high-level words. For example, *Click Clack Moo* by Doreen Cronin (2000), while straightforward in its plotline and easy to understand, uses high-level vocabulary. In this story, a group of cows and hens decides to hold back their milk and eggs because they want electric blankets in the cold barn. They send typed notes to the farmer and he responds with written challenges. At one point in the story, the text reads, 'Duck was a neutral party, so he brought the ultimatum to the cows' (Cronin, 2000: 19). Here, 'neutral party' and 'ultimatum' are perhaps words many young children do not know, but through this story and through conversations, young children *can* know these words (McKeown and Beck,

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2006). A teacher using a multidynamic literacy pedagogy understands that this type of vocabulary helps to bridge the gap between academic language and children's home languages in powerful ways, as it stretches 'scientifically based' early literacy benchmarks beyond words that are easily decodable. A teacher working within a multidynamic pedagogy helps the students understand (and read) these words through a playful social situation that the book itself sets up.

Typically, 'academic rigor' in early literacy programming gets translated into a focus on phonemic awareness and phonics. Alphabetic print concepts currently govern the ways in which we view 'natural' and 'appropriate' early literacy development (Hassett, 2006a), but again, this is a one-dimensional view of what it means to read and write. In both early reading research *and* sociocultural theories, a child's ability to be 'phonemically aware' or 'know phonics' develops through multiple literacy opportunities, often social in their nature. Playing with the language and ideas of good books, then, is academically rigorous in socially dynamic ways. This means that the basic, sound-discrete, elements of early literacy knowledge are encouraged through the joy and pleasure of reading (and rereading) language-rich books with rhythm, rhyme, repetition, alliteration, onomatopoeia, and flow.

The first tenet of a multidynamic literacy theory (that literacy is multi-faceted) acknowledges how the social dimensions of 'being literate' include but *exceed* the individual cognitive capabilities (e.g. skills) that are normally a part of early literacy instruction. Within a multidynamic literacy pedagogy, then, essential skills are seen as tools for reading and writing, and not ends in and of themselves. Playing with language and literature, as explored in this section, is important because it highlights how literacy is multidimensional: inclusive of all of the foundations of early literacy success (oral language, vocabulary, fluency, sounds), but necessarily practiced and made real in social situations that a teacher sets up. Engagement with high-quality children's literature provides reading, writing, and language experiences that are neither isolated nor decontextualized; instead, engagement with high-quality children's literature provides a forum for the active construction of meaning (Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), as well as a context for understanding oneself in relation to new concepts and cultures (Elley, 1991).

Literacy as constructed and socially practiced: Comprehension and complex thinking skills

In the 1980s and early 1990s, a body of research known as the proficient reader research looked at the kinds of cognitive strategies that good readers

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use to make meaning from a text (see Keene and Zimmermann, 1997: 20–3). This research points to the need for explicit instruction in comprehension strategies, including: activating prior knowledge; determining and retelling the most important ideas; asking questions while reading; creating visual images; drawing inferences and conclusions; and repairing comprehension when it breaks down by using reading strategies and cueing systems (e.g. Allington, 2005: 109–40; Block and Pressley, 2002; Pearson and Dole, 1987; Pearson and Fielding, 1991; Pressley et al., 1990).

In general, reading comprehension is seen as the interaction between the *reader*, the *text*, and the *context* of the reading. Sociocultural theories would add that the *reader* brings an identity and a set of background knowledge or skills to the text; the *text* has a particular set of characteristics, genre codes, and political power; and the *context* of the reading not only includes the purpose of a reading, the activities students are engaged in, or the teacher's expectations for the students, but also the social and cultural plane of the classroom. Viewing literacy as constructed and socially practiced (the second tenet of a multidynamic literacy theory) means that, pedagogically, teachers understand that children bring individual knowledge (skills) and identity (sociocultural) resources to any reading situation, and that comprehension is the construction of meaning based on those backgrounds and resources within the social situation of the classroom.

It is difficult to imagine using the *Reading Mastery* story quoted below to explicitly teach any of the important comprehension skills derived from reading research or sociocultural theory:

> thē cow sat on a gāte. thē cow said, 'thē gāte is hot.' shē said, 'I hāte hot gātes.' (Engelmann and Bruner, 1988: Story 95)

In this story, the language is far from authentic, and the literary elements (e.g. setting, objects, details, images, words, plot, symbolism, theme, tone) are not really meant to tell a story, such as it is. This story, about a cow who hates hot gates, is not necessarily about a cow who hates hot gates per se. Instead, it is written with special symbols as a way to emphasize sounding out words with long $\bar{a}$'s, long $\bar{e}$'s, and short $\bar{o}$'s.

