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Delia King

Carson City-Crystal Area Schools, kingdmcr@gmail.com

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A Dog, a Cat, and Professional Development: How Two Bobbies Introduced Elementary Teachers to C3WP and Michigan's Literacy Essentials K-3

DELIA KING

In late September of 2018, I attended a four-day state training for Michigan's Essential Instructional Practices, a perfect opportunity given my current role at Carson City-Crystal Schools (CC-C): retired second grade teacher and current literacy coach. Even better, I attended the event with Alexis Shaver, my elementary principal, so as we learned about the MAISA GELN Literacy Essentials (2016), we simultaneously began exploring concrete strategies for implementation back in Carson City. On the third night of the training, Alexis and I found ourselves, once again debriefing and processing our learning over a working dinner, when an unexpected text message arrived. Was I interested in helping to lead a year-long partnership with the elementary teachers in my district regarding the National Writing Project's (NWP) College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3WP)?

I still remember my excitement over this invitation. The C3WP had been a professional focus for me, as a teacher consultant for the Chippewa River Writing Project (CRWP), for two years. The first year was an NWP-funded introduction to the C3WP that I completed, along with several other teacher consultants across our service region. That first year was so inspirational that I petitioned my administration to consider a CRWP/CC-C partnership regarding the C3WP, and they were fully on board. A successful NWP grant was written, and the work during the second year began primarily for middle and high school ELA teachers, along with two elementary teachers (a second and a fifth grade teacher). The full-year partnership had also been so successful that the district had invited the CRWP to roll out the C3WP at the elementary level the following year.

I immediately agreed, and the planning and implementation of the year-long partnership began. Being immersed this year in two different ELA initiatives—implementation of both the literacy essentials and the C3WP—I know from first-hand experience that the programs align, which is good news for teachers K-3.

C3WP and the Literacy Essentials on the Same Team

How do the C3WP and the literacy essentials align? To understand, *LAJM* readers first need to know that the literacy essentials are currently a “work in progress,” with some areas more developed than others. To date, the pre-kindergarten and K-3 essentials are being implemented across the state, the 4-5 literacy essentials are in the roll-out and training stage, and the 6-12 literacy essentials are in draft form. This is one reason I'm focusing specifically on the K-3 essentials. It is also important to note the literacy essentials focus on the craft of teaching, classroom practices, and the teacher's behaviors. What can teachers do to create the optimal learning environment, how can they intentionally plan so that the resource/program/activity is used to support the research on student learning, and what instructional practices would make positive impacts?

According to the MAISA GELN Literacy Essentials website (2016), the purpose of early literacy essentials for grades K-3 is to improve children's literacy in Michigan. Professional development throughout the state can focus on this set of research-supported literacy instructional practices for **daily use in the classroom** (my emphasis). Emphasis is on the younger elementary child since literacy knowledge and skills developed in these early grades predict later literacy achievement. Early elementary education can help improve literacy proficiency outcomes. Expert research suggests that each of the ten practices outlined in this document can have a positive impact on literacy development. The use of these practices in every Michigan classroom, each and every day, can make a measurable, positive difference in the state's literacy achievement.

Although there are many literacy instructional practices, the ten instructional practices deemed essential in K-3 classrooms are:

1. Motivation and engagement,
2. Read alouds,
3. Small group and individual instruction,
4. Phonological awareness,
5. Phonics instruction,
6. Writing instruction,
7. Vocabulary instruction in literature/content areas,
8. Abundant reading opportunities and texts,
9. Observation and assessment,
10. Collaboration with families (MAISA GELN, 2016).

Each essential is further broken down into five bulleted items. For example, essential #2, read alouds, has the following bullets:

Read alouds involve:

- sets of texts, across read aloud sessions, that are thematically and conceptually related and that offer opportunities to learn that children could not yet experience independently
- modeling of appropriate fluency (accuracy, automaticity, and prosody) in reading
- child-friendly explanations of words within the text and revisiting of those words after reading using tools such as movement, props, video, photo, examples, and non-examples, and engaging children in saying the words aloud and using the words at other points in the day and over time
- higher-order discussion among children and teacher before, during, and after reading
- instructional strategies, depending on the grade level and children's needs (MAISA GELN, 2016)

To understand the connection between the C3WP and literacy essentials, I offer the story behind the planning and implementation for our very first PD session.

