Parents and caregivers who are lucky enough to read the same children’s book several times at one sitting or every night for months at bedtime see it: the preschool or primary children with whom they read move from apparent initial passivity to pointing, murmuring, repeating, reading along, anticipating, emoting joyfully, and acting as guides for others to finally taking over the full reading event. In the sequence of intensifying engagements with a particular delightful book, these fortunate children grasp the opportunity to deeply study a single text and its accompanying pictures. This typifies the powerful independent learning of young children in nearly everything they do.

This article explores what careful attention reveals of young readers: the children are making some of the most significant discoveries about this complex act we call “reading.” Adults who read with children serve as important reading mentors, teaching the children about the processes, products, and power of print. As the children listen to books, they work hard to learn about reading—and do so with glee.

Reading-like behavior

Five-year-old Joshua is a self-declared “good reader” who, when we invite him to read with us, brings along a wide assortment of books to share. Among his favorites is The Wide-Mouthed Frog by Keith Faulkner, a short, colorful pop-up book featuring a series of animal noses protruding from its pages. This is very clearly a book with which Joshua has spent a significant amount of time. His rendition of the text proves engaging, entertaining, fluent, “supremely
confident, and intonationally alive” (Doake 1988, 37), all qualities that, while difficult to describe, are instantly recognizable when listening to him read. Joshua displays “fluent reading-like behavior,” retrieving the story “with little or no attention to the print on the page” (p. 27).

Predictably, in comparing the actual text with Joshua’s “reading” of it, we discover differences between the two: different words, different or omitted sentences, even different dialect markers. This surface-level scrutiny may lead some adults to conclude that Joshua “isn’t really reading,” that he has simply “memorized” the book read to him by others. However, a closer look reveals that the child is operating at the deepest levels of comprehension, making personal connections between the book and self. His reading and the essential messages in the book are absolutely in sync. There is much to celebrate and build upon regarding what Joshua has already discovered about reading. In fact, his reading embodies “all the elements of readings by proficient readers, with the exception of integrating [phonics clues]” (Martens 1996, 24).

Below are excerpts from *The Wide-Mouthed Frog*, with Joshua’s rendition of that text beside it. To make differences explicit, anything that differs between the original text and Joshua’s reading of it is in color (red). In parentheses are descriptions of the book’s illustrations or Joshua’s actions, and his comments are in quotation marks.

*The Wide-Mouthed Frog* tells of a frog who hops about, inquiring into the eating habits of the animals he meets: a bird, a mouse, and finally, an alligator. The text begins with a line, part of which is repeated throughout the text and which Joshua reads nearly flawlessly and with enormous personality: “‘I’m a wide-mouth frog and I eat flies,’ said the wide-mouth frog, shooting out his long sticky tongue.” Joshua draws out the word—*l-o-n-g*—and points out, “It’s long, and he got a fly on it,” something we had not yet noticed.

Next the wide-mouthed frog meets a furry brown mouse.

**Text**

“I’m a wide-mouthed frog and I eat flies,” said the wide-mouthed frog.

“What do you eat, mouse?”

**Joshua**

“I’m a wide-mouth frog and I eat flies,” said the wide-mouth frog. “What do you eat, mouse?”

Initially, Joshua omits descriptions of the animals, but the characters are obvious in the colorful artwork. A naïve listener who isn’t reading over Joshua’s shoulder is unlikely to notice this omission, as his reading maintains the meaning of the story. It also mirrors the beginning of the book, where the frog simply introduces himself, telling readers what he eats. The frog asks the mouse what she eats.

**Text**

“I eat crunchy seeds and juicy berries,” replied the mouse, *wriggling* her whiskers.

**Joshua**

“I eat juicy berries and seeds—*slugs,*” said the wide-mouth said the mouse, *flapping*. (Joshua strokes the mouse’s three-dimensional whiskers. “What is that?” he asks. When he is told, he says, “Yeah, whiskers.”)

Joshua substitutes the more familiar *said* for *replied*, suggesting that he understands that more literary term. And though he doesn’t recall the words *whiskers or wriggling*, it is clear that he knows what part of the mouse is being described and that the mouse is *doing* something with it. Sensibly, he chooses a reasonable movement word—*flapping*. So, while Joshua’s reading is “not [accurate] at the word level, [he displays] a high degree of similarity at the

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meaning level” (Doake 1988, 26). In short, he is offering a rather complete and fluent rendition of the book, much to his and his listeners’ delight.

The text climax occurs when the wide-mouthed frog encounters an alligator and inquires about its food choices. Apparently aware that this book is new to us, Joshua deliberately slows the reading down, as if to add an element of drama or surprise.

Text

“I eat delicious, wide-mouthed frogs,” said the alligator, showing his sharp white teeth. The wide-mouthed frog stopped catching flies and gulped. Then he puckered his lips and made his mouth as small as possible. (The illustration shows the frog fretting, with his mouth now looking like a chicken beak.)

Text

“Oooooh. You don’t see many of them around, do you?” And he leaped in the water with a splash! (A big pop-up splash shows the frog jumping in.)

Joshua

“I eat juicy, delicious, wide-mouth frogs.” (He looks to see our response.) He puckered his lips as soon as possible. (Joshua touches the page and grins at us, evidently to make sure that we notice the lips are “pucked.”)

Joshua

“You never see a wide-mouth frog around here no more, do you?” And he jumped in the water with a b-i-g (drawing out the words as if gearing up for the big finish on the next page) splash! (Joshua points and smiles as he takes in the enormity of the pop-up splash. “Look!” he says.)

Joshua’s phraseology is a believable alternative to the frog’s original words. In fact, his “You never see a wide-mouth frog here no more” might be more convincing to a hungry alligator than “You don’t see many of them around.” And the young reader’s dramatic and enthusiastic addition of “b-i-g” to describe the escape splash accurately matches the pop-up illustration.

What early reading looks like

Early anything—cooking, gardening, golfing, parenting—appears as a rough approximation of the more mature version of the act. Babies who are “dancing” bounce up and down and smile a lot, but are they dancing? Of course! Six-year-olds playing basketball run down the court—dribbling being out of the question—as their pals clutch and grab at them. They don’t have the grace of pros, but they are playing basketball. Early painting attempts look like—well, like the paintings of beginners, almost regardless of the age of the novice. And yet they are creating art.

So what might we expect and hope for in an emerging reader? Like their dancing, basketball-playing, and painting counterparts, early readers approximate what more experienced readers do. Children brand new to books might just look at the covers. Those who have observed others opening books may try that as well, even if the text is upside down. Very young children who have listened to lively readings of texts attempt their own lively readings, even if
they don’t have the words to do so. Just their intonation provides clues of toddlers’ careful attention to the demonstrations of adults. And the more relevant experiences readers have with books and fluent reading, the closer and more mature or conventional their renditions of the text become. Joshua, at five, has already learned several things about reading books:

- Books are socially and emotionally delightful to experience.
- Text and illustrations complement one another, offering a dramatic plot.
- There is a unique language of stories that sounds similar to, but different from, everyday conversation.
- Lively readings breathe life into stories, engaging the listeners.
- Stories have “remarkable” parts worth sharing and discussing beyond the flow of the text.

And of course he’s also discovered some of the conventions of print—books covers open, text is read from left to right and top to bottom. Fluent reading-like behavior should be encouraged by helpful parents and teachers, just as we hold the hands of babies who are learning to walk. But in this era of great pressure to “academize” early learning experiences, some adults worry about reading skills. How do we help kids move from what sounds like real reading (but isn’t yet conventional) to becoming independent readers? