

Running Head: When size matters

When size matters:

A hybrid theory of early literacy content and sociocultural contexts

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Abstract

This paper addresses the impact of small class size on young children's early literacy learning. Using results from an evaluation of Wisconsin's *Student Achievement Guarantee in Education* (SAGE) program, which reduces class sizes in high-poverty K-3 classrooms, the authors analyze data from classroom observations and interviews to determine how early literacy instruction is constructed differently from classroom to classroom and school to school. From this analysis, the authors advance a theory that combines research on the foundations of early literacy success with sociocultural theories of language and literacy development. This hybrid theory of early literacy content and sociocultural contexts provides a way to understand how and when class size matters in early literacy instruction.

## When size matters:

## A hybrid theory of early literacy content and sociocultural contexts

*The children gather eagerly on the carpet around their teacher as she announces, "It's time for a story." Ms. Fitzer sits on her chair, holding a large, spiral bound Teacher's Text as the children settle into their places. She begins by saying, "I'm going to read Goldilocks and the Three Whats?" The children call in unison, "Bears!" With that, Ms. Fitzer begins. She reads quickly as the children begin raising their hands. When it becomes too much to ignore, she pauses briefly to state, "We need to hurry so we can get to recess, because I don't think you want me reading this during your recess." She continues until she is stopped by a child's question, "Can we see the pictures?" She brushes him off, saying, "This really isn't a picture book. This is just a read aloud." With that, she continues the rapid reading. As Goldilocks sleeps and the bears return, several students' hands shoot into the air. Ms. Fitzer pauses as a child asks, "Can we see the picture?" She reiterates, "This really isn't a picture book. It's just a book for you to listen to." With that, she concludes the adventures of Goldilocks and snaps the text shut. Carter raises his hand and with lowered gaze and a whisper voice asks, "Are you sure there aren't some pictures?" Ms. Fitzer replies, "Who's ready for recess?"*

Kindergarten at Allerton Farwell

Low Achieving School

Pupil-teacher ratio: 22:2

In studies and research reviews surrounding teaching in reduced-sized classes, effective teachers are often framed as those who focus on teacher-directed learning, basic knowledge skills, and behaviors such as time on task (Finn, Pannozzo, & Achilles, 2003, p. 323), whereas less effective teachers are found to emphasize child-centered learning, critical thinking abilities, creativity, self-direction, and meaningful enjoyment in the classroom (Molnar, Zahorik, Ehrle, & Halbach, 2000, p. 57). While time spent on task and teacher-directed instruction in basic literacy skills is indeed necessary for early reading success (National Reading Panel, 2000), so too is instruction that involves a child-centered sense of engagement and interest in reading (Edwards, 1995; Turner & Paris, 1995), or strategic and critical comprehension of increasingly complex texts (Bergman, 1992; Schwartz, 1997). Given this research on early literacy and language development, it is well worth taking pause to consider how we construct and generalize effective and non-effective early literacy teaching in reduced-sized classrooms.

In the above vignette, from a reduced-sized kindergarten classroom with a pupil-teacher ratio of 22:2, the students are “on task,” and the teacher is directing the learning. However, the teacher clearly missed a number of opportunities to support language and literacy development in rich and meaningful ways. She has a group of eager students, ready for a story, wanting to engage, and her first (and only) question is basic with a known answer: “Goldilocks and the Three Whats?” As she reads, her hurried pace and her need to get everybody to recess snip any conversational interactions in the bud. Although this teacher is technically in a reduced-size classroom, the possible positive effects of having a smaller class size are not realized here.

This paper asks how teachers in reduced-size classrooms capitalize – or don't capitalize – on the advantages of a smaller class size in terms of literacy instruction. Using results from an evaluation of Wisconsin's *Student Achievement Guarantee in Education* (SAGE) program, which reduces class sizes in high-poverty K-3 classrooms to a pupil-teacher ratio of 15:1, the authors analyze data from classroom observations and interviews to determine how early literacy instruction is constructed differently from classroom to classroom. While previous research on small class sizes has been helpful in understanding the processes and outcomes of class-size reduction initiatives, this paper traces variations in literacy instruction and classroom contexts in terms of early literacy research (e.g., CIERA, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000; National Research Council, 1998, 1999) and sociocultural theories of language and literacy (e.g., Au, 1993; Gee, 1996; Pérez, 1998). In the end, the paper offers a hybrid theory that combines early literacy research with sociocultural theories of language and literacy development, which can be used as a guiding framework for understanding how and when class size matters.

#### Summary of Research: An Evaluation of Wisconsin's

#### *Student Achievement Guarantee in Education* (SAGE) Program

Our study of early literacy practices in reduced-sized classrooms is situated within a larger evaluation of Wisconsin's SAGE program, which is implemented in more than 500 Wisconsin schools. The specific goals of the SAGE program include improving student achievement by a) reducing class size to a pupil-teacher ratio of 15:1, b) increasing school and community collaboration, c) enhancing professional development, and d) implementing a high expectations curriculum.

The SAGE program evaluation examined the processes that result from the implementation of this program's comprehensive class size reduction program in K-3 classrooms, including contextual characteristics that shape classroom practice, institutional programmatic structures, teacher beliefs, professional development opportunities, and family involvement. The sample included nine schools: four urban, two semi-urban, and three rural schools from a range of achievement levels (high-achievement, low-achievement, and rapidly improving). School achievement levels were determined by SAGE evaluation measures and the Wisconsin third-grade reading test, where records of producing high achievement, lower than expected achievement, or rapidly improving achievement could be established over at least three years of SAGE participation. All schools served high poverty populations with varying proportions of children of color, English Language Learners, and students with disabilities.

In these schools, a total of 27 classrooms with different classroom configurations involving pupil-teacher ratios were chosen based on principal nomination (e.g., 15:1; 30:2 team taught; 30:2 shared space; 30:2 block scheduling). For each classroom, data were generated through half-day observations throughout the 2004-2005 school year, and included field notes, standardized environment descriptions, a collection of instructional and administrative artifacts, surveys of teachers and parents, and interviews with classroom teachers, principals, students, and district administrators.

This paper uses data from the SAGE evaluation to analyze a range of early literacy teaching practices in K-3 reduced-sized classrooms. We began by looking at the data in terms of early literacy research and foundations of early literacy success. However, we quickly realized that teachers could be "delivering" forms of "best practice"

(e.g., the delivery of phonemic awareness activities), but still miss the mark in terms of meeting students' individual needs, interests and knowledge resources. Thus, to analyze the data, we drew upon two distinct bodies of research and theories: early literacy research on foundations of literacy success and sociocultural theories of language and literacy. A combined theoretical approach makes it possible to analyze classroom practices in terms of what we know about early literacy instruction as well as what we know about capitalizing on the social, cultural, and linguistic diversity found in our classrooms (Hammerberg [Hassett], 2004). We outline our theoretical frameworks next, before turning to a further description of our method and choices in this paper.

