Becoming a "WOW Reader": Context and Continuity in a Second Grade Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This five month qualitative study explored, over time and across literacy events, the ways in which a second grade teacher, Ms. Wilson, and her students built a shared frame of reference, or shared mental context, for viewing reading. Data sources included: field notes, video and audiotaped records, artifacts, and teacher and student interviews. Analysis was informed by Mercer's (2000) notions of context and continuity and considered the ways in which students and teacher drew upon contextual resources, both the context immediately available to them within the classroom and in the surrounding discourse, as well as *displaced contexts*, those objects, words, and understandings occurring in the past (Mercer, 2000). Constant-comparative and discourse analysis yielded three themes related to the building and maintenance of an active stance towards reading – what the students and their teacher called "WOW reading." First, the teacher encouraged students to draw on a variety of contextual resources, including personal experience, shared experiences, and the text environment to make sense of their reading. Second, Ms. Wilson talked explicitly about interpretive strategies and their connections to books, introducing a meta-level to their conversations. Third, students had multiple opportunities to engage in reading and thinking about reading. Theoretically, this study illuminates the building of and building on of shared contexts within lessons and the continuity that develops across classroom lessons. As well, it provides insights into the ways in which teachers may help students draw on a variety of contextual resources, in and out of school, that afford rich opportunities for learning.

> Good teachers help students see the educational woods as they lead them through the trees, and it is through teachers' effective use of language that a history of classroom experience can be transformed into a future of educational progress (Mercer, 2000, p. 55).

In the above quote, Neil Mercer (2000) aptly portrays teaching and learning as a connective and ongoing process.

This paper takes Mercer's theoretical framework of the "guided construction of knowledge" as a way of viewing experiences in a second grade classroom. Mercer and other socio-cultural theorists suggest that teaching-and-learning is a culturally-sensitive, interactive process. Rather than learning through the transmission of information, skills and understandings are appropriated through guided participation in cultural activities (Mercer, 1995; 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). The development of children's knowledge and understanding is shaped by their interactions and relationships with others – both with peers and with adults. Language, then, plays a vital role in the developmental process.

Researchers agree that while teachers are moving away from more directorial roles, their role as facilitator, guide, and coach is crucial to students' learning (Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, & Crawford, 1999). Mercer (1995) and Cazden (2001), among many others, suggest that to understand the roles these teachers play, focusing on the usually transparent medium of classroom language or discourse is key, studying the classroom as a network of linguistic relations. Discourse analysts (Bloome, 1989; Lewis, 1995) have done exactly this, examining any number of issues related to discourse and learning, for example, power, positioning, gender, etc.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which one second grade teacher, with her fifteen students, constructed shared understandings over time related to ways of thinking about reading. To examine this construction of shared understandings, I use Mercer's notions of context and continuity to explore how teacher and students draw on a range of contextual resources, both in and out of school, to make sense of their experiences.

According to Mercer and his colleagues (Edwards & Mercer, 1987; Mercer, 1995; 2000) *context* "consists of whatever information listeners (or readers) use to make sense of what is said (or written)" (p. 20). Context is both more and less than the surrounding physical, or even linguistic, environment of an interaction; what matters is what the participants in the communication understand and see as relevant. Context, then, is a mental phenomenon. At any given moment, speakers and listeners are drawing on a number of *contextual resources* to make sense of their interactions with

others. Participants actively negotiate, as the conversation moves forward, what to take as context, or as relevant, in order to make sense of the interaction. Further, context can be the immediately surrounding objects or words as well as *displaced contexts* in which speakers or writers reference objects, words, and understandings that occurred in the past (Mercer, 2000). In a similar way, part of the context for any conversation is the previously shared experiences of the participants and any shared knowledge built during those experiences. For example, if two university colleagues have a discussion on Monday around the topic of a particular article they are writing together, their conversation on Tuesday will necessarily take portions of the first conversation as context, both in the kinds of interactions they have around this topic and the shared understandings about the content of the article.

This building up of shared knowledge in interactions becomes immensely more difficult in a classroom with 15-20 students and one teacher. Mercer argues that successful "education" depends on the establishment of these shared understandings or shared mental contexts. Participants share relevant past experience and information and then use this "common knowledge" as the foundation, the *context*, for the joint activity that follows. *Continuity* occurs as these contexts are shared and developed over time. Classroom conversations have a history and a future – what Janet Maybin (1994) calls "the long conversation of teaching and learning." Teachers help establish continuity, or build this long conversation, through a variety of pedagogical techniques, including: recaps, reformulations, repetitions, reformulations.

Within this long conversation of teaching and learning, students and teacher also need to have a shared mental context or frame of reference if they are to make the most of classroom interactions. A shared frame of reference involves shared values and assumptions about purpose (Mercer, 2000). In classrooms, the teacher and students have often not built up a shared context for communication and this kind of shared frame is not achieved. Attempts to build context from shared history can be done successfully or unsuccessfully. Mercer examines "the joint action of context-building, which creates minute-by-minute shared frames of reference for keeping a conversation on track" (p. 58), but typically does so by examining single classroom lessons. While his analyses offer insights into the moment-to-moment unfolding of lessons and can create detailed interpretations of what learning looks like in those moments, they provide less insight into learning that occurs across lessons. Other researchers have looked across lessons, but have focused on lesson and interactional structure (Mehan, 1979; Cazden, 2001). However, learning in schools is not just about structure, but also about the building up of cohesive content in classrooms.

In this paper, I explore, over time and across literacy events, the ways in which Ms. Wilson[1] helped students build a shared frame of reference, or shared mental context, for viewing reading as they engaged in joint literacy activities and drew on a range of contextual resources. In doing so, I highlight specific kinds of contextual resources drawn on by the students and how these were encouraged, taken up, and supported by Ms. Wilson.

