**LIT 530 Assignment:**

*Classroom Research Project/Paper* The final paper for the course consists of a classroom research project on a topic of your own personal and professional interest (20-25 pages; 20 scholarly citations). The traditional way to do research and “write it up” is as follows: introduce your topic, its significance to the field, frame your own problem or question(s) in relation to the topic, discuss related literature and describe your methodology and discuss the outcomes and implications of your project. We will take time to acknowledge, critique and challenge this very linear process of research. You will be writing this paper in stages throughout the course and receiving much feedback and support from myself and from your peers.

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Research Paper

“How do primary students respond to reading to demonstrate their comprehension of a text?”
Introduction

“Reading is a meaning-getting activity,” states Dr. Dean Goewey, the principal of an elementary school in the Oswego City School District. Students of all ages and ability levels must construct meaning from and understand what they read in order to apply the acquired knowledge to other instructional activities and connect it to their personal lives. Because literacy is incorporated into all content areas within the elementary classroom and is the main focus of instruction throughout the entire school day, students are given the opportunity to demonstrate their comprehension of narrative and informational texts in a variety of ways. How students respond before, during, and after the reading of a text to show their understanding differs in the types of responses that they generate. My purpose for conducting research was to learn how primary students in Kindergarten through third grade demonstrate their comprehension of narrative and informational texts in response to reading.

Methods

While observing Ms. Ballard, a first-year Kindergarten teacher at an elementary school in Central New York, I learned about some of the ways in which her students respond to read-alouds before, during, and after the reading to demonstrate their comprehension of the text. I recorded my observations of this Kindergarten classroom in a field journal, writing thick descriptions of what I noticed as I observed the students demonstrating their understanding of texts in different ways. I also audiotaped the read-alouds that I observed in this classroom and transcribed them afterwards to ensure that I captured each line of dialogue between the teacher and her students. As stated by Santoro, Chard, Howard, and Baker, “Read-aloud time is an ideal opportunity to build comprehension through the use of oral language activities, listening comprehension, and text-based discussion” (Santoro et al., 2008, p. 407). Furthermore, I used my own substitute teaching experiences as an opportunity to collect additional data on how primary students in first grade, second grade, and third grade engage in pre-reading and post-reading activities to convey the meaning that they construct from texts that are read independently, in small groups, and in a whole class setting. I also interviewed two primary-grade teachers to gain insight into ways in which their students demonstrate their comprehension of texts. Throughout my qualitative research, I obtained findings that answered some of my sub-questions regarding
what motivates primary students to respond to reading to demonstrate their comprehension, which types of activities teachers have found allow their students to demonstrate their comprehension of texts most effectively, how students’ responses to reading differ from lessons that are and are not based on the Common Core ELA modules, and how students’ developmental levels, learning abilities, and other factors affect how they demonstrate their comprehension of texts. Louise Rosenblatt (1978) suggested that reading is a transactional process, which means that “the reader must transact with the text to make meaning” (Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009, p. 111).

Through the inductive analysis approach, I analyzed my data by reading over my field notes to identify frames of analysis, as well as domains within these frames of analysis, that were supported by information within the peer-reviewed resources that I used alongside my own findings (Hatch, 2002). After analyzing my data, my findings indicated that primary students seem to gain authentic and meaningful learning experiences by demonstrating their comprehension of texts through oral, written, illustrative, performative, and hands-on or “creative” types of responses, as well as through collaborative activities. Some of the activities within each response category incorporate more than one type of response and are classified in this paper according to one aspect of the response. All of the teacher and student names within this study are pseudonyms.

Findings

Demonstrating Comprehension Through Oral Responses

Primary students demonstrate their comprehension of narrative stories and informational texts in several oral ways during interactive read-alouds. “Interactive read-alouds are important learning opportunities for emergent readers because teachers and peers can actively model and scaffold comprehension strategies, engage readers, and cultivate a community of learners” (Wiseman, 2010, p. 431). During interactive read-alouds, students are able to demonstrate their comprehension of the text by giving responses to open-ended questions and constructing meaning through dialogue and interactions with others (Wiseman, 2010). Wiseman discusses a study based on students in a Kindergarten class to learn about how the teacher’s interactive read-aloud approach allowed the students to make sense of stories together through these “rich” interactions. Before beginning each read-aloud of a narrative text, the Kindergarten teacher
would ask her students to predict what was going to happen in the story after she read the title page and dedication and discussed the cover of the book with the class. “Her open-ended questioning emphasized that meaning existed in the minds of the readers and that the students had important perceptions for interpreting stories” (p. 434).

Responding to the reading by making predictions based on illustrations and events within the narrative story or informational text is one way that students demonstrate their comprehension before and during a read-aloud. Throughout my observations in Ms. Ballard’s Kindergarten classroom, I noticed that she often gives her students the opportunity to make predictions during a read-aloud, which allows them to use their prior knowledge and information from the text to demonstrate their understanding. During a read-aloud of an informational text about ladybugs, the following interaction between Ms. Ballard and her students took place.

Ms. Ballard: “Look at this picture right here. Raise your hand if you have a guess about what a ladybug might eat. Scotty, thank you for raising your hand.”
Scotty: “Grapes.”
Ms. Ballard: “Grapes. Maybe they eat grapes. They do kind of look like it in the picture, but what else do we think they might eat? Julianne?”
Julianne: “Bugs.”
Ms. Ballard: “Yeah, they eat bugs even smaller than them!”

(Field Notes, Oct. 22, 2013, p. 4)

These two students used the picture on a certain page in the book to make predictions about what a ladybug might eat before their teacher read the text on that page. Although Scotty’s response was incorrect, as ladybugs do not eat grapes, Ms. Ballard still restated his prediction and accepted it, because it was his individual guess and response to the picture. When Julianne responded by saying that ladybugs eat bugs, Ms. Ballard restated her response and added onto it to teach her students that although ladybugs are a type of bug, they eat bugs that are even smaller than they are. This conversation allowed students to demonstrate their comprehension by responding to a picture with a prediction during the read-aloud of an informational text.

Students also demonstrate their comprehension of a text by reflecting on whether or not their initial predictions were correct. “In addition to asking students to predict,” Santoro et al. (2008) state, “a teacher could ask why students made a particular prediction, then ask them to explain whether the prediction was correct after reading the story” to demonstrate their acquired
understanding (Santoro et al., 2008, pp. 397-398). It could have been beneficial for Scotty, Julianne, and other students in Ms. Ballard’s class to engage in this strategy as they would have been demonstrating comprehension by explaining why their predictions were correct or incorrect based on what they learned from the informational text. Bringing the conversation back to students’ predictions that they previously made shows “the importance of using student comments to build understanding” and that “pre-reading conversations can provide students with foundational knowledge that can add to their comprehension” as the read-aloud continues (Wiseman, 2010, p. 435). While substitute teaching in a first-grade classroom at an elementary school in Central New York, I performed a read-aloud of a fable entitled *The fox and the grapes*, asking students to make predictions beforehand about what they thought was going to happen in the story based on an image that I displayed. This lesson was part of a Common Core ELA module, so I asked the questions that were scripted, such as, “What character do you see?” and “What is the fox doing?” The students were also asked to predict whether or not the fox would be able to get the grapes. The fox was unable to get the grapes down from the vine in the fable, so I had the students think about and share whether their initial predictions had been correct or incorrect after I finished reading the story to demonstrate their understanding of what happened at the end of the fable (Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 1).

During my observations of interactive read-alouds in Ms. Ballard’s Kindergarten classroom, I found that some of the strategies that she uses are supported by Wiseman’s (2010) study, as well as one by Cummins and Stallmeyer-Gerard (2011). Ms. Ballard frequently offers her students encouraging comments with responses. On October 3rd, I observed a read-aloud of an informational text entitled *101 animal babies*. Ms. Ballard read about the baby alligator and baby anteater that day. After she finished reading aloud, she asked the students to share what they learned about either of the baby animals to demonstrate their comprehension of the text, and she provided positive comments in return.

Luke: “Um…uh…they…they…an alligator can hold a baby in its mouth.”

Ms. Ballard: “Yes! Luke said that the mama alligator can hold the baby alligator and carry it in her mouth. That was a good fact, Luke.”