### *Early Reading Theory*

Over thirty years of research on young children's early literacy and language development<sup>1</sup> has identified several foundations that are fundamental to children's early literacy success. We drew on early literacy theories (e.g., Adams, 1990; Allington, 2001; Pressley, 1998; Weaver, 1994) and research reports (e.g., Braunger & Lewis, 1997; CIERA, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000; National Research Council, 1998, 1999) to think about the level and type of instruction occurring in the classrooms observed. In particular, we used the framework provided by the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement's report, *Every Child a Reader: Applying Reading Research in the Classroom* (CIERA, 1998), which lists eight foundations of early literacy success. We describe each foundation here, and how it guided our analysis of the data:

#### 1) Oral Language Development

Children use oral language to understand the world around them as they interact with the people in their lives (Snow & Tabors, 1993). A precursor to phonemic

awareness and phonics, oral language is a springboard for further literacy and language development (Sulzby, 1996). Additionally, oral language is the primary means by which children are able to discuss and expand their understandings in school; therefore, experience with academic language (Gee, 1992, 1996), or the language of schooling, in all of its genres, is also a precursor to early reading success.

In our analysis, we looked at how teachers facilitated discussions, intentionally expanded and introduced oral vocabulary through conversation, or encouraged children to speak from their own perspectives and experiences. We also looked at the type of literature read aloud in the classroom, and the conversations happening around the book's reading.

## 2) Phonemic Awareness, Letter Naming, and Concepts of Print

Phonemic awareness, or the knowledge that words are made up of individual sounds (phonemes), is a powerful predictor of early reading success, as is knowledge of letter names (National Reading Panel, 2000; National Research Council, 1998; CIERA, 1998). Concepts about print (e.g., Clay, 1993) are also fundamental to early reading success, and include knowing that print carries a message, that it represents the sounds and words of oral language, and that it follows particular rules (e.g., left to right, top to bottom, punctuation, word spacing). Children become familiar with these early reading and writing concepts through experiences with language, sounds, rhymes, and exposure to print from an early age. An important element of learning early reading skills is ongoing talk about how print represents language (Cunningham, 1990). Making direct connections between the spoken word and print helps with phonics recognition later.



In our analysis, we looked at how the teacher encouraged play with language in books, rhyme, and words games, and how she or he directly explained some of the rules of language in print to the students. We also noticed the types of writing up and about the room, and how it was used.

### 3) Phonics and Word Recognition Accuracy

Knowing how sounds are represented in print by letters helps children to recognize unknown words as they're reading. Knowledge of phonics stems from a knowledge of oral language and sounds, which is learned best naturally, through wide and playful experiences with language (Brauger & Lewis, 1997). Word reading strategies that involve phonics include "sounding words out," but also include chunking words, or breaking them into smaller units. Other word reading strategies include using the context of the sentence (both meaning and syntax) in combination with phonics knowledge to decipher an unknown word. Instruction in phonics and word recognition is best when the instruction falls within the student's orthographic stage of literacy development (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2000), or individual zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

In our analysis of classroom field notes, we looked at how explicit instruction in phonics and word recognition strategies was based on individual progress and ongoing assessments. We also looked at how explicit phonics instruction was applied in the context of actual reading and writing.

### 4) High Frequency Words and Reading Fluency

Being able to recognize words in text quickly helps readers to better focus on the meaning of the text, which is the overall purpose of reading. Specific and guided

instruction in reading strategies (e.g., Fountas & Pinell, 2001) helps children learn how to coordinate the various cueing systems so that they can focus on the larger meaning of the text. Books with repeated sentences or phrases can initially help students understand the conventions of reading and give them a sense of fluent reading (Sulzby, 1985), but opportunities to choral and partner read difficult texts are also necessary for children to become fluent readers (Stahl, Heubach, & Cramond, 1997). Assisted and repeated readings of full texts help to develop fluency (Dowhower, 1987), as does matching books to readers based on difficulty level and interest.

In our analysis of the data, we paid particular attention to how teachers help students find appropriately leveled materials for reading (including ongoing assessment techniques), and how teachers assist students in monitoring their own abilities as readers.

#### 5) Strategic Comprehension

Knowing how different types of genres work, noticing when things don't make sense, predicting, re-reading, answering questions, and self-correcting are all examples of strategies used to make sense of a text (Pressley, 1998). Comprehension instruction often happens in the pre-reading phase, when teachers ask children to preview the text, draw on their background knowledge, generate questions, think about vocabulary, set purposes for reading, or make predictions. Strategic comprehension involves critical thinking and questioning of the text, making personal connections with the text, connecting the meaning of the text with other texts or world issues, or using the meaning of the text to expand awareness, think differently, substantiate opinions, or elaborate on other topics and concerns (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997).

In our analysis, we looked at how teachers engaged students in pre-reading discussions as well as modeling techniques that help to provide the necessary information needed to read and understand the text. We also looked at the extent to which reading materials used for comprehension instruction were authentic and meaningful to the students (e.g., child protagonist, issue that concerns children, representative of diversity, etc.) and/or tied to other content areas under study.

#### 6) Writing

Writing is a foundation for early reading success because it helps children gain insights into reading, and vice versa. Because of its attachment to early reading skills, writing instruction needs to be purposeful and systematic: the teacher needs to explain and model aspects of writing that her students will need as they write on their own (e.g., Button, Johnson, & Furgeson, 1996).

In our analysis of the data from classroom observations and teacher interviews, we looked at the value placed on children's writing (e.g., through conversations or display in the room), and we looked at how writing skills were taught in the context of meaningful writing assignments.

#### 7) Engagement and Interest In Reading

Perhaps the most basic of all early literacy foundations involves engagement and interest in reading and writing, because without a sense of joy and purpose for the literacy activities in the classroom, the other foundations run the risk of becoming rote and meaningless beyond the immediate task. While smaller and isolated skills are necessary tools for reading, engagement in literacy learning requires that students are interested in it, because they clearly see reading and writing as meaningful, enjoyable activities.

Engagement and interest in literacy are fostered when the classroom is a safe, inviting, and collaborative place to be, so that children can learn from each other as they also build a sense of ownership over their own literacy skills and knowledge (Turner & Paris, 1995). Engagement and interest in literacy are also fostered when classroom libraries and the books that teachers read aloud to children include books that children can identify with and learn from, when children's works and ideas are valued and displayed, when children have a chance to self-select activities or materials, and when children set their own literacy goals and are given time to complete them. In many ways, this requires a sense of classroom community and respect: for difference, for personal interests, for favorites, and for deep connections with home and community. In our analysis, we looked for examples of these characteristics in the classroom.