Because of the non-authentic, non-real-world, language in this story, the ability for teachers to directly coach children in important comprehension strategies is limited. Might we activate our prior knowledge about cows sitting on gates? Might we practice finding the most important ideas in a story as slim as this? Might we generate questions while reading (Why is the gate hot? Why does the cow hate hot gates?), or create visual images? Certainly, all of these things are *possible*, and *Reading Mastery* makes every effort to include comprehension activities based on the stories. However, the lack

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of complexity in the stories' simple plotlines, if we can even call them that, reduces the chance of activating prior knowledge, determining important themes, or forming significant questions about ourselves and our worlds – all basic comprehension strategies.

McKeown and Beck (2006: 282) also summarize a wealth of research surrounding reading aloud and early literacy development, stating that '[r]esearchers who observed teacher–student read-aloud interactions identified talk surrounding reading as the most valuable aspect of the activity for enhancing children's language development'. They go on to say that analytic conversations, where children interact with the teacher to think about the story's language and content, are most helpful in improving vocabulary and comprehension skills (McKeown and Beck, 2006: 282). When teachers read and discuss meaningful stories with their students, then, a social situation for understanding the text is set up because the children are able to play with the ideas in their heads and with each other through conversations based on what they already know about how the world works.

For example, Molly Bang's (1999) book, *When Sophie Gets Angry – Really, Really Angry*, is a text that encourages the reader to draw upon his or her own background of feeling upset or angry:

> Sophie was busy playing [with a toy gorilla] when . . .
> MY TURN
> . . . her sister grabbed gorilla.
> 'No!' said Sophie.
> 'Yes!' said her mother. 'It is her turn now, Sophie.'
> As her sister snatched Gorilla away . . .
> . . . Sophie fell over the truck. (Bang, 1999: 1–4)

So, Sophie gets really, really angry, and as the story goes on, she kicks and screams, and even blows up like a volcano. We can all identify with the intensity of Sophie's anger – and perhaps we can even laugh about it because it is not happening to us. Sophie has some strategies for coping, though, and after walking a bit, crying a bit, and feeling the breeze through her hair, 'the wide world comforts her' (Bang, 1999: 23), and she is able to go back home.

Conversations around books such as this – books we can identify with – provide the basis of good comprehension instruction, and the basis for the social construction of knowledge (tenet number two). A teacher working within a multidynamic literacy pedagogy, then, understands that conversations and play around books *with meat* provide the social and cultural context in which children can construct meaning. These teachers listen carefully to what students say and encourage further discussion (sociocultural context),

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while knowing that comprehension involves reflections, synthesizing, and retellings (early literacy content).

The comprehension questions of programmed reading series often state that the purposes of the questions meet many of the above stated comprehension goals: making predictions, making inferences, critical thinking. However, a closer look at the questions themselves tells a different story. For example, a story called, 'The Box' from Houghton Mifflin's (2003a: 146) anthology lists three questions in the student edition to think about after reading the story: (1) How many things did Don put in the box? (2) What might Dot do with the things in the box? (3) What would you put in the box?. In the teacher's edition (Houghton Mifflin, 2003b), under the heading, 'Comprehension/Critical Thinking', the first question is associated with 'noting details', the second with 'making predictions', and the third with 'critical thinking' (p. T51).

In terms of making predictions, the teacher's manual lists possible answers to question number 2, What might Dot do with the things in the box?: 'Dot may play with the things; She may pack them up and give them back to Don' (p. T51). While these are fine predictions, we are at the end of the story, and there is no more. Any predictions then fall outside of the story itself, and become a practice in 'predicting skills', as opposed to thinking more deeply about what may or may not happen (because nothing else occurs). In addition, effective comprehension instruction in general (not necessarily multidynamic) relies on explicit instruction and teacher modeling of various comprehension strategies, with the gradual release of the responsibility to the student him or herself (Pearson and Gallagher, 1983). However, it is difficult to fully model comprehension strategies for the story above using the questions we have available. The modeling of answers to 'critical thinking' questions designed for reading series creates a situation where teachers themselves must answer in rote ways, as opposed to being able to think out loud with their students in critical and meaningful ways.

