TextConnections:
Every Student Reading for Understanding

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"Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives. They will need literacy to cope with the flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future. In a complex and sometimes even dangerous world, their ability to read will be crucial. Continual instruction beyond the early grades is needed."

— Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999
Position Statement from the International Reading Association

TextConnections is a reading support course designed for striving adolescent readers with the primary goal of developing students' reading fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, writing, and independent reading skills. *TextConnections* is designed to help students become successful, strategic readers of the texts they will encounter in their academic, personal, and professional lives.

After outlining the need for focused attention on adolescent literacy, this paper describes both the *TextConnections* program design and the key instructional principles upon which *TextConnections* is based.

I. A Critical Concern: Adolescent Literacy and the Opportunity Gap

In an era of swift and sweeping global economic and political change, U.S. education, business, and policy leaders have focused intense scrutiny and growing concern on the issue of adolescent literacy as a predictor of the nation's future well-being and productivity. Numerous reports from universities, research institutes, and blue-ribbon panels paint an alarming picture of millions of middle- and high-school students who have not developed the literacy skills that will equip them for academic success in college or for challenging professional and occupational roles in the new global economy.

A. The National Picture

Reading scores of U.S. public school students, while relatively stable from 1992 through 2005, reveal that a majority of students lack solid skills. Specifically:

- Less than one-third (31%) of fourth- and eighth-grade students scored at the Proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The other 69% could not demonstrate an overall understanding of a text by making inferences, drawing conclusions, making connections to their own experiences and to other readings, or identifying some of the devices that authors use in composing text (National Center on Education Statistics [NCES], 2006).

- Significant numbers of students—36% of fourth-grade students and 27% of eighth-grade students—performed below the Basic level, indicating that they could not consistently demonstrate an understanding of the literal meaning of what they read, much less make relatively obvious connections between the text and their own experiences. These students could neither extend the ideas in a text by making simple inferences, nor draw conclusions based on the text (NCES, 2006).

- Over one-fourth (27%) of twelfth-grade students scored below Basic, which means that they were unable to recognize the sequence of plot elements, to retrieve information from a highly detailed document, to connect document information to real-life contexts, or to make simple inferences from explicit details in a document (NCES, 2006; 2007).

- Only about one student in five (21%) of more than one million 2006 high-school graduates who took the ACT was ready for college-level reading assignments in all four core subject areas: mathematics, history, science, and English (ACT, 2006a).

Further, these low reading scores are correlated with high dropout rates. Nationally, researchers estimate the overall high-school graduation rate to be between only 66.6% and 71%. In 1998, 22% of white students, 44% of African-American students, and 46% of Latino students did not graduate from high school on time—proportions that are unacceptably high in an economy with fewer low-skill jobs available (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006b; Barton, 2005; Greene, 2002; Sum et al., 2003; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003).

B. The Opportunity Gap

While little has changed since 1992 in terms of the proportions of students who master reading to the level of proficiency compared with those who do not, what has changed—and what continues to rise rapidly—is the level and the complexity of literacy skill demanded for participation in society and the labor market in the 21st century. The opportunity gap continues to widen between those who have adequate levels of literacy and those who do not.

For example, twelfth-grade students who scored only at the Basic level or below on the NAEP will have great difficulty reading and comprehending texts like loan applications, employee-benefits documents, tax forms, vehicle warranties, insurance policies, computer user manuals, and many newspapers (Daggett, 2003). According to the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce:

This is a world in which a very high level of preparation in reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, science, literature, history, and the arts will be an indispensable foundation for everything that comes after for most members of the workforce. (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007, p. 7)

More than two-thirds of new jobs require some post-secondary education (ACT, 2006b). Compared to their counterparts in past economic eras, many more 21st-century workers will need to be able to:

- access information from a wide variety of sources
- select, comprehend, organize, interpret, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information
- communicate effectively by writing, speaking, and representing information
- use information, system technologies, and personal and interpersonal resources to accomplish tasks
- produce and apply new usable knowledge
- shift between working independently and working collaboratively as part of a problem-solving team
- self-regulate and monitor their own thinking and learning
- examine multiple perspectives on problems and solutions (Smith et al., 2000)

As school systems continue to adjust to these demands, students in middle and high school will be expected to read more difficult texts, do more with texts of different types, and handle larger amounts of reading (Smith et al., 2000). Reading to learn in the middle and high school years requires more than fluent decoding—it entails sophisticated higher-order thinking and a flexible grasp of texts that vary in style, format, vocabulary, purpose, and intended audience.

C. The Striving Adolescent Reader

In the last decade, educational research has been influential in helping to create new programs, teaching practices, and policies that support the goal of all children reading well by the end of third grade. Yet, while most researchers agree that early reading is important, the unfortunate truth remains that millions of adolescent students struggle with the range of texts they are expected to read and comprehend in middle- and high-school curriculums. While the inability to decode is rare among adolescent readers, many have difficulty with comprehension, inadequate background knowledge, unfamiliar vocabulary, and motivation (Schoenbach, 1999).

