

# Engaging Strategies for Developing Reading Competencies

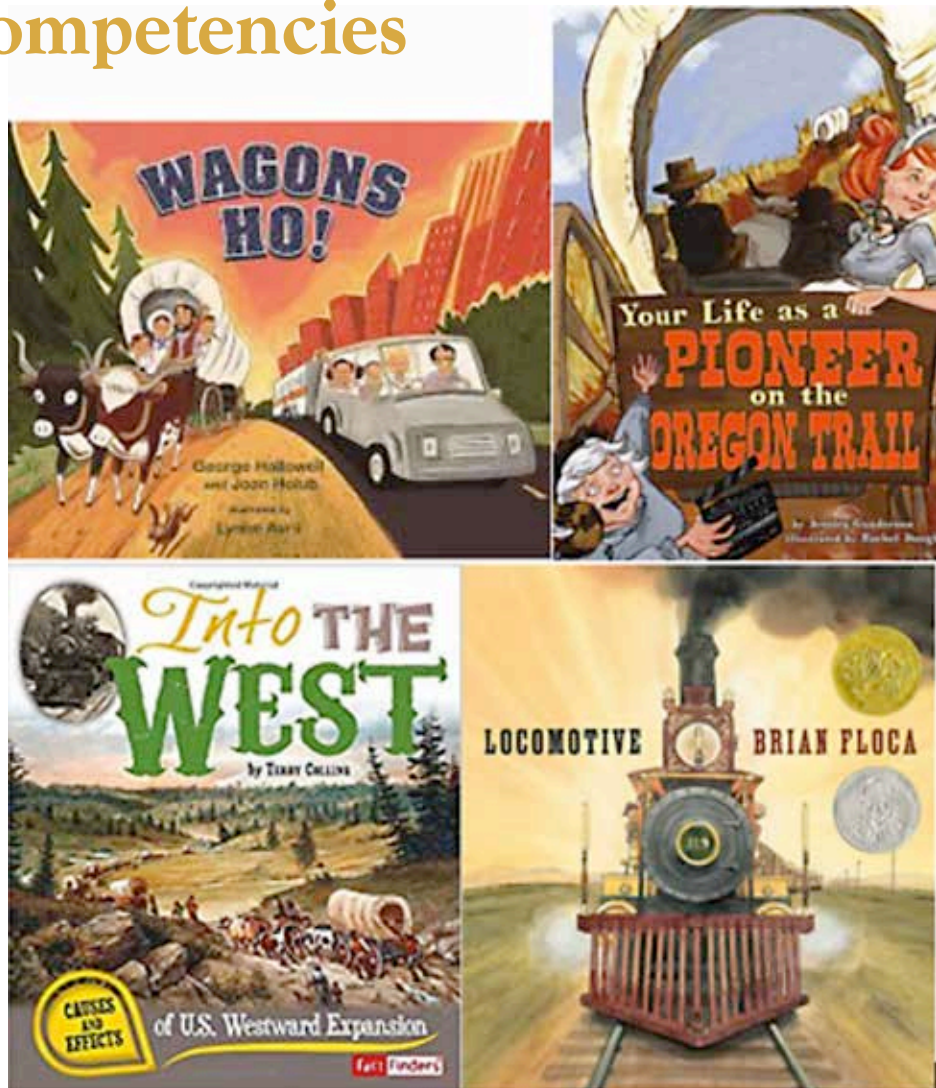
BY RENEE RICE MORAN,  
LASHAY JENNINGS,  
STACEY J. FISHER AND  
EDWARD J. DWYER

## Abstract

Students can become more powerful readers by engaging in lively and interesting print experiences. Deep study of a topic such as The Westward Movement in a text set format can provide information and also enhance reading competencies. The authors propose that enjoyment of reading and related experiences is of paramount importance for developing competent and life-long readers.

## Introduction

Emphasis on achieving higher test scores from well-meaning but generally uninformed political forces plays an ever increasing role in curriculum development and teaching strategies related to literacy instruction. This has led to increased focus on providing instruction that purportedly enhances students' ability to more competently provide the "right" answers to test questions. In this light, Shanahan (2014) determined that analysis of test items designed to drive literacy instruction is a misguided approach to literacy instruction. On the other hand, focus on strategies "that can make students sophisticated and powerful readers" (p. 187) is a much more effective approach for encouraging overall reading achievement with the added benefit of enhancing performance on standardized tests. We, the authors, agree with Shanahan and place emphasis on providing extensive amounts of engaging texts in a variety of formats without regard for the specific types of questions that might appear on standardized tests.