(Field Notes, Oct. 8, 2013, p. 4, 5)

Ms. Ballard also restates the students’ exact words, which is another strategy that is supported by Wiseman (2010). Throughout the observations that I made in Ms. Ballard’s classroom, I found
that she restated the words of her students almost every time they provided an answer to a literal or inferential comprehension question demonstrating their understanding. For example, on October 3rd, the following interaction took place after the read-aloud of 101 animal babies.

Ms. Ballard: “What else did we learn from what we just read about baby alligators and baby anteaters? Kellie?”
Kellie: “Um…hmmm… the baby anteater gets off mom’s back.”
Ms. Ballard: “Okay, good. The baby anteater gets off the mama’s back when it’s time to eat. Jason?”
Jason: “The anteater eats ants.”
Ms. Ballard: “We didn’t learn that from the reading today, but I think they do eat ants.”
Jason: “They do, ‘cause um…um… um…when I was watching ‘Bubble Guppies’ sometime, they showed an anteater and they showed it sticking its trunk in a hole to eat ants.”
Ms. Ballard: “Okay, good. I’m going to pick two more friends who can tell me something they learned from what we just read. Again, Jason?”
Jason: “The big crocodile can hear the baby cracking the eggs open inside the egg.”
Ms. Ballard: “Oh, I love what Jason just said. Jason just said that he learned that the mom can hear the baby alligators calling from inside the egg. Nice job, Jason! And Jake?”
Jake: “Some babies…the mama alligator got all the babies in her mouth.”
Ms. Ballard: “Yes, the mama alligator can hold the eggs in her mouth.”

(Field Notes, Oct. 8, 2013, p. 5)

Students construct ideas and meaning from stories not only based on the text and illustrations, but also based on their background knowledge and personal connections to them. This aspect of comprehension is shown through the connection made by Jason in the excerpt from my field notes above and will be discussed more thoroughly later on in this study.

Furthermore, each time that the Kindergarten teacher from Wiseman’s study finished reading a story aloud, she had the students talk about their “overall impressions of the book” by turning to their neighbors and telling them what they were going to write about afterwards (Wiseman, 2010, p. 434). “A focus question,” Santoro et al. write, can be “used to direct the student-to-student discussions” (Santoro et al., 2008, p. 403). This strategy is similar to the one
that Ms. Ballard uses in her classroom after read-alouds, allowing students to share their understanding of the text with one another.

I often have students do a “turn and talk” with a shoulder buddy, which involves students turning to someone next to them and responding to a question or topic I provide. After two or three minutes, I will have students come back together and share what they discussed. (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 6)

Through this activity, students interact with their peers to demonstrate their comprehension of the read-aloud. Ms. Ballard believes that talking to shoulder buddies is an effective way for the students to respond to the reading, because they are informally talking to friends about what they just learned (Personal Communication, Oct. 31, 2013). By listening to each other’s responses, the students are interacting in order to build meaning (Wiseman, 2010).

In Cummins and Stallmeyer-Gerard’s (2011) study, during the read-aloud of Icebergs and glaciers, she encouraged her students to examine and discuss the pictures in the text, which is another strategy that Ms. Ballard commonly integrates during her read-alouds (Cummins & Stallmeyer-Gerard, 2011). She frequently asks her students to look at a picture and respond to a question that she poses about it. During my observation of Ms. Ballard’s class on October 10th, she performed a read-aloud of a narrative story entitled Cock-a-doodle-do! Barnyard hullabaloo by Giles Andreae and David Wojtowycz. She posed a literal comprehension question about an event in the story in which the students could use the illustration and the text that had been read aloud on that page to help them respond and demonstrate their comprehension.

Ms. Ballard: “What does the barnyard cat do? Miranda?”
Miranda: “He keeps one eye open when he sleeps.”
Ms. Ballard: “Yes, and why does he do this, Miranda?”
Miranda: “To…try and catch a mouse.”

(Field Notes, Oct. 15, 2013, p. 3)

Miranda used the illustration on the page to help her answer both of the teacher’s questions. As I observed this interaction, I noticed that Miranda was slightly hesitant when answering the second question, as though she was unsure whether her answer to the first question was correct. However, Ms. Ballard was just posing an additional question for Miranda to respond to, allowing her to demonstrate her comprehension even further. Also, I found that students demonstrate their comprehension of texts by examining illustrations during a read-aloud and making inferences.
even when the teacher does not pose a question or prompt. For example, on October 10th, during Ms. Ballard’s read-aloud of *Cock-a-doodle-do! Barnyard hullabaloo*, one student raised her hand to share what she inferred from one of the illustrations, demonstrating her own understanding of what could have been going on in the narrative story.

Kellie: “Ms. Ballard, that one baby pig looks like he’s sad, because he’s not getting any milk from his mama.”

Ms. Ballard: “Yeah, it does look like he’s sad, doesn’t it?”

(Field Notes, Oct. 13, 2013, p. 3)

Kellie had looked closely at the picture while the teacher was reading the page about the pigs. She noticed that one baby pig had a sad face and was standing further away from the rest of the baby pigs that were drinking milk from their mother. Her comment showed that she was listening to the story, as well as analyzing the illustration for additional information. This inference aided Kellie in her comprehension of the story, and she shared this response with her teacher and classmates. By having her students closely examine the illustrations during picture book read-alouds, as well as during read-alouds of informational texts, Ms. Ballard is giving them the opportunity to use what they learn from the text to construct meaning and, therefore, demonstrate their comprehension.

A study by Morrison and Wlodarczyk (2009), focusing on peer-led discussions of narrative and informational texts, conveyed that “when students made connections to the material they were reading, listening to, or talking about, their understanding of the information accelerated. Thus, comprehension abilities are enhanced when students are required to make connections to texts” (Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009, p. 113). Morrison and Wlodarczyk (2009) discuss how making connections in first grade, and other primary grades, is another strategy that encourages students to become engaged with a text and allows them to demonstrate their comprehension. When students listen to a text, for example, they must construct their own meaning of it using their prior knowledge and adding new information that they learn from the reading to their schema. Students can make text-to-self connections based on their own personal experiences and background knowledge, text-to-text connections between the current text and other texts that they have read or listened to, and text-to-world connections to things that happen or have happened in the community at large (Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009). It is imperative for teachers to model how to make each type of connection so that the students can begin to make
their own and demonstrate their understanding of a text that they read independently or listen to during a read-aloud.

Throughout my observations, my findings have shown that many of the Kindergarten students in Ms. Ballard’s class demonstrate their understanding of a text by making connections and sharing stories that relate to the narrative and informational texts that are read aloud. Before Ms. Ballard’s read-aloud of 101 animal babies, Luke made a text-to-self connection by stating, “Hey! I seen alligators at the zoo!” (Field Notes, Oct. 8, 2013, p. 2). The same student made another connection later on during the read-aloud, which could be considered a text-to-world connection as he mentioned a television show in his comment. He stated, “This reminds me of the show ‘Too Cute’ with baby animals!” (Field Notes, Oct. 8, 2013, p. 4). By making connections to the main topics in the read-aloud, Luke was relating the text to aspects of his own life to construct meaning from it. During an interview with Mrs. Bryan, a teacher who taught second grade for five years and now teaches sixth grade within a Central New York school district, she commented on the importance of giving primary students the opportunity to make personal connections to texts that are read in small groups or as a whole class.

With primary-aged students, an opportunity to discuss things they notice in illustrations is a great hook to get them thinking about a story. Often when looking at the weekly story in the basal reader or using leveled readers in small groups, I have used the pictures to help students make connections to the text. Students in second grade particularly also love sharing connections they make between the text and their own lives. (Personal Communication, Nov. 1, 2013)

I also observed third-grade students making connections in a class that I substitute taught for on October 8th in an elementary school in Central New York. The students were asked to make text-to-text connections between a picture book entitled That book woman by Heather Henson, which was read aloud, and photographs with captions to demonstrate their understanding of how the physical environment that one lives in or travels through may cause that person to experience challenges and obstacles. The connections that the students made during this reading activity can also be considered text-to-world connections, as the students were looking at pictures of actual physical environments and landforms that people live in or near around the world. During this activity in response to the read-aloud, the students put themselves in the shoes of the book woman in order to identify what obstacles they would have
to overcome if they were to live in the particular physical environment displayed in the photograph that they were given in groups of two or three students. For example, one photograph depicted an image of an environment in which a volcano was erupting with lava. The students used what they knew about the book woman from the story to decide how they would overcome the obstacles of their physical environment if they were the book woman, who traveled to deliver books to a character in the story. This activity allowed the students to demonstrate comprehension by making text-to-text and text-to-world connections between the characters and events in the story and the image of an environment with specific landforms and challenges to overcome. The pairs and groups of students shared their ideas with the class afterwards (Field Notes, Oct. 22, 2013, p. 9).