Striving adolescent readers have already experienced years of frustration with their academic texts. By middle school, many students have come to believe that they simply do not have the capacity to understand what they read. They lack the necessary motivation to even try to comprehend the classroom reading put in front of them. Add to this the insecurity and fear of humiliation with which many adolescents struggle in and out of the classroom, and you have a group of reluctant readers who are afraid to take any reading-related risks.

The good news, however, is that many educators have recognized the complexity of the problem and have developed research-based models that address the social and emotional components of teaching reluctant readers. *TextConnections* is built on the best of these proven models to provide teachers with the "hook" they need to inspire engagement and confidence in their striving adolescent readers.

II. *TextConnections:* Reading Intervention to Close the Gap

In response to the critical need for higher levels of adolescent literacy, PCI Education has designed *TextConnections*. The ultimate goal of this year-long course is to help middle- and high-school students read independently with understanding. *TextConnections* accomplishes this goal through its research-based program design, which rests on seven key principles of instruction.

A. Program Design

The course design for *TextConnections* draws heavily upon the work of several adolescent literacy specialists who are nationally recognized for their research-based approaches to developing independent, strategic readers. Course elements in the overall design of *TextConnections* are synthesized from instructional approaches developed by Ruth Schoenbach and her colleagues (1999), with comprehension and vocabulary strategies adapted from Kylene Beers (2003) and Robert Marzano (2004), respectively.

Based upon the reading apprenticeship framework (Schoenbach et al, 1999), the *TextConnections* course:

- builds social support for learning by helping teachers create an interactive classroom environment
- demystifies reading by making comprehension visible
- integrates the social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge-building dimensions of instruction
- places metacognitive conversation (internal and external) at the center of learning

At both the middle-school and the high-school level, *TextConnections* is organized around an engaging, relevant theme:

- Change (Grades 6–8)
- Identity (Grades 9–12)

These big ideas provide a purpose for reading and opportunities to make connections across the content areas. The course is divided into five instructional units:

- Reading Self and Society
- Reading Media
- Reading English Language Arts
- Reading Science
- Reading Social Studies (middle school) and Reading History (high school)

Each unit is organized around guiding questions related to the central theme (change or identity), with accompanying lessons and student materials designed to help students develop content-area knowledge and higher-level reasoning skills.

Research has demonstrated that, in addition to quality instruction, content knowledge is acquired through broad and deep reading. As students move through the grades, texts are written with increasingly complex assumptions about what students already know. Consequently, in order to successfully understand and use the new information to which they are introduced, students need some prior familiarity with the topics discussed in the texts (Hirsch, 2003; Pressley, 2000; Recht & Leslie, 1988; Torgesen et al., 2007). *TextConnections* helps students gain anchor knowledge for content-area study in other courses through their work with literary, science, and social studies texts.

Higher levels of content-area literacy demand a flexible grasp of texts that vary in style, format, vocabulary, purpose, and intended audience. To be literate is to be able to make sense of many kinds of texts—to read and to write for meaning in many different ways. As students advance through the grades, they are required, in ever more sophisticated ways, to break down complex material for a sense of its underlying structure, to organize pieces of information into coherent wholes, and to make evidence-based judgments about the

validity or the quality of ideas (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000; Bruner, 1957/1973; Krathwohl, 2002). *TextConnections* teaches students to "go beyond the information given" to analyze, to synthesize, to evaluate, to compare, to make inferences and predictions, and to draw conclusions from texts.

Each *TextConnections* unit includes five instructional strands:

- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Comprehension
- Independent Reading
- Writing

Fluency

What the research says:

Reading fluency is the ability to read text with accuracy, speed, and prosody (appropriate expression, including rhythm, intonation, and phrasing). Efficient, automatic readers chunk letters together into words and words together into phrases to increase reading speed. Fluency is positively correlated with reading comprehension (Blachman et al, 2004; Foorman, Breier, & Fletcher, 2003; Hook & Jones, 2002; LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Lyon, 1998; Moats, 1998, 1999; Torgesen & Mathes, 1998).

How *TextConnections* applies the research:

In each *TextConnections* unit, students receive explicit instruction and practice in reading with appropriate volume, pace, intonation, and phrasing through research-based fluency-practice activities that draw from popular culture and media (Welsch, 2006). These activities include:

- Modeled reading
- Paired oral reading with peer coaching and rating
- Poetry readings, readers theater, and other group performance projects

Vocabulary

What the research says:

Vocabulary is the link between the word-level processes of phonics and fluency and the meaning-making process of comprehension. In middle and high school, students encounter increasingly more complex texts and thousands of new words each year, including many more academic and literary words that reach beyond their ordinary, everyday oral-language interactions. New vocabulary is added when teachers explicitly teach new terms prior to reading and when they engage students in active exploration of the relationships among words and word structure, origin, and meaning. Students also learn many new words incidentally through multiple exposures to new terms during wide reading of a variety of

texts (Chall, 1983; Chall & Jacobs, 2003; Hirsch, 2003; Lehr, Osborn, & Hiebert, 2004; Lyon, 1998; Marzano, 2004; Marzano & Pickering, 2005; Moats, 1999; Stahl, 2003).