#### 8) School-Wide Reading Programs

Beyond what happens in the classroom, the schools that are most successful at fostering literacy and language development are built on a common vision of school-wide reading success (Allington & Cunningham, 2002). Effective schools have clear and consistent goals from classroom to classroom (Briggs & Thomas, 1997), and they have high expectations for all students (Edmonds, 1985). Professional development is crucial (McLaughlin, 1991), and school-wide assessment and intervention programs must be in place, with small-group or individual tutorial sessions being more efficacious than whole-group instruction.

In our read of the data, we looked at each classroom within the context of the larger school setting to determine whether there were any possible correlations between

the literacy practices occurring on a daily basis in the classroom and school-wide reading philosophies.

These eight foundations served as a guide for our analysis as we reviewed classroom observational data and interviews. However, as noted earlier, the way literacy instruction “looks” in practice – its tenor, its purpose, its context – can be quite different from teacher to teacher or classroom to classroom, even if the same foundation of early literacy success is being “covered.”

Given the complexities of schooling in relation to cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity, we turned to sociocultural and constructivist theories of language and literacy development (e.g., Au, 1993; Heath, 1983; 1986; Gee, 1996; Pérez, 1998; Street, 1984) to understand variations in literacy instruction among the different classrooms. We view the classroom as a sociocultural plane in which early literacy learning may occur, and below, we briefly describe sociocultural theories of language and literacy development as related to our study.

### *Sociocultural Theories*

Sociocultural theories of language and literacy (e.g., Cazden, 1988; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Erickson, 1984; Ferdman, 1991; Gee, 1992, 1996; Heath, 1983, 1986; Pérez, 1998; Street, 1984) are not always about a traditional sense of “reading.” From a sociocultural perspective, literacy is more than decoding or encoding, more than being able to handle a set of discrete and technical skills (e.g., knowledge of letters, words, sounds) and more than “possessing” the cognitive capabilities necessary to engage with a text (e.g., attention, motivation, or memory abilities). Instead, the overall context of the situation shapes what it means to be literate, depending upon the type of text, the type of

reading or activity expected with that text, and the identity or background of the reader. A sociocultural perspective, then, emphasizes the social worlds and cultural identities of students, and views the act of making meaning as always embedded within a social context (Pérez, 1998), often within structures of power (Street, 1993).

For our purposes, we view the classroom as the “sociocultural context” in which literacy acts take place. “Sociocultural context” is a way of describing the social plane and cultural practices in which the learner and learning are situated (Hammerberg [Hassett], 2004). In part, the environment of the classroom and the purpose of the lesson provide the sociocultural context within which meaning is constructed (Pérez, 1998, p. 5). But additionally, the sociocultural context of the classroom is shaped by the experiences, background knowledge, and social/cultural identities that children bring to a learning activity.

From a sociocultural perspective, the kinds of early literacy understandings that are made and negotiated within a lesson depend on the students’ individual knowledge resources (e.g., background knowledge, knowledge of skills) as well as identity resources (e.g., cultural identity, cultural practices, cultural tools, perceived significance of the activity). For example, children use decoding or encoding skills (knowledge resources) as they read and write, but they also derive meaning from conversations, interactions, and relationships with teachers and peers (identity resources) (e.g., Au, 1990, 1993). In our analysis, we looked at how the sociocultural plane of the classroom was affected by various teachers’ attention to children’s knowledge and identity resources, as well as by requirements of the SAGE program itself (e.g., adherence to the 15:1 pupil teacher ratio or the implementation of a high-expectations curriculum). Thus, we use theories that

emphasize the social worlds of children to analyze content-learning in the classroom, defining literacy as the construction of meaning from within a sociocultural context (Erickson, 1984; Gee, 1992; Pérez, 1998).

*Methodology and data analysis*

Methodologically, this paper relies on data generated from classroom observations and teacher interviews conducted over the 2004-2005 school year. Data from case studies across classroom configurations (e.g., 15:1, 22:2) and grade levels were examined and re-examined in terms of a) foundations of early literacy success, b) the social and cultural plane of the classroom, and c) adherence to SAGE requirements. We focused on classroom environments, instructional delivery, purposes of lessons, and attention to the students' knowledge and identity resources. We used both inductive and deductive forms of qualitative analyses (Erickson, 1986; Graue & Walsh, 1998), applying knowledge of early reading research and sociocultural theories of literacy to the data. Thus, we used multiple markers to examine the data, including: a) the difficulty level of the work in terms of early literacy content; b) the social and cultural context of the classroom; and c) the function of SAGE requirements.

For this paper, we chose vignettes that are representative of the rich data at large in order to describe variations in the sociocultural contexts of the classroom (e.g., attention to the social construction of learning, and the students' backgrounds and identity resources) and variations in the level of complexity of the content (e.g., attention to early literacy foundations, the students' individual literacy needs, and their knowledge resources). In presenting a range of ways that literacy instruction is enacted in reduced-sized K-3 classrooms, we aim to outline how and when class size matters.

### When Size Matters: Sociocultural Contexts

If we turn back, for a moment, to the initial vignette that opened this paper – where the teacher was reading *Goldilocks and the Three Whats* to get to recess – it’s important to note that the second teacher in this classroom is out of the room. In this classroom, the two teachers “tag team” instruction, which means that one teacher leads the whole group (22 students) while the other teacher performs other duties, such as handling discipline issues or routine paperwork. In this way, the class is not actually receiving the benefits of a reduced-sized classroom at the time of the oral reading; it is a large group of kindergarteners with one teacher.

Immediately, the sociocultural plane is affected. As you’ll recall, the sociocultural plane of the classroom is shaped by the purpose of the lesson as well as the experiences and interests of the students. However, in the *Goldilocks* vignette, the purpose of the lesson (to get through the book before recess) creates a situation where the students’ questions and interests related to the reading are limited. In fact, there is barely room for a question (“Can we see the pictures?”), and as such, there is no room for elaboration of ideas or expansion of thoughts based on the book. The ideas being talked about are not related to the content of the reading at all. Instead, they are related to seeing pictures or getting to recess. In addition, the poor choice of literature with no pictures indicates that this teacher might not fully understand the educational purpose of a “read-aloud,” which isn’t necessarily to “get through” a story, but instead, to read and think about books with the students in shared conversations. This use of educational time, the “read-aloud-only” activity, and the decision to work with all students at once



affect the social and cultural plane of the classroom, including the kinds of conversations that can take place within this oral reading.

Sadly, the *Goldilocks* vignette is representative of many SAGE classrooms that tag-team teach, using one teacher to work with many instead of two teachers to work, talk and share with a few. For example, ten out of the twenty-seven classrooms in the study at large utilize a pupil-teacher ratio of 30:2, where either the shared space is separated by false dividers (e.g., filing cabinets), or the two teachers separate duties, leaving one teacher to work with a group of thirty students. The *Goldilocks* vignette thus demonstrates how a misuse of the SAGE program, which intends a pupil-teacher ratio of 15:1 during instructional time, effects the overall sociocultural plane of the classroom because there are more students to do less with.