An evidence-based strategy that Morrison and Wlodarczyk (2009) discuss is the use of discussion webs in the primary grades. The authors explain the following:

Meaningful conversational discussion has enormous value to the learning process (Cullinan, 1993), as it stimulates and extends students’ thinking (Cramer, 2004) while building and supporting social learning communities (Fish, 1980). Discussion enables collaborative sharing of ideas, alternative perspectives, and problem solving during learning (Almasi, 1996). (Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009, p. 115)

Through the discussion web activity, students may demonstrate their comprehension in response to a text by thinking about both sides of an issue or open-ended question. An open-ended question is posed after a read-aloud experience, and students come up with their own individual ideas using the knowledge that they acquired from the text. A valuable aspect of this strategy is that it “promotes the opportunity for all voices to be heard” (p. 115). Not only are critical thinking skills enhanced through the implementation of this activity, but students are also able to demonstrate their understanding and express the meaning that they constructed in response to a story or informational text. During my interview with Ms. Ballard, she talked about the effectiveness of using discussion webs in her Kindergarten classroom after she does a read-aloud. “Often after reading stories,” she began, “we will create a ‘web’ as a class, with the name of the story or topic in the middle. Students raise their hands to contribute one fact that they learned or one event that happened in the story” (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 6). Later on in the interview, I asked Ms. Ballard which teaching strategies seem
to elicit the most meaningful responses that demonstrate her students’ comprehension of a text, and her response once again reflected how valuable using discussion webs is for her students.

I would say that the most meaningful responses I have seen came from our class “webs.” These give students the opportunity to respond individually and contribute to something in which the whole class participates. It is meaningful because I write the students’ responses on the white board or the SMARTboard and leave it up for them to look at the rest of the day, so they know that their thoughts and ideas are important. We often refer back to the web throughout the day, helping students recall and remember the information. (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 6)

Demonstrating Comprehension Through Written Responses

Cummins and Stallmeyer-Gerard (2011) conducted a study to learn about the “influence of reading informational texts aloud to students on a regular basis and nurturing their synthesis of the content in these texts through written and sketched responses” (Cummins & Stallmeyer-Gerard, 2011, p. 394). Students can demonstrate their comprehension of an informational text by compiling the facts from the text to determine the author’s “big idea” (p. 395). Cummins used a “cake baking” analogy to teach her third-grade students what it means to synthesize. In the study, Cummins introduced a new book that she was going to read aloud. She shared the following purpose for listening with the students:

While you’re listening, think about the facts, or ingredients, in the text. Think about how they blend together, and how what you know and understand about a topic is transformed, like a baked cake. (p. 397)

After the read-aloud of an informational text, the students were asked to write and sketch their individual responses to the text, focusing on the overall purpose and big idea of the text that was supported by the literal details from the text. The students demonstrated their comprehension of the text by “thinking about the author’s message beyond the text” and using the many details within the text to synthesize a “big idea” (p. 399).

During one substitute teaching experience in a third-grade classroom within a Central New York school district, I observed a teacher as she taught a lesson from a Common Core ELA module based on the narrative story entitled The boy who loved words by Roni Schotter. Instead of the teacher doing the read-aloud, a YouTube video was played, so the students were not given
the opportunity to ask any questions or respond to any comprehension questions throughout the read-aloud. After the read-aloud was finished, the students engaged in an activity in which they individually read seven selected excerpts from their own copies of the narrative story and then wrote the gist of each excerpt as a class to demonstrate their comprehension of the text. Capturing the gist of each excerpt is similar to the synthesizing of a “big idea” from the text, which Cummins and Stallmeyer-Gerard (2011) discuss. For each excerpt that they read, the students were asked to write two sentences for the gist; the teacher also wrote each gist on chart paper at the front of the classroom as students offered some ideas. While observing this lesson, I did not find that this response strategy was effective for this particular third-grade class. Many students were having a difficult time reading the selected excerpts, because some of the vocabulary in the text was challenging, which was actually stated in the scripted lesson plan. Other students said that writing the gist for each excerpt was too much writing, and many of them were unfocused throughout the activity. Therefore, students may not have demonstrated their comprehension as well as they could have if they had carried out the activity through a different approach or engaged in another type of activity in response to this piece of literature (Field Notes, Oct. 15, 2013, p. 6).

Students in the primary grades also use their response journals to respond to reading and demonstrate comprehension. It has been found to be an especially useful tool for responding to chapter book read-alouds. “To successfully read chapter books, young children may well need more support in making meaning” (Martinez & Roser, 2008, p. 195). Martinez and Roser developed a case study that focused on how first-graders use their literature response journals to help them make meaning from their first chapter book read-aloud. During the read-aloud of the chapter book entitled *The castle in the attic*, each student was given a copy of the book to follow along as the teacher read aloud. To support the students’ understanding of the elements of the story, the teacher used instructional strategies and discussion questions to assess their comprehension during the reading. After the teacher finished reading aloud a chapter, the students were asked to write and illustrate their responses to that chapter in their literature response journals. However, no specific prompts were given to guide the students in their responses (Martinez & Roser, 2008). According to Pantaleo (2002), personal written responses to demonstrate comprehension can fall into the following categories: “states an opinion, states an opinion and explanation, describes an emotion, describes an emotion and explanation, puts self
in a character’s position, makes predictions about characters, extends the story,” or even retells events from the book (Pantaleo, 2002, p. 80). Pamela, one first-grade student who the case study focused on, demonstrated how she eventually “assumed the stance of living inside the story world as she wrote in her journal” in response to the chapters of The castle in the attic (Martinez & Roser, 2008, p. 200). She recounted the key events from the chapters in logical order as she focused on the plot and the thoughts, motivations, goals, and emotions of the characters. Pamela included dialogue from the characters in her written responses, and she “recreated scenes from the story through the drawings that accompanied her written responses” (p. 202). Pamela demonstrated her comprehension of the chapters within this challenging chapter book by responding through descriptive writing and detailed illustrations. Allowing students to choose what they will write and draw in response to a read-aloud gives them the opportunity to express their understanding of a text in their own ways. In Wiseman’s (2010) study, the Kindergarten teacher often had the students go back to their seats and write a response related to the book or anything else that came to their minds after the read-aloud. Wiseman states, “In this classroom, the journal writing did not have to be about the read-aloud, but the text often provided students with a springboard for important connections to their writing topics” (Wiseman, 2010, p. 434).

An instructional study that was done by Liang, Peterson, and Graves (2005) investigated approaches that foster elementary students’ comprehension of literature based on how third-grade students responded to the reading of folktale picture books during a Response-Oriented unit. On the first day of the unit, the students responded to the read-aloud of the folktale picture book by writing their own “why” stories, as the folktale told why the Indian Paintbrush flower got its name (Liang et al., 2005, p. 395). The students were given the opportunity to make text-to-text connections, as they were asked to think about other “why” stories that they had heard before they began writing their own. On the second day of this unit, the students reread the story in pairs, and then chose to engage in one of three writing activities to demonstrate their comprehension: 1. “Writing a poem or story about how the main character feels at the end of the story,” 2. “Drawing a picture of a scene they had a strong feeling about” and writing why they had this feeling, or 3. “Creating a short play about the story” with a few other classmates (p. 395). Both teachers involved in this unit believed that the most effective activities during the Response-Oriented unit were the choices of writing activities, as they noticed their students’
enthusiasm for being given the opportunity to choose how they would respond to the reading to demonstrate their understanding (Liang et al., 2005).

