READING THEMATICALLY RELATED TEXTS TO DEVELOP KNOWLEDGE AND COMPREHENSION

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One of the many reasons for reading is to learn about the world. What are some steps a teacher can take to make reading an engaging learning experience?

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to describe the logic for and approach to developing sets of thematically related texts. Themes are one component of the literacy intervention research we have conducted with intermediate-level struggling readers. After an overview of our research and a rationale for using thematically related texts, this paper includes examples of themes and details procedures we have found to be helpful in identifying and sequencing books within themes. These themes could be used to integrate another layer of learning with literacy instruction in intervention or general education settings.

Foundational Research

The Interactive Strategies Approach (ISA) is a comprehensive and responsive approach to early

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intervention for primary-grade students at risk for reading problems. In a series of studies, the ISA was found to significantly reduce the number of students experiencing reading problems, whether the intervention was delivered one-to-one (Vellutino et al., 1996), in small groups (Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, & Fanuele, 2006), or by classroom teachers who participated in ISA professional development (Scanlon, Gelzheiser, Vellutino, Schatschneider, & Sweeney, 2008). Moreover, the majority of children who received the ISA intervention maintained their status as average readers for several years after the intervention had ended (Vellutino, Scanlon, Sipay, et al., 1996; Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, & Fanuele, 2006).

The ISA provides beginning and struggling literacy learners with guidance and support in learning to use both code- and meaning-based strategies for word identification in order to help them build the extensive sight vocabulary necessary for reading comprehension. ISA instruction addresses the development of foundational skills as well as meaning construction, knowledge development, motivation for reading, and the development of vocabulary and other language skills. Teachers interested in learning more about ISA instruction can consult Scanlon, Anderson, and Sweeney (2010) or Vellutino and Scanlon (2002).

What is it like to be a reader with limited background knowledge? Read this passage, then answer the comprehension questions without looking back.

In June, Finean General John Moats left Alteria, Umberland, for Anthan, South Costain. The Gamrians wanted to separate the New Daris colonies so that they would not be able to help each other. Moats planned to attack from the north, and General Selnick would attack from the south. They hoped to trap the Cooperative Army in between. The orders did not reach General Selnick in time, however, and he did not move his army into position. The plan failed.

- Name the two sides of the conflict.
- Who were some of the individuals influential in planning the attack?
- Why did the plan fail?

Following the success of the ISA with younger readers, we sought to extend the intervention to struggling readers at the intermediate level (grades 3–7) and thus developed the Interactive Strategies Approach-Extended (ISA-X). Like the ISA, the ISA-X includes attention to meaning construction, knowledge development, motivation for reading, and vocabulary. The ISA-X responds to the varied needs of struggling readers. For all students, emphasis is placed on active engagement in meaning making while reading. For those whose limited sight vocabulary impairs comprehension, word identification strategy and foundational skills instruction is provided. For struggling readers whose accuracy is at or near grade level, instruction focuses on engagement in meaning construction and comprehension-repair strategies.

Research on one-to-one ISA-X intervention found it to significantly enhance reading accuracy, reading comprehension, and content knowledge among struggling readers from high-poverty schools (Gelzheiser, Scanlon, Vellutino, Hallgren-Flynn, & Schatschneider, 2011). We are currently conducting research using the ISA-X in small groups. Teachers interested in learning more about ISA-X instruction can consult Gelzheiser et al. (2011) and Gelzheiser, Scanlon, and Hallgren-Flynn (2010).

Knowledge Development: A Rationale for Thematically Related Texts

In previous research with intermediate-grade struggling readers (Gelzheiser, 2005), we became aware that a limited knowledge base is one cause of these readers' poor comprehension. The acquisition of vocabulary and knowledge is highly dependent upon reading (Stanovich, 2008). Students who avoid reading because of reading difficulties often fall further and further behind in their content knowledge and thus find reading even more challenging; differences in readers' knowledge and vocabulary produce "rich-get-richer and poor-get-poorer patterns of reading achievement" (Stanovich, 2008, p. 23).

Concern for readers' limited knowledge base led us to use our state's science and social studies standards in selecting books for reading instruction. We realized that if students read books organized into content themes, the ISA-X intervention could allow students to grow as readers and, at the same time, develop their knowledge base. Every ISA-X session begins with a minilesson that addresses a reading skill or strategy determined by the learners' needs; students then read and

Pause and Ponder

- Does your reading instruction provide students with sufficient opportunity to develop knowledge in the content areas? If not, what might you do to address that?
- Are there content themes from which your readers could benefit in terms of reading and knowledge?

discuss thematically related texts. These texts provide opportunities for students to practice foundational skills or word identification and comprehension-fostering strategies and to engage with the content and build knowledge and vocabulary. Sessions end with students reflecting, in writing, on what they learned or enjoyed as a reader that day.