How *TextConnections* applies the research:

TextConnections includes instruction in academic vocabulary, structural vocabulary, and content-specific vocabulary, as well as high-frequency sight words for those students who need them (see the *Strategies Handbook*). Learning academic terms such as prior knowledge, inference question, and synthesis is critical for understanding the comprehension strategies taught in each unit. Familiarizing students with these terms allows students and teachers to share a vocabulary for talking about reading and thinking. Learning academic terms such as sensory language, plot conflict, scientific method, and primary resource aids in students' comprehension of material presented both in *TextConnections* and in their content-area courses.

TextConnections students build vocabulary by using:

- a research-based vocabulary-journal process to describe and to draw pictures of academic vocabulary terms (Marzano, 2004)
- a four-column vocabulary strategy to approach text that has difficult or unknown words
- context clues to discern meanings of unfamiliar words and to answer multiple-choice vocabulary items
- word-analysis strategies with roots and affixes to determine meanings of unfamiliar words

TextConnections vocabulary activities support the other instructional strands by giving students additional exposures to the new terms introduced in each section. Cumulative review activities at the end of each unit encourage students to actively monitor their level of understanding of each new vocabulary term. In addition, Spanish translations of the new vocabulary terms are provided throughout the course.

Comprehension

What the research says:

Competent readers actively monitor their understanding as they read. They purposely use cognitive strategies to make connections between the text, personal experience, real-world examples, and other texts. Striving adolescent readers require explicit instruction and support in the use of these strategies. They also need to spend extended time reading—and being read to—from texts about the same topic. By discussing the facts and the ideas in texts that cover the same topic, students gain what E. D. Hirsch (2003) calls "world knowledge," an essential component of reading comprehension (Beers, 2003; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Hinchman et al, 2004; Pressley, 2000; Torgesen et al., 2007).

How *TextConnections* applies the research:

TextConnections students receive explicit instruction and practice with the following comprehension strategies:

- Finding the main idea of a text
- Engaging prior knowledge and understanding the role of schema in text comprehension
- Connecting text to self, text to world, and text to text
- Generating questions during reading
- Answering questions based on text
- Monitoring comprehension during reading (metacognition/self-regulation)
- Summarizing important ideas
- Identifying and analyzing text structures
- Determining the importance of details versus big ideas
- Visualizing text
- Making inferences
- Synthesizing ideas in order to form opinions, clarify perspectives, and generate new ideas
- Learning test-taking strategies

Students practice these strategies through research-based activities that include thinking aloud, Question-Answer-Response (QAR), double-entry journals, graphic organizers, anticipation guides, and rating scales. Students learn to use these comprehension strategies with multiple types of texts—including literary, expository, and informational texts—as well as with online resources (Beers, 2003). They also gain solid background knowledge on topics such as cloning, human rights, and the presence of the media in their lives.

Independent Reading

What the research says:

Research strongly suggests that free reading of materials of choice—including regular, ongoing in-school independent reading—contributes to growth in fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, spelling, and writing skills. This is especially true for less mature readers, since regular opportunities in school to read materials that are of personal interest and that are matched to the reader's skill level provide the reading exposure that can build student interest in reading (Allington, 2005, 2007; Cullinan, 2000; Fisher, 2004; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006; Krashen, 2005, 2006; Marzano, 2004; Ozburn, 1995; Parr & Maguiness, 2005; Pilgreen, 2003; Yoon, 2002).

How *TextConnections* applies the research:

The independent reading strand of *TextConnections* offers students the chance to "put it all together"—to apply the fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, and writing strategies they are learning to their own self-selected texts. Students:

- complete reading autobiographies, surveys, and self-assessments to learn about their own reading behaviors and goals
- determine the kinds of books they like and learn how to choose books based on their interests and abilities
- learn independent reading routines
- read books containing themes and concepts relevant to course content as a way of building anchor knowledge and making cross-text connections
- learn different ways of responding to literature through response journals, book talks, and pair-share activities
- complete projects based upon their independent reading selections

The teacher assesses students' independent reading levels, guides students in making book selections, and tracks growth throughout the year.

Writing

What the research says:

Students' reading comprehension is further enhanced as they discuss their own views, consider alternative interpretations of the texts they read, and write about what they understand. Giving students frequent, regular opportunities to write about what they read enables the teacher to gain insight into their comprehension levels (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Fearn & Farnan, 2001; Fisher & Frey, 2003; Frey, Fisher, & Hernandez, 2003; Moats, 1999).