During another substitute teaching experience, I was given the opportunity to lead a guided reading group through a writing activity in response to a text that the students read and re-read individually and as a small group. On October 22nd, I worked with a group of three third-grade students: one female student, Danielle, and two male students, Stephen and Brantley. After the students engaged in independent re-reads of an informational text entitled *All about sled dogs* from the Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) reading program by Fountas and Pinnell, their task was to write three things that they learned about sled dogs in their writing journals. Their goal was to demonstrate their comprehension of the story by recalling three things that stood out to them from the text. Stephen quickly thought of three facts to write in his journal and completed this activity in just over five minutes. Danielle told me that she could recall two things that she learned, but she needed the book to help her “think of another one.” Brantley remembered one idea on his own, but he had to refer back to the text and finish his writing the next day. However, he only had to look at a couple of the pictures to remind himself of facts that he had learned from the reading (Field Notes, Oct. 29, 2013, p. 2). This writing activity allowed the students to demonstrate their understanding of the informational text through recalling what they learned about the topic. The difficulty that Danielle and Brantley had when recalling facts that they learned could have been due to other factors that hindered their comprehension during their independent readings of the story, such as struggling with decoding some of the words.

Written responses to demonstrate comprehension of a text are also beneficial to students’ meaning-making process if the students have the opportunity to use digital reading devices or e-book readers to independently read books in or outside of the school setting. Larson (2010) discusses that “the International Reading Association (IRA; 2009) emphasized the importance of integrating information and communication technologies (ICTs) into current literacy programs” (Larson, 2010, p. 15). The digital note tool on these devices allows students to “write” notes that convey “the voice and mood of the individual reader while revealing an understanding of the story or expressing a desire for additional information or clarification of the emerging plot” during the reading of a text (pp. 17-18). Students can respond to the text to demonstrate their comprehension through “personal commentary or retelling of parts of the story” and “personal meaning-making” (p. 18). Their notes may also consist of questions that relate to the book that
suggest some confusion about the plot or a longing for deeper understanding beyond what can be literally interpreted through the reading of the text. Students may also demonstrate their understanding of a text through providing answers to questions that characters ask in the book, basically having “literal conversations with the author” (p. 19). The use of these “written” responses is similar to the use of Post-It notes to jot down questions and comments throughout the reading of a book, which Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, and Miller (2010) discuss as a way for students to demonstrate their comprehension of a text during reading (Certo et al., 2010).

Demonstrating Comprehension Through Illustrative Responses

Engaging in illustrative responses is another common way for primary students to demonstrate their comprehension of texts. Galda and Liang (2009) discuss the effectiveness of having primary students respond to read-alouds through practicing the visualizing strategy as they listen to a narrative story or an informational text. “Visualizing,” write Galda and Liang, “is an important and highly effective strategy for improving student understanding of both expository and narrative text” (Galda & Liang, 2009, p. 332). The authors write that the process of creating images in one’s mind of the characters, setting, and events that take place in a story or text does not come naturally to all readers. Therefore, it is important for students to practice this visualizing strategy in the classroom and when they read on their own outside of the school environment. Galda and Liang continue by saying, “Storytelling requires students to visualize, as does reading chapter books. So, too, does reading poetry, especially because many poems are found in collections that are not true picture books and where the words are dominant. It is easier to ask students to create their own images when they know that the image has not already been created for them!” (p. 332). Giving students the opportunity to respond to reading that does not include illustrations allows them to create their own ideas as they listen to the words, interpret the words, and construct their own meaning from the words. Galda and Liang advise to ask students questions such as, “What do you notice?” and “What do you see?” as the students listen to reading and create and discuss their “different visions as individual interpretations” (p. 333). Once students can describe the images that they have created in their minds after a story or text has been shared with them, they can continue to demonstrate their comprehension by drawing or painting what they visualized in their notebooks. O’Sullivan and McGonigle (2010) state that “for all children, illustrations play a key role in their responses to texts” (O’Sullivan &
During one of my substitute teaching experiences in a second-grade classroom, I led the students through this type of visualizing technique after reading a chapter aloud from the book entitled *Swamp monster in third grade* by Debbie Dadey. I did not show the students the cover of this book until after they had listened to the chapter, which described what the swamp monster looked like and how the other characters in the book reacted when they saw the swamp monster for the first time. The students listened as I read the chapter aloud, and they Brantley and colored their own representations of how they visualized the swamp monster. Once I revealed the cover of this pictureless chapter book, the students compared their own drawings with the illustration of the swamp monster. As stated by O’Sullivan and McGonigle (2010), “Drawing gets them inside the book in another way, deepens their responses, their understanding, and their writing” (Lincolnshire, 2009, as cited in O’Sullivan & McGonigle, 2010, p. 57). This activity allowed the students to create “pictures in their heads” and put them down on paper to demonstrate their understanding of the text (Galda & Liang, 2009, p. 333). Certo et al. (2010) state that “good comprehenders tend to construct mental images representing ideas conveyed in the text” (Certo et al., 2010, p. 253). When students engage with a text in this way, they create their own personal interpretations that help them remember what they read or learned from a story (Certo et al., 2010).

Another type of illustrative activity that was completed by students to demonstrate their comprehension in response to a read-aloud is discussed by Santoro et al. (2008). In their study, “teachers used a visual prompt sheet that included icons for the main character, what happened first, what happened next, and what happened at the end” of a story that was read aloud (Santoro et al., 2008, p. 403). Teachers had their students write notes or draw pictures on their prompt sheets to help them retell the story and demonstrate their comprehension. A significant finding that was concluded from this study was that “students in read-aloud classrooms also had retellings that reflected a depth of text comprehension” (p. 407). During the substitute teaching experience in a first-grade classroom that I previously referred to, I conducted a read-aloud of the fable *The fox and the grapes* and posed comprehension questions for the students to respond to during the reading. After the read-aloud, I had the students go back to their seats to individually complete story maps of the fable to demonstrate their understanding. On the story map, the students were to represent the main character, the setting, and the beginning, middle, and end events within the plot of the fable. I allowed the students to use both words and illustrations to
complete their story maps; however, most of the students solely used illustrations to represent their elements of the story. One female student also Brantley a dialogue bubble coming out of the fox’s mouth, which said, “I didn’t want those sour grapes anyways.” This dialogue was very close to the fox’s actual dialogue in the fable (Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 2). The students in this first-grade class retold the fable through illustrative representations to demonstrate their understanding. Some students included more details in their illustrations than others did, which may convey a difference in levels of comprehension.

While substitute teaching in two second-grade classrooms within two different school districts in Central New York, I taught and observed lessons from the Common Core ELA modules based on tall tales. The students in both of these classrooms demonstrated their comprehension of the particular tall tales that they had listened to earlier in the week through illustrative responses. In one second-grade classroom, the students had already listened to the tall tales about Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan, and I was asked to read aloud the tall tale about John Henry. Although some of the students raised their hands to tell me that they had a difficult time understanding the story due to the lack of pictures to aid in their comprehension, they completed the follow-up activity successfully based on the tall tale. The students individually demonstrated their comprehension of the tall tale about John Henry by writing one exaggeration that stood out to them from the story and illustrating it as well. After reviewing some of the exaggerations with the students, many of them decided to complete this activity based on the exaggeration that John Henry was born with a hammer in his hand (Field Notes, Oct. 1, 2013, p. 7, 8). In the second-grade classroom within a Central New York school district, the students were finishing up with the tall tale about Paul Bunyan on the day that I substitute taught. The student teacher in this classroom divided the students into four groups to engage in a different type of illustrative response activity. Each group was assigned a character from one of the four tall tales that they had learned about: Pecos Bill, John Henry, Paul Bunyan, and Casey Jones. As a group, they were asked to individually contribute to an illustration of their particular character on chart paper, which they would share with the class afterwards, to demonstrate their understanding of the characters in the tall tales. The students shared the marker during this collaborative activity. I did not get to observe the students as they shared their posters, but I did notice that the students included many details in their illustrations of the characters (Field Notes, Oct. 1, 2013, p. 8).
During another substitute teaching experience in a first-grade classroom at an elementary school in Central New York, I had the opportunity to listen to a student do a “guest-read” of a wordless picture book, using the illustrations throughout the book to develop a story and tell it to the class while displaying the pictures (Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 2). According to Pantaleo (2004), “Picture books with Radical Change characteristics provide opportunities for readers to develop their abilities in comprehending text inferentially and critically” (Pantaleo, 2004, p. 186). Carrie, the first-grade guest-reader, demonstrated her comprehension of the illustrations through storytelling.

Carrie: “It was a beautiful day in New York, in the city, and the sun was coming up.”

(Displays the illustration and turns the page to continue.)

Carrie: “People were waiting for the bus, while people were working on the apartments, while people were working… and a man was walking, and the birds were trying…to find scraps, and the men were building.”

(Displays the illustration and turns the page to continue.)