METHOD

This qualitative study explored classroom interaction patterns and how these related to literacy learning. The research occurred over five months, from January to May, and took place in a second grade classroom at Chavez Elementary. My original intent, upon entering this classroom for research purposes, was to take a look at how students learned strategies to use in their small group talk. Because of earlier observations in Ms. Wilson's classroom indicating high on-task behavior and productive talk during small group and independent work, I returned to Ms. Wilson's classroom to learn how her students learned to work productively in groups. I discovered that while Ms. Wilson did indeed teach particular conversational strategies, other features of this community and Ms. Wilson's teaching seemed more salient. The students were successful in their work with each other not only because they had particular things to say in their conversations, but also because they had appropriated a way of thinking about reading, and learning, more generally, that pervaded all aspects of the curriculum. Students were productive in their group work and independent reading because they were excited about reading and learning – they were curious to find out, to dig deeper, and to learn from one another. Although other reasons for this productiveness were clear in the data – affective climate of the room; expectation of respectful treatment; strong community – I turned first to an analysis of how these students and their teacher constructed these understandings about reading.

Participants

Participants included Ms. Wilson, who was in her second year of teaching and had been referred to me as an exemplary teacher, and her 15 students. Ms. Wilson completed a year-long internship at Chavez at the conclusion of her teacher preparation program at a nearby university. As a literacy professor at that university, I heard of her from another faculty member when I was in the process of seeking out teachers and classrooms for research purposes. A colleague, who taught Ms. Wilson in a number of her classes and was knowledgeable about her teaching, recommended I observe Ms. Wilson, whom she described as an excellent teacher. Following her internship at Chavez, which she described as a "comfortable space," Ms. Wilson was hired as a full-time

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.

teacher. The classroom population was reflective of school population that drew from surrounding working-class to lower-income neighborhoods. Most students walked to school or were dropped off by their parents or other family members. This particular class included 11 Latino(a) children, two African-American, and two European American students; there were 9 boys and 6 girls. All students spoke fluent English. Parents' involvement in this study was limited to providing consent for their child's participation.

Data Collection

Data collection included observations, with videotaping/ audiotaping in the classroom (1 to 2 days a week on average), teacher and student interviews, and collection of artifacts, including lesson plans, teacher's notes, student work, examples of student writing, and classroom assessments of student. Over a period of 20 weeks, I observed the classroom a total of 35 times. As a participant-observer, although I would occasionally help students as they worked or answer questions, I most often acted as an observer. I sat in the back of the classroom, taking notes by hand or by laptop computer. Ms. Wilson often mentioned me during class as someone who was able to provide help if needed, although the students rarely sought me out in this way. Field notes were compre-hensive, but they focused primarily on teacher and student interactions around texts across classroom events. These notes were expanded following observations, and theoreti-cal, methodological, and personal notes (adapted from Corsaro, 1985) were added. Field notes of discussions or teacher/student interactions were expanded to include a close paraphrase of teacher and student talk. Episodes related to the building of shared understandings of reading as well as the teacher's use of meta-language, or language about read-ing, and students' uptake of this shared language were transcribed. Audio and videotapes were catalogued and indexed in the expanded field notes to facilitate access to pertinent episodes or critical events.

I interviewed the teacher formally twice and informally multiple times. The first interview focused more generally on her decisions about curriculum and her thoughts on the students. The second interview centered on her use of informational texts, as well as her purposes for particular literacy events and texts. Field notes documented a number of informal conversations with students that occurred usually in the context of self-selected reading as students encountered various texts. In addition, I formally interviewed eleven students. Of the four students who were not interviewed, two were students who joined the classroom late in the year and two were unavailable for interview. These interviews included questions related to students' relationships with other students and with Ms. Wilson, thoughts on the class-room and curriculum, and their perceptions of themselves as readers and learners. All interviews were transcribed.

Data analysis was inductive and used the constant-comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and discourse analysis of interaction patterns during classroom events. The constant-comparative method involves the comparison of segments of data to determine similarities and differences, with the purpose of detecting patterns and categories in the data set. Constant-comparative analysis yielded a number of themes related to interaction and learning in this second grade classroom, including the ways in which Ms. Wilson built continuity in her lessons over time. A more detailed analysis suggested that she was drawing on various contextual resources that allowed her to effectively communicate with students and helping students draw on contextual resources that allowed them to make better sense of classroom lessons. Discourse analysis, guided by Mercer's analytic scheme, was used to explore lesson data from across the semester for evidence of contextual resources used by both teacher and students. Because what speakers and listeners draw on is indeed a mental process, I inferred what was being treated as contextual by noticing the reference speakers made and how the information they put into their conversations was treated as an accumulated basis of common knowledge as their conversations unfolded over time. This analysis focused first on analysis of single lessons, usually read aloud sessions in which Ms. Wilson's role was most salient, and then moved to an analysis across multiple events.

Classroom Context

Ms. Wilson called her students her "treasures," and they were known as such around Chavez. Ms. Wilson emphasized to students the importance of Treasures treating each other with kindness and respect. She describes her thoughts below.

> I just want them to… learn something every day… and what's more important to me even in that is… I'm a really life-skills-driven girl. Like if they know, and I think they all do, what respect means and responsibility, and then they can take that with them for the rest of their lives and I think… it's important to educate the full little person. [teacher interview]

Data collected during the Spring semester uncovered little negative behavior directed at their peers.

Ms. Wilson also brought to her classroom a passion for reading and for learning, a passion that she wanted to pass on to students.

> I think it's important to model being a learner yourself, and I want them to be passionate about learning and reading, and that's why I think it's important for me to show them that I'm passion-ate about it, too, and excited. And kind of unlocking, you know, something special for them… It's so funny to me how, if you let that happen, how each of them has their own little

thing that they let emerge that they're interested in… I guess the whole goal really is to be a life-long learner. You know, establish good learning habits… so that you prepare them for when they leave your classroom. You're giving them tools to be successful along the way.

