TEACHERS’ ADAPTIVE INSTRUCTION SUPPORTING STUDENTS’ LITERACY LEARNING

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In this article, the authors examine data spanning the last decade and pose the question, What are the qualities of adaptive teachers?

During a read-aloud of the story Winnie Finn, Worm Finder by Carol Brendler, students in Ms. Branen’s kindergarten class share their connections via pair and share. Ms. Branen models how good readers make connections to the story as they read. The focus of the lesson was on making connections as a comprehension strategy. However, after hearing how rich students’ conversations were, she decided to extend the lesson by including a discussion on inferences and how good readers access what they know to make inferences to decide what will occur next in the story. She says to her students, “You can also use what you know as a reader and information from the text to make inferences. What is an inference?” She writes down students’ responses on the dry erase board and then shares what her students have said. “It’s when you use the information in your brain and the text to make sense of what is happening in the story. Remember, text is another word for book or what you are reading. I want you to go back to your seat and write an inference about the story. Make an inference about what you think will occur next in the story.” Eliza (all student names are pseudonyms) shares, “I infer that there has to be worms in the wagon because the wagon is full of soil.” Nia shares, “I think that the girl is going to help the worms by making food for them.” Ms. Branen writes down students’ inferences on chart paper and continues to read aloud the story, showing students how to check if their inferences are correct. She reminds her students, “Good readers think about the story when they make an inference.”

In this scenario, Ms. Branen enhanced this read-aloud by deciding, in the moment, to insert a minilesson on how good readers use inferences to further comprehend. When asked during her post-lesson
Interview why she adapted her instruction to include writing about inferences, she shared, “All the students can make an inference and process it... I thought that by including a writing component, students could add to their understanding of what this [strategy] is. I hadn’t planned on doing this, but I can add a writing component to anything they’re reading.” This adaptive decision allowed Ms. Branen to talk to her students about how good readers use this comprehension strategy to build their understanding of the text. She then invited her students to share these inferences in their journals—also an unplanned adaptation—thereby connecting reading and writing in a developmentally appropriate way.

Scholars have described such instructional moves as adaptive teaching (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999; Fairbanks et al., 2010). Adaptive teaching occurs as “teachers accept the differences in the capabilities in pupils and take these differences as the starting point for teaching/learning” (Van den Berg, Sleegers, Geijsel, & Vandenberghe, 2000, p. 334). Ms. Branen decided in the moment, based on her students’ understandings and responses, to adapt her lesson objective to include an additional comprehension strategy and writing activity. Such awareness and willingness to modify one’s literacy instruction is necessary as the student population in today’s schools becomes increasingly diverse (Kena et al., 2014). Students enter school with vast differences in prior knowledge, English language proficiency, and life experience (e.g., Farkas & Beron, 2004; Hart & Risley, 1995, 2003; Lesaux, 2012), and it is incumbent upon teachers to adapt to these students’ differing needs.

In addition, with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) by many states across the United States, teachers are redesigning their teaching to integrate literacy instruction across disciplines. This shift in instructional emphasis increases the complexity of literacy instruction. To effectively engage in this complex work, teachers need to be flexible and responsive to provide integrated instruction that meets the diverse needs of the students they serve. This perspective is not new. Dewey (1933), for example, demonstrated the need for an adaptive approach:

> “This adaptive decision allowed Ms. Branen to talk to her students about how good readers use this comprehension strategy.”

In this excerpt, Dewey gives his definition of adaptive teaching: the ability to be flexible and take advantage of unexpected incidents and questions. He also reminds teachers to ask themselves what prior knowledge students have, how students can connect to the text, how to engage students, how to clarify misconceptions, and how to personalize the topic. These questions provide insight into the underlying tenets of adaptability.

Since Dewey (1933), many researchers have recognized that effective literacy teachers are adaptive (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Duffy & Hoffman, 1999; Pearson, 2007; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001; Rosaen, Carlisle, Mihocko, Melnick, & Johnson, 2013; Taylor, Raphael, & Au, 2011). For the last decade, we have engaged in research on teacher adaptations to learn more about how and why teachers adapt their literacy instruction (Duffy et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2006; Parsons, 2012; Parsons, Davis, Scales, Williams, & Kear, 2010; Parsons & Vaughn, 2013; Parsons, Williams, Burrowbridge, & Mauk, 2011; Vaughn, 2015; Vaughn & Parsons, 2013; Vaughn & Parsons, in press). In this research, we observed teachers’ literacy instruction to identify instructional adaptations and interviewed teachers after the observations to learn more about their thinking when they made adaptations. This research occurred in grades K–7.
in different regions across the United States. In this article, we returned to these data to identify patterns in characteristics of teachers who were adaptive.