Carrie: “While a man was carrying a big, big heavy thing of…cow food, the people were baking, and the man was getting the stuff from the truck, and the farmer was putting posters up.”

(Displays the illustration and turns the page to continue.)

Carrie: “While the boy was skateboarding, the other boy was skateboarding, and he flipped, and he went flying, and his skateboard did, too. The women working went like this (made a frightened face). And the man in the store peeked out, and the guy that was…the farmer…pulled his wagon, and the girl clapped.”

(Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 2, 3)

Carrie used the illustrations to create the characters based on what they looked like and what they were doing in the pictures. She expressed the motivations and thoughts of the characters in order to tell what was happening in the pictures throughout the book. Furthermore, she brought her prior knowledge into the storytelling process in order to determine what each of the characters was doing (Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 4). During interactive read-aloud sessions of these wordless picture books, teachers can encourage students to demonstrate their comprehension by asking open-ended questions that allow the students to draw inferences, make interpretations, generate hypotheses, and create possibilities for the storyline (Pantaleo, 2004). In response to
wordless picture books, like the one that Carrie created a story about for her class, students may demonstrate their understanding through illustrative techniques. By drawing three pictures that show how one character’s actions in a story resulted in two subsequent events that involved other characters, students can convey their understanding of the motivations of the characters and the unfolding plot (Browne, 1998, as cited in Pantaleo, 2002). Using speech balloons to portray each character’s thoughts also allows students to be creative in developing dialogue for a wordless story (Pantaleo, 2002).

Demonstrating Comprehension Through Performative Responses

Students’ engagement during storybook read-alouds can also be “expressive and performative. Children demonstrate this type of engagement with words and physical actions. They become active participants in the story” (Sipe, 2002, pp. 476-477). Through the five types of expressive engagement that Sipe (2002) discusses, students can “make the story their own” and gain a “richer understanding of stories and how they work” by responding to read-alouds in these ways (p. 482).

The first type of expressive engagement that Sipe discusses is “dramatizing the story spontaneously—in nonverbal and verbal ways” (p. 477). Students can engage this way by imitating or physically interpreting what is happening in a story or text, which is a response that demonstrates their comprehension. While substituting in a second-grade classroom and using this experience as an opportunity to gather information on ways in which primary students respond to reading to demonstrate their comprehension, the students and I engaged in a lesson from a Common Core ELA module. I read *The boy who cried wolf* aloud to the students and asked them to express the emotions of the characters in each scene in any way they wished, such as through hand gestures and facial expressions. This type of expressive engagement showed me whether or not the students were paying attention to the reading, if they were looking to their peers for support, or if they seemed to comprehend the events in the story that they were listening to. Additionally, Adomat (2010) conducted a qualitative study by focusing on one second-grade reader to explore “how young readers build literary understanding through performative responses in picture book read-alouds” (Adomat, 2010, p. 207). Mime and gestures were two types of performative responses that second-grade reader, Ashley, used to express her understanding of stories. During the teacher’s read-aloud of Mem Fox’s *Possum magic*, Ashley
raised her arms up and then crouched down to the ground with her arms wrapped around herself, using gestures to act out the line, “…magic for tall and magic for small” (p. 213). These gestures “accompanied the reading of the text to illustrate key words” and to express an important event in the story (p. 214).

Adomat also discusses the use of sound effects and vocal intonations that students can use in response to a read-aloud. Ashley generally repeated the language used in the text and added vocal intonations to her responses. Some sound effects that Ashley made during the read-aloud of Speedboat were gagging and spitting sounds when the teacher read the line, “Suddenly—Patooie! Raisintoast spat it all out” (p. 214). Using these vocal intonations and sound effects allowed Ashley to establish a mood for the story and show that she understood the story’s events. During my observation of Ms. Ballard’s Kindergarten class on October 10th, she and her students used sound effects throughout the read-aloud of Cock-a-doodle-do! Barnyard hullabaloo, which is a story about different animals on a farm. Ms. Ballard prompted her students to make these vocal intonations by saying, “Friends, what sound does the rooster make? Make the sound with me” (Field Notes, Oct. 15, 2013, p. 2). She also prompted these sound effects later in the reading by stating, “Friends, let’s make the sound that the goat makes together” (Field Notes, Oct. 15, 2013, p. 4). Additionally, I noticed that during the read-aloud, students made spontaneous vocal intonations on their own, such as gobbling noises while Ms. Ballard was reading the page about the turkey. She did not stop reading, however, because these sound effects were one way in which the students were demonstrating their understanding of the story (Field Notes, Oct. 15, 2013, p. 4).

The second type of expressive engagement that is described is “talking back to the story or characters” (Sipe, 2002, p. 477). When students address characters directly, such as making a statement in response to something that a character says or does in a story, the separation between the world in the story and the children’s world becomes “blurred,” as Sipe puts it (p. 477). In Ms. Ballard’s Kindergarten classroom, I experienced one male student, Luke, talking back to a character in the story during the teacher’s read-aloud of the narrative story entitled The rainbow fish by Marcus Pfister. The teacher had just asked the students a literal comprehension question about why the other fish did not want to go near the Rainbow Fish and were turning against him when Luke “talked back” to the Rainbow Fish by saying, “That was being mean” (Field Notes, Oct. 1, 2013, p. 3). Although Luke spoke out of turn, the teacher did not seem to
mind as he had demonstrated comprehension of the story through the comment that he made in response to a main event.

“Critiquing/controlling,” which is the third type of expressive engagement, involves the students suggesting “alternatives in plots, characters, or settings” (Sipe, 2002, p. 477). It can be encouraged by teachers if they pose questions such as, “What would you say?” or “What would you do now?” at points throughout the story (p. 481). Sipe calls this type of talk “I would” or “I wouldn’t” talk, and it allows the students to respond to the reading using their personalities, choices, ideas, and capabilities to demonstrate comprehension (p. 478). The students draw the stories to themselves by managing the events and characters through this type of expressive engagement (Sipe, 2002).

Students may also become engaged in “inserting,” the fourth type of expressive engagement, in which they “assume the role of story characters, or shove their classmates into the story in some way” (p. 478). The students may make comments or predictions about a story by placing themselves and their friends in it, like in the example, “Maybe right here she got punched! Maybe Kenny punched her!” (p. 478). This comment was made by one first-grader about his classmate, Kenny, during a read-aloud of *The three bears* after an illustration was displayed showing Goldilocks with a missing tooth (p. 478). In Adomat’s (2010) qualitative study, second-grade student, Ashley, responded to read-alouds through the modality referred to as “characterization” by supplying voices for the characters in the stories, interacting with the characters in the stories, and imagining herself to actually be the characters from the stories (Adomat, 2010, p. 215). By inserting themselves into the stories, students respond to reading in ways that allow them to have fun with stories and make them their own, while also demonstrating their understanding of the characters and main events within them.

The fifth type of expressive engagement that Sipe (2002) discusses is called “taking over,” in which the students respond during the read-aloud in any way that they wish (Sipe, 2002). They manipulate the text for their own purposes. They may not make any attempt at making meaning from a story, but they do express their creativity in ways such as singing a song or clapping at certain points in the story (Sipe, 2002). During the observations that Adomat (2010) made to support her qualitative study, she saw Ashley create a play, begin a game show, and sing songs during some of the teacher’s read-alouds in her second-grade classroom, which are ways of “taking over.” For example, Ashley brought song and dance into her responses
During the read-aloud of *Possum magic* by dancing around in a circle to the tune of “Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush,” which was the connection that she made in response to the characters in the book dancing to “Here We Go Round the Lamington Plate” (Adomat, 2010, p. 216). Adomat concluded, “The more elaborate mini-performances showed how performative responses worked to strengthen the social fabric and meaning-making possibilities of the group” (p. 216).

**Demonstrating Comprehension Through Hands-On/Creative Responses**

Through conversations that I had with Ms. Ballard and observations that I made in her classroom, I found that primary students also commonly demonstrate their comprehension of texts by responding through hands-on activities and other methods that give them the opportunity to be creative. Ms. Ballard told me during my first interview with her that she did a read-aloud of a book entitled *My eyes are for seeing*, which “goes through different things we see, like colors, animals, snow, flowers, stars, and the sun. It also talks about how we use our eyes when we do everyday activities, like ride our bikes and explore places” (Field Notes, Sept. 17, 2013, p. 1). After allowing the students to make connections during the reading and talk with their shoulder buddies, Ms. Ballard took out a tray with ten objects on it and asked her students to come close to her so that they could use their eyes to look at the objects. She continued by stating the following:

> We went through each object and said what it was, and we counted the objects together. I told them to use their eyes to notice the colors, shapes, and sizes of the objects. Then, I told them to close their eyes, and I took one object away. They had to figure out what was missing. (Field Notes, Sept. 17, 2013, p. 1)

Ms. Ballard said that this activity provided her students with an authentic experience with the topic of sight that they had just read about (Field Notes, Sept. 17, 2013, p. 2). Although the students did not get to manipulate any objects themselves, this activity was a game in which they had to use their own sense of sight, like the story discussed.

Another activity that I observed after a read-aloud in Ms. Ballard’s classroom was in response to the narrative story entitled *The rainbow fish*. In school that week, the Kindergarten students were learning about the colors of the rainbow. After reading aloud *The rainbow fish*, Ms. Ballard had her students go back to their seats to color their own rainbows. She passed out a
blank rainbow coloring sheet to each student and guided them through coloring it correctly by modeling it on the white board. Later that day, the students counted a certain number of each color Froot Loop and glued them onto the same color on their rainbow coloring sheets from that morning (Field Notes, Oct. 1, 2013, p. 7). This hands-on activity allowed the students to demonstrate their comprehension of the story that was read aloud through making connections between the colors of the Rainbow Fish and the colors that a rainbow truly consists of.

The students engaged in another hands-on activity after Ms. Ballard read aloud a couple of excerpts about baby alligators and baby anteaters from an informational text entitled *101 animal babies*. Ms. Ballard had her students apply the skill of looking for and identifying the uppercase letter “A” and lowercase letter “a” on their own, as well as identifying pictures that represent the short “a” as the beginning sound. Each student’s goal was to engage in a creative activity in which they were to look through the magazines that she provided to find uppercase and lowercase letter “A’s” to cut out and glue inside of their own big letter “A” that was traced on construction paper to be cut out afterwards. Ms. Ballard also explained that the students could cut out any pictures in which the word’s beginning sound was the short “a” sound, like they had been practicing that week (Field Notes, Oct. 8, 2013, p. 6). This “cut and paste” activity allowed the students to make connections between the short “a” sound that they learned was the beginning sound in the words *alligator* and *anteater* by applying the phonetic skill beyond the text and constructing new knowledge.

To demonstrate their comprehension of what they learned from the informational text entitled *Ladybug*, which Ms. Ballard read aloud to her students on October 15th, the Kindergarten students engaged in a “Build Your Own Ladybug” craft activity. Ms. Ballard provided each of her students with construction paper on which the wings, head, body, and spots of the ladybug were outlined in white colored pencil, ready for the students to cut out. The students built their ladybugs using these body parts, and they were given six legs to add to their ladybugs after the rest of the body was glued together. The students used the facts that they learned about ladybugs from the read-aloud to demonstrate their comprehension by engaging in a hands-on activity, which enhanced their learning experience (Field Notes, Oct. 22, 2013, p. 8, 9).

Martin and Martin (2001) discuss two additional literature response activities that build strategic reading for students who have difficulties in the area of literacy. These activities focus on students’ personal interpretations of characters in stories and allow them to share their
interpretations with other students. The first strategy involves the students in making “character cubes,” which is a hands-on, pre-writing technique that allows the students to look at a topic from six different perspectives (Martin & Martin, 2001, p. 89). This literature response activity focuses on one specific character in a story that is being read in the classroom. Each side of the cube is dedicated to one of six prompts:

To describe the character, students must ask, “How does the character look?” To compare, students ask, “What is the character similar to/different from?” To associate, students ask, “What does the character remind me of?” To analyze, students ask, “What makes this character who he/she is?” To apply, students ask, “What can this character do?” And, finally, to argue for or against the character, students ask, “What is my opinion of the character and why?” (p. 89)

The teacher may read the story aloud, or read an initial description of the selected character, to help students with learning disabilities develop ideas about the character before they read the text on their own and engage in the character cube literature response activity. The teacher then splits the class into six groups, asking each group to focus on one of the six prompts and share their parts with each other afterwards (Martin & Martin, 2001). Similar to what I have found through my observations and substitute teaching experiences, the responses to these prompts can be written or illustrated to demonstrate a deep understanding of the selected character within the story.

The second literature response activity that Martin and Martin (2001) describe that promotes students’ comprehension of a text is creating character books. Through this bookmaking activity, students analyze how a character is developed based on the meaning that they construct from the text, as well as their own “personal interpretations based on prior knowledge” (Martin & Martin, 2001, p. 90). Students focus on the structure of the story by paying attention to how the author creates the characters through descriptions of how they look, what they say and think, what they do, and what the characters in the story say and think about each other. This activity allows the students to respond to reading to show their understanding, as the characters’ “dialogue, thoughts, and actions” directly correspond to the events within the plot (p. 91). The teacher may read the story aloud to the whole class after selecting a character and showing a picture or reading a description of the character as a pre-reading strategy to enhance students’ familiarity with the character. They may illustrate their responses, as well as use
writing to convey their information about the selected character. These summaries and illustrations can then be combined into a class “Character Book” (p. 91). Students can even choose to respond to books that they read independently by engaging in this bookmaking activity (Martin & Martin, 2001).

During the time that I spent substitute teaching a guided reading group of three first-grade students on October 22nd at an elementary school in Central New York, the students engaged in a different type of bookmaking activity to demonstrate their comprehension of an informational text entitled *Jump*. This text was from the Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) reading program. After the students re-read this text a few times, they put together a small book about animals that can jump. Their individual books were also titled “Jump,” and each of the four pages included the prompt, “A __________ can jump.” The students demonstrated their comprehension of the informational text by recalling four animals that they learned could jump and filling in the blanks with these animal names. If they needed help with spelling the animal names, they could refer back to the text. Above each prompt that they completed, the students Brantley a picture of that particular animal jumping. Then, they cut out their four pages, stapled them together, read their books to themselves, and took them home at the end of our time together that day (Field Notes, Oct. 29, 2013, p. 1). This hands-on activity incorporated both writing and illustrations into it.

Browder, Lee, and Mims (2011) focus on how students with multiple, severe disabilities can demonstrate their comprehension of a text through a hands-on response method after engaging in interactive shared book readings with their teacher (Browder et al., 2011). Because students’ developmental and ability levels vary, response modes must be differentiated to adhere to individual strengths and needs. One example that the authors discuss is adapting the books to attach actual objects that are related to the stories to the pages, which can be removed and used to demonstrate comprehension of the text. While the teacher reads a page aloud, they prompt the student to touch the particular object that is being described in that story, as well as ask a comprehension question involving the correct object and another “distracter” object (Browder et al, 2011, p. 341). An example of this method to demonstrate understanding is asking the student, “What did Alexander get stuck in his hair?” (p. 341). The student would point to the correct object, which in this case, is either gum or a pen (Browder et al., 2011). Through this hands-on activity, students with physical or intellectual disabilities can show their understanding of a text in a way that works for them.
While a teacher interacts with a guided reading group, the remaining students in a primary-grade classroom may demonstrate their comprehension of a shared reading lesson, content area lesson, guided reading lesson, or their own independent reading through “kidstation” activities that involve writing, illustrating, and being creative (Guastello & Lenz, 2005, pp. 147, 152-153). Kidstation 1, which “focuses on the knowledge of word recognition, vocabulary development, and literal comprehension,” involves students in independent activities such as constructing story maps, character mapping, or creating pictures to retell a story to demonstrate their literal comprehension of a text (pp. 148, 150). Students may complete activities that “call upon their ability to develop implicit, interpretive, and inferential levels of comprehension and to express their ideas in written form” during Kidstation 2 through making story boards or story quilts, writing retellings of stories, and responding in their journals (pp. 149, 151). Kidstation 3 “challenges the student[s] to elaborate in response to the literature” through writing reviews of a book, writing the story from another point-of-view, writing a new ending for the book, or discussing what they learned from the book and how it made them feel (pp. 150-151). These literature response activities allow students to demonstrate their understanding by critically analyzing a text and thinking beyond it. The final independent kidstation allows for “social interaction and presentation,” as the students demonstrate what they learned by presenting one of the activities that they completed to the rest of the class (p. 150). “They are meaningful and authentic,” state Guastello and Lenz, “and students must complete them and demonstrate evidence of understanding through the presentation of their work” (p. 151).