The Intentional Planning Behind the Scene

As previously indicated, when the CC-C administration and CRWP leadership team asked me if a C3WP year-long partnership was doable, I immediately agreed, but then reality set in. The NWP has updated the C3WP for teachers 4-6; however, there are no resources available for teachers K-3. I could build on the 4-6 mini-units, but there were no K-3 text sets, so everything for the CC-C would need to be created. Luckily, I attended the 2016 NWP annual meeting where Kentucky Writing Project shared lessons they had created for elementary teachers, so I reviewed their materials and got to work.

First, I spent time getting to know the lessons I might use as the foundation for the C3WP lessons I would create. These lessons included: "Routine Argument Writing," "Identifying Arguments" and "Entering the Conversation," and "Joining a Conversation in Progress." After much reflection and professional dialogue with my CC-C and C3WP colleagues, I decided the first mini-lesson for the CC-C teachers would be "Joining a Conversation in Progress," a lesson called "Who's at the Table?" because the central metaphor of the lesson is a round table with seats for various perspectives.

I decided a teaching demonstration was the perfect way to introduce the teachers to C3WP and the literacy essentials, as well as to offer a glimpse into an important aspect of NWP summer institutes. Being a literacy coach, I knew the CC-C teachers were visual learners and would appreciate seeing a practice in action. So, armed with the "Who's at the Table?" structure and the literacy essentials, I set off to create a teaching demo.

Reminding myself the essentials are about the instructional moves and decisions a teacher makes, I set out to select a text. As I looked through my library of picture books, I knew my choice needed to be a nonfiction text because the C3WP focuses upon leveraging nonfiction sources in argument writing. The literacy essentials also emphasize using informational text sets in read alouds and for vocabulary instruction. According to Elizabeth Moore, a teacher-consultant and coauthor of the *Units of Study* series, there are five subsets of nonfiction: traditional, browsable, narrative nonfiction, expository literature and active titles. Traditional nonfiction gives a general overview of a topic. Browsable nonfiction books are full of pictures and short facts, such as *Guinness Book of World Records* or the *Eyewitness Books*. Narrative nonfiction tells a story AND teaches information. One example is Katherine Applegate's (2014) *Ivan: The Remarkable True Story of the Shopping Mall Gorilla*. Ivan's life story is revealed in this picture book in a narrative structure based on the facts from his life. Expository literature is information with great attention given to word choice. It does NOT sound formulaic. Seymour Simon comes to mind as an example of an expository literature author. Finally, active titles are books designed for the do-er: recipe books, craft books, and how-to books. Although I wouldn't be using a text set, I knew that the chosen text needed to be nonfiction and have many different perspectives. Given the teachers' grade levels, however, I adapted the text set for our first PD session and showcased a single book with multiple characters that would prompt multiple perspectives (beyond pro/con). My prediction here was that teachers and students would be able to fill

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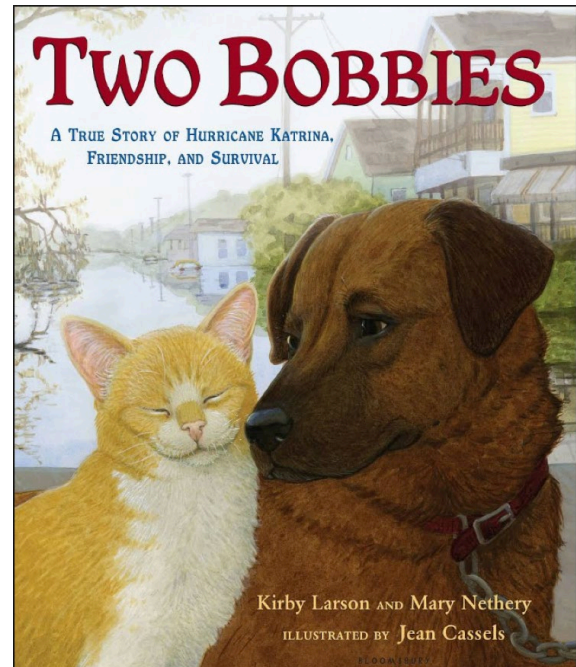
the round table chairs with characters from the story.

I settled on a book I met at a MAISA GELN Literacy Essentials conference, *Two Bobbies: A True Story of Hurricane Katrina, Friendship, and Survival* by Kirby Larson and Mary Nethery (2008). This book chronicles the journey of a dog, a cat, and the many individuals that play a part in helping them survive Hurricane Katrina. How could a bobbed-tail dog, Bobbi, and a tailless cat, Bob Cat, survive after Hurricane Katrina? Once chained to a porch, Bobbi breaks free, and then he and his friend, Bob Cat, must fend for themselves for months to survive. As the city starts to recover, Bobbi and Bob Cat wander upon a construction site where a kind-hearted worker, Rich, feeds the two strays and trims Bobbi's chain to a shorter length, leaving just enough to scrape the ground because Bob Cat likes to follow the chain. After a week, the foreman of the construction site confronts Rich and says the two strays must go. Rich entices the two into his truck with treats and takes them to a shelter set up in a former arcade. The two friends are initially separated, causing Bobbi to howl and pace the entire night. To preserve everyone's sanity, the workers make a pen where the two friends can be together. As the workers observe the two friends, however, they discover something important about one of the Bobbies, making the mission of finding a forever home even more important. One person in the story who steps into help is CNN's Anderson Cooper. He introduces Bobbi and Bob Cat to the world via his news show, hoping their forever family is watching. Hundreds of people contact CNN, but only one woman makes the trip to meet the Bobbies. Would she be their forever family? Would the Bobbies choose her?

This book was the perfect nonfiction text to use: a narrative nonfiction book that would appeal to young children and that would sound and feel familiar to them because of its story-like format. Additionally, the book is loaded with facts and information about post-Hurricane Katrina life. I'd showcase this text with multiple characters that would prompt a discussion around multiple perspectives. My prediction here was that teachers and students would be able to fill the round table chairs in the "Who's at the Table?" unit with characters from the story, each with their own perspective and impact on the other characters. This book offered:

- A perfect narrative nonfiction text
- Many perspectives
- An opportunity for in-depth conversation

Now to get started. I wanted to intentionally plan my teaching demo with the literacy essentials in mind. If I was going to coach teachers in using the literacy essentials, I needed to walk the walk. To shed light on the intentional



planning necessary, the literacy essentials treat read alouds as a teaching tool. The text is deliberately selected with the possibilities of many instructional opportunities, revisited many times throughout the week or unit of study. Some of the instructional opportunities might include developing tier 2 and tier 3 vocabulary, exploring how a character changes over time, determining a theme of the text, investigating the writing craft of the author, learning how a text builds the students' knowledge on a concept or subject, or using textual evidence in a classroom discussion, to name a few. These are the foundational skills for what is known as close reading in upper grades. This does not mean that all read alouds are used in this depth, but the literacy essentials are encouraging a shift from picking up a book with an appealing cover and reading it to the class to using read alouds as the instructional tools to address a multitude of standards.

I previewed the text, reading it from beginning to end. Yes, the story was riveting and would make a great read aloud (essential #2), it had tier 2 and tier 3 vocabulary to teach (essential #7, bullet #1), and it had opportunities for discussion (essential #2, bullet #4) (MAISA GELN, 2016). With the literacy essentials in mind, I knew I had made the right choice in text. Next, I needed to reread *Two Bobbies* to select vocabulary that might be unfamiliar to students. I made a list of vocabulary words and tried to come up with child-friendly definitions (literacy essential #2, bullet #3 and essential #7, bullet #2). In theory, this sounded easy, but I found it was harder than I thought. I wrote each word on a sticky note, with its child-friendly definition, and stuck it to the back

of the book for easy access. I had modeled the work needed prior to a read aloud, as well as provided samples of child-friendly definitions. I was on a roll!

Conversation is important to both C3WP and literacy essentials. So, with the vocabulary portion done, I needed to think about “Who’s at the Table?” and the type of question that would promote purposeful talk. Spending time with the two Bobbies again, I thought there could be in-depth discussion about which character did the **most** to save the two Bobbies in the story. There would be different opinions. There was textual evidence for the multiple possibilities. Yes, it would work.

What else would teachers need for their students to be successful in holding a productive, purposeful discussion? Sentence stems. The sentence stems needed to be big enough for the students and teachers to see from anywhere in the classroom to be used during class discussion. In addition, if I created them for the teachers, there was a greater chance the teachers would post them in the classroom as a discussion resource. So, I quickly created a set of sentence stems based on Graff and Birkenstein’s *They Say, I Say* (2014) and the Literacy Essentials videos (MAISA, 2016).