In contrast, the following vignette shows how two kindergarten teachers working with twenty-seven students use the opportunity of having two adults in the room to facilitate informal conversations between the teachers and the students, and the students and each other. In this example, both teachers are “engaged” with the class, which helps the students do the same.

*8:30 A.M. – The kindergartners begin to arrive in their classroom, as both teachers, Nancy and Karen, greet their charges with broad smiles, warm hugs and laughter. Each teacher bends over to talk with the children about everything from a Halloween print t-shirt to the new Spongebob video game that someone got over the weekend. No child moves through the door unnoticed, as each one is stopped for a brief chat. These visits are carried over to the carpeted area where Karen sits with the class as Nancy continues to greet students at the door. Karen visits and laughs with the*

*students on the carpet, asking a variety of questions. For instance, a child explains that she got some new hair ties, and Karen asks her if the one presently in her hair is one of the new ones. She then turns to another girl and asks her who fixed her hair today. This banter is casual and fluid, as she chats with all of the children.*

*As the class officially begins, Nancy and Karen sit among their group, encouraging them to share “anything that comes to mind.” The easy conversation, intermixed with little rhymes now and then to refocus the students, allows each child to share something. Eventually, Dillon shares that he brought his acorn collection to school today. Without missing a beat, Nancy shoos him out of the room to get it. When he returns, the teachers and students huddle around, as Dillon unscrews a Mason jar and extracts a single, perfect acorn. This instigates yet another round of discussion, as the students talk about squirrels, trees and the many uses for acorns. The casual conversation, which has so spontaneously combusted, lasts for thirty minutes. It comes to an end when the teachers, noticing the time, realize that they must get on to “formal” instruction.*

Kindergarten at Montford

Rapidly Improving School

Pupil-teacher ratio: 27:2

The classroom environment in the above vignette is highly positive such that children are more than encouraged to speak and ask questions; they are also encouraged to “be themselves,” share personal information, and take their thinking a step beyond. The teachers allow the conversation to be directed by the students, but they also prompt them on to further discussion. This creates a classroom context – and a sociocultural plane – in which children know their opinions and thoughts are valued.

While this example appears to show a random, informal activity, it has a clear purpose. The teachers explained during an interview that their goal for these social conversations was to encourage children to interact with each other, while the teachers had a chance to scaffold the children's ideas and language as they shared their thoughts and learned from each other. In stark contrast to the *Goldilocks* example, where the goal for the activity ended at merely reading the story out loud, an instructional conversation (Goldenberg, 1993) such as this provides an opportunity for teachers to intentionally promote complex language and expand new vocabulary. In an instructional conversation, the teacher asks fewer "known-answer" questions and instead responds to the students' contributions by asking further questions (e.g., *What do you mean?* or *How do you know?*) and by providing a thought-provoking, relaxed, and safe atmosphere for listening and dialogue (Goldenberg, 1993, p. 319).

This guidance during literacy and language learning takes a teacher who listens carefully to what the students are saying, allowing students to direct conversations based on their interests and curiosities, so that the teacher can intentionally introduce new ways of talking and thinking within the context of a lived conversation. Beyond providing young children with a bridge to further language and literacy development, these kinds of instructional conversations also provide a sense of respect for personal identities and knowledge, which goes a long way toward establishing a situation where engagement and interest in the classroom are the norm.

None of this is to say that engaging and thoughtful discussions *can't* occur in classrooms with pupil teacher ratios that are larger. However, reduced-sized classrooms create an opportunity for teachers to facilitate discussions among students, allowing them

to direct the conversations as a matter of intentionally expanding students' known language skills. In reduced-sized classrooms, the chances for substantive and extended conversations around topics that are both meaningful to children (socially and culturally) and the basis for further reading development (academic language structures) have an excellent chance of taking off.

As a comparison, let's look at the next vignette, in which a first grade teacher, Nina, is attempting to engage twenty-two students in a daily news task:

*Nina asks the children to find their learning spots. Each of the 22 students moves into position in rows on the carpeted space facing their teacher and her easel. One child hides behind a desk and needs to be reminded to "make a good seating choice." The child moves out from behind the desk. The teacher continues, taking a pointer with a funny-looking rubber hand stuck to the end. She begins to point at a sentence that has been written on the easel. She stops to ask Josh to pay attention. She moves back to the message:*

*Wednesday, September 14, 2004.*

*Good morning children. We talked about cooperation yesterday. Today we will practice. Our parents are invited to a meeting after school today.*

*Have a happy day!*

*Nina asks for volunteers to read the various parts of the message. She pauses to send Auggie to a "time away," as he has been pushing students at the back of the group. Nina turns back to the group, still waiting for a reader. She gets no response. She prompts the group by saying, "C'mon team 130 (the classroom number)." She waits. "Who wants to volunteer?" This doesn't inspire the children, so Nina begins reading the*

*message herself. She pauses before the last two sentences, looking expectantly at the children. Sandy offers to read. When she is done, Nina asks if the students have any questions or comments. Tico wonders if they have to attend the parent meeting, and Nina assures him that they do not. The children fall silent again.*

First Grade a Montford

Rapidly Improving School

Pupil-teacher ratio: 22:1

In the above example, the children are not inspired to be a part of this lesson, even though the teacher gives it a good “college try” on several occasions (e.g., using a funny pointer or looking expectantly at students). But she reads the majority of the message herself, and does not directly explain some of the early reading knowledge necessary to get through this message.

Here, we can think in terms of the sociocultural context of this classroom, and the learning that is to occur within it. The purpose of the lesson is to “get through” the reading of the daily news, and this helps to shape what one is to do when “being literate.” The social environment of the classroom in the above example also sets forth the possible realm of appropriate literacy acts within the context of the lesson. In this situation, the sociocultural context of the classroom (lesson and social environment) situates the learner as one who watches the pointer pointing at words, and/or raises a hand to read out loud.

The sociocultural context of this example is affected by the number of students in the room (with a ratio of 22:1 there are too many distractions with some people misbehaving), but it is also affected by the lack of room for students to talk with each other about what they are thinking and seeing. In addition, the small amount of talk about the activity is not content-driven in terms of early literacy skills. Tico’s question is

about the message itself, which is fine in terms of the practical aspects of reading a message; however, no one is talking about early reading strategies (content-related), and the message itself falls short of the students' interests (related to the social and cultural context of the classroom).

More positive examples were found across the study, most often with a pupil-teacher ratio of at most 15:1. In examples where the learner is expected to lay him or herself on the line, engage with the task with a partner, or speak about various print and literacy concepts, the content-related activity is attached to the students' identity-resources as well as knowledge-resources. A sociocultural plane for learning happens when the students are free to discuss what they're noticing about print with each other.