Demonstrating Comprehension Through Collaborative Responses

On many occasions, primary students work together in pairs, in small groups, or even as a whole class to demonstrate their comprehension of narrative and informational texts. For example, during my substitute teaching experience on September 20th in a classroom within a Central New York school district, the second-grade students had the opportunity to work together as a class to teach me something that they had learned during their unit on tall tales. The student teacher loaded the pictures onto the SMARTboard that went along with the tall tale about Paul Bunyan, which the students had listened to as a read-aloud the day before. The students retold the tall tale by looking closely at each picture to help them recall the main events in the
story. I had told the students that I had not heard the tall tale in a long time, which was true, so I
wanted them to provide as many details as possible through their class retelling. I found that
almost every student in the class raised his/her hand to contribute at least one detail about the
pictures that aided in the retelling of the tall tale, which demonstrated their comprehension of the
story (Field Notes, Oct. 1, 2013, p. 8).

Primary students, even as young as first grade, also engage in literature circles in order to
demonstrate their comprehension of a common text based on small-group, peer-led discussions
(Certo et al., 2010). Certo et al. focus on students’ perceptions of their learning experiences
during literature circles. The authors cite a study by Hadjioannou (2007) in which the students
seemed “willing to initiate topics, express opinions, reflect on what was being discussed, make
humorous comments, as well as provide information, elaborate, and clarify” during literature
circles (Certo et al., 2010, p. 245). Roles are assigned to each student, in which their
responsibilities contribute to literature circle discussions when the group meets. Some of these
roles include “the discussion director, the connector (connects text to personal life), the
vocabulary enricher, the travel tracer (keeps track of setting and plot), and so on” (p. 247). When
students talk in a group about a book, this participation allows individual students to make
meaning from text and learn how to respond to texts through literacy conversations (Certo et al.,
2010). In Larson’s (2009) article discussing students responding to reading through online
learning communities, she identifies a few different types of prompts that can be used to initiate
student discussion. Experiential prompts can be used to “focus on what the reader brings to the
reading experience through prior personal experiences and prior knowledge,” aesthetic prompts
encourage “emotional interactions with the texts while eliciting feelings, empathy, and character
identification,” and cognitive prompts allow students to demonstrate comprehension by making
predictions, solving problems, and making inferences about the plot and characters (Larson,

During literature circles, students may also use writing to “fuel discussion of books,”
which leads to their developed understanding of the elements within a text (Certo et al., 2010, p.
252). Using Post-It notes to jot down questions and comments about parts of the book, as well as
writing responses in journals or reading logs, are just a couple of ways that writing may be
integrated into the literature circle activity to allow students to respond to the reading and
demonstrate their developing comprehension. These responses move students to “higher levels of
thinking” about the text (p. 252). Other student perceptions about literature circles included how they “learned the power of questioning for meaning-making” (p. 252). Students used the questions and responses offered by their group members to monitor and rethink their own interpretations of the reading, which allowed new ways of thinking to develop during the discussions. The authors write that “peer-led discussions allowed students to ponder confusing aspects of text” and ask each other questions to arrive at meaning and understanding as a group (p. 253).

In a guided reading group that I led on October 22nd at an elementary school in Central New York, three second-grade students and I engaged in a shared/interactive writing activity in response to a narrative story entitled *The mitten*, which was also from the Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) reading program. After we finished re-reading this text as a choral read, I told the students that they were going to help me summarize the story to show their understanding of the main events. The students provided me with details and events from the beginning, middle, and end of the story using sequencing words, such as *first, next, then, and last*. Keith and Dustin remained focused as I wrote each sentence on the white board, and they wrote them in their writing journals. Taylor took longer to write the sentences, and she did not offer much to the summary of the text, even when I prompted her with specific questions. Keith and Dustin seemed to demonstrate their complete understanding and recall of the characters and main events in the story through the details that they were offering for the summary. Taylor did not demonstrate her comprehension through this activity, as she only focused on writing down the sentences that her group members were providing (Field Notes, Oct. 29, 2013, p. 2, 3). I noticed that two aspects of this response activity that may cause it to be ineffective at times are that some students may always rely on their classmates to participate as they “sit back” and let them take control, or they may fall behind due to the pace at which the teacher leads the writing activity.

One other way to motivate students to interact with the text in order to make meaning and demonstrate understanding is through a collaborative strategy involving the filling in of Alphaboxes. Morrison and Wlodarczyk (2009) state the following:

Alphaboxes can take the form of a pre-reading or a post-reading activity to help stimulate students to think about and discuss key ideas in the text. For example, while notating examples under the appropriate alphabet letter in each box, students can generate questions; highlight important concepts; make connections; provide explanations; locate,
identify, and discuss unfamiliar words; and present different points of view. (Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009, p. 112)

In the primary classroom, it is most effective for a teacher to model and guide the students through the Alphaboxes strategy as a whole-group activity. Then, after the students become familiar with the process of completing Alphaboxes, they can begin to collaborate in pairs or small groups before or after read-alouds to demonstrate their comprehension of a narrative story or informational text. Lisa Wlodarczyk, a first-grade teacher, states, “I have never required them to fill in all 26 boxes. Over time, I introduced them to coming up with questions, or trying to figure out a word they didn’t know, or explaining a term or idea from the story and things like that” (p. 112). After students complete their Alphaboxes in pairs or groups, it is a valuable option to have them do a “community share” so that they can learn from one another’s ideas to aid in their overall comprehension of a story or text (p. 112). As students become familiar with this comprehension strategy before a read-aloud or in response to one, they move from simply recalling factual information to “going beyond the information presented in the text” through making connections, offering individual perspectives, and asking questions that they have (p. 112). This activity is one in which students can work together to construct meaning in response to a text to demonstrate their shared understanding.

What The Primary Teachers Say

Through the interviews that I held with Ms. Ballard, a Kindergarten teacher, and Mrs. Bryan, a former second-grade teacher who now teaches sixth-grade students, I gained insight into what motivates their students the most when responding to reading to demonstrate their comprehension of a text. Ms. Ballard responded to this question by stating that she has noticed that her students become motivated to demonstrate their comprehension in response to a text when they are given the opportunity to connect the text with their lives. She stated:

Whether I am reading fiction or nonfiction, I try to relate the topic to them in some way. For example, when we learned about spiders, I asked the students if they had ever seen a spider, what kinds of spiders they have seen, what they looked like, and where they saw them. This got the students excited to share their stories and learn more about spiders’ characteristics and about different types of spiders. (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 4)
Similarly, Mrs. Bryan’s response to this question indicated that her second-grade students also became motivated to demonstrate their comprehension of a text when they were asked to make connections “between the text and their own lives” (Personal Communication, Nov. 1, 2013). Applegate and Applegate (2010) found that “it may be the inclination to approach narratives as thoughtful links between human experience and text that determines whether children of either gender feel impelled to engage in the activity of reading” (Applegate & Applegate, 2010, p. 231). Therefore, it can be concluded from these teachers’ responses that primary-aged students enjoy demonstrating their understanding of a text when they can bring aspects of their own lives into a story or relate to the information that they are learning about.

During the interviews, I also asked Ms. Ballard and Mrs. Bryan which types of reading activities they find to be most effective for their students to engage in to demonstrate their comprehension of texts. Ms. Ballard told me that she has found oral responses to be very valuable to her students, as “Kindergarten students love to talk and share stories” (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 4). She went on to say that through her students’ oral responses, she is easily able to “see if they understand the content” (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 4). Additionally, when Ms. Ballard reads a story aloud, she asks questions that the students can answer in unison as a class, as well as questions that they can respond to individually (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 6). “Reading aloud,” as stated by O’Sullivan and McGonigle (2010), “has been especially significant for less experienced readers, particularly boys” (O’Sullivan & McGonigle, 2010, p. 57). This statement is significant, as Ms. Ballard has communicated with me about one male student, Luke, who is one of the lowest readers in her class. She told me that through interactive read-alouds, Luke is able to demonstrate his comprehension of the text effectively through his oral responses, because he is not faced with the challenge of decoding words and interpreting their meanings within the context of the text (Personal Communication, Sept. 26, 2013). Luke can use the pictures, as well as the teacher’s literal and inferential questions, to help him demonstrate his comprehension of texts.