How *TextConnections* applies the research:

Because writing builds comprehension, students involved in *TextConnections* engage in Quickwrites (Graves & Kittle, 2005), which provide frequent opportunities for low-stakes writing and are used as:

- class-period entry or exit activities
- a way to introduce a topic and to tap into students' prior knowledge
- a review of content knowledge and skills

TextConnections students regularly write in response journals as a way of warming up to the lesson topics, activating their prior knowledge, and reflecting on their reading. The writing component of the course also includes process writing as students engage in the following writing projects:

Middle School

- In Unit 2, student groups create spoof advertisements.
- In Unit 3, students write tableaux performance scripts, first in groups, then individually.
- In Unit 4, students reformulate expository science texts into songs and poems.
- In Unit 5, students write a futuristic travel brochure.

High School

- In Unit 2, students create "above-the-fold" newspapers.
- In Unit 3, students write talk-show scripts.
- In Unit 4, students write persuasive essays about the controversial topic of human cloning.
- In Unit 5, students write "five-minute news hour" newscast scripts.

After prewriting, drafting, and revising, students perform or present their writing for the class, and their peers rate their writing and presentation skills using a rubric that the teacher models.

B. Key Principles

All of *TextConnections* instructional approaches and learning tasks that build fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, independent reading, and writing are based upon the following seven key instructional principles. Proven to be crucial for the academic success of striving adolescent readers, these principles guide effective teaching and learning and form the foundation of the *TextConnections* course design:

1. Scaffolded Instruction
2. Metacognitive Strategies
3. Memory Connections
4. Motivation and Engagement Through Choice and Relevancy
5. Guided Inquiry
6. Cooperative Learning and Effective Student Grouping
7. Individualized Student Learning

1. Scaffolded Instruction

Striving adolescent readers need a great deal of support and practice to become proficient readers. *TextConnections* is designed to help students develop independent, self-regulated, strategic reading skills through instruction that is deliberately and carefully scaffolded.

What the research says about scaffolded instruction:

Scaffolds are temporary external instructional supports, such as modeling and offering constructive feedback during guided and independent practice. These supports are used

during initial learning to break complex skills into manageable chunks to be more easily mastered. Scaffolded instruction provides students with a period of learning during which they can see new skills expertly modeled. They can then practice under watchful guidance, moving from assisted performance to competent independent performance. The supports are carefully removed as new skills become internalized, habitual, and automatic, freeing working memory for new tasks at hand (Clark & Graves, 2005; Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1990; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pressley, 2002; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

How *TextConnections* applies the research on scaffolded instruction:

Each *TextConnections* lesson begins with substantial teacher support and slowly decreases that support as students practice and assume responsibility for performing new skills. Scaffolded instruction is provided through a systematic gradual release of responsibility model that follows the cycle of direct instruction, modeling and guided practice with immediate feedback, independent practice/application with feedback, and assessment (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Pearson & Fielding, 1991).

For example, in the *TextConnections* comprehension strand, instruction is explicit and carefully sequenced. Students are presented with just the right level of challenge as they assume increasing responsibility so that they do not give up or fail. Each lesson typically adheres to the following research-confirmed sequence (Beers, 2003; Ellis & Worthington, 1994; Good & Brophy, 2003; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Rosenshine, 2002; Rosenshine & Meister, 1992):

- Direct instruction: The teacher begins by explaining a specific comprehension strategy, including how and when it is used.
- Modeling: The teacher models using the strategy while checking for student understanding.
- Guided practice with feedback: Students practice the strategy in pairs, groups, or individually under close teacher supervision with feedback and guidance.
- Independent practice/application: Students apply the strategy independently to a variety of texts, including texts that are self-selected.
- Assessment: Student performance is assessed formally through reading passages followed by multiple-choice, short-answer, and open-response test items. The Student Guide also includes a progress-monitoring graph on which individual comprehension checks are recorded so that both teacher and student can assess growth and determine what type of specific further practice is needed.

TextConnections instructional methodology allows all students to be successful throughout each lesson: before, during, and after reading. Pre-reading scaffolded strategies include the use of:

- anticipation guides
- K-W-L charts
- previewing and predicting strategies
- reviews of difficult passage vocabulary

During reading, students are encouraged to:

- predict what will happen next
- question the text
- monitor their understanding
- apply fix-up strategies
- clarify text
- respond to text on sticky notes or in journals
- make personal connections
- make inferences
- visualize
- re-read
- connect to the text and really think about what they are reading

Many of these techniques are also used as post-reading strategies. After reading students also may:

- summarize and retell
- identify and analyze text structure
- determine main idea and details
- make comparisons
- identify problems, causes, and effects
- identify literary elements

Thus, student confidence is built through structured assistance that leads toward independence, which further improves successful performance.

