Scriptwriting: Exploring the Use of Mentor Texts to Extend the Readers Theater Experience

Kristie Miner, Patricia Follette, Timothy Rasinski, Kasim Yildirim

Abstract: Readers theater is a recommended instructional approach to improve students' proficiency in fluency and comprehension. Having students author and perform authentic readers theater scripts based on high-quality literature extends the readers theater experience and provides students opportunities for deep reading and exemplary models for writing. In this article, we describe a scriptwriting unit of study designed for fourth- and fifth-grade students and provide evidence that supports how using mentor texts in scriptwriting can improve students' writing both in terms of quality and quantity.

Ms. Miller (all names are pseudonyms) is working with her fourth-grade students on a script-writing unit of study. After teaching a mini-lesson on scene selection, she sits down to confer with a small group of students who recently read *As Simple as It Seems* by Sarah Weeks.

Ms. Miller: I see your group has decided on a scene for your readers theater script. What are you thinking about?

Tanner: We wanted to choose a scene from our book that had a lot of tension and conflict.

Aubrey: We thought that would draw the audience into our performance.

Anthony: We decided on the part in the book where Verbena and her mom are arguing.

Ms. Miller: Tell me more about that scene.

Kaitlyn: Verbena has a lot going on in her life. She doesn't like how her mom treats her like a baby. Her mom and dad are a lot older than the parents of most kids her age, and she doesn't like that either.

Aubrey: She just wants to be left alone, and her mother just keeps bothering her.

Tanner: The scene we picked ends with a giant fight between Verbena and her mother.

Anthony: Verbena runs up the stairs to her bedroom and slams the door shut really hard.

Ms. Miller: Wow! It sounds like you picked a scene that will get your audience's attention. I can't wait to see how it unfolds!

Readers theater has been widely recommended as an approach for improving students' reading fluency and overall reading achievement (Griffith & Rasinski, 2005; Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011). In this article we explore extending the readers theater experience by having students create their own scripts from authentic literature they have read.

Comprehension, the ultimate goal of reading, refers to the reader's ability to access the author's meaning from a given text. One must wonder if a reader does not understand the text, if reading has occurred at all. Graham and Herbert (2011), in their research review on the impact of writing on reading, report that students' writing about material they've read improves their comprehension of material. When students create a script based on a text they have read, they spend a great deal of time reviewing and responding to the text.

Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956) offers many scholars and practitioners a way to conceptualize learning and comprehension. The highest level of learning according to a recent revision of Bloom's taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002) is "creating." When readers are able to take what has been read and create, compose, produce, or imagine something new, it provides evidence that they have achieved a high level of comprehension or understanding of the original text. Thus, we view scriptwriting based upon texts students have previously read as a creative approach for deepening students' comprehension of the original texts.

In addition to viewing scriptwriting as a way for students to improve their comprehension through creative interpretation of a text, we also see the transformation of texts into scripts as opportunities to improve students' writing. As students work with original texts, or what have been termed mentor texts, transforming them into scripts, they discover what the authors did to create these exemplary pieces of writing. Students are then able to transfer and apply these discoveries into their own writing as they develop their scripts.

Dorfman and Cappelli (2007) define mentor texts as pieces of literature that students can return to repeatedly in order to scaffold them in developing their competency in and capacity for writing. Smith (1994) calls this "reading like a writer" (p. 195), meaning the student is "reading with the author, as if one were writing the text oneself" (p. 195-196). "In other words, the writer positions him or herself beside the author and studies how the text is constructed and how it communicates" (Culham, 2011, p. 249).

Graham and Perin (2007) identify the "Study of Models" as one of the essential elements in helping students develop critical writing competencies. They recommend that teachers provide students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate "the critical elements, patterns, and forms embodied in the models in their own writing" (p. 20). Culham (2011) notes that "models… are what students should be turning to for examples of what good writing looks like in its many forms" (pp. 248-249).

Although the use of mentor texts for writing has been well established, less is known about the impact of scriptwriting from mentor texts on students' writing. Few scholarly reports have explored scriptwriting in the elementary classroom (Rasinski & Young, 2011; Young & Rasinski, 2011). Given our limited understanding of scriptwriting based on mentor texts, we chose to explore how a scriptwriting experience in real classrooms may impact the writing of a group of fourth and fifth grade students. Interestingly, the new Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (2010) identifies the ability to write narratives that include dialogue, description, and show the responses of characters to situations as a key standard for fourth and fifth grades. Scriptwriting, based on mentor texts, provides students with the opportunity to develop these standards-based skills in their own writing.