**What Is Adaptive Teaching, and Why Is It Important?**

Teaching reading is a complex endeavor that includes multiple actors, and thus, lessons rarely go exactly as planned. Pearson and Hoffman (2011) explained, “For a teacher to simply carry on down a planned path ignoring the reality of current circumstances is a recipe for failure” (p. 20). Scholars have used different terms to describe teacher adaptability, including *improvisation, responsive instruction, and dialogic teaching*, to name a few. For example, Sawyer (2004) and Graue, Whyte, and Karabon (2015) described the importance of “teacher improvisation.” Graue and colleagues (2015) explained, “Teachers improvise when they actively respond to students’ diverse intellectual, social, and emotional experiences and needs; taking multiple bodies of knowledge into moment-by-moment interactions with children” (p. 14). Assaf and Lopez (2012), Cajkler and Hall (2012), and Howell (2012) highlighted the importance of “responsive instruction,” where teachers respond to students’ instructional needs by being alert and active in building upon student cues. Boyd (2012) and Pifarré and Staarman (2011) called this “dialogic teaching,” which highlights the interactions and the co-construction that occurs in classrooms when teachers and students think together during instruction. Although discussed differently in the literature, these concepts align with adaptability, suggesting that teachers use their knowledge of students to carefully construct learning opportunities with and for their students (Parsons, 2012; Reeves, 2010; Vaughn, 2015).

**Theoretical Perspective**

Adaptability aligns with the theoretical perspective of social constructivism (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivism highlights the social context within which individuals participate and learn. At the core of social constructivism is the collaborative nature of individuals constructing knowledge and meaning. In the context of literacy instruction, adaptive teachers invite collaboration via adaptations, as they engage students in the curriculum and encourage participation in developing and sharing the responsibility of learning outcomes. In this way, adaptability is grounded in social constructivism (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978), where learners collaborate and construct meaning in social contexts.

Consider the following example during an integrated science and literacy lesson. During small-group discussions of a vocabulary word in a higher challenge text, a group of students appear to miss the meaning of the word. As a result, Ms. James (pseudonym) pulls the group aside and reviews the features of informational texts. Ms. James shares, “Let’s think together. Why do you think authors put words in bolded print? What do you think these words have to do with what you are reading? Let’s look at this together. How does this help you to understand and make meaning?” She adapted her instruction by revisiting text features, which was not a planned part of the lesson, to deepen student understanding.

In addition, Ms. James asks students to share their perspectives in the lesson, using questions like “What do you think?” and “How does this help you?” Students respond by sharing “The print is bolded” and “This makes the words stick out.” This example illustrates how adaptive teachers listen to their students’ dialogue when making adaptations. Adaptability requires that teachers share ownership of their classrooms. In this way, adaptive teachers invite students into the lesson so they can help to reshape the direction of learning outcomes.

**What Are the Characteristics of Adaptive Teachers?**

From our research, we have identified patterns in the characteristics of adaptive teachers: (a) they constantly informally assess students, (b) they reflect on their practice, (c) they know their students well, and (d) they have a vision. We describe each of these characteristics in the next sections and provide illustrative examples from our research.

**Adaptive Literacy Teachers Informally Assess Students... Constantly**

Because adaptability requires teachers to insert adaptations in the midst
“She adapted her instruction to push students toward a deeper level of thoughtfulness about the text.”

of instruction, adaptive teachers must informally assess and know when to support their students. Consider how a fifth-grade teacher listens to her students during instruction and how she scaffolds her students based on her informal assessment of their understandings in the moment:

Get out your reading notebook and get to a fresh page. While you’re doing that, I want to share. We talked about what good readers do—they think about what they do: inferring, synthesizing, and asking questions. You are doing a good job about that because I heard you do this as I was circulating around and taking notes. You’re connecting your background knowledge in your literature groups by bringing in your own experiences to the group. I want to take a minute to share an entry.