Ms. Ballard further expressed the importance of giving her students many opportunities to demonstrate their comprehension of a text through oral responses before, during, and after read-alouds through strategies such as talking to a shoulder buddy and creating class discussion webs (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 6). Ms. Ballard claimed:
Oral responses are definitely meaningful to the students’ learning because they allow for conversation. Their responses may lead to more questions and discussions, creating more learning. (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 5).

When I asked Mrs. Bryan this same question during her interview, she responded by stating that with the emerging readers in her class, “the opportunity to use illustrative responses is great as both an introductory activity as well as to measure comprehension after reading” (Personal Communication, Nov. 1, 2013). Ms. Ballard also feels that illustrative responses are effective ways for her students to demonstrate their comprehension of texts, “especially for some of the quieter students who do not often share verbally” (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 4). She believes that illustrative activities are valuable to her students’ learning experiences, because they allow them to “create meaning in their own way,” promoting uniqueness and individuality (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 5).

While I was developing my purpose for conducting research, a question that came to my mind was how students’ responses to reading that demonstrate their comprehension differ from lessons that are and are not based on the Common Core ELA modules. Therefore, I asked both Ms. Ballard and Mrs. Bryan this question during the interviews. Although Mrs. Bryan was unable to provide a response to this question, because she did not have experience teaching Common Core lessons at the primary level, Ms. Ballard provided me with some insight into how the Common Core affects her Kindergarten students. First, through personal communication on October 3rd, Ms. Ballard filled me in on how the teachers in her school implement these scripted lessons.

So, some schools adopted the Common Core modules and have to teach them exactly as they are and say and do all of it, and it’s very scripted, but our school didn’t do that. We can use the Common Core modules and adapt them to our own curriculum however we see fit. So, we don’t have to read it like a script. As long as we are teaching the skills, we can teach it however it will work best for our students. (Personal Communication, Oct. 3, 2013)

Dresser (2012) states that “teachers can adapt the curriculum, materials, and practices to make it interesting for the students and to ensure academic success,” (Dresser, 2012, p. 81) which is what Ms. Ballard and the other teachers in her school have the liberty of doing (p. 81). Ms. Ballard does not mind incorporating the Common Core into her daily instruction, and she feels lucky that
she is able to teach the skills in alternative ways from the scripted lesson to support her students’ strengths and needs (Personal Communication, Oct. 3, 2013).

Ms. Ballard then discussed that the read-alouds that she has done from the Common Core ELA modules “require her students to sit and listen for a long period of time with few visuals” (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 5). She said that despite the length and content of the lessons, her students have performed well during the instruction. However, she has found that her students are “not as eager to respond throughout the reading and do not seem to have as much to say,” partially because the lessons do not consist of many pictures to aid them in their comprehension of the texts (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 5). This lack of visuals also puts her students at a disadvantage, as I have concluded through my research that pictures and illustrations are an important part of literature that students can respond to in order to demonstrate understanding.

On the contrary, Ms. Ballard stated through personal communication that when she and her students engage in read-aloud lessons that are not a part of the Common Core, the students are much more motivated to respond to the reading and show their understanding of a narrative or informational text. “They absolutely loved learning about the baby animals that start with ‘a,’” Ms. Ballard began, “and they really enjoyed cutting pictures and the letter ‘a’ from the magazines. Those were much more authentic activities, and I think that they got a lot out of the lesson” (Personal Communication, Oct. 3, 2013). When she teaches lessons aside from the Common Core, Ms. Ballard takes the time to choose books about topics that she knows her students will be interested in, which makes them want to respond, make connections, and demonstrate their comprehension. “It also allows me to better accommodate more learning styles,” Ms. Ballard began, “because I can read the story aloud, show the illustrations, ask questions, and have the students complete a hands-on activity that shows that they understand the content” (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 5). This statement indicates that hands-on responses are effective ways in which her students demonstrate their comprehension of texts after listening to read-alouds.

Through the interviews with Ms. Ballard and Mrs. Bryan, I learned about several factors that they feel affect how their students respond to reading to demonstrate their comprehension of texts. First, I asked both of these teachers how their students’ developmental levels and learning
abilities affect how they respond to reading to demonstrate understanding. Ms. Ballard responded by stating the following:

I have found that students with higher developmental levels and learning abilities respond to reading using higher-level thinking. They are able to answer questions posed throughout the reading with specific details from the text and illustrations. They are also better able to make inferences and predictions of what will happen next in the story. (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 5)

In contrast, her Kindergarten students with lower developmental levels and learning abilities respond to reading “more simply and literally” (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 5). They may struggle with higher-level thinking skills, like making inferences, making predictions, and providing explanations for a response, while they demonstrate their comprehension well through explicit questions that are posed (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 5). When I asked Mrs. Bryan this same question about her second-grade students, her response was similar to Ms. Ballard’s response in that she has found that students at lower reading levels usually respond in “superficial, literal ways” (Personal Communication, Nov. 1, 2013). Furthermore, Mrs. Bryan has learned that students at higher reading levels are willing to “explore connected texts and discuss those connections” (Personal Communication, Nov. 1, 2013).

Ms. Ballard and Mrs. Bryan both discussed a few additional factors that affect how their students respond to reading to show their understanding of texts. Ms. Ballard believes that interest level is a significant factor, because if she reads aloud a story about a topic that the students are interested in, “they are much more engaged with the story and eager to respond and make connections to it” (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, pp. 5-6). She also claimed that students’ background knowledge is a factor that affects their responses, and she explains through the following statements:

If the students already know a lot about the topic, they have a lot to contribute, and they can synthesize what they already know about the topic with what they are learning from the story to create new knowledge. If students are not familiar with the topic about which I am reading, it is more difficult for them to make connections. (Personal Communication from Field Notes, Nov. 5, 2013, p. 6).
Because making connections is an integral way for students to demonstrate their comprehension of narrative and informational texts, students’ background knowledge or lack of background knowledge about particular topics can give them an advantage or disadvantage when reading. One last factor that Mrs. Bryan believes greatly affects her students’ oral responses when demonstrating understanding is the set-up of small-group and whole-group lessons. While some students do not feel comfortable sharing their ideas and talking in front of the whole class, they may demonstrate their understanding of a text more effectively through participating in small-group discussions, like in guided reading groups (Personal Communication, Nov. 1, 2013). This statement supports the ways in which students can demonstrate their comprehension collaboratively, which I observed and obtained knowledge about through my research process.

Conclusion

Through my qualitative research, I collected data from my observations and substitute teaching experiences that allowed me to draw conclusions from my findings after the analysis process was completed. From these observations and firsthand experiences in elementary classrooms, I have concluded that primary students in Kindergarten through the third grade generate a variety of different responses within the categories that I established for my research in order to demonstrate their comprehension of narrative and informational texts. I have determined that engaging in oral responses during the interactive read-aloud process is common in the primary classroom, as they allow students to answer literal and inferential comprehension questions, make predictions and connections, and participate in discussions with one another. Demonstrating comprehension through written responses is another way in which primary students show their understanding of a text, although activities that allow the students to engage in illustrative responses seem to be used more frequently in the primary classroom, as the students can demonstrate their responses more effectively through drawing and coloring at this age level. Writing is commonly integrated into illustrative responses, however, giving the students the opportunity to convey their understanding using words and pictures. Students demonstrate their comprehension of texts through performative responses as well, although few of my observations and substitute teaching experiences provided me with data for this response category. I have concluded that hands-on and “creative” responses allow students to show their understanding of texts in meaningful, authentic ways, such as through bookmaking, arts and craft
activities, or games. Collaborative types of responses allow the students to demonstrate their comprehension of texts by working together to achieve a common goal or complete a task, like writing a summary of a text together through an interactive/shared writing activity or participating in a class retelling of a story through a series of pictures.

According to Morrison and Wlodarczyk (2009), “Engaging with text requires active thinking and reflecting, which enhances comprehension” (Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009, p. 112). Through my observations, substitute teaching experiences, and interviews with two primary-grade teachers, I have concluded that primary students engage with texts before, during, and after reading through different types of responses that give them the opportunity to connect the material to their own lives, apply their acquired knowledge to a task, think beyond the texts, and demonstrate their overall comprehension to continue developing as readers in the area of literacy.

References