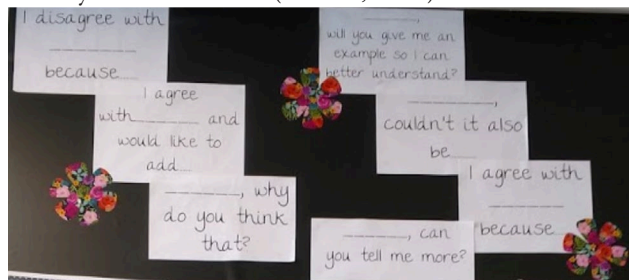


Figure 1: Discussion stems in one first grade classroom.

As I continued planning, I knew having the teachers use the sentence stems while having a conversation might feel contrived, but the PD session was a teaching demonstration, which meant their role was to be elementary students. I hoped that participating in a discussion using the sentence stems would give the teachers a glimpse of how it would look and sound in their classrooms.

Literacy essentials creators and NWP leaders believe writing instruction should happen every day, so I had to decide: What type of writing should teachers create? The C3WP materials feature Gretchen Bernabei’s kernel essay (2019), which is an introductory, structured writing task to help writers decide where they stand on a topic. If I asked them to write a kernel essay, what scaffolding would be needed? I created an anchor chart with the following sentence starters:

- **I think...**
- **I didn’t think about...OR I hadn’t considered...**
- **Now I think....OR I still think...but...**

I decided to reveal the sentence stems in three different parts of the lesson, so I taped black paper over the parts I wasn’t ready for them to see. This would be a very low-tech Vanna White-like reveal.

I was ready. I was prepared. Now, I just needed to wait.

The Teaching Demonstration

The day finally came. I was about to combine the principles of C3WP and Michigan’s literacy essentials into a teaching demonstration (a staple of the NWP’s Summer Institute, as previously indicated). To say I was nervous was an understatement. My fight or flight instincts were heightened, mostly because all of the participants were colleagues and friends. My goal was for teachers to see that the NWP’s C3WP resources could work in their classrooms, that the literacy essentials were good instructional practices, and that the C3WP and literacy essentials worked well together.

I “introduced” Bobbi and Bob Cat to my CC-C colleagues and friends by reading the book aloud, just as teachers do for their students in their own classroom. As I did, I sprinkled in the child-friendly definitions I had prepared on my sticky notes and had ready on the back of the book, just as the literacy essentials videos demonstrate (MAISA GELN, 2016). After the read aloud, the teachers pulled together a round table surrounded by empty chairs, in keeping with the central metaphor of the mini-unit, and then I asked teachers to identify the characters in the story. As they did, we invited the “guests” to the “Two Bobbies table” by putting place cards by the various chairs to represent the characters. After all of our “guests” were seated at the table, the teachers briefly discussed which of these characters metaphorically seated at the table did the MOST to save the two Bobbies.

Next, I introduced the sentence stem from C3WP’s kernel essay, *I think...*, and asked teachers to write a paragraph explaining their reasoning about who did the most to save the two Bobbies. Then it was time to share their writing and have a purposeful conversation using the sentence stems taped to the front of the room. At first, teachers agreed with the first character offered up as doing the most to save the two friends, adding other pertinent textual evidence. Then it happened: Someone identified a different character. When the “I disagree” sentence stem was used, the discussion became lively.

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There were “I agree with _____ and would like to add” and “I think it is _____ because...” They WERE the students. This was giving them a glimpse of what a classroom discussion could look like in their classrooms. I had them.

After this lively discussion, it was time to introduce the next part of the kernel essay, *I didn't think about...OR I hadn't considered...*, and continue the writing. Teachers immediately began writing feverishly because of the conversation in which they had just participated. The conversation had acted as an oral rehearsal, so it was easy for them to write to explain the new insight that resulted from listening to their colleagues' perspectives. As these stems suggest, they are designed to help students reflect upon and then reconsider their original thoughts regarding the topic at hand by taking into account a new perspective, one they hadn't originally considered. After the writing was complete, teachers once again had time to share their reflections and compare notes.

And then it was time for the final sentence stem: *Now I think...OR I still think...but...* By the time all of the teachers had completed their third sentence stem and shared their writing, the results were clear: Nearly everyone in the room had experienced a shift in their thinking. In some cases, the shift was subtle; however, in other cases, teachers had totally changed their mind because of the conversation we had that day.