In the ISA-X, students read multiple books on a single topic, because new concepts are formed with repeated but varied exposure to an idea (Clark, 1983). While a single exposure to an idea (e.g., that cities are often built near rivers) is unlikely to develop students' knowledge, a set of texts related to rivers provides students with repeated and varied exposure to knowledge that will anchor an understanding of the relationship between rivers and cities.

Reading multiple books organized into content themes is consistent with the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2012). The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for grades K–5 are designed to develop readers with strong content knowledge and so recommend that students read books selected to form "themes that systematically develop the knowledge base" (Standard 10) and that are closely aligned with critical concepts in the curriculum. Further, the CCSS suggest that these themes include an "adequate number of titles on a single topic that would allow children to study that topic for a sustained period" (Standard 10).

Video recordings of students and teachers in our research show them to be enthusiastic about literacy instruction that integrates knowledge development. As students acquire knowledge, they better understand what they are reading and become more engaged in the reading process. And as less confident students acquire knowledge, even they are more likely to have something to say during discussion. Classroom and intervention teachers respond to more knowledgeable, engaged, and motivated readers with enthusiasm and enjoyment, starting a positive cycle of interaction.

Simpler Texts to Develop Self-Efficacy: Learning That "As a Reader, I Can Learn New Information"

For most teachers, planning a reading lesson begins by previewing the text in order to identify critical vocabulary and background knowledge and deciding how to teach or activate this knowledge. This approach can encourage students to view the teacher as the expert source of knowledge and to see themselves as dependent upon the teacher for understanding.

In contrast, ISA-X themes are organized to teach students that *reading* is an enjoyable way to independently develop knowledge. Students first read simple informational texts, often with one sentence and a photograph or illustration on each page. Although some readers may initially perceive simpler texts as "babyish," simpler texts are presented as learning tools whose illustrations and straightforward presentation support knowledge development. And, because multiple simpler texts might be read in a given lesson, students soon recognize how much information they provide. Simpler texts are followed by more challenging text on the same topic in order to provide ample experience with the critical ideas and vocabulary related to the theme. ISA-X teachers *avoid* teaching content knowledge in order to allow more time for reading and to reinforce the idea that reading allows learning. Instead, the teacher might direct students to read to learn about a particular topic or to read and share "wow facts." As students see themselves as capable of independently learning by reading and discussing texts, their self-efficacy as readers is enhanced.

Table 1 lists some simpler informational and fictional books that allow struggling readers to independently read to learn about bees. Bees are an excellent example of animal adaptations, and reading about them provides a basis for understanding the concept from the NGSS Lead States (2013) that "being part of a group helps animals to obtain food, defend themselves, and cope with changes" (p. 23). Many students and teachers have limited

What is it like to be a reader with greater background knowledge? Read this passage, then answer the comprehension questions without looking back.

In June 1777, British General John Burgoyne left Quebec, Canada, for Albany, New York. The British wanted to separate the New England colonies so that they would not be able to help each other. Burgoyne planned to attack from the north, and General Howe would attack from the south. They hoped to trap the Continental Army in between. The orders did not reach General Howe in time, however, and he did not move his army into position. The plan failed.

From Smolinski, D. (2002), p. 16.

- Name the two sides of the conflict.
- Who were some of the individuals influential in planning the attack?
- Why did the plan fail?

Table 1 Books That Allow Struggling Readers to Build Knowledge About Bees

Reference and Guided Reading Level	Content
Schaefer, L. (1999). *Honey bees and hives.* Mankato, MN: Capstone Press. (E)	This informational text explains that bees live in hives that have a honeycomb structure. Bees store pollen, make honey, and lay eggs in the hive. Two bee jobs, feeding the young and guarding the hive, are introduced.
Tagliaferro, L. (2004). *Bees and their hives.* Mankato, MN: Capstone Press. (I)	This informational text explains that bees build hives made of wax, which is shaped into cells that make up the honeycomb. The queen lays eggs in the cells; when the eggs hatch, worker bees feed the young. Guard bees protect the hive.
Dickmann, N. (2010). *A bee's life.* Chicago, IL: Heinemann Library. (I)	This informational text focuses on the bee life cycle. The queen lays eggs in cells; larva hatch from the eggs. Other bees feed the larva, which then turn into bees. Some larva turn into worker bees, who get food and make honey for the hive. Others become drones, and one becomes the queen.
Giles, J. (2000). *Speedy bee.* Austin, TX: Harcourt Achieve. (D)	The fictional baby bees in this text are hungry. A worker bee visits flowers to get food for the baby bees.
Giles, J. (2007). *Speedy bee's dance.* Austin, TX: Harcourt Achieve. (E)	In this fictional text, a worker bee communicates the location of flowers to other bees by dancing. Then lots of worker bees visit flowers to get food for the hungry baby bees.
Randell, B. (1994). *Honey for baby bear.* Austin, TX: Harcourt Achieve. (F)	This fictional text explains that bees make honey and introduces the idea that animals steal honey from bees.
Giles, J. (2000) *Little Chimp and the bees.* Austin, TX: Harcourt Achieve. (F)	In this fictional text, guard bees attempt to protect their honey from animals who steal it.
Barraclough, S. (2005). *Bees.* Chicago, IL: Raintree. (K)	This informational text details the parts of a bee's body and notes some bee jobs. It also points out that there are many different kinds of bees. This book can be used to introduce the idea of adaptations that bees have.