[teacher interview]

Her passionate stance towards learning was contagious. Students were curious about the world around them and found a way to explore this world within the classroom through books, conversations, and the internet.

The daily schedule in Ms. Wilson's classroom consisted of a morning literacy block, beginning with an interactive read-aloud event, featuring fiction and nonfiction texts. These sessions were always characterized by active discussion that occurred before, during, and after the read aloud. Following the read aloud, students moved directly into Self-Selected Reading (SSR) during which they took their SSR boxes – magazine boxes with 10 or so books they had selected earlier– and large pillows, what they called their "comfy spaces," and found places around the room to sit and read. Following SSR, on most days, students engaged in various literacy centers as Ms. Wilson worked with small guided reading groups in the corner of the room. The morning concluded with Writing Workshop in which students worked on their writing – all at varying stages of the writing process although usually working on the same genre of text. Following lunch, students returned to the classroom to participate in math and science investigations. Typically, social studies topics were brought into the curriculum during her literacy block, often through the reading of historical and nonfiction texts.

RESULTS

Analysis indicated that Ms. Wilson and her students effectively built shared understandings of ways of thinking about and approaching reading. In other words, the teacher and students developed a shared frame for reading. Over time, the classroom community appropriated, with guidance from the teacher, a way of thinking about reading that valued (a) a deep and careful consideration of the text, and (b) making connections between the text, themselves, other texts, and world knowledge. At the same time, Ms. Wilson and her students read texts for a variety of purposes, including to enjoy them, to find information, and to become better readers.

Students' appropriation of this way of thinking and acting was evident in their actions during whole group discussion of literature, small group guided reading sessions, self-selected reading, and in fact, during discussions of other content areas (see Table 1). Analysis across data sources and across classroom events documented numerous behaviors in line with this stance toward reading. Initial

observations in this classroom indicated high rates of on-task activity during SSR as well as pair or small group work. Upon closer observation it was clear that students were not just on-task, but students were engaged in *active* reading across multiple genres. They read, laughed to themselves at the funny parts, leaned over and asked questions of their neighbors, pointed out interesting parts to others, and told stories about their personal lives that related to the books. The following episode with Manuel, drawn from my expanded field notes, provides a representative example of how students engaged with reading in this classroom.

I sit down with Manuel, who is about halfway through *The Rain Came Down* (Shannon). I ask him if I can listen to him read and he starts telling me about all of the things in this very busy picture he's looking at. He describes what is happening in the picture, which illustrates things that have happened thus far in the story (… "there's holes in the top of this store but they could be, and um, and I think both stores have leaks in their stores and it keeps being wet…"). When I ask Manuel how he knows all of this, he responds "cause I read it" and moves back into re-telling the story. Suspecting he might just be looking at the pictures or is already familiar with the book, I ask him if he's read it before, to which he answers "no." Then, I ask him to read to me. He reads fluently for several pages and then excitedly flips back to show me a "really good part."

Interactions such as this one were common in my field notes. Students were also able to articulate their understandings about reading, particularly when they were asked to do so by their teacher. Periodically, Ms. Wilson asked students at the end of self-selected reading about what they were doing to be "WOW readers" – a label used for good reading in the classroom. Students answered with such comments as, "I read a new genre," "I used expression in my reading," "I read way down deep," "I stopped to think," and "I used chunks to figure out a word." This active, thoughtful stance towards reading played out during small and whole group discussions, as students voiced connections to their lives, asked questions about things that confused them, and spontaneously made predictions.

This way of thinking about reading was one that was highly valued and intentionally forwarded by Ms. Wilson. Over time, students came to see reading as a meaning-making process that is about making connections to themselves and their past experiences and understandings. In other words, students viewed experiences inside and outside the classroom as relevant context for making sense of their reading and discussions.

Analysis indicated a number of themes related to the building and maintenance of this shared frame over time. First, Ms. Wilson taught and elicited students' connections

TABLE 1

Key understandings about reading in Ms. Wilson's classroom

"WOW" Readers	Explanation	Examples of Student Actions
Enjoy reading	Students show enjoyment by • Choosing to read at home and school • Sharing their reading with others • Engaging with their reading	• Students choose to read during SSR (high rates of on-task reading documented in field notes) • Janelle and Mark sit next to each other reading a book together & telling stories • Maria asks to reread a book that Ms. Wilson read in Read Aloud • Jeremy makes comments directed at the characters as the class reads *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* (i.e., "He is with ya'll. Ya'll are sitting on him!") • Students comment on their enjoyment of reading in student interviews.
Read for particular purposes	Students read • To enjoy story • To enjoy the sounds of language (e.g., poetry) • To find out • To become better readers	• Mark reads from a joke book during SSR, marking his favorite jokes to share later • Analea and Angela read *Sick* chorally during SSR • Jeremy takes *Five Little Monkeys* home to practice reading it for his kindergarten buddy • Angela looks through books on trees to answer a question she has about how maple syrup is made • Jose finds a book on storms to answer a question about thunder/lightning during a storm
Read multiple genres	Students read multiple genres during SSR and are exposed to multiple genres during instructional events (e.g., read aloud, guided reading, Science investigations, etc.)	• See above examples • During daily SSR, students read from a range of genres including poetry, cartoons, magazines, informational books, joke/riddle books, newsletters, storybooks, and student-written stories • According to her interview & documented in field notes, Ms. Wilson tries to read fiction, non-fiction, poetry & a joke per day
Read "way down deep"	Students read "way down deep" by • "Stopping to think" before, during, and after their reading • Making connections • Reading for meaning • Using strategies to make sense of their reading	• Analea comments, "Reading a book is fun because you can stop to think about what happened." • Students spontaneously make predictions and ask questions about what they are reading, during whole group discussions and during SSR individual reading • Students make a range of connections to personal experience, to other texts, to shared experiences • Manuel leans over to his neighbor during SSR to ask him a question about something he doesn't understand in the book he is reading

during literature discussions. She encouraged students to draw on a variety of contextual resources to make sense of their reading. Second, Ms. Wilson talked explicitly about interpretive strategies and their connections to books, introducing a meta-level to their conversations. Third, students had multiple opportunities to engage in reading and thinking about reading. Each of these themes is discussed below.