Because children come to school with substantial individual differences in their language backgrounds and knowledge of print (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Biemiller, 1999; Hart & Risley, 1995), one way to boost young children's language and literacy skills is to read and discuss high-quality, language-rich children's literature. Here, instructional conversations *about* the books being read provide ways for children to elaborate their ideas within the context of texts and academic language. Using an instructional conversation around an oral reading, the first grade teacher in the vignette below models comprehension strategies and questioning techniques throughout the story, encouraging students to engage with the story orally with each other.

*The children settle into their spaces on the carpet to listen to their teacher read Two Bad Ants by Chris Van Allsburg. Before she begins, Ms. Casper explains that this is a pretend or fiction book. She then asks the children a variety of questions about insects. The children talk about the insect world until they've run out of things to say, and Ms.*

*Casper begins reading. She holds the book out as she reads, and the children huddle around to look at the pictures. She pauses after each page to ask questions and to encourage the children to predict what will happen next. The children are eager to share their predictions, so Ms. Casper suggests that they whisper to a neighbor what they think is coming. When the whispers subside, Ms. Casper continues the story. Stopping periodically, she muses aloud about the ants: "Where could they be living?" "What are they doing that makes them bad ants?" She asks the children to look for clues about where the ants are living. As they look back through the pages for clues about the ants' whereabouts, the children notice items that could be found in a house. Ms. Casper continues reading, stopping in mock confusion, "Here's a bag with the word 'gar' on it. Hmm... what it could be?" The students wonder aloud if the ants are in a kitchen. They inch closer to their teacher as the naughty ants move into a sugar bowl and are spooned into a cup of coffee. Ms. Casper turns another page, and the children witness as the ants are nearly swallowed. The anticipation is palpable as Ms. Casper comes to the conclusion of the story. Before she turns the final page, she asks the students to predict the outcome and reveal where the ants are living. The children call out, "They're on a table." "That's a toaster." "They're in a kitchen in someone's house." "They're gonna get squished!" They squirm as she turns the final page where they learn that their predictions were (mostly) correct. The ants live happily ever after in a toaster, on a counter, in a kitchen in someone's house. Ms. Casper praises the children for their excellent foresight as she closes the book and passes it into their outstretched hands.*

First Grade at Allerton Farwell

Low Achieving School

Pupil-teacher ratio: 25:2

This vignette is representative of teachers who take advantage of smaller class sizes to choose quality materials that they know will match their students' interests – because they know their students. In this example, Ms. Casper did all the right things in terms of modeling comprehension strategies while reading, demonstrating that she knows early literacy instructional techniques, as well as her students, their motivations, and their abilities to think and ask questions while reading. She engaged in pre-reading discussions, such as previewing the text and drawing on background knowledge about insects; she paused after each page to ask questions; she encouraged children to make predictions; and she even modeled inferencing strategies by looking at the beginning of a word in the picture (“gar”) and leaving it open for the students to infer where the ants might be (on a “garbage” can).

Most importantly, however, the children fell in love with this book because Ms. Casper gave them a chance to become actively engaged as learners: whispering predictions to a neighbor, looking for clues about where the ants are living. Here, the context of the classroom makes it *impossible* for the children to sit idly by as passive recipients of the story. Instead, comprehension of the text's content is enhanced through talk and discussions, guessing and game playing, all of which help children to relate a text's content to personal experiences, world experiences, and the perspectives of others (e.g., Keene & Zimmermann, 1997). High-quality, language-rich books read aloud in the classroom provide an opportunity for students to connect with texts, while expanding their knowledge of ways to think deeply about a story, such as returning to the text to substantiate an idea, or speaking from one's own perspectives and experiences to interpret the meaning of a text.



When the purpose of the lesson aligns with the students' own identities as literacy learners, children can even "fall in love" with seemingly "dry" literacy activities in the right sociocultural environment. For example, the vignette below, from a third grade classroom, shows how a teacher has chosen to teach editing and grammar skills, fairly basic – and often "boring" – tasks. To begin, the teacher writes the morning message on the board with mistakes, reads through it, and then has the children make corrections and observations about the message. The children, organized in teams, correct as many mistakes as they can find, and they also mark each word's part of speech.

*The children crouch at their desks, negotiating within their groups who will make the first move. The elected child, in a sprinter's stance, waits for the teacher to give the command to begin. Mr. Delmar, enjoying the anticipation almost as much as the children, pauses before waving the checkered flag. The children leap into action and move toward the board where they address the morning's message. Alicia corrects misspelled words, Therman labels several verbs, and Aaron circles conjunctions before turning and hustling back to hand the pen off to a team member. Teammates cheer and Mr. Delmar offers a running commentary: He calls out, "Good Job, Alicia! I didn't think anyone would see that." To another he shouts, "Wow, Aaron, you're a conjunction machine!" The beaming boy calls back, "Yah, and I got some verbs too!" Mr. Delmar adds through a laugh, "Well, you're an active conjunction machine then." The banter, cheering and flurry of writing continue for several minutes until Mr. Delmar calls "Stop," and the weary racers fall into their chairs to await the results.*

Third Grade at Allerton Farwell

Low Achieving School

Pupil-teacher ratio: 13:1

Here these students were, getting excited about finding parts of speech, but while the general goal of this activity may have been to find all the mistakes and to mark all of the parts of speech, the collaborative nature of this activity gave the children a chance to become engaged in ways that might not have been possible if they had completed this task alone at each of their desks. Additionally, this teacher used this activity to scaffold his students' own use of grammatical terms in a social context (e.g., "You're a conjunction machine!" "I got some verbs too!"). In this example, a smaller community of learners enabled more social opportunities for learning, thus affecting the sociocultural plane.

In sum, deeper engagement with literacy activities occurs when the teachers create a social climate for learning. The kinds of discussions that occur during the course of a lesson truly matter in terms of early literacy skills and concepts. However, the students' own motivations and interests matter just as much, if not more. When teachers use a smaller class size as an opportunity to create a social environment for learning, then size matters.

### When Size Matters: Complexity of Content

In many ways, a sociocultural context for learning creates a situation where students are engaged and interested in whatever is happening in the classroom. But engaged and interested in *what*? While a small class size does indeed provide an opportunity for social learning and for teachers to know their students' backgrounds and interests, sociocultural contexts for learning may mean very little academically, unless

the teacher can tie his or her students' social identities to literacy content. This entails a teacher's knowledge of the skills to teach as well as the individual needs to meet.

The next example demonstrates many of the benefits of a reduced size class, including engagement and interest in the activity, but here, the interests and expertise of each child is tied to a research project – and complexity of literacy content. In this classroom, there are two teachers to 25 students. Each teacher works with small groups during the morning's literacy block.