Note. Books are listed in the order in which they are typically read.

knowledge about bees, and reading about them provides a genuine opportunity to learn new and interesting knowledge.

Multiple Texts to Develop Knowledge That Supports Reading

After reading some or all of the books in Table 1, the process of reading and learning can continue with other, increasingly more challenging informational and fictional texts about bees. Selected examples are listed in Table 2. These texts provide the reader with many opportunities to practice both generally useful vocabulary (e.g., *honey*, *egg*, *hatch*, *queen*, *worker*, *guard*) and scientific terminology (e.g., *pollen*, *comb*, *cell*). They provide repeated exposure to major science concepts (e.g., animals depend on plants for food) as well as specific facts about bees.

As students read their fifth, sixth, and seventh texts on bees, familiarity with critical vocabulary and concepts begins to provide support for their reading. Knowledge allows struggling readers to read with greater confidence, fluency, and comprehension; it also provides contextual support that assists them in identifying and learning unfamiliar words. As knowledgeable readers, they can experience success in more challenging text, as advocated by the Common Core State Standards.

Using Narrow Topics to Quickly Develop Knowledge That Supports Reading

We have found that the fastest way to develop knowledge that will support reading is to organize mini-themes that are focused and repetitive, with a small set of vocabulary and ideas. We identify narrow or mini-themes by looking for more specific ideas within a larger topic. For example, mini-themes within Colonial America include colonial homes, food, clothing, and jobs.

When a topic is narrow, there may be few books about only that topic, and only portions of more general informational texts will be relevant to the topic. This focus provides readers with a genuine reason to learn to use a table of contents and headings and to practice using text features to find relevant information. In a mini-theme, readers can gain experience sampling from informational texts in order to acquire information related to specific purposes or questions, instead of reading informational text from cover to cover.

Table 3 summarizes how students read about colonial homes in multiple texts, then about colonial clothing. For each topic, relevant sections of longer informational texts are read. Students' knowledge of clothing and houses supports them as they read a challenging culminating text.

Table 2 Books That Encourage Readers to Continue to Learn About Bees

Reference and Guided Reading Level	Content
Haydon, J. (2004). *Facts about honeybees.* Austin, TX: Harcourt Achieve. (J)	This informational text has short chapters that address different topics. Some describe the bee's body parts and variations among bees. Others describe the processes of getting nectar and pollen from flowers. It is explained that when bees collect pollen from flowers, they also help the plant to make seeds and reproduce. Different bee jobs are described, and it is pointed out that the colony works together to survive. Because the chapters are very simple, students can practice looking for specific information in this text.
Ashley, S. (2004). *Bees*. Pleasantville, NY: Gareth Stevens Publishing. (I)	This informational text is written in narrative form, without a chapter structure. It covers many topics: parts of a bee, the processes of getting nectar and pollen from flowers, different bee jobs, the bee life cycle, and the structure of the hive. This text is best used when students have some of this knowledge but are still acquiring some of it.
Milton, J. (2003). *Honeybees.* New York, NY: Penguin Books. (K)	This informational text is written in narrative form, without a chapter structure. It covers many topics: parts of a bee, the processes of getting nectar and pollen from flowers, communicating via dance, different bee jobs, the bee life cycle, the structure of the hive, and how a new hive is formed. This accessible text provides more of an explanation of each topic than many of the other texts and so will allow students to continue to build their knowledge.
Allen, J. & Humphries, T. (2000). *Are you a bee?* New York, NY: Macmillan. (N)	This fictional text focuses on what your life would be like if you were a bee. You would have wings, pollen baskets, and thousands of sisters. Where you would live, the jobs you would do, and adaptations that allow your hive to survive are described. This book provides a unique perspective on bee life.
Mortensen, L. (2009). *In the trees, honey bees.* Nevada City, CA: Dawn Publications. (P)	This text alternates between poetry and information about bees. Many of the illustrations are from the point of view of a bee. The book discusses the processes of getting nectar and pollen from flowers and the bee life cycle. Bee jobs are described in detail. Additional information is provided in an author's note. The poem and illustrations provide a unique environment for learning about bees.

Note. Books are listed in the order in which they are typically read.

Table 3 Protection From the Elements in Colonial Times

Reference and Guided Reading Level	
	Houses
Yates, V. (2008). *Buildings then and now.* Chicago, IL: Heinemann Library. (H)	This informational text introduces the idea that the materials, tools, and parts of houses have changed over time.
Thomas, M. (2002). *Homes in colonial America*. New York, NY: Scholastic. (F)	This informational text describes the features of colonial-era homes, including materials, furniture, heating, and lighting.
Isaacs, S. (2001). *Life in a colonial town*. Chicago, IL: Heinemann Library. (O) Houses chapter	This chapter provides more detailed information about colonial homes, including materials, furniture, heating, lighting, and plumbing.
McGovern, A. (1964). *If you lived in colonial times*. New York, NY: Scholastic. (Q) pp. 42–47	On these pages, the reader can find more detailed information about colonial homes, including furniture, rooms, heating, and plumbing.
	Clothing
Thomas, M. (2002). *Clothes in colonial America*. New York, NY: Scholastic. (F)	This informational text describes the types of clothes the colonists wore, including breeches, frock coats, shoes, dresses, and pudding caps.
Isaacs, S. (2001). *Life in a colonial town*. Chicago, IL: Heinemann Library. (O) Clothes and Shoes, Making Clothes chapters	One chapter describes what the colonists wore: dresses, aprons, hats, breeches, stockings, shoes, and jackets. The other describes the process of making clothes and wigs. Wool is cut from sheep, dyed, carded, spun into thread, woven into cloth, and then sewn into clothing. Tools used to make clothes include a spinning wheel, loom, and needles.
McGovern, A. (1964). *If you lived in colonial times*. New York, NY: Scholastic. pp. 9–12 (Q)	These pages provide information about what colonists wore: dresses, hats, cloaks, hoods, breeches, stockings, shoes, jackets, and wigs. They also describe how these clothes were made. Wool is cut from sheep, dyed, carded, spun into thread, woven into cloth, and then sewn into clothing. Some clothes were knitted. Tools used to make clothes include a spinning wheel and loom.
	Culminating Text
Cocca-Leffler, M. (2007). *Spotlight on Stacey*. New York, NY: Kane Press. (M)	This mixed-genre text features contemporary fiction with numerous factual text inserts. Stacey learns about colonial life in preparation for the class play and uses her knowledge to save the play when a problem arises. Stacey learns about the colonists' clothes (hats, skirt, shoes, breeches, and wigs). She talks to a girl making yarn at a spinning wheel. A text insert shows the process of and tools used in shearing, carding, spinning, dying, weaving, and sewing a skirt. Stacey goes inside a colonial house and learns about rooms, lighting, plumbing, and heating.

Note. Books are listed in the order in which they are typically read.

Table 4 provides another example of narrow topics featuring the events leading up to the American Revolution. Students read only the portions of Paul Revere's biographies and the informational texts that pertain to the Boston Tea Party. Once this topic has been fully developed, students return to the same biographies and informational texts to read about the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

Developing Knowledge to Support the Reading of a Culminating Text

In planning a sequence of thematically related texts, we identify one or more "culminating texts." Typically, these are quality works of fiction (picture books, chapter books, or graphic novels) that assume that the reader will have background knowledge related to the theme. After determining the knowledge that is useful for readers to have for reading the culminating text (see examples below), easier texts are selected that allow readers to develop this knowledge by reading. The goal of this process is to foster knowledgeable readers who can read texts that are more challenging than the texts they would be able to read without such preparation.

If there is more than one culminating text option, teachers are encouraged to engage students in selecting the text so as to increase their motivation for reading and learning about the topic (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). For example, from a set of books about the Statue of Liberty, teachers and students can choose between two culminating texts: *The Copper Lady* (Ross & Ross, 1997) or *A Picnic in October* (Bunting, 1999).

The Copper Lady (Ross & Ross, 1997) is historical fiction that draws upon knowledge of when, how, and why the Statue of Liberty was constructed and how the statue got to America. It also requires the reader to be familiar with the statue as a symbol of freedom to immigrants.

A Picnic in October (Bunting, 1999) is contemporary fiction that assumes knowledge of how and why visitors go to see the statue on an island in New York Harbor and requires the reader to understand the significance of the statue to immigrants. Readers who are familiar with the 100th birthday celebration that was held for the Statue of Liberty may be able to predict whose birthday is being celebrated in this book.

Table 5 provides lists of texts used to prepare readers to read and understand *The Copper Lady* or *A Picnic in October.* Teachers can select texts or chapters (or engage students in selecting texts) that will best prepare students for the culminating text.

As students read and discuss multiple informational texts about the Statue of Liberty, they repeatedly encounter information about the symbolism of the statue and its parts as well as the particular importance of the statue to immigrants arriving in the United States. Depending on the culminating text chosen, students will also repeatedly read about how the Statue was constructed or its location on Liberty Island in New York Harbor, which is reached by ferry. Repeated exposure to the ideas and vocabulary allows students to develop an understanding of these abstract concepts and to practice reading and using vocabulary essential to comprehending the culminating text (e.g., *copper, harbor, symbol, liberty*).