Although this teacher had not initially planned to comment on students’ entries during the lesson, she reasoned that because she saw how successful a student was in incorporating synthesizing and using evidence from the text, she wanted to use this example to highlight what writers can do in their work. During her post-lesson interview, she explained, “I shared that [entry] because [the student] was taking information that explained, “I shared that [entry] because you are making these connections between what we are doing in reading and writing.

During this four-month study, this teacher’s adaptations to her instruction were often based on informal assessments like this (e.g., clipboarding), where she listened to smaller groups of students and then brought the class together to scaffold something new based on these small-group discussions. Students contributed during the lesson by sharing their thoughts. Mike says, “The scene is important, Yellowstone at Old Faithful, this tells us about what the characters are facing.” Haley shares, “A dog got eaten by the wolves so the people must be scared and angry.” The teacher then pulls out the text and says, “In small groups, talk with your group and let’s think about how Troy must be feeling, given this information.” These discussions were not planned, but the teacher used her students’ contributions to scaffold and redirect her literacy instruction.

In another classroom, during the opening lesson of a unit incorporating music and poetry, a sixth-grade teacher had students read through the lyrics of the song “Imagine” by John Lennon. They were supposed to underline a lyric that stood out to them and write an explanation of why it stood out. As they worked, the teacher interjected, “The point of this project is to think about why—explain why you feel the way you do. You just want to underline and be done, but I want you to ask why.” When asked why she made this interjection, she explained,

Because when I looked around, they were just underlining. Even when I asked them to explain, it was difficult for them to explain. It is really difficult to help them push past that initial “I’ll do the task because you told me to do the task, not because I should understand what I’m doing.”

This teacher was constantly monitoring students’ work—and she was monitoring more than just task completion. The students in this example were doing what she told them to do: underlining text. However, this teacher’s careful informal assessment led her to see that students were superficially completing the task, not engaging in the thoughtfulness she had planned to evoke when she planned the lesson. So she acted. She adapted her instruction to push students toward a deeper level of thoughtfulness about the text. And her students responded. When we asked one student about this teacher’s adaptation, she responded,

It helped me, like… We had to write the songs. You talk about your feelings or anything you want to talk about. And if you keep singing the song, and the person, like, the person you’re explaining it to…the person who researches the song and then put the lyrics, and then they’ll understand what you’re talking about.

This student demonstrated a new perspective in response to the teacher’s adaptation: She considered the importance of the audience in writing songs and poetry.

**Adaptive Literacy Teachers Reflect on Their Practice**

Moreover, adaptive teachers reflect on their practice. Zeichner and Liston (2014) highlight the importance of reflection:
“Adaptive teachers do not just take action without thinking it through, but rather quickly reflect, analyze, and determine a student’s needs based upon pedagogical expertise.”

Reflections like this support how adaptive teachers listen to students in the moment and redirect their instruction based on what students bring to the lesson. We often hear adaptive teachers using language such as, “I noticed... and so I...,” and “I wondered why she thought this, so...” This language indicates that they observed something in their students, used the observation to assess what their students needed next, and took that course of action. Adaptive teachers do not just take action without thinking it through, but rather quickly reflect, analyze, and determine a student’s needs based upon pedagogical expertise and their knowledge of their students. They are then able to reflect on the effectiveness of these instructional decisions afterward.

Consider another example from our data, where a third-grade teacher conferred with a student in writers’ workshop during a unit on essay writing. In the conference, this student reads his nonfiction piece aloud to her. The teacher adapts her instruction and tells the student that she made two inferences as he read. She explained that readers can make inferences as they read nonfiction, too. While she had no intention of emphasizing that inferencing is a reading strategy that spans types of text, she adapted her instruction to teach this minilesson as the opportunity presented itself in this writing conference. This teacher reflected,

That’s what I like about this reader’s workshop conferencing method is whatever they have, you teach from that. And it’s right there in the text and, of course, it means you also have to look at things when they’re reading... they’re not doing too well inferring word meanings in the text. And a lot of times, I don’t think they have random knowledge of vocabulary. Some of them do, but some of them don’t. But really using the text to give them the support for understanding the vocabulary— that’s sort of...if I can find kids reading difficult enough text where they would have to use some word inferring, I want to do that, but I did not intend to infer with him.