*Dena works alone with 6 students. After chatting briefly about various reading strategies to use when things aren't making sense (reading slowly, chunking words, rereading), she reminds the students that they need to use these reading skills as they read to learn about the cities they are each researching. She then announces to her group, "I want to hear from my experts on Mexico City, Cairo and Moscow. Give me a thumbs-up if you'll make something to represent your city." The children all show her their thumbs.*

*Smiling, Dena prompts them with questions like, "What does your city have in common with Walton River?" and "Do you think we could use a map or globe to show where your city is?" This leads the children into conversation about the research they will do and the ways in which they'll each present their research.*

*Kammy suggests that they should each have a map of their country, so they can show where their cities are located. Dena agrees and holds up a large map. The children are smiling and attentive. Braden is up out of his chair to get a better view. They discuss whether they should all work off of one map, attaching sticky notes to*

*represent their individual cities, or if they should do as Kammy suggested. They decide, in the end, to photocopy the map, so they each have their own.*

*Dena then asks the children to report on their research progress. She asks Halle to begin by asking her, “Do you have any info? Didn’t you say you had a friend in Mexico City?” Halle responds, “Yah my grandma’s friend went there.” She goes on to explain that she will interview this friend. Landry shares a book that she is writing about Washington D.C. She is shy at first, but with encouragement from Dena, retrieves her book from her desk and shares it with the others. Becky is also studying Mexico City. She shows the group a small wicker basket full of colored tissue paper. She explains that each color of tissues is supposed to represent flowers, fish and other things that can be bought at the street market in Mexico City. She beams as she explains that she read about the markets from books she got at the library. She adds that she is also working on a picture of a sombrero. After each child has reported in, they move to their desks to continue reading, writing and drawing their data.*

Second Grade at Montford

Rapidly Improving School

Pupil-teacher ratio: 30:2

In this vignette, Dena is not only working with a small group, but she is able to individualize instruction within the group. Each student is allowed to complete research on the city of his/her choice. Each student is also allowed to determine how they will complete this research. Some choose to read for information, others conduct interviews, and others use a combination of methods. Each child is encouraged to be a researcher – collecting data and putting it into a form of their choosing to represent to the whole class. Because the group is small, each child has the space to discuss their individual research,

as well as to discuss methods collaboratively. Ultimately, the children are engaged and interested with the process of learning as a whole because they are invested.

As seen in the next example, the size of the group matters in terms of instruction in early reading and writing content. This vignette is from Nancy and Karen's kindergarten classroom of twenty-seven students, but here the two teachers split the large group into two smaller groups for instructional purposes. At the time of the vignette, Nancy, the teacher, is working with twelve students, while Karen is in a space out at the end of the hall doing the same morning message and activities with the rest of the class.

*Nancy turns her attention to the Daily News written on the easel next to her. She begins by having the students look at the first line: Today is Monday, September 27, 2004. She reads it aloud, following with a pointer. She then asks the students to read it aloud with her. Next, she encourages the children to make observations about the sentence. The children take turns looking at the letters and drawing conclusions about the letters that are in the sentence as well as in their own names. Each of the ten children in this group makes an observation. Some circle letters, and others circle entire words that they recognize.*

*After all have observed the sentence, Nancy turns to the next sentence: The weather is \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. Nancy asks the children to help her fill in the blanks. One child offers, "sunny." Nancy comments that "sunny" is an excellent choice, and she writes it into the first blank. Another child offers "cold." Nancy hesitates and asks the child if he wore his mittens and snow boots to school. He replies that he didn't. She asks if he wore his winter coat. He gives a head shake. Nancy*

*suggests that they amend the answer to “cool.” The children agree, so Nancy fills the blank with “cool.” She rereads the sentence and has the children read it again with her.*

*Finally, Nancy asks Claué to create a sentence for the group to “think about.” He says, “My shirt glows in the dark.” Nancy writes on the easel: Claué said, “My shirt glows in the dark.” She asks Claué to step out his sentence in order to help them observe the length of his sentence. He skips to the edge of the carpet and, as the students chant his sentence, Claué takes one step for each word. Nancy comments that he has created a wonderfully long sentence (Claué takes really big steps). The message continues with students creating, stepping, counting and discussing their sentences.*

Kindergarten at Montford

Rapidly Improving School

Pupil-teacher ratio: 12:1

Several early reading concepts were demonstrated in the above lesson, including left to right directionality (following with a pointer), the concept of words (stepping out the number in the sentence), and early writing skills of choosing the best words for what you want to say (“cool” over “cold”). In addition, the social context for learning provides time for the students to explore some writing with each other, as the students have a chance to do their own observations of the print without the teacher’s interference. The literacy instruction is content-driven because the students’ talk is about early print concepts and letter sounds, and it is also meaningful because the students are involved.

In the example below, from a first grade classroom, explicit phonics instruction and word reading strategies are applied in the context of reading. In this vignette, two students work with Dorinda, who has a background in reading.

*Dorinda hands each boy a “Sunshine Reader” that is leveled for their ability. They open the books, and Dorinda leads them on a picture walk. They notice that there is only one character in this book, and each page finds her perched atop something different. After the picture walk, Dorinda begins reading, and the children follow each word with their index finger. The sentences are nearly the same on each page. On the left side of the double page spread is a sentence that reads, Up on a \_\_\_\_\_. On the right side of the spread is a picture. While the sentences are repetitive, there is one word in each that must be deciphered. Dorinda pauses in these places and asks the boys to fill in the missing word. They automatically look to the corresponding picture in order to do this, but they learn quickly that this strategy doesn’t necessarily work. For instance, when the book’s character is “Up on a wall,” both boys state that she is “Up on a fence.” When the girl is up on a bunk, the boys say “Up on a bed.” Dorinda helps the boys sound out each word. She also helps them to break up/chunk the words in order to read them. When they have completed the book, she asks them to write the sentence from the first page onto a sheet that is covered with small, square cells. The boys do this, being careful to write only one word per cell. When they are done, they each read their sentence, sounding out the final words. Dorinda applauds them for their hard work and leads them back to the classroom.*

First Grade at Montford

Rapidly Improving School

Pupil-teacher ratio: 22:2 + Title I Teacher

While the learning in the above vignette may not appear to be entirely social or interactive, it is contextual: Dorinda helps the boys think about the tools they have at their disposal (reading skills and strategies) to figure out an unknown word in the context of

reading this story. The literacy content these boys are learning is “just right” for them in terms of complexity: they are working at their “instructional levels” with materials that are neither too easy nor too hard for them to handle. In doing this, they can address word recognition and phonics within the context of reading a text, and their lesson is based on individual developmental progress and ongoing assessment. The boys can read this book with the support of a teacher, the teacher knows which book to choose, and in so doing, the boys learn key skills and concepts.