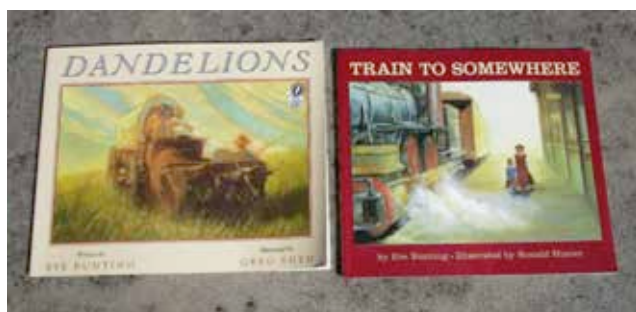
## Text Sets

Engaging and informative reading material can be presented through the text set format for fostering the development of powerful readers. In this context, a text set is a set of books with a common theme. The books range in difficulty level from approximately two years below the designated grade level of the target class and two years above that level within an overarching range from grade two to grade eight. . The text set has information about a common theme that contains both fictionalized as well as basically factual information. Often fiction is interwoven with fact in that the events depicted are couched in terms where characters experience the events within a historical context. The model text set presented herein, The Westward Movement, provides the readers with interesting and informative reading material. In addition, the study complements a text set previously studied titled The

Trail of Tears that chronicles the forced movement of Native Americans from the southeastern United States to the western territories. The movement of people from the eastern parts of the United States to the western territories primarily in the 1800s was encouraged by the federal government to secure lands. The introduction of the Conestoga wagon promised settlers comfortable traveling. The Monroe Doctrine and the concept of Manifest Destiny appealed to the patriotism of easterners what appeared to be limitless opportunities. Enthusiasm was powerfully enhanced by Horace Greeley's admonition to, "Go west young man."

A text set is a vehicle for building background knowledge through reading a variety of quality texts and eventually mastering reading of a "target text" (Lupo, Strong, Lewis, Walpole, & McKenna, 2018). The target text(s) is selected for students to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the major theme of the text set. Practice with texts at instructional level and independent level and in-depth comprehension study can lead to success in reading and reporting on information presented in the target text(s). The target text(s) is not necessarily a more difficult text relative to readability but a text(s) that comprehensively and engagingly addresses the major theme of the overall text set. In addition, Cummins and Stallmeyer-Gerard (2011) determined that study of a variety of texts with a culminating study of a target text encourages students to synthesize information leading to a broad understanding of the topic under study.

The target texts in The Westward Movement set are *Dandelions* (Bunting, 1995) and *Train to somewhere* (Bunting, 1996). These elegantly written and beautifully illustrated texts provide a heartfelt experience for THE reader. Based on earlier study in the text set, students are likely to have a high level of understanding and appreciation of the Bunting target texts.



Target texts by Eve Bunting

Information can be enhanced through Internet searches but, initially, the text set study is based on books. However, much background information for the teacher is available at [www.history.com/topics/westwardexpansion](http://www.history.com/topics/westwardexpansion) and for possible use by students

to further enhance study of The Westward Movement.

We like to stay with books to avoid over complicating study of the topic. We study maps on a large screen using an ELMO™ projector. We encourage use of songs, and poems. For example, we sing and read the words to Home on the Range in connection with The Westward Movement text set. A basic model of a text set, the Westward Movement, is presented in Appendix A with accompanying photographs 2 and 3. We have a sub-set of texts by MacLaughlin (2001, 1994, 1993, and 1985) that we use on occasion when there are students who demonstrate that they would like to read and share reading experiences when using these texts.



Books by Patricia MacLachlan

The text set provides opportunities for developing in-depth knowledge of subject matter. All too often, as the National Council for the Social Studies (2008) suggested, students experience superficial encounters with subject matter. In addition to providing in-depth study, we propose that text sets with accompanying target texts provide opportunities for encouraging reading fluency and comprehension. For example, in the Westward Movement text set there are stories and informational texts that can be made into readers' theater productions.

### Fostering Reading Fluency

We propose that fluency can be enhanced through



repeated readings of passages directly taken from text set material or in a summarized format. Students practice using such strategies as echo reading, choral reading, paired reading, repeated readings, and shared reading to foster fluency (Rasinski, 2010). In the shared reading strategy, in this context, students sit side by side and take turns reading, discussing content, and providing support for each other.

The readers' theater productions culminate in performance reading after high levels of fluency have been achieved. Readers' theater performances can be recorded and a CD produced. In addition, we produce CDs of individual students reading a selection from one of the texts. The CD demonstrates to the student that he or she can be a fluent reader. We make professional looking labels using materials such as those produced by Memorex™ and Avery™. We can Google™ the topic and under Images find an appropriate picture to add to the label. A step further is to make a video recording of the reading using a smartphone. Students are delighted with their CD recordings and video recordings. The video recordings can be emailed to the student's home while the CD can become a family treasure. In this light, Braker, (2013) determined that learning to read proficiently must be authentically interesting and enjoyable and not a quest for competence that demonstrates a "robotic" (p. 201) rendition of the text.