In this article we describe a "use-inspired" (Stanovich & Stanovich, 2003) exploratory study of how fourth- and fifth-grade students in a rural upstate New York school engaged in a unit of study in readers theater scriptwriting. The process included text selection, literature study, scriptwriting and performance. It required students to engage in high levels of comprehension in order to create authentic scripts that built on the writing of experienced authors of high-quality children's literature. As a result, students came away from the experience with a deeper understanding of the texts they read and improved writing skills in the genre of scriptwriting.

Project Overview

Three fourth-grade teachers, two fifth-grade teachers and one special education teacher with teaching experience ranging from one to thirty years accepted the invitation to participate in the teacher-research project. The students from the five classes included 60 fourth-grade students and 36 fifth-grade students. Each class consisted of a heterogeneous mix of students with reading abilities ranging from above grade-level to below grade-level. Additionally, one fifth-grade class included students with learning disabilities.

It was explained to the teachers that the project would require 60-minutes of instructional time each day during the months of February and March and would consist of three components. The first component immersed students in quality grade-appropriate literature through literature study for about two weeks. The second component took students through a four-week readers theater scriptwriting unit of study during writing workshop. In the third component, students rehearsed (engaged in repeated reading of) the scripts over a period of two weeks, culminating with groups of students performing their scripts during a Family Literacy Night.

As an introduction to the project, teachers worked with Kristie (first author) to gain an understanding of literature study and readers theater scriptwriting and performing. They investigated the process of literature study (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006), examined published readers theater scripts, and viewed video clips of former students and children's book authors performing scenes from familiar texts (see www.teachingbooks.net for Authors Readers Theatre performances). To facilitate the process, teachers were provided with a set of mini-lessons in both literature study and readers theater scriptwriting that Kristie had developed. The mini-lessons included topics like choosing scenes with humor and tension to increase the dramatic effect, editing for dialogue tags, adding text to allow the audience to understand the scene more fully, and trimming descriptive passages to focus on the dramatic core. The teachers worked collaboratively to develop a timeline, and for the next eight weeks they met on a weekly basis to problem solve and share their ideas and progress.

Students were introduced to the project in a way that mirrored the teachers' introduction. It was explained to them that they would be taking part in a "project" that encompassed reading, writing, and performing. They had an opportunity to view video clips of students and professionals performing and peruse published scripts, recording their findings about the genre of scriptwriting. Once students had the big picture, they participated in the project from the ground up.

Step 1: Selecting Quality Texts

Student choice of text was an important consideration to ensure that students were immersed in literature that was both high in quality and personally engaging. Students began by first researching their favorite authors' works online and reviewing books found in their classroom and school libraries.

The genres of the books they reviewed included fantasy, historical fiction, mystery, and realistic fiction. After researching authors and titles, each class compiled a list of between 4-6 of their most popular titles and each student chose his or her personal top three. Figure 1 shows each class's final book choices.

Final Book Choices

Class # 1
Poppy by Avi
The Tale of Despereaux by Kate DiCamillo
Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson
Paint the Wind by Pam Muñoz Ryan
Oggie Cooder, Party Animal by Sarah Weeks

Class #2
Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing by Judy Blume
Because of Winn Dixie by Kate DiCamillo
Spy Cat by Peg Kehret
Oggie Cooder, Party Animal by Sarah Weeks
Stuart Little by E.B. White

Class #3
Midnight Magic by Avi
The Tiger Rising by Kate DiCamillo
Edward's Eyes by Patricia MacLachlan
The Dreamer by Pam Muñoz Ryan
As Simple As It Seems by Sarah Weeks

Class #4
Midnight Magic by Avi
Heroes Don't Run by Harry Mazer
Riding Freedom by Pam Muñoz Ryan
Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli

Class #5
Spy Cat by Peg Kehret
Swindle by Gordan Korman
Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone by J.K. Rowling
Holes by Louis Sachar
Regular Guy by Sarah Weeks

Figure 1: Final Book Choices

Once book selections were finalized, teachers created literature study groups based on the students' preferences.