One of the strongest statements to make in support of smaller class sizes is that it allows teachers to better meet each student’s individual reading needs within the context of meaningful reading experiences. However, knowing how to meet individual needs in the context of reading and writing is a matter of professional training as well as careful observation and knowledge of the students’ abilities. Yet, literacy training for teachers can not be assumed in all SAGE classrooms. Thus, it is not just a matter of reducing class sizes, but also a matter of professional development around how to best utilize reduced-sized classes for early literacy learning.

In the next two examples, we will see guided reading sessions in action, where teachers are attempting to assist students in the fluent reading of books that are determined to be “at their level.” Here, we are focusing on the ways in which ongoing individual assessments assist teachers in finding the best materials for students to practice reading fluently: books that are matched to their abilities and interests. In the first example, Dana and Maureen, two first grade teachers, divide the children into groups for the literacy block of the morning. Dana works with the children in a “guided reading” format (i.e., a small group of 4-6 students), while Maureen dictates spelling words to a



larger group as they practice writing the words on individual dry erase boards. Others in the class are working in different areas of the room, such as the journal writing center.

*Dana takes four children to her table and distributes photocopied pages – they have been folded and stapled to resemble a book – to each child. Dana begins leading the children on a picture walk through the book but is soon interrupted by loud noises coming from the journal writing center. She leaves her group to redirect Ronny, Brian and Caufield, the sources of the loud noise. She moves back to her group but is soon distracted by Marni, who is standing on a chair wiping the dry erase board at the front of the room. She directs her group to “just circle the words with ‘oa’ in them” and moves off to address the child. Dana’s group chats as they go through their black and white books highlighting ‘oa’. The interruptions continue as Dana works through “Coal for Gramps” with the children. As time dwindles, Dana begins reading the book and having the students repeat each sentence after her. In this manner, they get through the book in time for recess.*

First Grade at Allerton Farwell

Low Achieving School

Pupil-teacher ratio: 25:2

The atmosphere of the classroom in the above vignette is loud, and the guided reading group is unfocused, in part because of the noise in the larger classroom, but also because the guided reading lesson is not necessarily guided toward individual ability and need. Circling “oa” words and repeating the sentences of the book after the teacher reads may not be content-driven activities based on ongoing student observation and individualized assessment. Despite the fact that Dana is working with a small group of students, they may or may not be organized according to early reading needs.

When asked about the methods that Dana uses for assessing each student's reading level, she explains that the text series presents materials at three different levels. The children are placed into either the Emergent, Early or Fluent level. When asked how she arrives at a conclusion about where to place each student, she explains that there is a holistic assessment for each unit in the text; however, they only use that when they have to, or if they feel someone "just isn't getting it." She adds that she is familiar with Running Records, but that she doesn't use them. She includes, "We don't really use any other assessment; I just kind of know their fluency."

This vignette is representative of teachers who aren't aware of a wider spectrum of early reading assessment and intervention methods. "Just kind of knowing their fluency" is the same as not knowing the power of careful and ongoing assessments in meeting individual needs. In this low-achieving school, teachers have not had the opportunity for professional development around current early reading methods, and it shows.

In contrast, two teachers in a different first grade classroom also divide their class of twenty-six students into reading groups. However, instead of placing students in one of three leveled groups, in this case, the groups range in levels from 3 to 20, based upon a Reading Recovery method of matching books to readers. Because of this specificity, the group sizes vary from a single child to a group with six children. Diane takes her groups to a table at the front of the classroom. Nina moves to an alcove at the back of the room with her groups, and Doris, a Title I aide, takes her children to her office down the hall.

*After doing some initial word study activities with a group of two boys, Nina continues the lesson with a book that the children have read before. They re-read,*

*pausing frequently. Nina can be heard reminding the boys to “sound it out,” “stretch it out,” “get your mouth ready,” and “this is the trickiest one to read...let’s read it together.” When they finish the book, Nina slides a copy into each boy’s reading envelope for him to take home and practice with a family member.*

*Moments after Nina dismisses this small group of two, she has six new students around her table. She tells them that they may vote on whether they read fiction or nonfiction for today’s reading. The group chooses nonfiction, and they get to work “picture walking.” As they flip through their books, they comment on their discoveries: “Cool. It’s a clown fish.” “That’s not a clownfish.” “Yah it is – see, it says, ‘clownfish.’” “That is an awesome fish.” “There’s an Atlantic whale.” “Look at this baboon.” “It has sharp teeth.”*

*When they are done, Nina asks them to share their discoveries. They then take turns reading through the book, pausing frequently to discuss their findings. When they get near the end of their group’s reading time, Nina takes the children to the library where they each choose a book from the stacks with a red sticker on its binding. The books have been leveled, and the red ones are congruent with these children’s levels. The books include many Newbury, Caldecott and Charlotte Zolotow award winners.*

First Grade at Montford

Rapidly Improving School

Pupil-teacher ratio: 26:2 + Title I Teacher

When the teachers and reading specialist in the above vignette are asked how they have arrived at a way to determine and monitor the reading level of each child in their classroom, they explain that they have developed, over several years of working together as a staff, a schoolwide series of assessments. The teachers emphasize that every teacher

understands the assessments at each level. They have refined them to the point that they all use the same format, the same prompts and the same scoring method. They computerize their findings so that they are accessible to any teacher at any given time. The organization is so well established that a new teacher, or even a substitute teacher, can master the tools quickly. The primary benchmark assessments occur in the fall and the spring in order to chart the growth of each individual. The teachers also employ other assessments in order to move their students through the levels of reading throughout the school year. In particular, the teachers are trained in the use of Running Records, and they use them for each child when they feel that he/she is ready to move to a new level.

In the above guided reading groups, this school-wide commitment to careful assessment shows. The content of the lessons actually changes based upon what the teachers know about individual children's reading abilities. In addition, the materials are leveled across a greater range of ability, and include both fiction and non-fiction, as well as different genres. Most significantly, high quality children's literature is a part of these children's reading day. As Beck & McKeown (2001) point out, "[t]exts that are effective for developing language and comprehension ability need to be conceptually challenging enough to require grappling with ideas and taking an active stance toward constructing meaning" (p. 10). Thus, it is not only a matter *that* we read with children, but *what* we read and *how* we engage students in the discussion. While leveled Sunshine readers are great for teaching necessary reading skills and strategies, the purpose of fluent reading is to have the skills and strategies necessary to comprehend more complex texts. With smaller class sizes, and appropriate professional development, teachers have the

opportunity to know their students' ability levels as well as interests, so that readers can be matched to complex and interesting texts.

In sum, a smaller class size provides the possibility for teachers to incorporate rich early literacy content that meets the individual needs of their students. But without a sociocultural context that lays the foundation for engagement and interest in early reading and writing skills, rich content runs the risk of falling on deaf ears. When teachers use a smaller class size as an opportunity to design lessons and curriculum “not merely to *fit* the school culture to the students' culture but also to *use* student culture as the basis for helping students...conceptualize knowledge” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 142), then size matters.