This instance and the teacher’s thoughts about it demonstrate her reflectiveness. She had reflected on students’ use of reading strategies (i.e., they are not good at inferring word meaning from context), on students’ vocabulary knowledge (i.e., many have limited vocabularies), and on instructional strategies she can employ to best address these concerns (i.e., she is going to seize any opportunities that arise to help students learn to infer word meanings from text). This example demonstrates how this teacher used knowledge to reflect on her practice to help her make instructional decisions in the classroom.

Adaptive Literacy Teachers Know Their Students Well

Another characteristic of adaptive teachers is that they know their students well. Specifically, teachers need knowledge of students’ backgrounds and experiences in order to create meaningful learning opportunities for them (Banks et al., 2005). Teachers need to know about
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their students’ home cultures, their language development, and their interests.

In a sixth-grade classroom, the class is using specially selected vocabulary words to write about social studies content they are learning. Because most of the students in this class are learning English as a second language, the teacher focuses on building students’ vocabularies and background knowledge. As students write, the teacher circulates through the classroom. She adapts her instruction by having a conference with a particular student, saying, “You are the most creative girl, but you just rush and rush. You can tell me a story using these words.” When asked to explain why she had this particular conference with this student and talked with the student about slowing down her thinking to capture it in her writing, the teacher explained:

Well, Alexa’s a great storyteller… So my point to her was if I ask a volunteer group who are sitting in a circle, “Who can use all these words in the story?” the first hand to go up would be Alexa. “Oh, me,” and tell this, like, great story. But because she has to put it on paper, she’s saying she can’t do it. She likes to verbalize things but struggles a lot to write things. I don’t think she likes to write. She has a learning disability, and I think that that affects her. I think she’s very self-conscious of her writing.

Because this teacher is aware that many of her EL students prefer to talk out their ideas and understandings with peers and others, she chose to conduct a conference with Alexa so that Alexa could share her ideas first verbally and have an opportunity to shine as the “storyteller.” To support her writing development, the teacher then scaffolds Alexa by reviewing the vocabulary words and providing explicit instruction about how these words can fit into the context of what the student is writing. As seen in this teacher’s reflection on this one instructional decision, she has vast knowledge about her students’ language capabilities, literacy skills, and individual characteristics and strengths. As a result, this teacher uses this knowledge to guide her instruction—on the fly, in the midst of teaching.

In a different lesson in this same teacher’s classroom, students were writing personal narratives about a time that changed their lives. She was conferencing with one student, asking questions and writing down his responses. She explained this instructional decision as follows:

He had a huge page written when I got back [from conferring with other students], which was kind of shocking to me. I didn’t expect it. And Gabriel has a really hard time articulating his feelings…they exist in there, but he really can’t explain them… So he wrote about teaching his little brother how to walk, and I had been to the family’s house, so I know that his little brothers adore him and it’s like a sense of joy in his life and he’s really proud that they love him so much, so I knew that he was actually writing…he cared about but he couldn’t get over that, so [I asked], “What was the effect of teaching your brother to walk?” and he kept saying “I’m a good big brother, he learned to walk.” He couldn’t, like, push past. So I really had to work with him, like, with what effect? “What [and how] did it make you feel about you?”

When asked about this adaptation, the student responded that talking about his home life helped him with his writing. This example further demonstrates the deep knowledge this teacher has for her students. And her knowledge goes far beyond her understanding of their academic skills and strengths. As demonstrated in this second example, she conducts home visits with all her students, which gives her an understanding of their home lives but also uses the students’ discourse to build and extend the lesson.

Adaptive Literacy Teachers Have a Vision

Teachers who possess a vision have a direction and long-term plan for their instruction. A vision is “a teacher’s conscious sense of self, of one’s work, and of one’s mission…a personal stance on teaching that arises from deep within the inner teacher” (Duffy, 2002, p. 334). These visions guide teachers in their instructional decisions and influence student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Parsons, Malloy, Vaughn, & La Croix, 2014). Consider some of these vision statements from teachers who exhibited adaptive teaching behaviors from across our studies:

- A seventh-grade teacher: “My vision is to create thoughtful, independent, inquisitive young people who can collaborate with one another and have a sense of leadership and who can lead.”

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“Adaptive Literacy Teachers Have a Vision”
Another seventh-grade teacher: “I want to create independent readers who are motivated and who want to read on their own.”