2. Metacognitive Strategies

For many striving adolescent readers, reading is passive in that they do not interact with the text or draw meaning from it. Metacognitive strategies empower students by giving them active control over their thinking and learning processes. *TextConnections* helps students to identify problems in their reading and to choose from a range of possible

solutions. The result is that students become active, rather than passive, readers and engage in the "co-creation" of meaning in a text.

What the research says about metacognition and metacognitive strategies:

Student achievement and teacher effectiveness are both enhanced by the self-regulated learning that results from metacognition, a process that involves task analysis, setting task-related learning goals, strategically planning and monitoring progress toward the goals, and knowing when and how to ask for help along the way. Self-regulated learners are intrinsically motivated, have a sense of self-efficacy, and believe that errors afford learning opportunities. They are aware of their own strengths and limitations and attribute outcomes to factors over which they have control, such as effort (Newman, 2002; Perry & Drummond, 2002; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Zimmerman, 2002).

Strategic metacognitive processes must be intentionally and explicitly taught through a skillful combination of teacher-directed and student-directed activities. Clear explanations, modeling, well defined learning goals, and shared understandings of the criteria by which those goals will be evaluated must be joined with ample opportunities for student choice and self-direction, during which the teacher continues to provide guidance and feedback (Barley et al., 2002; Corno, 2004; Eshel & Kohavi, 2003).

How *TextConnections* applies the research on metacognitive strategies:

The *TextConnections* course teaches metacognitive skills through direct instruction, teacher modeling with think-alouds, partner think-alouds, and "thinking silently" activities. Students learn to use cognitive tools like anticipation guides, rating scales, and self-assessments. In group activities, students learn strategies for reflecting on their thinking about the texts and also on their group processes. In addition, metacognitive techniques are used when students respond to texts in their journals and questioning is used as a metacognitive strategy throughout the course.

For example, drawing upon the work of Beers (2003), students participating in *TextConnections* learn to apply the following specific metacognitive comprehension strategies:

- Activate prior knowledge
- Monitor comprehension by
    - re-reading
    - checking for context clues
    - using the four-column vocabulary strategy
    - previewing and predicting
    - note taking
    - summarizing
    - using graphic and semantic organizers
    - questioning

- clarifying by checking other sources
- determining the main idea or essential message in a text
- Analyze text structure, including
  - comparison-contrast
  - cause-effect
  - problem-solution
  - chronological order
- Analyze text features, including
  - main headings
  - subheadings
  - photographs and captions
  - sidebars
  - italic or boldface text
  - bulleted items
- Analyze text organizers, including
  - table of contents
  - glossary
  - index

3. Memory Connections

Memory functions to process, store, and retrieve information. A critical goal of the *TextConnections* curriculum is learning for transfer—building students' ability to store information and processes in long-term memory in such a way that they can be accessed and applied appropriately in new contexts. Because striving adolescent readers often lack adequate background knowledge, learning how to process and use prior knowledge is a key component of *TextConnections*.

What the research says about memory and learning:

Learning involves the interaction of working memory and long-term memory. Working, or short-term, memory is the "surface" consciousness that engages with new information or experience, whether verbal, visual, or sensory. Students store information in long-term memory by means of interconnected networks called knowledge structures, frameworks, or schemas. The size of a student's knowledge structures—the number, strength, organization, and richness of connections between pieces of information—affects the ability to process new information and to solve problems (Bransford & Vye, 1984; Rosenshine, 2002).

Knowledge frameworks include verbal (text, discussion, writing), visual (internal imagery, colors, drawings, films, photos, charts, diagrams), and sensory (smells, sounds, textures) "packets" of information in separately functioning but interrelated neurological circuit

systems, both linguistic and nonlinguistic. For example, concrete words that readily evoke mental images (e.g, apple, elephant, tree) are more easily remembered than words that evoke mental images with more difficulty (e.g., fact, thing) or words that evoke concepts (e.g., true). This is because concrete words are encoded both linguistically and nonlinguistically in the brain through functionally independent yet interconnected coding systems (Richardson, 2003).

Therefore, students' cognitive schemas are fortified and learning is bolstered when teachers present information in a manner that helps them organize, store, and retrieve the new knowledge by activating all of these interconnected coding systems. In order for sustained learning to occur, students must actively engage with lesson content through various forms of practice, and they must receive feedback on their performance in order to improve it. Students also need multiple opportunities to compare and contrast new knowledge and processes with what is already familiar so that they can identify what they do and do not know (Anderson, 1989; Anderson, Greeno, Reder, & Simon, 2000; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Good & Brophy, 2003; Marzano, 1998; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992).

Instruction that incorporates verbal, visual, and sensory experiences with the new material—including physical activity and self-generated representations of all types—enables students to encode this information in long-term memory through multiple modalities, which, in turn, renders it more durable, robust, and easily accessible in new contexts. Emotional, social, cognitive, physical, and reflective neurological systems that process incoming information must work together if students are to learn to transfer (Gellevij et al., 2002; Given, 2000; Greenleaf, 2005; Richardson, 2003; Sadoski, 2005; Snow, 2002).

Because working memory is limited and can attend to only a few "chunks" of information at any one time, it is incapable of highly complex interactions between multiple pieces of new information that have not been previously stored in long-term memory. Therefore, rather than requiring students to engage in complex reasoning processes involving combinations of unfamiliar elements, effective instruction teaches them to break multi-part problems or ideas into manageable sub-components (Sweller, van Merrienboer, & Paas, 1998).

How *TextConnections* applies the research on building memory connections:

TextConnections lessons include activities that explicitly help students connect new information to prior knowledge, use visualization techniques, and have opportunity for repeated exposure through a variety of engaging, hands-on activities. *TextConnections* instruction is designed to help students actively encode new concepts and skills into long-term memory by linking this new information with previously stored knowledge through the use of three encoding processes: elaborative encoding, visual imagery encoding, and organizational encoding.

- Elaborative encoding purposefully helps students make meaningful connections between new information and previously stored information in order to enhance retention. In *TextConnections*, when students activate prior knowledge before, during, and after reading, they are increasing their ability to do elaborative encoding.

- Visual imagery encoding increases the chance that new information will be stored in long-term memory. *TextConnections* students create visual images to activate prior knowledge and to help them store information by converting it into mental pictures and by connecting two items in memory. This process allows students to create an image that shows the two items interacting.

- Organizational encoding involves categorizing pieces of information according to the relationships among them, which can greatly enhance recall, especially when working with multiple-level categories from general to specific. In *TextConnections*, sorting and categorizing activities are included throughout the course.

4. Motivation and Engagement Through Choice and Relevancy

TextConnections is designed to motivate striving adolescent readers through a learning environment that offers them choice, instruction, and learning topics that are relevant to their own lives, along with learning activities that encourage them to actively engage with texts, content, other students, and the world.

What the research says about motivation:

Motivation to read is vital because the extent to which students do or do not engage in regular, frequent reading significantly determines the extent to which fluency, vocabulary, content knowledge, higher-order thinking skills, and comprehension strategies will develop. Students who become efficient readers and who learn to enjoy reading at an early age set an "upward spiral" into motion. They are more likely to read more over the years and thereby to make greater academic gains, while students who struggle with reading lose academic ground as they move through the grades (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Stanovich, 1986).

When students are empowered to become active participants in their learning,

- behavior problems decrease
- tasks are completed more quickly
- the quality of their work improves
- they are more likely to invest time in learning
- the likelihood that they will try difficult tasks increases
- they exhibit more creativity and higher-order thinking
- their perception of themselves as learners becomes more positive (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Ragozzino et al, 2003)

Research has shown that when classroom environments provide a wealth of interesting and appropriate texts, and when students make their own choices from these texts and

collaborate with others while reading, the impacts on reading achievement are larger than those reported by the National Reading Panel for the presence of systematic phonics instruction (Allington, 2005; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004).

Self-efficacy, a student's belief in his or her own capacity to learn from reading, is also an important factor in motivation (Dweck, 1989; Vacca, 2006). Students' beliefs about their own competence regarding reading and writing tend to decline as they enter middle school and move from self-contained classrooms to content-area courses with different teachers and a greater emphasis on course grades (Oldfather & McLaughlin, 1993; Wigfield et al, 1991).

In light of these findings, external rewards, consequences, and competition should be used only sparingly with striving adolescent readers. While promised rewards or threatened punishments may serve to control behavior temporarily, they undermine intrinsic motivation for interesting tasks and impede the internalized self-regulation students need to persevere at tasks that are less interesting but in which students see intrinsic or longer-range value (Deci et al, 1991; Guthrie, 2001).

How *TextConnections* applies the research on student motivation:

Choice and relevancy are fostered in several ways. First, through the independent reading component of *TextConnections*, students have opportunities to choose their own relevant, high-interest materials, which need not be limited to books, but can include other print materials and electronic media. Lists of recommended "Good Reads," along with information on the reading level of each book, are included in the *Teacher Handbook*.

TextConnections also provides a wide range of passages written to engage the striving adolescent reader. The first two units of the course are specifically written to "hook" the striving adolescent reader back into the learning experience. Passage topics include hip-hop artist Mary J. Blige and her passion for reading, advertising that targets teens, cloning, and the American road trip. Students also read excerpts from popular literature, such as Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J. K. Rowling, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

In addition, the *TextConnections* curriculum encourages teachers to provide choice. For example, students may select from among multiple Quickwrite prompts. Also, after finishing an independent reading selection, students can choose from several different projects to celebrate their accomplishments. Such projects include writing a letter to the teacher, creating a storyboarded movie preview, and so on.