We prefer a CD because it is a physical product rather than just a digital file. Students like getting their hands on their very own CD. For example, a parent emailed to tell us that her son came racing out of school waving his CD and immediately wanted to play it in the van.

Students can become familiar with the evening news and the personalities who deliver the information. We invite students to watch the local evening news or other news formats and study how the reporters present the information. Students develop news reports based on information from the text set. For example, a news reporter might interview a traveler and ask about crossing a river with a covered wagon. Sometimes the news broadcast can get quite elaborate with eventual broadcast on the school closed-circuit TV system. Some teachers prefer to tape news segments to present to their students that comfortably fit their instructional goals. There is generally good community support. For example, a teacher in a nearby school invited the anchor of the local six-o'clock news program to her classroom and he graciously accepted. The news anchor noted how important it is to read the news ahead of time and use appropriate phrasing, intonation, and energy.

### Developing Comprehension

Comprehension is encouraged through repeated

readings described above and through questioning strategies. Duke and Carlile (2011) proposed that fluency is essential for readers to synthesize ideas from different sources to enhance what they proposed are "growth constructs" (p. 200). Growth constructs, according to the researchers, can never be fully mastered but can be enhanced through fluency development and application of comprehension strategies. In this light, we like a simple but comprehensive set of questions based on a model presented by Trosky (1972) (see Appendix B).

### Conclusions

Students learn to synthesize information and develop their knowledge based on a variety of printed texts. Students enhance their knowledge by presenting their knowledge of the topic through activities such as reporting events in a TV news format. Practice for news reporting encourages fluency development which enhances comprehension. Students often say, "I want to sound good!" Production of a CD and/or a video production adds to the competencies developed. We agree with Martin and Duke (2011) that application of "multiple strategy instruction" (p. 351) provides support and engaging activities for students, especially for lower achieving readers. In addition, we have found that the strategies presented herein can be modified by creative teachers for a wide variety of learning environments and grade levels.

We greatly enjoy using text sets within the contexts presented above using a variety of strategies. Study of the strategies presented suggests that the activities effectively complement a variety of standards. We especially like that the activities are enjoyable and provide an opportunity for lively and interesting study. In this light, an extensive review of research led Guthrie and Wigfield (2018) to conclude that literacy instruction must take place in a classroom environment that "generates productive and joyful literacy engagement continually" (p. 75).

We appreciate the emphasis Harvey and Ward (2017) placed on developing literacy competencies within an enjoyable setting. In this light Harvey and Ward retired the word "struggling" and replaced it with the word "striving". We hope that strategies presented herein can be a means for encouraging "struggling readers" to become "striving readers" and eventually, as Harvey and Ward proposed, "thriving readers" (2017).

### References

- Braker, J. (2013). Power of books. View from the chalkboard. *Reading Teacher*, 67, (3), p. 201.
- Cummins, S., & Stallmeyer-Gerard, C. (2011). Teaching for synthesis of informational text with

read-alouds. *The Reading Teacher*. 64(6), 394-405.

Duke, N. & Carlile, J. (2011). The development of comprehension. In M.L. Kamil, P.D. Pearson; Moje, E.B., & Afflerbach, P.P. (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research: Volume IV*. (pp. 199-228) New York: Routledge.

Guthrie, J. & Wigfield, A. (2018). Literacy engagement and motivation: Rationale, research, teaching, and assessment. In D. Lapp & D. Fisher (Eds.), *Handbook on research on teaching the English language arts*. (4th ed. pp.57 – 84). New York: Routledge.

Harvey, S. & Ward, A. (2017). *From striving to thriving*. New York: Scholastic.

Lupo, S.M., Strong, J.Z., Lewis, W., Walpole, S., & McKenna, M.C. (2018). Building background knowledge through text sets: Rethinking text sets. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. 61, (4), 433 – 444.

Martin, N.M. & Duke, N. K. (2011) Interventions to enhance informational text comprehension. In A. McGill-Franzen & R. Allington (Eds.), *Handbook of reading disability research*. (pp. 345-361). New York: Routledge.

National Council for the Social Studies (2008). *A vision of powerful teaching and learning in the social studies: Building social understanding*. A position statement of the National Council for the Social Studies. <http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerful>

Rasinski, T. (2010) *The fluent reader* (2nd ed.). New York: Scholastic.

Shanahan, T. (2014). How and how not to prepare students for the new tests. *The Reading Teacher*, 68, (3), 184-188.

Trosky, O. (1972). Questioning behavior in the development of reading comprehension. In H.A. Klein (Ed.) *The quest for competency in teaching reading*. Newark, DE: International Literacy Association.