Thus, from within a multidynamic pedagogy that combines the best of what we know about reading comprehension with attention to the sociocultural backgrounds of our students, it is very important to model comprehension strategies using materials, questions and discussions that are real and meaningful to our students, rather than a rote reaction (Peterson and Eeds, 1990). From this pedagogical stance, it is important that any reflections and retellings are not busywork: instead of more formal responses to a reading, such as writing a summary, answering strictly text-based questions, or even drawing a picture, our time might be better spent reading more to students and engaging them in meaningful discussions (Hoyt, 1999: xii–xiii). Just see where the conversations take you.

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Children's literature is especially well suited for explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies (e.g. activating prior knowledge, determining the most important ideas or themes, asking questions related to life) mostly because the stories and plotlines are substantive. It is through understanding a story enough to retell it (Hoyt, 1999: 42), making connections with a story (Keene and Zimmerman, 1997), questioning the text itself (Harvey and Goudvis, 2000: 22), and visualizing a story (Miller and Goudvis, 1999) that young readers learn key comprehension strategies. Generating questions before, during, and after reading are necessary skills for deep comprehension (Andre and Anderson, 1979; Brown and Palinscar, 1985), and questioning the text or the author requires that the book has substance. So, as we choose materials for comprehension instruction, in many ways, it is far easier to choose books that have some 'meat'. Comprehension skills learned through conversations and imaginative thinking extend beyond the book itself when teachers help students bring that language into their sociodramatic play (Morrow and Schickendanz, 2006). Drawing on a type of reader response in which children 'live through or live in' the stories they hear and read (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978), teachers can use the shared experience of the book to provide a context for playing with language and high-level concepts. As Morrow and Schickendanz (2006: 276) point out, when helping children use language to express meaning through play, '[c]onversations in which teachers use rare words, limit how much they talk relative to how much the child talks, and listen to what children say benefit children's language development the most'.

Books with controlled or leveled vocabulary are a bit tricky to bring into playful situations where teachers encourage the use of rare words, despite all the best efforts to write comprehension questions into the units. For example, a story from Unit 13 of *Language Readers* (Greene and Woods, 2000) is called 'The Class Trip', which sounds promising in terms of making comprehension connections with the text, but listen to the language:

> Miss Pitt's class has a wish. They think of plans to have a class trip.
>
> Sid and Nick plot to stop back at the long ship at the dock. They could tell the class of fish, clams, shells, and nets. They could brag of long flat bass and fresh cod fish.
>
> Tam and Pat plan a trip to Big Ben, a big tin clock with a black bell that rings and a flat red flag that flaps on top.
>
> They would have to cross six blocks to get to the clock, Big Ben, yet they would have a thrill when they got to it.

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Al plans a swim trip. Al would wish that the class could get to a hot spot, swim and snack . . .

The 'Language Expansion Questions' for this story attempt to make text-to-self connections for comprehension purposes: 'If you could have voted in this story, which trip would you have voted for?'. However, the 'wishes' of Sid, Nick, Tam or Pat are not necessarily based on universal themes that all children can connect with. The field trip ideas are not, in other words, socially situated within the lives of most real students, so constructing a meaning is tied to only one dimension of reading: identifying the words.

Because a multidynamic pedagogy views literacy as the construction of meaning, not the reiteration of meaning, learning to read involves helping children use what they know to construct meaning out of a text. High-quality children's literature, unlike most leveled readers, contains themes universal to childhood (e.g. family relationships, friendships, emotions). Here, children are offered a chance to connect and identify with conceptually challenging ideas and content that they then can bring into their own imaginative play. Playing with the language and ideas of books, together through shared conversation, is the same thing as playing with comprehension strategies: questioning, visualizing, inferring, connecting with ideas, expanding ideas, making educated guesses, imagining. In ways that cannot be captured by a worksheet, comprehension skills are not discrete skills that can be taught out of context. In this way, high-quality children's literature gives comprehension instruction a purpose: to read and understand a great book.

In terms of curriculum and instruction in early literacy, a sociocultural stance combined with effective reading strategies allows us to use the experiences children bring with them to the texts they are reading, both skills and world knowledge, to help them construct a meaning. Written to tell a story, with care for plot and meaning, children's literature provides a forum for deeper thinking, loaded questioning, vivid discussions, and lively interactions. Curriculum around high-quality children's literature, then, makes classroom communities and connections to lived worlds the social context through which early literacy skills and strategies can be learned, and practiced through play.