Best of all, after the teaching demonstration, CC-C teachers had the time to brainstorm how they could utilize their current classroom resources to replicate the same mini-unit but with different texts and questions. Here are a few examples:

- Kindergarten teachers - The kindergarten teachers looked at their upcoming story, *Animal Babies in Grasslands* by Jennifer Schofield (2004). To enter an ongoing conversation on this topic, their students would read the book and watch videos about three different baby animals and then have a class conversation about which animal is their favorite and why.
- First grade teachers - The first grade team decided that they would use the “Who's at the Table?” activity with a basal story, “The Farmer in the Hat” by Pat Cummings (2007). The students would invite all of the characters to the table and decide who deserved to be the farmer in the school play, *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*.
- Second grade teachers - The second grade teachers also decided to use an upcoming basal story, *Turkey for Thanksgiving* by Eve Bunting (1995), by tying it to the CC-C character educational resource, *True-*

Success (2019). The November theme was gratitude, a concept students had studied through videos, images, and discussion. The question they decided to explore was which character in *Turkey for Thanksgiving* showed the most gratitude, substituting this text directly into the *Two Bobbies* teaching demonstration.

- Third grade teachers - The third grade team decided to use *Two Bobbies*, recreating the teaching demonstration in their classrooms.

Did I accomplish my goal? Did I show that C3WP and the literacy essentials work well together? I believe I did. The teachers were immersed in the principles and content of C3WP and the instructional practices of the literacy essentials (Table 1). I modeled how to intentionally plan and blend the two initiatives. And they made plans on how they could apply or adapt what they experienced that day.

What's Next?

As the implementation of the Two Bobbies teaching demonstration suggests, the Michigan literacy essentials K-3 align with the C3WP, which brings me to a wondering. Will NWP consider creating C3WP lessons specifically for lower elementary? I have witnessed elementary students participating in conversations where they are listening, agreeing/disagreeing, and giving evidence to support their thinking. With scaffolding and support, they are able to produce writing and participate in conversations that represent their thinking on issues. Lower elementary students need C3WP resources because they are able. They are able to have discussions. They are able to back up their thinking with text evidence. They are able to practice having civil conversations about issues that matter to them. Pairing the literacy essentials (MAISA, 2016) with the C3WP (NWP, 2019) will give them the opportunities to engage in argument where they are able.

Delia King worked her entire career at Carson City-Crystal Area Schools, spending most of her time with second graders. After retiring, she returned to Carson City as a literacy coach. She also is a teacher consultant for Chippewa River Writing Project.

| Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy (MAISA GELN) | College, Career, and Community Writers Program (NWP) |
|--|--|
| <p>Motivate and engage readers and writers through opportunities for students to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “see themselves as successful readers and writers;” • “make choices in reading and writing;” • “collaborate with peers in reading and writing;” • “read and write beyond being assigned or expected to do so...” | <p>Engage students in reading and writing practices through opportunities for students to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “build knowledge about a conversation focused on a single topic;” • “talk with each other about the strength of a text’s evidence for an argument;” • “respond to texts: agreeing or disagreeing.” |
| <p>Read aloud age-appropriate texts with opportunities for students to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • experience texts “that are thematically and conceptually related;” • hear appropriate fluency modeled; • engage in learning new words from a text; • participate in “higher-order discussion...before, during, and after reading;” • “build knowledge of the structure and features of text...” | <p>Introduce nonfiction sources with opportunities for students to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “explore text sets that represent multiple perspectives on a single topic, beyond pro and con;” • see the teacher’s “thinking and writing as a model;” • “talk with each other about the strength of a text’s evidence for an argument;” • “identify features of argument writing in the texts: claim, evidence, counterargument.” |
| <p>Provide daily writing opportunities that give students opportunities to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learn “writing processes and strategies, particularly those involving researching, planning, revising, and editing writing;” • “study models of and write a variety of texts for a variety of purposes and audiences...” | <p>Provide regular practice in reading and writing arguments with opportunities to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “write arguments routinely and informally;” • practice “creating, assessing and revising a line of reasoning in their writing to tie together claims and evidence;” • study “mentor texts to teach elements of argument writing.” |
| <p>Intentionally and ambitiously help students to build vocabulary and content knowledge with opportunities to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learn “word meanings... during reading and content area instruction;” • Talk with each other, “particularly during content area learning and during discussions of print or digital texts.” | <p>Help students to engage in arguments found in public conversations with opportunities to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “take risks, trying more sophisticated writing;” • participate in “productive peer response.” |

Table 1: Alignment of the College, Career, and Community Writers Program (NWP) with the Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy (MAISA GELN). The statements in Table 1 come directly from the two websites: the College, Career, and Community Writers Program (NWP) and the Essential Instructional Practices in Literacy (MAISA GELN).

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