"Repeated exposure to the ideas and vocabulary allows students to develop an understanding of these abstract concepts."

As students develop this background knowledge "gradually and seamlessly, they will find themselves ready for texts of increasingly greater depth and complexity," (Adams, 2009, p. 184). Recently, a small group of students read *The Copper Lady* (Ross & Ross, 1997). As they studied the cover, they independently asked well-informed questions ("I wonder if the story will take place in France or America?") and noted reasonable evidence ("Those look like the crates used to ship the parts of the statue to America, so I think the story takes place in France"). Students read with fluency multisyllable words like *freedom, copper,* and *pedestal.* They understood with little effort why the statue was so important to the protagonist: it is a symbol of a better life. Students used the knowledge they had developed while reading earlier texts to support the comprehension of a more complex and challenging text.

"Students used the knowledge they had developed while reading earlier texts to support the comprehension of a more complex and challenging text."

Table 4 Events Leading to the American Revolution

Reference and Guided Reading Level	
	Boston Tea Party
Winter, J. (2003*). Paul Revere and the bell ringers*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing. (O)	In this biographical sketch, readers learn where and when Paul Revere lived. Paul and his friends form a club. The club's rules and contract afford Paul both freedom and responsibility. As an adult, these values continued to be important to him as a Patriot.
Trumbauer, L. (2004). *Paul Revere*. Mankato, MN: Capstone Press. (K) pp. 1–17	This biography presents a timeline of Paul Revere's life. It describes his work and family, and how colonists were unhappy with British taxes. These pages describe how Paul Revere helped to plan the Boston Tea Party and told other colonists about it.
Longfellow, H. W. (1990*). Paul Revere's ride.* New York, NY: Penguin Books. (R) pp. 1–15	This biography compares what Patriots like Paul Revere wanted with what the British king wanted. Paul's activities as a Patriot, including the Boston Tea Party and the king's response, are described on these pages.
Corey, S. (2004). *Paul Revere's ride*. New York, NY: Random House. (N) pp. 1–18	In this biography, Paul Revere is described as a silversmith and member of the Sons of Liberty. This section of the text describes how the Patriots responded to the taxes imposed by the king, including the Boston Tea Party.
Adler, D. A. (1995). *A picture book of Paul Revere*. New York, NY: Holiday House. (M)pp. 1–18	This is another, more detailed biography that provides more information about Paul Revere's family and work. In addition to describing his participation in the Sons of Liberty, the initial pages in this book describe the Boston Massacre and Paul's involvement in using this incident to increase resentment of the British. The Boston Tea Party is detailed.
Osborne, M. P., & Boyce, N. P. (2004). *American revolution: A nonfiction companion to Revolutionary War on Wednesday*. New York, NY: Random House. (N) Chapter 3	This chapter from one of the Magic Tree House Research Guides describes the colonists' resentment of British-imposed taxes and the role of the Sons of Liberty and the Boston Massacre in protesting these. The Boston Tea Party is described as another tax protest. Interestingly, Paul Revere is mentioned only for his role in printing an illustration of the Boston Massacre.
Edwards, P. D. (2001). *Boston Tea Party*. New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons. (T)	This engaging text uses poetry and commentary by a cast of British and Patriot mice for a unique presentation of information about the Boston Tea Party. It includes the king's need to tax and the resentment by colonists, including the Sons of Liberty. The book goes on to describe the war and the United States' current independence.
	Culminating Text Following the Books on the Tea Party
Gunderson, J. (2008). *Ropes of revolution*. Minneapolis, MN: Stone Arch Books. (Q)	This text is historical fiction and alternates between traditional and graphic formats. Benjamin and his friend Joseph are apprentices who secretly listen to the Sons of Liberty plan the Boston Tea Party. Ben's master is a Loyalist who tries to prevent Ben from joining the event. Will Ben be able to help? And if he does, will his master punish him?
	Battles of Lexington and Concord
Trumbauer, L. (2004). *Paul Revere*. Mankato, MN: Capstone Press. (K) pp. 19–21	In this part of the biography, Paul Revere warns the Patriots that the British are coming so that they are prepared to fight. Eventually, the Patriots win the war, and Paul is remembered for this ride.
Longfellow, H. W. (1990). *Paul Revere's ride*. New York, NY: Penguin Books. (R) pp. 16–29	In this part of the biography, the king is looking for hidden Patriots and guns. Paul rides in the dark to wake people up, to warn the Patriot leaders to hide themselves and the guns. Paul is captured, but not the guns, and the war begins. Paul serves in the war and is remembered for his ride.
Corey, S. (2004). *Paul Revere's ride*. New York, NY: Random House. (N) pp. 18–39	In this part of the biography, Redcoats are looking for hidden Patriot leaders. Paul and a friend use a system of lanterns to communicate which way the Redcoats will travel. Paul is successful at warning the leaders and at hiding important papers. He is captured by the British but released. The war begins.
Adler, D. A. (1995). *A picture book of Paul Revere*. New York, NY: Holiday House. (M)pp. 19 to end	In this part of the biography, the British plan to attack Patriots. Paul and a friend use a system of lanterns to communicate which way the Redcoats will travel. Paul and two others ride to warn the Patriots. Paul is captured and released, but only his friend is able to warn the Patriots. The war begins; the colonies declare themselves free. Paul serves in the war and makes cannons and gunpowder. He is remembered as a Patriot who helped his country.
Benchley, N. (1969). *Sam the minuteman*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers. (J)	Church bells wake Sam and his father at the start of this historical fiction text. Paul Revere has warned that the British are coming their way. Sam and his father go to the village green. Sam's friend explains that the British are coming after hidden Patriot guns and gunpowder. Although the Minutemen are not successful in keeping the British from going to Concord, they are more successful when the British return. The war begins.
Benchley, N. (1977). *George the drummer boy*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers. (K)	In this historical fiction text, George is a drummer in the British army. A British commander decides to capture Patriot cannons and gunpowder. George's company crosses the river at night. George sees signal lights and hears warning church bells and horses in the distance. The British soldiers fight in Lexington and Concord but do not find the cannons or gunpowder; they go back to Boston. The war begins.
Osborne, M. P., & Boyce, N. P. (2004). *American Revolution: A nonfiction companion to Revolutionary War on Wednesday*. New York, NY: Random House. (N) Chapter 4	This chapter explains that the colonists were beginning to gather weapons and train for war. British soldiers set off for Concord to capture hidden weapons. A system of lanterns is used to communicate which way the Redcoats will travel. Paul Revere's two friends ride to warn the Patriots. Paul is captured and released, but only his friends are able to warn the Patriots. Although the Minutemen are not successful in keeping the British from going to Concord, they are more successful when the British return. The war begins.
	Culminating Text Following the Books on Lexington and Concord
Gunderson, J. (2009). *Secret weapons*. Minneapolis, MN: Stone Arch Books. (M)	This half-graphic work of historical fiction begins with Will and Daniel pretending to practice for the militia while the real militia practices on the village green. When Daniel returns to work in his father's blacksmith shop, he notices the storeroom is locked. That night, Paul Revere wakes Daniel with his call that the British are coming. When Daniel joins his father at the blacksmith shop, he is asked to help with a secret mission.