Step 2: Implementing Literature Study

The groups began by mapping out their reading over a 2-week period. All students read the texts with some using assistive technology (e.g., audio books) to make the texts accessible. They met weekly in teacher-facilitated literature study groups to share their thinking and deepen their understandings about what they had read. After the books had been read and discussed, students began the work of writing their readers theater scripts.

Step 3: Implementing a Scriptwriting Unit of Study

A series of teacher-created mini-lessons were presented in whole-group settings. They were designed to help students adapt a section or sections of the narrative text they had read and discussed into a seven to eight page readers theater script.

On the first few days of this writing unit, students learned strategies for choosing scenes for their scripts (see Figure 2 for mini-lesson).

Readers Theatre Script Writing
Mini-Lesson Plan

Writing Principle (management, conventions, or writer's craft)
Scriptwriters choose scenes with humor and tension to increase the dramatic effect.

Illustrative Example (chart, mentor text, student or teacher writing, or other resource
Think Aloud—

- **Yesterday, we began thinking about choosing scenes from the books we read during literature study. We were looking for scenes that have a lot of dialogue, because we learned that conversation between characters helps us get to know the characters, as we get involved in their story. There are other things to consider when choosing scenes for readers theatre. *Today, I'm going to teach you that scriptwriters choose scenes with humor and tension to increase the dramatic effect.***

Let's start by talking about the meaning of humor and tension.
Have students turn to their partners and talk about what the word *humor* means. Chart some of their responses and examples on the board. Next, have them share their understandings of *tension* with each other, and then with the whole group. Again, chart some of their responses and examples.

Let's look at an excerpt from *Oggie Cooder, Party Animal* by Sarah Weeks (show charted example of a humorous excerpt found on pages 24 and 25).

"I want you to send an invitation to the Cooder boy across the street," Mrs. Perfecto had announced one morning as Donnica sat at the table carefully addressing the envelopes for her party invitations.

"You must be joking, Mother. Why would I do that?" asked Donnica.

"He's our neighbor, Cupcake."

"So what? He plays with cheese and makes that annoying sound with his tongue all the time. Plus he dresses like he's from another planet. Yesterday he wore a bow tie to school. A bow tie, Mother."

- **What emotion did that passage make you feel?**
- **Can anyone recall a funny moment from the book that your group read?**

Now let's look at a scene from *The Fighting Ground* by Avi (show charted excerpt from pages 111 and 112). **In this passage, Jonathan is running from the Hessians, carrying the young boy he met earlier that day. He sees a fire in the distance, and as he gets closer, he hears low muffled voices. He stops, and nervously waits, trying not to be noticed.**

Jonathan gazed at the light and listened.

He knew they could be other Hessians. "Americans," he prayed, "make them Americans."

Still more cautiously, he moved forward, trying to feel his way without making any sound, trying to see through the dark. As he drew closer, he could make out at least six forms hunched around the fire.

He crept forward. Soon he began to hear hushed words, and he strained to catch the language. German . . . or English?

"Halt!"

- **What do notice about this passage?**
- **What kind of feelings does it create?** (tension)
- **What does it make you wonder?**

Let's look at another example from *Paint the Wind* by Pam Muñoz Ryan (show charted excerpt from pages 55 and 56). **In this scene, Maya's grandmother suddenly slumps over at the table during breakfast. Valentina, the housekeeper, runs to the kitchen and uses the telephone to frantically call for help while Maya tries to awaken her grandmother.**

She ran to her and put both hands on her fallen shoulders. "Grandmother? Grandmother?" Grandmother's body drooped and her arms dangled at her sides, like weighted lines.

Valentina appeared and gently pulled Maya away.

"Help is coming. They are on the way."

Valentina wrung her hands. "I do not know. She needs a doctor."

Confusion and hysteria welled inside Maya. She yelled, "Grandmother! Wake up! Wake up right now!"

In the distance, the whine of an ambulance escalated.

- **Why might this be a good scene to use for a readers theatre script?**

"Have a Go"
Instruct students to skim through the first two chapters of the book they have been reading to find examples of humor and/or tension. Ask them to turn to their partners and share one of their examples.

Application
Students will go back and gather with their book club members and will be instructed to find scenes or chapters in their books that are filled with humor and tension. Ask them to mark several places to indicate scenes where these elements are present. Have them record in their writers' notebooks a note about the scene and why they feel it would create a dramatic effect.