Connections:
Widening Contextual Resources for Meaning-Making

Ms. Wilson encouraged students to draw on previous experiences by teaching and encouraging students to "make connections," including text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997). This "connections" language provided students with a framework through which they made connections to many areas of their lives in and out of the classroom. In part through this connection framework, Ms. Wilson supported students in their links to previous lessons and past experiences. Ms. Wilson highlighted as relevant several contextual resources students might use to make sense of their reading, including personal experiences, shared classroom experiences, and other texts. This connection-making engaged students in active sense-making and at the same time helped build continuity across lessons and texts.

Personal experiences. One contextual resource used by both students and Ms. Wilson were personal experiences, many of which took place outside of school walls, such as experiences in their homes, their families, and their communities. Although I focus specifically on literacy events, Ms. Wilson's emphasis on personal connections occurred across the curriculum. Ms. Wilson facilitated the students' sharing of their personal experiences in several ways. First, she shared her own personal connections. She often modeled connections explicitly in whole group sessions, starting with "You know what that makes me think about?" At other times, she simply shared personal stories with students in one-on-one situations. For example, when Jose stopped reading to share something he noticed about dandelions, Ms. Wilson told him a story about how she and her dad would hunt for and blow dandelions when she was a little girl. Or, when Melissa was reading a book about Colorado, Ms. Wilson told a story about when she went to college in Colorado.

Second, Ms. Wilson facilitated students' personal connections by encouraging them to make text-to-self connections during discussions. In the following excerpt, Ms. Wilson and a small group of students were discussing the book *Happy Birthday, Martin Luther King, Jr.* and considering what "life skills" – part of the character education curriculum at school – Martin Luther King, Jr. demonstrated. The excerpt begins in the middle of the discussion after

students have discussed how Martin Luther King, Jr. showed perseverance.

[** denotes undecipherable speech]
Ms. Wilson: Ok, so, I think that this is a very important life skill that you all thought of. (Roberto has his hand up) Roberto.
Roberto: I remember, I wasn't giving up.
Ms. Wilson: When were you not giving up? When did you use the life skill of perseverance?
Roberto: I wasn't giving up on uh, uh, uh, (gesturing to the language chart)
Student: That little yellow sheet (referring to the language chart), he wasn't giving up.
Ms. Wilson: Oh, when we were filling out the graphic organizer? That's right, you weren't giving up, but you were…
Student: ** ** Thurgood Marshall, but I ** ** **
Ms. Wilson: Thurgood Marshall, that's right and you didn't give up and you figured out that word, didn't you? (Jose has his hand up) Jose.
Jose: I didn't give up on myself when I was running the track.

In this example, Roberto's connection prompted connections from other students. Starting with Jose, several students volunteered ways they had shown perseverance in their lives, for example, Evan authored a book; Mary convinced her grandmother to get a dog. Notice that Roberto's connection was not elicited by the teacher; discussion leading up to Roberto's comment focused almost entirely on how Martin Luther King, Jr. demonstrated these life skills. Roberto's comment effectively redirected their conversation, and Ms. Wilson began to question other students about how they had persevered. Students' comments ranged from in-class experiences to P.E. activities to interactions in their home, and their experiences in and out of school became resources for their sense-making – context they took as relevant in this discussion. When Ms. Wilson took up Roberto's comment, probed for details, and extended the conversation by drawing in other students, she sanctioned students' use of personal experiences as context for understanding.

By inviting students to use their home, family, or community experiences, what Mercer calls "displaced contexts" – contexts drawn upon but not actually present in the current interaction, as context for their meaning-making Ms. Wilson widened what was considered relevant to classroom instruction. Students were encouraged to draw on personal experiences as contextual resources for their meaning-making. Further, by engaging with reading in this way, students carried forward from these interactions notions of what reading might involve. In other words, their joint action– their engagement with texts in these ways – contributed to their shared notions of and approaches to reading, highlighting the bringing in of personal experience as key to understanding what one reads.

Shared classroom experiences. Another contextual resource students and Ms. Wilson used to make meaning were their shared experiences in the classroom. Back references to past events, conversations, and texts were common during read-aloud and guided reading sessions. For example, Ms. Wilson regularly introduced read aloud sessions by connecting the book with books read previously.

> Ms. Wilson: Yesterday I got to read you one of
> my favorite books because of the setting and
> today I want to read you one of my favorite
> fiction stories and it's not because of the
> setting, it's because of the main character.
> I just really love the main character in this story
> and also I love this book because one thing
> leads to another thing, there's so many
> different causes and effects in this story.
> And you're going to see while we're reading it
> how one thing just keeps happening and it
> causes something else to happen and it's such
> a crazy series of events. I think you'll really
> like it. Some of you might have read this before.
> Just like *Mirette on the High Wire*, this book is
> also a winner of the Caldecott Medal.
> Do you remember what that medal is for?
>
> Jeremy: I've seen this book, in Ms. Howard's
> class, I won't tell it because I remember it.
>
> Ms. Wilson: Thank you for not spoiling it for us.
> It's always fun for me to revisit my favorite
> books… Analea, do you know what the
> Caldecott Medal is for?
>
> Analea: For the pictures…

Here, Ms. Wilson introduced their read aloud for the day by referring back to *Mirette on the High Wire* (McCully, 1997), the book they read the day before. She recapped the previous lesson and re-formulated its content by linking it to her pedagogical focus in the new read-aloud. While Ms. Wilson highlighted as relevant the instructional focus of the lesson, because she shared this connection within the frame of her love for these books, she communicated to students an affective dimension to reading as well. Her recap helped carry forward the context created in the previous day's read aloud and simultaneously communicated affective and instructional purposes for reading. The reference to the Caldecott Medal also brought forward some of the historical context of this classroom by drawing on the previous day's lesson as well as conversations across the year.