Note. Books are listed in the order in which they are typically read.

Table 5 Developing Knowledge About the Statue of Liberty for Different Culminating Texts

Reference and Guided Reading Level	Concepts Relevant to Both Culminating Texts	Concepts Relevant to Bunting, E. (1999). *A picnic in October*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc.	Concepts Relevant to Ross, A., & Ross, K. (1997). *The copper lady*. Minneapolis, MN: Millbrook Press.
Eldridge, A., & Eldridge, S. (2012). *The Statue of Liberty: An American symbol*. Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers, Inc. (B)	The statue is a symbol of freedom and of America.	The statue is located on an island in New York and is often seen from a boat. A ferry is shown in one photograph.	The statue is large and made of metal.
Douglas, L. G. (2003). *The Statue of Liberty*. New York, NY: Children's Press. (F)	The statue is a symbol, and different parts of the statue symbolize different aspects of freedom.	The statue is located near New York City. Photographs show its location on an island and people looking at it from a boat. People visit the statue.	The statue was a gift that was made in the 1800s in France.
Harris, N. (2008). *The Statue of Liberty*. Chicago, IL: Heinemann Library. (I)	The statue is a symbol, and different parts of the statue symbolize different aspects of freedom.	The statue is located in New York City.	The statue was a gift from France in the 1800s.
Bauer, M.D. (2007). *The Statue of Liberty*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing. (K)	The statue is a reminder of freedom.	The statue is located in New York Harbor and is still a reminder of freedom.	The large statue was made from copper wrapped around steel. It was created in the 1800s by a French sculptor, Bartholdi, as a gift from France. It was shipped in parts and re-assembled.
Behrens, J. (2009). *What is the Statue of Liberty?* New York, NY: Children's Press. (J)	Immigrants came to the United States for freedom.	The statue is located on Liberty Island in the Hudson River, near New York City. When people came to the United States for freedom, they often traveled by boat, and the statue was one of the first things they saw. Visitors today come by boat to see the statue.	The statue was built in France, taken apart, and shipped in boxes. It is made of copper around an iron structure. The book reports that the statue is 120 years old.
Penner, L. R. (1995). *The Statue of Liberty*. New York, NY: Random House. (L)	The statue symbolizes freedom, especially to immigrants.	The statue stands in New York Harbor. Immigrants saw it as they first arrived by ship in the United States. The statue is still a symbol today.	The statue was made in the 1800s by a Frenchman, Bartholdi, in very large pieces. It was so large that he needed to have many workers helping him. Once completed, the statue was taken apart, packed in crates, and shipped to New York.
Binns, T. B. (2001). *The Statue of Liberty*. Chicago, IL: Heinemann Library. (K)	The statue is a symbol of freedom; the parts symbolize different aspects of freedom. The statue was especially important to immigrants.	The statue is located on Liberty Island near New York City. People now take a ferry from New York City to Liberty Island to visit the statue. A big celebration was held on Liberty's 100th birthday.	The statue was a gift from France more than 100 years ago. Bartholdi designed a giant sculpture that was built by hammering copper into molds. An iron frame supported the statue. When it was complete, the statue was taken apart, packed in crates, and shipped to New York.
Braithwaite, J. (2011). *The Statue of Liberty*. Minneapolis, MN: Learner Publications Company. (J)	The statue stands for freedom and was especially important to immigrants.	The statue is located on an island in the harbor of New York City. It was seen by immigrants when they arrived by ship. Visitors now must take a ferry across the harbor. A big celebration was held on Liberty's 100th birthday. The statue is still a symbol.	The statue was built by Bartholdi in the 1800s. Workers in France hammered copper sheets to make the statue; these were then attached to an iron frame. The statue was taken apart and shipped to the United States.