Literacy skills as relevant: Engagement and interest in early literacy skills

some girls went to the moon in a moon ship. a girl said, 'I will find some fun.' shē walked and walked. soon shē cāme to a cow.

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the moon cow said, 'wē have lots of fun. come with mē.' The girl went with the moon cow to a pool. (Engelmann and Bruner, 1988: story 148)

Engagement and interest in reading are perhaps the most basic of reading foundations, for without a sense of joy and purpose in reading, the other foundations run the risk of becoming rote and meaningless beyond the immediate task (Edwards, 1995; Turner and Paris, 1995). Pressley (2006: 387) writes: 'The data are overwhelming that tasks a little bit beyond the learner's current competence level are motivating (e.g. Brophy, 1987)'. He goes on to say that 'low-challenging tasks never provide learners with the opportunity to see what they can do', and that 'effective teachers monitor what children are capable of doing and then nudge them to try something more challenging' (Pressley, 2006: 387). For children to see literacy skills as relevant, they must be truly engaged in reading, interested in it and challenged by it. They must see reading and writing as meaningful, enjoyable activities that are relevant to their lives (Pressley, 2006: 371–416).

The example above from *Reading Mastery I* means what it says it means (a moon cow and a girl go to a pool to have fun), and while being on the moon or swimming with a cow could be fun activities, the language is too vague ('some girls' go to the moon; 'a girl' walks) to allow children the challenge of imagining who these girls are or what their own motivations might be. To engage with this story is to engage with the specific skills we are to learn, as opposed to engaging in a larger sense of meaning. Viewing literacy skills as relevant to the students in the context of their lived experiences (tenet number three of a multidynamic literacy theory) means that, pedagogically, teachers know their students well enough to 'attach' a literacy skill to the needs and interests of each student. This tenet is based in sociocultural theories that place the child within a larger sociocultural context or draw on the child's social and cultural background, but beyond that, this tenet also requires that teachers are actively aware of important skills to teach as related to the children in their class. It is pedagogy – the art and science of teaching – that allows teachers to dynamically draw on both sociocultural theories and early reading research to make literacy skills relevant to their students' lives, giving individual students a reason to engage in literacy learning in the first place.

Using and discussing good children's literature in the classroom gives teachers a dynamic space for contextualizing the literacy skills they want their students to learn through texts chosen with specific children in mind. Many children's authors assume that children are capable, deeply intelligent, humorous individuals, and teachers working within a multidynamic literacy theory can assume the same. In having the flexibility to choose

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books that speak to their students' capabilities, intelligence, and humor, teachers are enabled to select books that challenge their students to think *about* themselves, but also *beyond* themselves.

The challenge to 'think beyond' is itself a zone of proximal development as children explore their ideas of how they agree, disagree, think, and question with teachers and peers. For Vygotsky (1978), this zone of proximal development is also created through make-believe play. 'In play', he writes, 'the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behavior' (Vygotsky, 1978: 74). Bodrova and Leong (2006: 249) note that 'Vygotsky pointed out repeatedly that children would learn to read and write only if these activities became meaningful for them (in fact, he wrote "as meaningful as play")'. Thus, providing situations where the language and concepts of good books can be brought into children's play-times is not only motivating for the challenge of thinking beyond ourselves, but also the heart of early literacy development in a Vygotskian sense.

Gee (2003, 2004) also thinks about the issue of learning and playing in terms of video games, with several important messages for classroom teachers who wish to fight for continued play in their classrooms. 'In a good game', Gee (2004: 70) writes, 'there is never a real distinction between learning and playing'. He goes on to say:

> When learning stops, fun stops, and playing eventually stops. For humans, real learning is always associated with pleasure and is ultimately a form of play – a principle almost always dismissed by schools.
> There is one crucial learning principle that all good games incorporate that recognizes that people draw deep pleasure from learning and that such learning keeps people playing. Good games allow players to operate within, but at the outer edge of, their competence. (Gee, 2004: 71)

It is through a multidynamic literacy pedagogy that we can recognize the inherent relationship between learning and pleasure, pleasure and learning, because a multidynamic pedagogy takes early literacy skills and places them squarely within real and challenging situations for the students.