Share
Ask for one or two students to volunteer to share examples of humor and/or tension that they found in the book they were reading. Then ask students to turn and share their work with their partners.

Comments/Evaluation

Figure 2: Lesson Plan

No limit was set on the number of scenes students could choose, but they were encouraged to focus on one or two. They applied this learning by reviewing their texts to find scenes that were rich in dialogue and helped communicate the character's voice to the audience. To increase the dramatic effect in their scriptwriting, they searched for and chose scenes filled with humor and tension based on examples found in mentor texts that were used in the mini-lessons. Figure 3 features an excerpt from a dramatic scene that students chose from *Midnight Magic* (Avi, 1999).

This script adapted from *Midnight Magic*, 2011

SCENE 1

Characters (in order of appearance):
NARRATOR ONE
NARRATOR TWO
NARRATOR THREE
NARRATOR FOUR
NARRATOR FIVE

NARRATOR ONE: In 1491, in the kingdom of Pergamontio, there lived a twelve-year-old boy by the name of Fabrizio.

NARRATOR TWO: He was the sole servant of Mangus the Magician.

NARRATOR THREE: One sweltering summer eve, near midnight, a violent storm broke over the city where Fabrizio lived.

NARRATOR FOUR: Lightning splintered the inky darkness. Thunder rumbled like siege guns.

NARRATOR FIVE: The falling rain fell with the sound of a million hissing snakes.

NARRATOR ONE: Close at hand was a lantern that burned a flame no bigger than a button.

NARRATOR TWO: As far as Fabrizio was concerned, the most important thing before him was a tattered pack of tarot cards.

Figure 3: Script

Once the scenes were chosen, students began making decisions about which characters and roles to include in the script to portray the scene clearly. They also had to decide if one or more narrators were needed to help tell the story. Students learned how to remove dialogue tags (e.g.,

"he said" and "she said") in order for the conversation between characters to sound authentic. Some scenes the students chose were filled with descriptive text. As students developed the scenes, they trimmed descriptive passages and focused on the dramatic core of the text. Students learned to combine passages from different parts of the story to clearly convey meaning, and in some cases, they added text to allow the audience to more fully understand and visualize the scene.

Students learned about the importance of writing a script that would be entertaining and engaging to a variety of audiences. They learned how to divide long sections of text, striving for a balance among performers' voices. Students also learned how to enrich their performances by incorporating a few timely special effects (e.g., sound of a car honking its horn, a clap of thunder ushering in a storm).

Step 4: Practicing and Performing

After the scripts were written, students began practicing for their performances.

During this two-week time period, they listened to the flow of the story and edited their texts to improve the rhythm of their scenes. As performance time drew near, they finalized their scripts and through repeated reading, focused their attention on the delivery. They listened and coached each other to effectively use phrasing and intonation to develop their characters and build humor and tension. The goal of the repeated reading rehearsal was to deliver the text to the audience in a way that enhanced the audience members' understanding and appreciation of the characters and story. The students dressed in black for their performances and used their scripts and voices to successfully portray their stories.

On performance night, over 200 family members and friends gathered to enjoy the performances. Audience members responded enthusiastically to the performances!

Impact of Scriptwriting

The focus of our classroom study was the impact of writing scripts on students' writing and in particular, in their ability to incorporate their use

of voice and development of characters and story in their writing. Prior to the initiation of the readers theater project all 96 fourth- and fifth-grade students who participated in the project were asked to provide a prompted writing sample. The prompt asked students to think about notable characters that they encountered in their reading, put them into an interesting situation, and create a brief story. Students were specifically asked to describe the setting for their narrative and to include a conversation between characters in order to allow readers to "get to know more about your characters." Students were given up to thirty minutes to complete their stories.

Approximately eight weeks later, at the conclusion of the readers theater project, students were again asked to provide a writing sample using the same prompt. Again, students were given up to thirty minutes to complete their stories. The pre- and post-project writing samples were paired. Then, 24 pairs of writing samples (a quarter of all writing samples) were randomly selected for analyses. See Appendix for one student's pre- and post-project writing samples.

Given that a purpose of readers theater script reading and performance is the improvement in reading fluency, we wondered if script writing, followed by rehearsal and performance, might improve students' writing fluency. Writing fluency can simply be defined as the amount of coherent writing a writer can generate in a given period of time (Rathvon, 1999). Although writing fluency may be considered a gross measure of writing, it is clearly important for writers to get their words on the page in an efficient manner.

The first analysis, then, of the randomly selected writing sample pairs was a simple word count. The results are reflected in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Pre- and Post-Test Measures on Volume of Writing

	Pre-Project		Post-Project	
	M	SD	M	SD
Number of Words Witten	118.33	58.61	172.67	64.23

A t-test analysis of the difference in writing volume between the pre- and post-project writing indicated that improvement made was significant ($t = -2.958$, $p = .005$).

Most students were able to write considerably more when responding to the same prompt after having engaged in the scriptwriting project. We feel that the instruction provided in scriptwriting, followed by the actual practice in writing, rehearsing, and performing the scripts contributed to students being able to develop a metacognitive template for writing text that includes authentic dialogue between characters.

Writing fluency is important. In order to be successful in writing, writers must be able to get their words on the page. However, we were also interested in the quality of students' writing. Because the development of a script requires writers to consider story development and character voice, we analyzed changes in students' use of voice and development of characters and story in their writing samples.

A second analysis of pairs of writing samples was then done to assess students' use of voice, and character and story development. A rubric was developed to guide independent raters in evaluating the students' writing (see Figure 6).

Name: _____ **Date:** _____

Pre- and Post-Project Writing Benchmark Rubric

	VOICE				
KEY:	**4 = Outstanding; 3 = Sufficient; 2 = Limited; 1 = Insufficient**	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**
Commitment to Topic	The student includes detail in his writing to reveal commitment to the topic.				
Strong Feelings, Honest Statements	The student reveals the character's personality by communicating strong feelings; the piece is packed with emotion; the writing sounds genuine.				
Individual, Authentic and Original	The student's writing sounds authentic; the voice is original and consistent throughout.				
Definite and Well Developed Personality	The student's writing allows the audience to get to know the personality he is presenting through his or her words.				
Appropriate Tone for Purpose and Audience	The student's tone gives flavor and texture to the message and matches the purpose for his writing and the audience to which he is writing.				
	CHARACTER & STORY DEVELOPMENT				
KEY:	**4 = Outstanding; 3 = Sufficient; 2 = Limited; 1 = Insufficient**	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**
Character's Appearance	The student establishes the character's appearance by including physical details about the character's appearance.				
Physical Setting	The student establishes the physical setting surrounding the characters using narration and dialogue.				
Character's Thoughts, Feelings and Opinions	The student reveals the character's thoughts, feelings and opinions through dialogue and narration.				
Character's Personality	The student reveals the character's personality by revealing other characters surrounding the character.				
	The student reveals the character's personality by providing details about what the character does.				
Personality Traits	The student reveals personality traits about the character through conversation between characters.				

Score: _____

Comments:

Figure 6: Writing Evaluation Guide

The rubric contained four criteria that reflected voice and six criteria that reflected character and story development. Criteria for the rubric were determined by examining a number of rubrics including Education Northwest's 6+1 Trait® Rubrics that specifically addressed the areas of voice, story and character development.

Raters could evaluate each criterion on a four-point scale (4= outstanding, 3= sufficient, 2= limited and 1= insufficient). Total scores for each writing sample could range from 10 to 40. Two sets of raters were asked to read and rate each pre- and post-project writing sample. Pre- and post-writing samples were randomly arranged so that raters could not identify the names of the students who wrote the scripts or if they were rating pre- or post-project writing samples. Authorship of papers was also randomized so that raters knew that any writing sample adjacent to the one they were currently reading was not written by the same student.

All raters were college graduates who had taken coursework in written composition and who use writing in their own professional work. Two sets of raters were used in order to determine the reliability of the ratings. After all the ratings were complete, a correlation between the first and second set of raters was determined. A moderate but significant ($p = .006$) positive correlation ($r = .394$) was found. This finding means that the raters, in general, agreed with one another on the relative quality of the writing. In order to honor both ratings for each writing sample the two individual ratings for each sample were summed (range of scores increased to 20 -80). The qualitative ratings for the pre- and post-project writing samples are reflected in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Pre- and Post-Test Measures on Qualitative Assessment (N = 48)

	Pre-Project		Post-Project	
	M	SD	M	SD
Qualitative Rating	22.19	7.71	27.75	6.79

A t-test analysis of the difference in qualitative ratings between the pre- and post-project writing indicated that improvement made in the post-project writing was significant ($t = -3.755$, $p < .001$).