Note. Books are listed in the order in which they are typically read.

Develop Genre Knowledge Through Thematically Related Texts

Another advantage of reading multiple texts on a related topic is that students often encounter multiple examples of one genre; they may also encounter the same information presented in several different genres. These positive and negative examples of the genre allow students to develop their concept of the genre, which is useful because the genre provides a schema to support comprehension and students' writing. Thus, for each theme, we find it useful to identify a "focal genre" and to draw students' attention to that genre.

In the Statue of Liberty theme described above, students read multiple informational texts and repeatedly encounter opportunities to use tables of contents, headings, bold print, glossaries, labels, and captions. They encounter text feature variations (e.g., informational texts may have picture glossaries, text glossaries, or no glossary). When students read fictional works that include the Statue of Liberty, the purpose and features of these fictional texts can be contrasted with the purpose and features of informational text.

As another example, in a theme about Native Americans of New York state, students read informational text about the Iroquois and Algonquian Indians and multiple examples of Iroquois and Algonquian folktales (see Table 6). These help students to develop a schema for folktales. This schema supports comprehension, as readers know to expect exaggerations, creatures with

"Genre provides a schema to support comprehension and students' writing."

Table 6 Iroquois and Algonquian Folktales

Reference and Guided Reading Level	
	Explanatory Folktales
Lynch, P. (1996). *The night sky*. Parsippany, NJ: Modern Curriculum Press. (G)	This explanatory folktale begins by introducing the idea that long ago, people told stories to explain the stars they saw in the sky. One story, retold in this book, tells the origin of a constellation.
Tchin (1997). *Rabbit's wish for snow*. New York, NY: Scholastic. (K)	This Native American explanatory folktale is a retelling of how rabbits came to look the way they do today. Rabbit wishes for snow so hard that it snows during the warm weather. Rabbit fails to anticipate all the consequences of getting the snow that he wishes for.
Bruchac, J., & Bruchac, J. (2012). *Rabbit's snow dance*. New York, NY: Penguin Books. (L)	This is another retelling of a Native American folktale about how rabbits came to look the way they do today. Rabbit is successful in getting the snow that he wishes for, but complications arise.
Bruchac, J., & Bruchac, J. (2001). *How Chipmunk got his stripes*. New York, NY: Penguin Books. (L)	In this explanatory folktale, Bear brags, and Brown Squirrel challenges him and does not listen to his grandmother's advice about teasing. When Bear gets angry, Brown Squirrel is changed forever.
Bruchac, J., & Bruchac, J. (2004). *Raccoon's last race*. New York, NY: Penguin Books. (K)	Raccoon is changed by his race in this explanatory folktale. His failure to respect the capabilities of a rock and of ants has consequences that are not to his benefit.
	Folktales About Resourcefulness
Floyd, L. (2000). *Rabbit and Turtle go to school*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc. (E)	In this version of the folktale, Rabbit and Turtle race on the way to school.
McLenighan, V. (1981). *Turtle and Rabbit*. Cleveland, OH: Modern Curriculum Press. (F)	In this version of the folktale, Rabbit and Turtle race through town to see who will pay for dinner.
Williams, R. (2005). *Slow and steady wins the race*. Huntington Beach, CA: Creative Teaching Press. (K)	In this version of the folktale, Rabbit encounters many distractions in town during the race.
Giles, J. (1998). *The hare and the tortoise*. Austin, TX: Harcourt Achieve, Inc. (K)	This version of the folktale includes a play. Rabbit encounters many distractions in the meadow during the race.
Leonhardt, A. (n.d.). *Turtle's big race*. Orlando, FL: Steck-Vaughn. (I)	Turtle wakes to find that Beaver is changing the pond. In this Native American folktale, the animals race to determine who will control the pond. Guess who wins?
Bruchac, J., & Bruchac, J. (2003). *Turtle's race with Beaver*. New York, NY: Penguin Books. (J)	Turtle wakes to find that Beaver is changing the pond. In this Native American folktale, the animals race to determine who will control the pond. Does Beaver learn a lesson?
Orme, D., & Gordon, M. (2004). *The thirsty moose*. Columbus, OH: School Specialty Publishing. (H)	This story is a retelling of a Native American folktale about a clever fly who outwits the more powerful Moose.
Ehlert, L. (1994). *Mole's hill*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company. (J)	In this Native American folktale, Mole must outwit Fox, Skunk, and Raccoon.