Links across shared experiences serve both similar and different purposes than links to personal experiences. Personal experiences and shared experiences both provide contextual resources for sense-making. They differ in that while personal experiences serve as contextual resources in primarily *personal* meaning-making, shared experiences create context to which all participants potentially have access. This feature of shared experiences, then, makes connections across shared experiences critically important in creating a shared context or continuity. Ms. Wilson's connections to these previous lessons highlighted at least part of what she perceived as relevant knowledge for the present interaction. These links helped orient the participants to particular aspects of events that might become useful in the future. Clearly, students have personal experiences they take as context that not everyone shares, and everyone remembers different pieces of the past experience. However, having some sort of sense or understanding of what has occurred seems important as teacher and students move forward with future joint action.

The next episodes illustrate the way Ms. Wilson used elicitation as a way of building continuity across lessons. In this example, Ms. Wilson highlighted relevant background information by eliciting a student's knowledge gained through a previous classroom shared experience.

> Ms. Wilson: …Turn the page and you'll see the
> Washington monument.
> And Roberto, what happened there?
>
> Roberto: The 'I have a dream' speech.
>
> Ms. Wilson: Yes, we listened to that, didn't we?

Ms. Wilson linked a shared classroom experience – listening to the "I have a dream" speech – to their current text, an issue of *Scholastic News*. She modeled here a way of drawing upon previous experiences and background knowledge to make sense of a new text. Interestingly, she used her knowledge of a particular student's interest during this past experience as context for her decision of whom to call on.

Ms. Wilson also used elicitations to review content from a previous day's lesson. The following excerpt occurred in a discussion that preceded the reading of *The Kapok Tree* (Cherry, 1990).

> Ms. Wilson: Our book we're going to read today,
> since we've been talking about peanuts and
> flowers and seeds trees, and we planted a tree
> when Amy from TreeFolks was here, and she
> told us about lots of good reasons why we
> need trees. Does anyone remember what those
> good reasons are?

In her comment, Ms. Wilson situated *The Kapok Tree* within their larger classroom unit on seeds and plants, and in doing so, highlighted for students information or experiences they might take as context for the reading of this text. She then directly elicited prior learning around their "tree planting" experience, a much enjoyed joint activity. Ms. Wilson's question prompted the sharing of several ideas related to how trees are beneficial. She helped establish a connection with a previous event by having students generate what they learned from Amy, a visitor from TreeFolks, who came to help them plant a tree. By questioning, she managed to draw out information relevant to the reading of this book in a way that positioned this knowledge as owned by the students. And, in highlighting a focus on the need for trees and how to protect trees, students moved into the reading of *The*

Kapok Tree within a context of conservation – an important context for constructing meaning from this book.

Later in this same discussion, Angela asked about how people make syrup from trees, and Ms. Wilson responded by referring her to a book she could read during self-selected reading.

> Ms. Wilson: You do get a certain kind of syrup in the… in fact, Angela, I have a book for you in self-selected reading so you might answer that question. I think you'll like that book. I have lots of books on trees if anyone else is interested in reading a book in self-selected reading on trees and there's going to be one that's ** for everyone in our classroom…

Here, we see an example of a connection made to a future event – self-selected reading. In the midst of a pre-reading discussion, Ms. Wilson referred Angela to a different resource for finding the answer to her question – one that she could pursue after this shared discussion. Suggestions such as the one made here to Angela and to other students were common in Ms. Wilson's teaching and played a critical role in the situating of texts and readers in her classroom. This reference that moved students to consider future contexts of use helped connect students' shared experiences with their future interactions with texts, both on their own and with others. Field notes taken immediately after the read-aloud described above indicated that a number of students sought out and read the books referenced by Ms. Wilson.

During this ten-minute discussion leading up to the book, then, Ms. Wilson highlighted a number of contextual resources from which students could draw to make sense of the book, including their shared experience of learning about and planting trees and their anticipation of finding out more information during self-selected reading. At the same time, she presented reading as a process of making connections across texts and understandings – something that helps us understand, values connections to what we already know, offers a place to find things out, and is enjoyable.

Text environment. Prior experiences often entered the conversations via texts posted around the room – records of conversations past. The classroom's "local texts" – texts generated within the walls of the classroom (Maloch, Hoffman, & Patterson, 2004) – covered the walls, hung from the ceilings, and lived in table boxes. These texts allowed opportunities to bring yesterday's words forward – written artifacts students could and often did use as resources in their present day meaning-making. A list of "Treasures"-generated characteristics of "WOW readers" was posted in the reading corner. Entitled, "What do good readers do?," it included the following characteristics:

- They choose easy and just right books.
- They read quietly and respect others.
- They read smoothly (not too fast and not to slow).

- They go back and use strategies if it doesn't make sense.
- They read with expression.
- They stop to think about the book.
- They talk back to the book and the author.
- They read way down deep.
- They love reading!

The list was generated by the teacher and students during the first semester and was referred to during classroom discussions all across the year. Reading "way down deep" and "stopping to think" were two sentiments voiced many times over by the teacher, the students, and included in multiple texts on the walls. Other texts related to literacy included a chart listing strategies for identifying words, various charts with dull words (e.g., said) and a web of alternative "sparkle" words (e.g., exclaimed, murmured, whispered), a word wall, writing folders students kept in their table boxes, a list of phrases or sentence starters to use in discussions (e.g., "I agree," "I disagree," "Why do you think that?"), lists related to writing workshop (e.g., student-generated list of tall tale characteristics), among others.