We acknowledge that our project was limited in terms of internal validity (Stanovich & Stanovich, 2003): size, duration of instruction, control over instructional practices, and the analyses employed. Moreover, our analyses do not control for developmental changes in student writing in the absence of scriptwriting. However, we feel the study is high in external validity – it took place in real classrooms under authentic teaching conditions. The purpose of this classroom-based study was exploratory in nature – we wished to determine if there is possible or potential instructional merit in using mentor texts for scriptwriting to improve student writing in actual classroom settings. The results of our analyses suggest that instruction in writing scripts for performance appeared to lead to increases in writing fluency and in improvements in students' ability to incorporate their use of voice and development of characters and story in their writing. These results suggest that the opportunity to explore and receive instruction in scriptwriting writing may contribute to the students' ability to write more fluently and improve the quality of their writing, in terms of story and character development and voice integration. Clearly, more research is needed in this area. However, our study does suggest that a scripting approach to writing instruction may be a fruitful approach and is worthy of further consideration in the scholarly community.

Student Responses

Students' perceptions of the scriptwriting experience may offer insight into its impact. In interviews that followed the project students offered a variety of thoughtful responses. When asked about how scripting affected how they thought about and comprehended the original texts from which the scripts were developed, Kayla responded, "Earlier when I read I would just look on the surface of thinking. Now I try to dig down deeper and think how I would react." (Student names are pseudonyms.) Max offered, "It helps me understand because in scriptwriting we had to re-read and that makes me know a lot more than I used to." And Jonathan, thinking about how he would have to perform the script said, "It helped me think more about the characters because I was going to have to act as those characters."

The notion of recasting or transforming the original text seemed to impact several students' text comprehension. Ava noted that, "Writing my script helped me understand my book better because when I wrote it (the script), it was a lot easier to get what they (the characters) were saying…at the beginning, I didn't get what they were telling me but now I do." And Abigail added, "It improved my understanding of the original text when I got to put it in my own words." Sam suggested, "It helps when you put the script into your own words…it helps a lot."

Students were also able to note how scriptwriting affected their writing dialogue. Jonathan reported that writing a script "helped me because now I make things sound like I'm actually saying it. I now use dialogue to show what the characters are like and narration to explain what they are doing." Julie pointed to the how scriptwriting helped her make affective connections to her writing, "It's helped me add emphasis to some things and add vivid details. I use dialogue to show emotional feeling. I use narration to help people get to know my character." Grace also understood how the text that was transformed into a script provided a model for her own writing, "I use narration to describe what the characters look like, what they sound like, even what they can smell like. I was inspired by *Paint the Wind* because the lady who wrote it described all those things."

Teachers who participated in the project also commented on the positive impact of scriptwriting. Teachers noted that scriptwriting led students to a deeper analyses of original texts and fostered cooperative learning skills as they worked together to create their scripts. Perhaps the greatest benefit noted by teachers was the increased confidence in students as readers and writers. Engaging in an authentic and creative experience that was eventually performed for an audience helped students see themselves as readers and writers who read and write for an authentic purpose. Five of six teachers surveyed commented that students found the experience engaging and interesting and their interest in reading and writing had increased noticeably. One teacher noted that student conversations about texts went from being "within texts" to "beyond texts and about texts." Through the process of scriptwriting, students were moving from more literal interpretations of texts to more inferential, nuanced, and creative considerations of texts and text structure.

Conclusion and Implications

When designing this project, we anticipated seeing improvements in students' writing through the readers theater scriptwriting project. Indeed, the findings from our limited analyses suggest that the students' writing improved. Both in terms of quantity and quality students made substantial improvements in their writing. There are several factors that we feel may have contributed to these gains.

First, the students used high quality literature as mentor texts. One of the best ways to learn to write well is to read and study authors who write well (Culham, 2011). Thus, through their choice of quality literature students were supported by mentor texts that they could emulate in their own writing. Students studied and discovered how authors of mentor texts create quality writing, worthy of publication.

Second, the power of transforming a text into a script cannot be underestimated. In the transformational process, students continually referred back to the mentor text and made decisions about what to include, edit, or revise in their scripts. In doing so, they made judgments about what was noteworthy and significant in the text. Students were motivated by this creative act of transformation to construct new and valuable texts that they eventually performed for an audience.