Note. Books are listed in the order in which they are typically read.

TAKE ACTION!

Develop Your Own Content Themes for Struggling Readers

Use Your State Standards and Resources to Identify Themes and Books

- Consult your state's science and social studies standards to identify potential topics.
- From the potential topics, look for topics for which there exists a sufficient number of easy-to-read books to develop useful background knowledge to support comprehension.
- To find books and determine their difficulty levels, consult the websites Titlewave (www.titlewave.com) and Kansas Book Connect (www.kansasbookconnect.com). These resources for librarians allow you to search books by topic. Titlewave is restricted to books in print, while Kansas Book Connect also lists out-of-print books. Both sites list books in order of difficulty, combining several different readability formulae to estimate difficulty.
- Also consult the catalogs of publishers who feature easy-to-read informational texts; for example, Capstone, Rosen, Rigby, National Geographic School Publishing, and Lerner.
- Check whether the book can be previewed at Google Books (books.google.com). Many of the publisher websites provide direct links to a book preview site.

Put Books in Order

- Start with informational text, because this is the fastest way to develop readers' knowledge base.
- Consider sequencing the informational texts according to how they develop ideas (as we have done in Tables 1–6), rather than by using an assigned reading level.
- Read texts that provide more detail after texts that introduce concepts in a more general way.

Design a Set of Books That Includes a Culminating Text

- Once you are comfortable with collecting groups of books related to a topic, design a theme with a culminating text.
- Start by reading the culminating text(s) you are considering.
- Select a culminating text that is likely to engage your readers and presents opportunities to teach critical literacy concepts.
- Generate a list of knowledge that will assist readers in understanding this text.
- Select easier texts that provide students with repeated exposure to these ideas.

Create Cost-Effective Themes With a Small Budget

- Look at informational texts available in your book room and consider how these texts relate to the science and social studies standards in your state. For example, almost any animal for which multiple titles are available could be used in a theme about animal adaptations.
- Look carefully at your collection of challenging picture books and short chapter books. What science and social studies knowledge is required to understand these texts? Can you develop a theme related to this knowledge?
- Develop a theme by selecting informational texts that provide repeated exposure to an idea that is central to a chapter book. For example, a favorite chapter book for struggling readers, *Bears on Hemlock Mountain* (Dalgliesh, 1952), includes relatively few characters, lots of repeated language, and great suspense as to whether the black bears have come out of hibernation. We created a theme by supplementing the novel with informational texts that describe hibernation among black bears.
- Select a chapter book that has a companion informational text, such as some of the Magic Tree House series.
- Look for books that will support multiple themes. For example, books about pandas can help students to develop knowledge about China or knowledge of how endangerment occurs if an animal is adapted to a specific and shrinking habitat.

extraordinary powers, and/or marvelous events in a folktale, as compared to expecting to find facts in informational text.

This set of related texts includes folktales which presents the Native American explanation for various things. The examples by Joseph Bruchac and James Bruchac (*Rabbit's Snow Dance, How Chipmunk Got His Stripes, Raccoon's Last Race*) are always on our readers' favorite books lists. A second set of folktales teaches lessons about the value of persistence through less powerful animals or people who succeed using their cleverness, resourcefulness, or insight. Folktales are an excellent vehicle for introducing the idea that, in fiction, the characters may learn a lesson or the story may present a message for the reader.

Simple versions of the Tortoise and the Hare folktale may be read prior to tackling the more challenging Native American version that pits Turtle and Beaver against each other. Reading multiple versions of the same folktale allows readers to attend to the way different retellers present their characters and messages.

Summary

When literacy instruction engages readers with carefully crafted sequences of thematically related texts, it can promote the attainment of literacy goals and develop readers' content knowledge, vocabulary, and self-efficacy for reading. As readers read and learn about a topic, their newly acquired knowledge supports them in the reading of more challenging text on the topic. Thematically related texts provide opportunities to teach about useful genre features or how to sample from informational texts in order to learn specific information. Teachers are encouraged to develop their own sequences of thematically related texts that will foster both literacy and knowledge aligned with local curricula.

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