## Appendix A: Westward Movement Text Set Introduction

The Westward Movement is the story of people from the eastern part of the United States moving west to find new homes and opportunities for more enriching and meaningful lives. The students read about the journey west and what the trip was like. The level of information presented at the outset will depend on



Moving West text set



Moving West text set continued

the competency levels of the students relative to the complexity of the information presented. Not all of the books in the text set would likely be used with any particular group of students. The text set is dynamic in the sense that it is subject to change with the addition and possible elimination of texts. School and public librarians are invaluable support personnel. On the other hand, the target texts are fundamental to study in this text set context.

## Westward Movement Model Text Set

American Girl Collection (1999). *Welcome to Kirsten's world-1854: Growing up in pioneer America*. Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company. (Susan Sinnott mentioned as the author on the copyright page.)

Bunting, Eve. (1996). *Train to somewhere*. Ill. Ronald Himler. New York: Clarion.

- Bunting, Eve. (1995). *Dandelions*. Ill. Greg Shed. New York, NY: Harcourt Voyager Books.
- Collins, Terry. (2014). *Into the west: Causes and effects of U.S. westward expansion*. North Mankato, MN: Capstone Press.
- Dean, Arlen. (2003). *The Santa Fe Trail*. New York, NY: Power Kids Press/Rosen.
- Floca, Brian. (2013). *Locomotive*. New York, NY: Athenaeum Books for Young Readers.
- Fox, Mem V. (1991). *The story of women who shaped the west: Cornerstones of freedom*. Chicago, IL: Children's Press.
- Friedman, Mel. (2010). *The Oregon Trail*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Greenwood, Barbara. (1994). *A pioneer sampler: The daily life of a pioneer family in 1840*. Ill. Heather Collins. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Gunderson, Jessica & Daugherty, Rachel. (2012). *Your Life as a pioneer on the Oregon Trail*. North Mankato, MN: Picture Window Books
- Hallowell, George & Holub, Joan. (2011). *Wagons ho!* Ill. Lynne Avril. Park Ridge, IL: Albert Whitman & Company.
- Harvey, Brett. (1988). *Cassie's journey: Going west in the 1860s*. Ill. Deborah K. Ray. New York, NY: Holiday House.
- Hermes, Patricia. (2002). *A perfect place: Joshua's Oregon Trail diary*. (My America Series.) New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Hester, Sallie. (2014). *Diary of Sallie Hester: A covered wagon girl*. (Fact Finders: First Person Histories series.) North Mankato, MN: Capstone Press.
- MacLachlan, Patricia (1985). *Sarah, plain and tall*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- MacLachlan, Patricia. (1993). *Baby*. New York, NY: Delacorte.
- MacLachlan, Patricia. (1994). *Skylark*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- MacLachlan, Patricia. (2001). *Caleb's story*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- McMullan, K. (2003). *A fine start: Meg's prairie diary*. (My America Series.) New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Patent, Dorothy H. (1995). *West by covered wagon: Retracing the pioneer trails*. Photographs by William Munoz. New York, NY: Walker and Company.
- Rajczak, Kristen (2015). *Life of a pioneer: What you didn't know about history*. New York, NY: Gareth Stevens.
- Wright, Courtni C. (1995). *Wagon train: A family goes west in 1865*. Ill. Gershorn Griffith. New York, NY: Holiday House. (African American family.)

## Appendix B: Questioning Strategies

**1. Literal questions** wherein the answer is directly found in the text. Ex. "Where did the Santé Fe Trail begin?" Literal questions are usually easy for students to answer but are helpful for building confidence. However, we have to be cautious about asking too many literally based questions at the expense of more thought provoking questions.

**2. Inference** questions involve drawing conclusions not directly stated but based on information presented. Ex. "Why did Sacagawea help Lewis and Clark?" The text does not say precisely why something happened but the reader is asked to determine from context why something occurred in the selection read.

**3. Imagination** questions are presented to study possible outcomes of events. Ex. "What would have happened to Meg's family if their wagon got destroyed while they were crossing a river?" The text does not address this possibility but the reader can determine what might have happened based on the context of the overall selection.

**4. Evaluation** questions are designed to study if a character/historical figure acted appropriately. Ex. "Was it fair that people who got to the prairie first took the best land for building homes and farms?" The reader is invited to provide a value judgement based on the events and the characters responses to those events in the selection read.

**5. Translation** questions are asked to determine understanding of vocabulary and concepts. Ex. "What is another way of saying 'Oregon Fever'?" The reader is invited to translate terminology from one form of expression to another. This type of question encourages vocabulary building and measures understanding of terminology that is essential to comprehending the overarching theme of the text set. Students can be encouraged to keep vocabulary cards with terms on one side and definitions on the other side.