Students are more likely to be excited about learning when it involves engagement with others—the teacher, the author, other students, or the world at large. *TextConnections* gives students opportunities to work cooperatively in pairs or small groups in almost every lesson. They are also invited to engage with the teacher and the rest of the class in whole-class, open-ended discussions, and with the text and author through their response journals. Sharing information and ideas, challenging each other's interpretations,

rethinking their own interpretations, and solving problems together all lead to deeper understandings of texts and the many reading-related concepts we want students to learn.

5. Guided Inquiry

In addition to choice, relevancy, and engagement, students are motivated by inquiry-based teaching approaches that challenge them to seek out answers to their own questions. Energizing striving adolescent readers by engaging them in their own thinking processes is the heart of *TextConnections*.

What research says about guided inquiry:

Students learn effectively when they are assigned tasks that go beyond rote recall to require problem solving, critical thinking, and conceptual understanding. Therefore, instructional goals that emphasize development of student expertise through application of their knowledge are vital. Student achievement is improved when students have opportunities to engage in experimental inquiry, problem solving, decision making, investigation, and the generation and testing of hypotheses (Good & Brophy, 2003; Marzano, 1998, 2003; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollack, 2001).

One instructional approach in line with these findings is inquiry-based learning, which has been described as:

…a way of learning that requires active engagement. The learner identifies what he already knows, asks intriguing questions about what he does not know, investigates the answers, constructs new understandings, and shares those understandings with others. Inquiry involves reading, writing, speaking, and listening to learn. The entire process is permeated with reflection and critical thinking. The result of inquiry is not only deep learning about the inquiry question, but also the development of skills for independent learning. (Stripling, 2004, p. 15)

Inquiry-based instructional approaches result in students' increased self-direction, higher levels of comprehension, growth in interpersonal skills and teamwork, and greater motivation to learn (Harada & Yoshina, 2004).

How *TextConnections* applies the research on guided inquiry:

TextConnections actively involves students in asking questions, seeking answers, cooperating, and collaborating to solve problems. Students participating in *TextConnections* assume responsibility for their own learning through:

- peer- and self-assessments
- reflective practices and response journals
- student-led discussions and literature circles
- student-selected activities

Every *TextConnections* unit is organized around guiding questions that offer a starting point for generating student questions. Questioning is also used as a teaching strategy throughout the course. Students are encouraged to question the text themselves and to respond to texts and class topics using open-ended inquiry approaches.

More extended inquiry techniques are used in larger projects, such as career-goal setting and examining the effects of advertising on popular culture. *TextConnections* teachers are encouraged to elicit students' own questions and to model asking open-ended questions that promote diverse perspectives, that test moral and ethical values, or that make connections to the wider world.

6. Cooperative Learning and Effective Student Grouping

Many striving adolescent readers are reluctant to talk about a text in front of a large group. Therefore, *TextConnections* students frequently interact with texts in pairs or small groups in order to deepen their understanding through collaborative and cooperative learning processes.

What the research says about effective student grouping:

Structured, scaffolded group work in which students follow teacher-designed prompts as to what to discuss and how to manage the discussion (including student roles and responsibilities) can benefit students who would be reticent to express their ideas to the whole class. Group work provides smaller contexts in which they can experiment with critical thinking, receive peer validation, and build social and emotional confidence. This requires teacher planning for grouping students in ways that will best accommodate individual student needs, capabilities, and styles (Topping, 2005; Willis, 2007).

When students work in effectively designed cooperative/collaborative pairs or groups, their interest in reading is bolstered. They exert more effort to achieve, use higher-level reasoning strategies more frequently, and retain information more accurately. Students' understanding of concepts and ideas, as well as their interpersonal communication skills, increase when they must work to explain and argue ideas rather than when they passively receive transmitted information. Social collaboration increases interest in reading (Guthrie, 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Topping, 2005).

Well designed pair and group work dramatically increases the amount of class time students have to actively engage with academic material. To be effective, pair or group activities must have very clear goals that require the participation of all group members and that are attainable by students without constant, direct teacher guidance. Monitoring, arbitrating, and redirecting as necessary, the teacher remains an active, circulating resource during group work. Assessment rubrics for group tasks should be clear from the beginning so that both students and the teacher can evaluate the group's work. Group work is most effective when there is both group and individual accountability (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Topping, 2005; Willis, 2007).

How *TextConnections* applies the research on effective student grouping:

TextConnections lessons frequently include group-work or pair-share activities. The Teacher Handbook and *Teacher Guide* offer practical suggestions for effectively grouping students and for procedures for successful group work. *TextConnections* students are encouraged to follow practical guidelines for group work, including active listening, positive responses, and focused conversation.

As students work in pairs or groups, *TextConnections* teachers:

- monitor performance by circulating throughout the class, observing groups as they work
- occasionally sit in with each group for a few minutes at a time
- require periodic self-assessment of team functioning
- assess both individual participation and the final group product

7. Individualized Student Learning

Any class of students will contain a range of learning needs and language skills. *TextConnections* does not assume that a set of one-size-fits-all activities will build the reading skills of all students in the same way at the same time. Rather, the course's learning activities have been designed to support the learning needs of a wide range of striving adolescent readers, including English language learners.