A third-grade teacher: “I want them to have a love for learning. And that one of the ways that they learn is through reading, getting information through writing out their ideas and sharing their ideas with other people. So, I mean, it is to have that love for learning because that is going to carry them through into their adult life, no matter what it is they choose to do. If they don’t have that, then their opportunities are shutting down in front of them.”

These visions are enacted in practice by a variety of instructional moves and adaptations. For example, in a guided reading group in a sixth-grade classroom, the teacher introduced cause and effect to students. The students were then given sticky notes to track their thinking as they read the guided reading book independently. A few minutes into the reading time, the teacher stopped the students and said,

“We’re going to work on cause and effect, but that doesn’t mean we stop doing all the things good readers do. So we’re still making predictions and connections... Rodrigo, I see that you wrote “cause and effect” because that’s where your thinking is, but I want you to go back and read and think, “Do I have any questions here? Do I have any connections here?”

When asked to explain this action, the teacher explained,

I don’t ever want them to read for skill; I want them to read and to think about what they’re reading, and I feel like they’ve been so trained to just accomplish whatever the particular skill that they’re working on. Even you were noticing Camilo here, he was, like, I said—I asked him some questions [and he responded], “cause and effect.” But there was no thought. He just thought, “We’re starting cause and effect and I should say ‘cause and effect.'”

This episode demonstrates that this teacher has a vision for her students as readers. She wants them to become thoughtful, strategic readers, not students who just accomplish the task given to them. This teacher’s vision for her students went beyond the day-to-day work in her classroom. She explained, “I hope that through teaching, I foster a passion for lifelong learning and an ability to constantly question the world around them.” Such visions shape teachers’ actions in the classroom and serve as a thoughtful plan of their ideal classroom.

**Conclusion**

Given the increasingly diverse student populations in today’s classrooms, a thoughtful and flexible approach to literacy instruction is warranted—one in which teachers modify their instruction to teach across disciplines in their efforts to promote literacy skills. This approach to teaching literacy in an integrated, discipline-specific direction (Swain & Coleman, 2014) is a refreshing perspective in contrast to recent educational reform efforts (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act, 2002), which required strict adherence to mandated curricula and pacing guides (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Coburn, Pearson, & Woulfin, 2011; Valencia, Place, Martin, & Grossman, 2006). We contend that although teachers are at an exciting point to reclaim autonomy of their instructional decisions during literacy instruction, implementing literacy instruction flexibly and adaptively after roughly 15 years of mandated curricula and with continuing high stakes for teachers in light of their students’ achievement is daunting.

As teacher educators, literacy researchers, and classroom teachers, we closely examined a decade of data in an attempt to understand the characteristics of thoughtfully adaptive teachers. In doing so, we found insight into the practices of adaptive literacy. Overall, adaptive teachers are knowledgeable experts who invite collaboration via adaptations to engage students with the curriculum. These teachers continually assess their students to gauge how their instruction can best fit the individual characteristics of each student they serve. Moreover, adaptive teachers encourage participation in developing and sharing the responsibility of learning outcomes with their students. In this way, they are persistent in refining their craft, reflecting about learning opportunities, adaptations, and their students’ instructional, emotional, and social needs. As a result, these teachers know their students well and can modify their instruction in the moment based on this knowledge. Finally, these teachers have a vision, articulating what works best for their students, and what they ultimately
Teachers’ Adaptive Instruction Supporting Students’ Literacy Learning

**TAKE ACTION!**

1. Reflect on your literacy instruction. Review your instruction to see if there were any adaptations you inserted in your lesson. Consider why you made those adaptations and what resulted for your students. Think of adaptations you could have inserted based on the findings of this research.

2. Make a T-chart. Reflect on your vision for literacy instruction in one column. In the other column, write two to three instructional practices you engage in to support teaching according to your vision. Reflect on how you can adapt your instruction to support these instructional practices during literacy instruction.

3. Think about the different ways you gain knowledge of your students and how you informally assess them to build upon students’ cultural, linguistic, and social-emotional needs. Share this knowledge with a colleague and discuss new ways to informally assess your students.

wish for their students to become as a result of their instruction. As a result, we suggest that teachers reflect on their practice, ask questions about their instructional moves and their relationship to adaptability, and articulate a vision about their instruction to help guide them in their trajectories toward adaptability.

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