Local texts can become dead records of living conversations – records that become more like wallpaper than resources. Not true in this classroom. Ms. Wilson played an important role in the referencing of texts, often gesturing to the wall texts as she was saying something, helping students link instruction and experiences with these texts. For example, during a guided reading lesson, a time when students read silently or quietly to themselves as the teacher moved from student to student, Matthew came to a word he had trouble decoding and looked up at Ms. Wilson.

> Ms. Wilson: How can you figure out that word? Let's look up here (pointing to the chart listing strategies for identifying "tricky" words). Ok, the first thing is 'think about the story.'
> (Matthew rereads, is able to read the word, and continues reading.)

Students came to see these texts as contextual resources for their use. Students often referenced these texts during whole group lessons and as resources during their independent reading or writing time. For example, students regularly left their seats during reading or writing time to look up words on charts such as the "sparkle word" charts, word walls, and charts of characteristics of particular genres. Ms. Wilson validated students' use of local texts during conversations and independent work.

Local texts were both documentation of previous conversations and an important resource students and the teacher used to build continuity across lessons. As seen in the example with Roberto earlier, he used the language chart as a reminder to himself and others of his attempts to spell a word correctly. As he gestured to the chart, another student helped him put words to his earlier attempts. In this way, the participants took this language chart as context – a written record indexing an earlier conversation. Thus, written artifacts of

prior conversations provided a resource for meaning-making and the building of continuity across lessons.

Students also regularly made connections to published texts, bringing these texts into the conversation as contextual resources in their understanding. Although Ms. Wilson sometimes reminded students to make text-to-text connections, students most likely appropriated this strategy by seeing her model it during lessons. Ms. Wilson regularly made references to other texts read in class during both guided reading and read aloud sessions; these text connections were a way for her to connect with the previous lesson or read aloud. Students' sharing of these text connections most often occurred without any prompting from the teacher, as in the following example when Mark volunteered a connection as his small guided reading group was previewing a book about dogs.

> Mark: I have a text-to-text.
> Ms. Wilson: You have a text-to-text connection? What's your text-to-text connection?
> Mark: This one * *** dog (Goes to get book that has a picture of a dog in it.)
> Jeremy: (When he sees that Mark is going to get the book.) Oh yeah! The dog that we read.
> Ms. Wilson: A book about dogs?
> Jeremy: Yeah, it reminds, it's a **, it's a ** ** dogs, it's ** ** **
> [Mark returns and shows the book.]

Here, Mark shared a text-to-text connection, relating their current book with one they had read previously. Jeremy immediately knew the book to which Mark was referring and shared some of what they learned from that book. Incidentally, as the discussion proceeded, Jeremy and the other students went on to make many other connections, including connections to movies and cartoons.

As students considered personal, shared, and text experiences as contextual resources in their meaning-making, they engaged in a process that invited active participation and engagement and one that welcomed their personal responses and connections to literature. This kind of sense-making, characterized by making connections and drawing on resources, is characteristic of mature readers and is suggestive of complex and nuanced comprehension work with text (Pressley, 2000). Further, Ms. Wilson's and students' connections across texts, across experiences, and across time enabled the building of a more comprehensive shared frame for reading – one that valued active and thoughtful reading.

Meta-Language: A Facilitating Mechanism

Ms. Wilson talked explicitly about strategies and their connections to books, introducing a meta-language that allowed students and teacher to talk *about* reading. This meta-language functioned as a facilitating mechanism for building continuity across lessons, offering a specialized language or discourse

that the classroom community could use as a way of referencing and building their notions about reading.

Ms. Wilson was explicit with students about reading strategies they were using or might use, structures and features of text, and students' growth as readers. For example, as evident in the examples from the previous section, Ms. Wilson taught students terms for making connections in their reading. She introduced the "connections" language initially in relation to the daily read aloud sessions. For two weeks, students read Strega Nona stories (dePaolo, 1975) and documented their connections on a language chart. After students had read several of these books and generated connections together, Ms. Wilson asked students to make these same kinds of connections during their self-selected reading time, giving each student a post-it note to record at least one connection during their reading time.

Gradually students began to make connections during discussions although they often did not label them as such. Ms. Wilson consistently followed students' connections by first validating or acknowledging their connection and then labeling it (e.g., "Good connection;" "You just made a text-to-self connection"). Gradually some students began to incorporate this language into their own talk as is evidenced in the earlier example with Mark introducing his text-to-text connection into the conversation. One student even improvised around this framework as seen in the following example.

> Jeremy: I got a text. … a different one. I have text-to-*movie*.
> Ms. Wilson: Oh, please tell me your text-to-movie.
> Jeremy: It's about, it's about, it's connected to both of them, cats and dogs.
> Ms. Wilson: Is that a ** movie?
> Jeremy: Yeah, because it's about the man ** *** and they can talk

While some students, like Mark and Jeremy, used these labels to introduce their connections into the discussion, such labeling was not Ms. Wilson's purpose in using these labels with students. Rather, Ms. Wilson's naming and distinguishing of the different types of connections seemed to be related to students' more refined use of these connections. In other words, understanding different kinds of connections helped students diversify the kinds of connections they were making. And, building up a shared understanding of the meanings of these terms enabled and facilitated future instruction around the making of connections in reading. These terms became part of the contextual foundation of their conversations and offered a shorthand way of referring to previous learning.

Ms. Wilson's explicit talk about strategies extended beyond the labeling of their connections. This can be seen in the following example as Susan makes an observation about the main character in *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* (Steig, 1987). In the book, Sylvester turns himself into a rock when he makes an accidental wish as he holds a magic pebble.

Susan: I have two things to say. My dad says that Spring starts today. And, he's been a rock for a whole year.

Ms. Wilson: How did you know that? The author didn't say, "Sylvester has been a rock for a year." How do you know that he's been a rock for a year?