What research says about individualizing student learning:

Adolescents at all reading levels are still developing fluency and knowledge of word patterns and meanings, and every student's reading performance is multidimensional. Each student needs an appropriate level of challenge and a safe, responsive, and supportive learning environment in order to effectively process new information and make sense of it in light of previous learning (Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998). For example, one student with weak decoding skills may comprehend and think critically when she hears the text read, while another student may use more sophisticated strategies for reading self-selected, high-interest text than he does when reading an assigned textbook (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000).

Ivey and Broaddus (2000) suggest four practices that build a foundation for teaching reading to a wide range of students:

- Move independent reading to the front of instruction
- Provide access to varied reading materials
- Approach reading instruction as a developmental process
- Learn about individual students as readers and writers

Student-centered approaches differentiate instruction according to student readiness, interests, and learning profile or preferences (Tomlinson, 2005).

How *TextConnections* applies the research on individualizing student learning:

The *TextConnections* Teacher Guide provides a variety of tools to help all students make connections between texts, self, and the wider world, including:

- models for using reading strategies in different contexts
- lesson extensions
- adaptations for extra support
- extra practice options for fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary
- graphic organizers
- anticipation guides
- rating scales
- reading comprehension passages designed with striving readers in mind
- Spanish translations of vocabulary terms

TextConnections guides teachers to assess students' instructional needs regularly and to vary approaches and teaching styles to incorporate visual, auditory, and hands-on modalities in order to increase the achievement of all students. A rich array of suggestions for meeting the needs of English language learners is also included.

III. Conclusion: Meeting the Needs of Striving Adolescent Readers and Their Teachers

According to the National Council of Teachers of English (2004), "Reading is not a technical skill acquired once and for all in the primary grades, but rather a developmental process. A reader's competence continues to grow through engagement with various types of texts and wide reading for various purposes over a lifetime." The NCTE goes on to elaborate on what striving adolescent readers and their teachers need.

Adolescent striving readers need:

- sustained experiences with diverse texts in a variety of genres that offer multiple perspectives on real-life experiences. Although many of these texts will be required by the curriculum, others should be self-selected and of high interest to the reader. Wide independent reading develops fluency, builds vocabulary and knowledge of text structures, and offers readers the experiences they need to read and construct meaning with more challenging texts. Texts should be broadly viewed to include print, electronic, and visual media.
- conversations/discussions regarding texts that are authentic, student-initiated, and teacher-facilitated. Such discussion should lead to diverse interpretations of a text that deepen the conversation.

- experience in thinking critically about how they engage with texts:
  - When do I comprehend?
  - What do I do to understand a text?
  - When do I not understand a text?
  - What can I do when meaning breaks down?
- experience in critical examination of texts that helps them to:
  - recognize how texts are organized in various disciplines and genres
  - question and investigate various social, political, and historical content and purposes within texts
  - make connections between texts, and between texts and personal experiences to act on and to react to the world
  - understand multiple meanings and richness of texts and layers of complexity

Teachers of adolescents need:

- adequate and appropriate reading materials that tap students' diverse interests and represent a range of difficulty. Continued support and professional development assist in:
  - bridging adolescents' rich literacy backgrounds and school literacy
  - teaching literacy in their disciplines as an essential way of learning in their disciplines
  - recognizing when students are not making meaning with text and providing appropriate, strategic assistance to read course content effectively
  - facilitating student-initiated conversations regarding texts that are authentic and relevant to real-life experiences
  - creating environments that allow students to engage in critical examinations of texts as they dissect, deconstruct, and re-construct in an effort to engage in meaning making and comprehension processes

TextConnections meets these needs through a well organized, carefully designed program of instruction based upon proven best practices for increasing striving adolescent readers' fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, writing, and independent reading skills. A scaffolded lesson structure and relevant, high-interest content allows *TextConnections* to actively engage striving adolescent readers in learning and using metacognitive strategies to guide their encounters with text.

By employing both linguistic and nonlinguistic modalities, *TextConnections* students build robust memory connections between new information and prior knowledge. Choice, relevance, and the opportunity to pursue their own questions keep students engaged in their learning. Striving adolescent readers' need for social contexts of learning is met through *TextConnections* peer-learning activities, while students' individual progress and requirements for specific types of practice or intervention are monitored through a variety of formal and informal assessments that are used to inform and to guide instruction.

Finally, teacher support and professional development are carefully embedded throughout the *TextConnections* program in the Teacher Guide and accompanying Teacher Handbook and *Strategies Handbook*. *TextConnections* provides a wide array of tools to effectively enable teachers to engage their students daily in successful, strategic encounters with texts that build content knowledge and that increase students' confidence and interest in reading.

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