Even though commercial reading series are leveled to create a situation where children can operate on the outer edge of their competence in terms of early reading skills, the message of pleasure and learning is often lost because the leveling is about vocabulary and decoding, not a deeper sense of engagement. For example, the excerpt below from book 47 of the *Open Court Reading* series called 'Garden Sisters' (West, 2002), is about two sisters who want to plant a garden, but it is winter outside:

> The sisters like plants. Mom is a gardener. Jennifer and Amber are Mom's garden helpers./'I wonder, can we plant big ferns in the garden?' asked Jennifer./Mom

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said, 'Yes, in the summer.' / 'It is winter and the garden is white,' said Mom. / 'I want to plant big ferns,' Amber said. 'In the summer, I will plant big ferns.' / 'In the summer, Amber can plant big ferns,' Mom said. 'Jennifer can plant big ferns in the garden.' Jennifer and Amber felt better. They like summer. (West, 2002: 4–8)

In this story, children work at the outer edge of their competence by being introduced to a few new high-frequency words (*they, want, we, white*) and by learning the new story word, 'wonder'. However, the story is an insult to the outer edge of many students' competence in terms of world knowledge, such as knowing that we cannot plant a garden in the snow, or in terms of knowledge of oral language structures, such as the over-repetitive phrase, 'plant big ferns'. The pleasure of reading this book stops at recognizing and decoding individual words, and does not 'nudge' us into a place where we can extend our thinking or have fun with larger ideas and richer words.

Meanwhile, the 'nudging' effect necessary for engagement and interest in reading is fostered when classroom libraries and the books that teachers read aloud to children include books that children can identify with and learn from (Keene and Zimmermann, 1997). Characteristics of high-quality children's literature automatically include elements that children can identify with and find pleasurable: a child protagonist, an issue that concerns them, an enjoyable read that does not overtly moralize, a gratifying sense of fairness, and topics that expand (rather than shut down) awareness. Thus, children's literature for actual children provides ways of stretching the mind: connecting to something we know, but providing a dynamic space to construct something further.

For example, *Lucky Song*, by Vera B. Williams (1997), points out the universal theme that we all need consistent things day after day after day – food, shelter, love – whether we are similar to or very different from the main character, Evie. The book, *Shades of Black*, by Sandra L. Pinkney (2000), brings topics of difference close to home through rich metaphoric language, describing various hair textures, eye colors, and shades of skin. This type of language is rarely (if ever) present in leveled readers, yet the use of metaphors in this story gives young children a chance to connect with issues of race, including our similarities and our most beautiful differences. In these types of books, which are *like us* in some way, or *not like us* in other ways, we are encouraged to connect reading to something real, and think more deeply about ourselves in the world.

To read these books together requires a sense of classroom community and respect: for difference, for personal interests, for favorites, and for deep connections with home and community. In these examples, some very basic

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early reading skills are embedded in the texts themselves, and can be explicitly demonstrated to the students: the conventions of placing oral language into print (left to right, top to bottom), one-to-one word matching, oral sounds to alphabetic letters, and so forth. Meanwhile, children are also learning about how various genres and structures of stories work, while being surrounded by meaningful language, plots, and characters.

In light of the importance of enjoyment and interest in reading, essential early reading skills must always be situated in contexts that are meaningful to children, with purposes above and beyond merely learning basic skills. Humor in stories for children is one of the best ways to encourage a love of reading – while children are also encouraged to connect early literacy skills to the humor and play within the books. For example, in *Bark George* by Jules Feiffer (1999), little George the puppy is not barking at all, but he is making all kinds of other animal sounds. The sounds themselves, and the ways they are printed on the pages, teach everything from phonemic awareness and phonics to exuberant oral reading behavior. A doctor eventually pulls out all kinds of different animals from little George's mouth, and in terms of comprehension, one has to infer how any of this is possible, especially at the end, when he says, 'Hello'. As another example, *Don't Laugh, Joe!* by Keiko Kasza (1997) is a story about Joe the little possum, who is a giggler. Being a giggler is not so great when trying to play dead, which possums have to do learn to do. The delightful surprise ending is not spelled out for readers, who need to think about and infer why the other animals in the story might play dead. These types of stories contextualize literacy skills and complex thinking skills for students because they are playful and fun, even (dare I say) more fun than going to a pool with a moon cow.

Perhaps the most important thing that a teacher can do to support early literacy learning is to encourage active (and interactive) engagement and interest in reading and writing as children learn the basics of early literacy skills. Thus, playing with language and literature creates a zone of proximal development where real learning occurs, and, as Gee (2004: 71) noted, 'when learning stops, fun stops'. To not let the fun stop, we must take the social and cultural contexts of students into account as they learn the essentials of early reading instruction, so that the learning is attached to something meaningful, and something meaningful is attached to play in multiple and dynamic ways.