#### Concluding Remarks: A Hybrid Theory

*Kathy lies on the carpet next to Ashlee and asks, “What are you writing about?” Ashlee doesn't have any idea at all, but after lying next to Kathy for a while, she decides to write about her fondness for her teachers. Kathy asks her how she will figure out how to spell her teachers' names. Ashlee hops up and moves to the pocket chart across the room that contains the names of all students and teachers in the class. She takes the cards with the teachers' names printed on them back to her space and begins writing.*

Kindergarten at Montford

Rapidly Improving School

Pupil-teacher ratio: 25:2

In order to take full advantage of smaller class sizes, we know that improved student achievement requires substantive changes in teaching methods (Pate-Bain, Achilles, Boyd-Zararias, & McKenna, 1992; Robinson, 1990). To this, we would like to

add that substantive changes to the pedagogy behind the methods are in order as well, for it is not only the “what” of teaching – the methods, goals, and substance – but also the “how” – the pedagogical art and science required to connect educational goals to individual students’ interests and needs.

In the vignette above, Ashlee didn’t have any idea what to write about, and had Kathy not been in her space, lying down for a bit in this comfortable classroom, Ashlee may have sat without an idea indefinitely. The very presence of a teacher in Ashlee’s space helps to push Ashlee’s envelope in terms of ideas for writing, and the very presence of Ashlee in the teacher’s space leads to impromptu instruction in the writing tools available in the room for Ashlee to use. Furthermore, Kathy knew Ashlee; Kathy knew this would work.

Now of course, a smaller class size provides an opportunity for Kathy to take the time to lie down next to Ashlee, which is a definite benefit. Yet, as we have seen in other vignettes, specific literacy goals can be “covered” or “hit” without this personal touch. And personal touches don’t necessarily indicate that the material being taught is academically rigorous, or “on target” for each student.

In our analysis of the data, we saw that a small class size provides teachers with the chance to incorporate best practice methods into their teaching, but that alone is not enough. And we saw that smaller classes provide opportunities for teachers to know their students’ interests, abilities, and background, but that also is not enough. Thus, from our analysis of the data, emerged the need for a hybrid theory that combines research on the foundations of early literacy success with sociocultural theories of language and literacy development.

As a guiding framework for understanding how and when class size matters, we propose three basic tenets of a pedagogy that embraces both early reading research and sociocultural theories. A hybrid theory views: 1) literacy as multifaceted, with both individual and social dimensions; 2) literacy learning as constructive and socially practiced; and 3) literacy skills as relevant to the students in the context of their lived experiences.

First, a hybrid pedagogy for reading and writing instruction provides a basis for viewing literacy as multifaceted, inclusive of all eight foundations for early literacy success (the content of literacy) as they are needed to make sense of various texts (the context of literacy use). Here, the social dimensions of “being literate” include but exceed the individual cognitive capabilities that are normally a part of literacy instruction. Pérez (1998) notes that “[c]urrent positions on definitions of literacy tend to cluster around two major dimensions, ‘the *individual* dimension and the *social* dimension’ (Green & Dixon, 1996, p. 292)” (p. 22). Beyond seeing literacy as a person’s *individual* mental ability to read and write (Ferdman, 1991), or a collection of isolated and decontextualized skills (Heath, 1986; McLaughlin, 1989; Moll, 1992), sociocultural theories clearly focus on the *social* dimension, and literacy becomes a complex cultural phenomenon (Cazden, 1988; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gee, 1992; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984). To be literate in a “multifaceted” sense means to have the skills and knowledge needed to make meaning in multiple situations with multiple forms of text.

When literacy is seen as multifaceted, a student’s identity as “literate” or “not literate,” “abled” or “disabled,” “poor student” or “good student,” can shift and change based on the context and task. Instead of imagining that students “possess” certain

cognitive traits or attributes, which could be applied in similar ways to all texts, a hybrid pedagogy combines knowledge of what it means to read and write with knowledge that a “good reader” or “good writer” for one type of text might struggle with a different text. In this way, a student who is struggling with one particular kind of literacy act can be seen as having the language and abilities necessary to succeed at another one.

According to tenet number one, class size matters when students are viewed as capable of understanding themselves and their worlds in multiple ways, both personal and social. We saw this tenet enacted when all teachers in the classroom were engaged with their students, choosing to listen to them and learn from them (as opposed to doing paperwork), and in classrooms where the atmosphere was one of respect, support, and academic achievement. Teachers used the tools for reading and writing as just that – tools – not ends in and of themselves, but instead, necessary tools that helped their students read and write for numerous and diverse purposes. Students who did not normally speak up in class found themselves suddenly involved, suddenly good at literacy, because a teacher was available, right there by their side.

Secondly, a hybrid pedagogy acknowledges that meaning is constructed in social situations, and negotiated through children’s individual knowledge and identity resources. This means acknowledging that learners bring experiences with the world to any text, as well as well as a knowledge of the skills to use with the text, as they interpret a meaning from the text (Bruner, 1996; Erickson, 1984; Ferdman, 1991; Gee, 1992; Pérez, 1998). A pedagogy that combines literacy research with sociocultural theories views children’s identities and cultural contexts as absolutely implicit and necessary for understanding the symbols and texts of reading and writing instruction in the first place.



According to tenet number two, which views literacy learning as constructive and social, class size matters in order to create a sociocultural plane for learning. We saw this tenet enacted in examples where teachers encouraged social interactions and conversations, with the caveat that social and interactive learning was connected to instruction in skills and techniques. Teachers in our study made the most of small classes when they facilitated discussions among students, listened carefully to what the students said, allowed students to direct conversations, and intentionally expanded and/or introduced new vocabulary based on these conversations. More than using skills and techniques in and of themselves (e.g., when the read-aloud *becomes* the entire literacy activity as opposed to a tool to encourage instructional conversations), a hybrid pedagogy uses what children know as a starting point for further literacy growth and exploration. In effect, this produces a social and cultural context in which the students' ideas and opinions are valued, and in which future learning can occur.

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

According to tenet number three, class size matters as a way to contextualize literacy learning for students. This tenet was enacted when teachers used ongoing and daily assessments to assist students in finding quality materials to read based on their interests, their reading level, and their future needs. It was enacted when the teachers

knew their students well enough to make reading and writing instruction relevant to each student's backgrounds and interests – both sociocultural *and* academic.

In sum, smaller classes provide opportunities for teachers to engage in practices that improve student achievement, but it is what teachers choose to do in and with smaller classes that matters, not simply size. Teachers capitalize on the advantages of a smaller class size when both early literacy content and sociocultural contexts are taken into account. When the foundations of early literacy success (in content and method) are combined with sociocultural theories of language and literacy (in context and pedagogy), then size matters.

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### Endnotes

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