Third, because of the nature of scriptwriting, narration and dialogue are used to make the characters and story come alive. This is no small task and students worked constantly to write and revise their scripts in order to effectively tell the story through the narrator and the voices of the characters, along with an occasional, well-placed sound effect.

Fourth, because scripts are meant to be performed orally for an audience, students had to rehearse their scripts. During rehearsals, students had the opportunity to investigate character and voice development. Students explored different ways of expressing their lines orally. Hearing the lines read aloud with appropriate fluency, phrasing and expression is certainly a fine way to test the quality and authenticity of the written lines. Indeed, the success of the eventual performance is dependent on the audience's ability to understand the script and appreciate the work of the scriptwriter and performers.

Finally, the tasks involved in writing, rehearsing, and performing scripts was a very authentic task that can be found in the real world. Indeed, many references to real world examples of these tasks were made during the study. The authenticity of the instructional approach made it highly engaging and motivating for students. Students created something of value that did not exist previously.

The positive results of this study indicate that more research into the impact of scriptwriting on students' writing development would be worthy of further investigation. A study of this limited size and design may be suggestive but it clearly is not definitive. More work examining the impact of longer periods of scriptwriting on a variety of writing variables is called for. We do feel, however, that the study does suggest some possible courses of action by teachers.

Teachers are often looking for ways that students can extend their experiences with reading literature. We think that transforming texts into scripts is an authentic and engaging extension activity that teachers can employ. Scriptwriting of this sort requires students to examine mentor texts more closely, engage in repeated reading of scripts, write in a new genre, and engage in a creative act, one that according to Bloom's taxonomy is evidence of high-level thinking and understanding.

Throughout this project, it was exciting to see the growth in both the students and teachers involved. The value of scriptwriting in developing students' critical competencies in reading and writing were evident throughout the project and were reinforced by data results. One of the greatest and long-lasting rewards of using mentor texts for script writing and then performing them in an authentic manner in front of eager and appreciative audience is the sense of accomplishment and confidence the students gained. Based on what we have found and report in this article, we would encourage you to consider making scriptwriting from mentor texts a part of your literacy curriculum.

AUTHOR'S NOTE
Special thanks to Molly Babcock, Theresa Cialone, Laura Beth Farwell, Ken Hand, Susan Musshafen, and Lauren Sonalkar, dedicated teachers who volunteered to devote their time and effort to this study.

REFERENCES

Bloom, B.S., Engelhart, M.D., Furst, E.J., Hill, W.H., & Krathwohl, D.R. (Eds.) (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals. Handbook 1: Cognitive domain.* New York: David McKay.

Culham, R. (2011). Reading with a writer's eye. In T. Rasinski (ed.), *Rebuilding the foundation: Effective reading instruction for the 21st century* (pp.245-270). Bloomington, IN: Solutiontree.

Dorfman, L. R., & Cappelli, R. (2007). *Mentor texts: Teaching writing through children's literature, K-6*. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse.

Education Northwest. (2010) 6-point 3-12 writer's rubric. Retrieved from http://educationnorthwest.org/webfm_send/773

Fountas, I., & Pinnell, G.S. (2006). *Teaching for comprehending and fluency: Thinking, talking, and writing about reading, K-8*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Graham, S. & Herbert, M. (2011). Writing to read: A meta-analysis of the impact of writing and writing instruction on reading. Harvard Educational Review, 81(4), 710-744.

Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). *Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools: A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York.* Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.

Griffith, L. W., & Rasinski, T. V. (2005). A focus on fluency: How one teacher incorporated fluency with her reading curriculum. *The Reading Teacher, 58*, 126- 137.

Kratwohl, D. R. (2002). A revision of Bloom's Taxonomy: An overview. *Theory into Practice, 41*, 212-218.

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Common Core State Standards- English Language Arts Standards.* Washington DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers.

Rasinski, T. V., Reutzel, C. R., Chard, D. & Linan-Thompson, S. (2011). Reading Fluency. In M. L. Kamil, P. D. Pearson, B. Moje, & P. Afflerbach E (Eds), *Handbook of Reading Research, Volume IV* (pp. 286-319). New York: Routledge.

Rasinski, T., & Young, C. (2011). Mentoring authors' voices through readers' theater. In J. Richards & C. Lassonde (eds.), *Writing Strategies for All Primary Students*, pp. 257-266. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rathvon, N. (1999). *Effective school interventions*. New York: Guilford.