Concluding remarks: Flexibility and judgment

In an age of restrictive standards and accountability measures, teachers often find themselves in a position where they have to struggle to keep play

with language and literature as a focus of their early literacy instruction, as 'scientifically based' reading programs, phonics, or scripted instruction take center stage. My aim in this study has been to advance a multidynamic literacy theory that early childhood teachers can use to explain the necessity of playing with language and literature in their early childhood literacy programming. While using children's literature in the classroom is not a new idea, *requiring* it for explicit instruction in early language and literacy skills is.

A theoretical stance becomes important because the focus of scientifically based reading policies is similar to the focus of all teachers everywhere: to ensure that all children receive exceptional literacy instruction in their earliest years of schooling. Yet there are substantially different types of programs and approaches available to achieve the same goal. As we choose materials and approaches for our students, it is important that we, as professionals, choose wisely based on all of the knowledge we have – knowledge about our students' interests and backgrounds as well as knowledge about early literacy learning. A multidynamic theory that combines sociocultural theories of language and literacy with proficient reader research enables us to approach program development in early literacy with a mind toward the social and cultural contexts of students.

To develop this theoretical stance, I have proposed three basic tenets of a multidynamic literacy pedagogy that embraces both early reading research and sociocultural theories (see Table 1).

First, a multidynamic literacy pedagogy provides a basis for viewing literacy as multifaceted, inclusive of all eight foundations for early literacy success (the content of literacy) as they are needed to make sense of various texts (the context of literacy use). Beyond seeing literacy as a person's *individual* mental ability to read and write (Ferdman, 1991), or a collection of isolated and decontextualized skills (Heath, 1986; McLaughlin, 1989; Moll, 1992), sociocultural theories clearly focus on the *social* dimension, and literacy becomes a complex cultural phenomenon (Cazden, 1988; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gee, 1992; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984). A combined hybrid (multidynamic) approach takes the best of both: to be literate definitely means to have the skills and knowledge needed to read and write, but in a 'multifaceted' sense, literacy is making meaning in multiple situations with multiple forms of text.

According to tenet number one, authentic children's literature actually *provides* multiple situations to engage with multiple forms of text, not leveled for decoding, but chosen for specific uses. The early literacy skills, vocabulary and content are neither isolated nor decontextualized along one dimension; instead, they are embedded within the pages of the books, and

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Table 1 **Three tenets of a multidynamic literacy pedagogy**

Multidynamic tenet	From reading research	From sociocultural theory	Enacting this tenet in the classroom
Literacy is multifaceted	There are eight foundations of early literacy success (5 from 'scientifically based' research). Oral language is a primary foundation – home language and literacy experiences are the building blocks for learning academic language and book language.	Literacy is a social and cultural phenomenon. Literacy is more than decoding or encoding.	Treat reading and writing skills as tools. Choose materials that provide situations for language development, talk, and play. Engage and play with your students using high-level vocabulary and concepts.
Literacy is constructed	Comprehension is constructed from an interaction between the *reader*, the *text*, and the *context* of the reading. Reading research calls for explicit instruction in comprehension skills such as questioning, making inferences, etc.	Literacy is a cultural tool that is put to use differently in different social circumstances. Children have knowledge resources and identity resources. Constructivist theories of learning.	Choose materials with substance based on children's interests. Encourage and value social interactions. Connect what children know to what they are learning.
Literacy skills as relevant	Engagement and interest is a basic foundation of early literacy success.	Literacy skills are usable when they are applied in authentic situations. Draw on the child's social and cultural backgrounds.	Make literacy skills relevant to the students' background and skill levels. Choose materials based on students' interests and reading needs – know skills to teach as well as social needs to meet.

brought to playful situations by the students and teacher. This tenet is enacted when the tools for reading and writing are treated as just that – tools – not ends in and of themselves, but instead, necessary tools that help students read and write for numerous and diverse purposes. Students are viewed as capable of understanding themselves and their worlds in multiple ways, both personal and social. Thus, a multidynamic literacy pedagogy calls for teachers who are engaged with their students, playing with them, connecting what they know to what they are learning, choosing to listen to them and learn from them, teaching them long vowel sounds only so they can notice the music of a poem.