Susan: Because it showed autumn, then it showed winter, and then it showed the last part of the year.

Ms. Wilson: Because you were looking at the *clues* in the book. What season was it when Sylvester turned into a rock?

(Flips back to that part of the book)

Student: Spring

Ms. Wilson: It looks like spring or summer. And now, we went through (pause – turning page) Fall, it must have been summer if Fall came next, it was summer, then fall, then winter, and spring so it's been almost a whole year. Good thinking, Susan. You were using the clues in the book.

Here, Susan made an interesting and pertinent observation that much time had passed since Sylvester became a rock. Knowing that this understanding had not been stated explicitly in the text, Ms. Wilson elicited her reasoning or thinking behind the observation. Susan's thinking then became a resource for other students' meaning-making, both present and future. Ms. Wilson's labeling of her strategy, "using the clues in the book," tied Susan's strategy both to previous learning about comprehension strategies by referencing a strategy already learned and to future use by grounding the "using clues" strategy in a concrete use of that strategy by Susan. Further, by highlighting Susan's use of this strategy, Ms. Wilson again validated the importance of becoming a thinking reader.

The above excerpt followed a pattern typical in the data of (a) student shared an observation about the text, (b) Ms. Wilson asked student to explain reasoning behind the observation or response, (c) student explained, and (d) Ms. Wilson labeled and validated the strategy or connection used/made. What we see here were students having opportunities to engage in these strategies first with the teaching coming later – a true teaching-in-context experience for students. Ms. Wilson's labeling of the strategy helped students link their actual strategies and behaviors with the developing shared language about reading. The following two examples of teacher labeling further illustrate her role.

Responding to Jose: You know what you did, Jose? I'm going to tell you a very fancy word (when she says fancy, she says it in an English accent). You were inferring. That means that the book didn't tell you but you figured it out.

Responding to Maria: So, when he said "I wish it would stop raining," it stopped raining…That's a good prediction, Maria. I like the way you stopped to think.

In addition to labeling students' strategy use in the context of discussions, Ms. Wilson encouraged students to use these strategies during their independent reading, as well. A familiar ending to the daily SSR time was Ms. Wilson asking a question such as, "Who can think of a time today when they stopped to think?," or "Why do you think it's so important that good readers stop to think when they are reading?" Tying students' actions as they engaged with text to the specialized language that had developed around reading in this community, as well as having students generate reasons for these actions, helped solidify students' shared understandings about strategies they might use for their own reading development.

In addition to her focus on being explicit about reading strategies, Ms. Wilson's meta-language also referenced values and purposes reading. For example, she talked almost daily about her love for reading and her connections with books and authors. She emphasized to students that they should only "choose books that interest [them]." Evidence that students were, indeed, enjoying their reading was salient across the data, from interviews, to field notes, to video records. Students chose to read both at home, according to student interviews and comments during class, and in school, as evidenced in field notes taken during SSR, when students were on-task most of the time. During SSR, students engaged with texts and with one another as music played quietly in the background. They read from multiple genres, including joke books, poetry, storybooks, newsletters, magazines, and information books. Students shared their reading with one another, with the teacher, and with visitors. They read their favorite poems in pairs, excited with the sounds of the language, stopped me as I walked by to read to me or point out funny pictures and laugh, shared personal connections with one another as they read from the same book, asked to reread books that were read aloud in class, and actively engaged in small and whole group discussions of literature.

Ms. Wilson and her students discussed the purposes of texts and reading often. Clearly, a salient purpose for reading in this classroom was enjoyment, as already mentioned. Another purpose was learning, or reading to find out. Ms. Wilson talked regularly about "reading to find out" and encouraged students to pursue their own questions. Students, in turn, used texts as resources for their personal questions, such as when Mark found an ABC book on dinosaurs to answer a question raised by another book; in other content areas, as when Manuel jumped up from a Science investigations discussion to find his Science journal with an appropriate diagram; and across the day, such as when Jose found his book on storms when students had a question about thunder and lightning that they could hear/see outside their classroom. Likewise, local texts referenced the varied

purposes authors might have for writing – to inform, to entertain, etc. – and Ms. Wilson used this language with students as they encountered texts together. She frequently began discussions by either telling students the author's purpose or eliciting this information from students. Ms. Wilson tried to read fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and a joke every day, and, as a result, students were exposed to many genres. Thus, Ms. Wilson and her students viewed reading as a way to accomplish many purposes.

Ms. Wilson's use of meta-language, or explicit talk about values, the reading process, and student's reading growth, worked as a thread that ran throughout the data helping sew together various events, texts, and understandings as it provided a shared language that, in turn, signaled a shared understanding about reading. This meta-language became part of the context for students, and functioned as one way of building continuity (Mercer, 1995) by carrying ideas forward. In other words, Ms. Wilson used meta-language as a contextual resource to draw in previously shared experiences and understandings and facilitate future instruction.

Multiple Opportunities to Engage

Finally, student and teacher connections and the teacher's use of meta-language that helped weave events, texts, and understandings into a cohesive frame would not have been effective or useful without students' regular opportunities to engage with text in these ways. The classroom was flooded with over 2000 books of all genres. Students encountered texts across the day in the context of teacher-guided instructional events, such as read-aloud and guided reading, in their self-selected reading time (where students read independently), and across content areas and the school day, as students used texts as resources in their daily school living and learning.

Read aloud and guided reading sessions, in particular, allowed students room for active participation in discussions with support and guidance from the teacher and peers. Although teacher-led, the literature discussions created space for students to engage with texts in active ways, asking questions and making observations. Students often initiated comments that were then followed by the teacher asking for students' reasoning and/or labeling their actions in some way. We saw this in the earlier example with Roberto and his personal connection about perseverance.

Spontaneous contributions, defined as student observations, questions, or responses not initiated by the teacher, such as Roberto's, were increasingly common as the year progressed. These unsolicited comments or questions included students' connections to themselves, other texts, and the world; clarifying questions centered on vocabulary or confusion; observations about the story or text features; and comments that indicated that students were engrossed in the story world. For example, as Ms. Wilson read *Sylvester*

and the Magic Pebble (Steig, 1987), students frequently interrupted her reading with comments or questions such as these:

> "What is 'stone dumb'?"
> "He's been a rock for a whole year."
> "It's a wishing rock."
> "He is with ya'll! Ya'll are sitting on him!"
>   (talking to characters in the book)
> "I know what we could have wished for."

The fact that students felt at ease making these contributions and even interrupting the teacher's reading to do so was indicative of the low-risk environment of the classroom, even within this teacher-led discussion. Students were free to "stop and think" out loud as they engaged in a read aloud event with their teacher and their peers. In some ways, then, these discussions provided a discursive space for students to engage with text in active ways, as thinking readers. Inasmuch as ground rules of a conversation are a part of the context for any interaction, students' opportunities to engage discursively in this way sent subtle messages to students about valued responses to text. In other words, students' exchanges with the teacher modeled for students how they might engage with text, on their own, in the same way.

The students' daily self-selected reading time allowed students ample time to engage actively with texts in more independent ways. Ms. Wilson encouraged active reading by conferencing with students daily, eliciting language about strategies they were using (e.g., "Who can tell me something you did to be a WOW reader today?"), and reinforcing students' reading and engagement with personal notes written on post-its and attached to their books. Students' active involvement with texts was documented through field notes, video records, informal conversations with students around books, and interviews. Many of these data have been shared in previous sections.

Thus, students' many opportunities to engage with texts in active and varied ways became part of their context for viewing and valuing reading. Students saw Ms. Wilson actually *using* texts in a variety of ways (e.g., as a resource, to enjoy), not just *talking* about using texts in particular ways. Seeing texts used in authentic and meaningful ways helped give purpose to reading. As students listened to her teaching, engaged with peers in discussions, and encountered texts on their own, they built up a context of authenticity, of real people reading real texts for real reasons.

DISCUSSION

In stark contrast to sequenced, directed lessons designed to deliver skills, Ms. Wilson's comprehensive approach to literacy instruction addressed strategies within a shared frame about reading that prioritized enjoyment and authentic uses of texts. She fostered an approach that began to hand over responsibility for literacy learning to the students – an approach that enabled students' active and continuing literacy learning. Theoretically, this article adds to the work of Mercer (1995; 2000) with analysis that illuminates the building of and building on context within lessons and the continuity established over time, as these contexts are developed across lessons.

Examining the contextual resources upon which students draw to make sense of their interaction and shared activities around text seems critical to an understanding of her teaching and possible implications that flow from it. Most obviously, Ms. Wilson encouraged her students to draw upon personal experiences in and out of school, shared classroom experiences, and the textual environment as students made meaning from text. Importantly, she invited students' out-of-school experiences and connections in a way that validated these experiences as meaningful and relevant to school activities. To that end, this article offers insights into how teachers may help students draw on a variety of contextual resources, in and out of school, that afford more opportunities for learning.

Beyond these connections made to texts, however, there were other contextual resources upon which students drew to make sense of reading in this classroom. Students' literacy experiences occurred within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in which they had multiple opportunities for engagement with texts. The kind and number of opportunities students had to engage with texts became context for these students as readers. In other words, students' lived opportunities to use and read texts in authentic and personally relevant ways, ways aligned with the purposes articulated by the teacher, was a resource in their thinking about what constitutes reading. Considering opportunity as a contextual resource that students are using to make sense of reading may cause teachers to ask: What kinds of literacy opportunities am I offering in the name of reading? Are these opportunities in line with a view of reading I hope my students adopt? Do these opportunities support and extend my verbal instruction?

Interestingly, a critical contextual resource for students was the shared frame of reading that they were in the process of constructing together. Students seemed to draw upon their shared notions about the value and purposes of reading as they encountered or talked about texts. At the same time, in a dialogic between shared frame and concrete experience, students' everyday experiences with text and the interactions around these texts, shaped their constructed shared frame about reading. This back-and-forth movement from shared frame to everyday experience, from abstract to specific, helped build continuity over time in how they viewed reading as a community.

Finally, the teacher's use of meta-language became a contextual resource for students as they made sense of their reading. Her meta-language might be thought of as an overlay of students' daily experiences. In other words, her meta-language was grounded in students' daily and supported opportunities to engage with real texts in real ways. Students had opportunities to use strategies and experience text before being asked to name or talk about them in any way. Further, the specialized discourse developed around their shared notions of reading, such as WOW reading, "stop to think," and reading "way down deep," became resources for students, as well – a way of connecting to previous experiences, to their shared frame for reading, and future encounters with text.

Viewing Ms. Wilson's classroom from a perspective of contextual resources illuminates a complex and interactive process of literacy learning. The following quote, cited at the beginning of the article, seems reflective of what took place in Ms. Wilson's classroom.

> Good teachers help students see the educational woods as they lead them through the trees, and it is through teachers' effective use of language that a history of classroom experience can be transformed into a future of educational progress (Mercer, 2000, p. 55).

In this second grade classroom, Ms. Wilson effectively drew students' attention again and again to a shared frame, or context, for reading that valued authentic, enjoyable, and active encounters with text – "the woods" – as she guided them in their appropriation of reading skills and strategies – "the trees." The threading of connections across lessons, to and from their developing shared frame for reading and to students' personal lives, particularly through the mechanism of meta-language, helped students build a cohesive framework about reading in which skills, strategies, and the mechanics of reading were situated within a context of authentic purposes for reading. This kind of threading is not explained easily in linear, written form – as in an article such as this one – but it is just this complexity that makes it worth exploring.

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