Smith, F. (1994). *Writing and the writer* (2nd edition). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Stanovich, P. J., & Stanovich K. E. (2003). Using research and reason in education. Washington, DC: U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services.

Young, C.J., & Rasinski, T.V. (2011). Enhancing author's voice through scripting. *The Reading Teacher, 65*(1), 24–28.

Zeichner, K. M. (1987). Preparing reflective teachers: An overview of instructional strategies which have been employed in preservice teacher education. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 11, 565-575.

Zeichner, K., & Liston, D. (1996). *Reflective teaching*. New York: Erlbaum.

Children's Books Cited

Avi. (1995). *Poppy*. New York: Orchard.

Avi. (1999). *Midnight magic.* New York: Scholastic.

Blume, J. (1972). *Tales of a fourth grade nothing*. New York: Dutton.

DiCamillo, K. (2000). *Because of Winn-Dixie.* Massachusetts: Candlewick.

DiCamillo, K. (2001). *The tiger rising.* Massachusetts: Candlewick.

DiCamillo, K. (2003). *The tale of Despereaux.* Massachusetts: Candlewick.

Kehret, P. (2003). *Spy cat*. New York: Dutton.

Korman, G. (2008). *Swindle*. New York: Scholastic.

MacLachlan, P. (2007). *Edward's eyes*. New York: Atheneum.

Mazer, H. (2005). *Heroes don't run*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Muñoz Ryan, P. (1998). *Riding freedom*. New York: Scholastic.

Muñoz Ryan, P. (2007). *Paint the wind*. New York: Scholastic.

Muñoz Ryan, P. (2010). *The dreamer*. New York: Scholastic.

Paterson, K. (1977). *Bridge to Terabithia*. New York: Crowell.

Rowling, J.K. (1997). *Harry Potter and the sorcerer's stone*. New York: Scholastic.

Sachar, L. (1998). *Holes*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Spinelli, J. (2000). *Stargirl*. New York: Random House.

Weeks, S. (2000). *Regular guy*. New York: HarperCollins.

Weeks, S. (2009). *Oggie Cooder, party animal*. New York: Scholastic.

Weeks, S. (2010). *As simple as it seems*. New York: HarperCollins.

White, E.B. (1945). *Stuart Little*. New York: Harper & Row.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kristie Miner is the Intermediate Literacy Coordinator for the Whitney Point Central School District in Whitney Point, New York. She has 20 years of elementary-level teaching experience in both general and special education. She completed her MSEd at Binghamton University and received a certificate of advanced study in Literacy Coach Training for the Literacy Collaborative at Lesley University. Kristie is currently enrolled in the doctoral program in Educational Theory and Practice at Binghamton University.

Patricia Follette is currently the superintendent of Whitney Point Central School District in Whitney Point, NY. She earned her BA in Education from St. Joseph's College, NY and received her MSEd as a reading specialist from Binghamton University. After twelve years in the primary classroom, she earned her credentials as an administrator from the State University of New York College at Cortland. She studied at Lesley University, Massachusetts to become a Reading Recovery Teacher Leader and then worked as Supervisor of School Curriculum Improvement and Educational Leadership at Broome-Tioga BOCES. Before becoming superintendent, Patricia served as Director of Curriculum and Instruction with the Whitney Point Central School District for four years. She is currently enrolled in Binghamton University's doctoral program.

Timothy Rasinski is a professor of literacy education at Kent State University. His scholarly interests include reading fluency and word study, reading in the elementary and middle grades, readers who struggle, and parental involvement. His research on reading has been cited by the National Reading Panel and has been published in journals such as Reading Research Quarterly, The Reading Teacher, Reading Psychology, and the Journal of Educational Research. Tim served on the Board of Directors of the International Reading Association. He has also served as co-editor of The Reading Teacher and the Journal of Literacy Research. In 2010 Tim was elected to the International Reading Hall of Fame. Prior to coming to Kent State Tim taught literacy education at the University of Georgia. He taught for several years as an elementary and middle school classroom and Title I teacher in Nebraska.

Kasim Yildirim is an associate professor at Mugla Sitki Kocman University. He received his Ph.D. in Elementary Classroom Teaching from Gazi University. His research area includes Turkish language arts, particularly reading fluency of elementary school students. He authored many articles about literacy education of elementary school students.