Second, a multidynamic literacy theory acknowledges that meaning is constructed in social situations, and negotiated through children's individual knowledge and identity resources. A multidynamic pedagogy that combines literacy research with sociocultural theories views children's identities and cultural contexts as absolutely implicit and necessary for understanding the symbols and texts of reading and writing instruction in the first place.

According to tenet number two, which views literacy learning as constructed and social, children's literature is especially well suited for early literacy instruction because it is substantial. Playing with 'meaty' stories creates a sociocultural plane for learning rich language and high-level concepts, and it is essential for comprehension instruction. This tenet is enacted when teachers encourage social interactions, facilitate discussions among students, listen carefully to what they say, allow students to direct conversations, and intentionally expand and/or introduce new vocabulary based on these conversations. More than using skills and techniques in and of themselves (e.g. when reading a book out loud *becomes* the entire literacy activity as opposed to a tool to encourage instructional conversations), a multidynamic pedagogy uses what children know as a starting point for further literacy growth and exploration. In effect, this produces a social and cultural context in which the students' ideas and opinions are valued, and in which future learning can occur.

Third, a multidynamic pedagogy views literacy skills as usable when they are relevant to the students in the context of their lived experiences. This requires that students are engaged and interested in the literacy task. This also requires that teachers not only know early reading content (the skills to teach), but also the individual progress, knowledge, abilities, and interests of their students (the needs to meet) in order to make literacy learning relevant for their students.

According to tenet number three, play with language and literature is a way to contextualize literacy learning for students. This tenet is enacted when teachers find quality materials to read and discuss based on their students' interests, their reading level, and their future needs. A multi-dynamic literacy pedagogy is enacted when teachers know their students well enough to make reading and writing instruction relevant to each student's backgrounds and interests – both sociocultural *and* academic.

In sum, a teacher working within a multidynamic pedagogy draws on early literacy research as well as sociocultural theories to make careful decisions in her students' best interests. She needs a curriculum that is flexible enough for depth and breadth, able to bend to her informed decisions on a daily basis. She knows a lot of children's books, but she

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knows her students better. She knows that she can talk with them about what they think, and push them to critique and question. She teaches early literacy and language skills explicitly, and she is able to talk with the students about what they are doing and why. Yet, she does not make a clear distinction between learning and playing, and she knows how to argue her point on this one, to parents, administrators, whomever will listen. Thus, she knows that it is not only a matter *that* we teach children the basics of early literacy, but also a matter of *what* we are reading with them (high-quality children's literature), and *how* we engage them in the discussion (through sociocultural play).

Notes

1. I have focused on research and reports on early literacy and language development from: (1) the National Reading Panel (2000); (2) the National Research Council's (NRC) *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (1999) and *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success* (1998); (3) the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD); (4) the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL); (5) the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA); (6) the Center on English Learning and Achievement (CELA); (7) the Northwest Educational Regional Laboratory's (NWERL) *Building a Knowledge Base in Reading* (Braunger and Lewis, 1997); (8) the International Reading Association (IRA); (9) the National Association for the Education of Young Children; (10) Learning First Alliance (1998) *Every Child Reading: An Action Plan*; (11) 'good reader' research (e.g. Afflerbach and Johnston, 1986; Pearson et al., 1992); and (12) comprehensive research reviews such as Adams (1990) *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print*, and Weaver (1994) *Reading Process and Practice*.

2. The sociocultural theories of language and literacy that I draw on (e.g. Cazden, 1988; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Erickson, 1984; Ferdman, 1991) involve the new literacy studies (e.g. Gee, 1996; Street, 1993), stem from socio-historical psychology and constructivist theories of learning (e.g. Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), and focus on the social dimensions of literacy in the classroom (e.g. Au, 1993; Heath, 1983, 1986; McLaughlin, 1989; Moll, 1992; Pérez, 1998; Weaver, 1994).

3. Other characteristics of exemplary children's literature include (adapted from Temple et al., 2002: 6–7):

- A child protagonist and/or an issue that concerns children.
- A strong sense of story and consistency; a regularity of character and place.
- Language that is vivid and concrete, with rhythm and flow.
- Topics of consideration that expand awareness of the world and life experiences.
- An enjoyable read that does not overtly teach or moralize.
- A gratifying sense of truth, fairness, integrity, and honesty.
- Precisely chosen words, plot, characters, and an overall sense of quality.
- Originality, humor, and ways to stretch the mind, giving readers new ways to think about our similarities, differences, and possibilities as human beings.

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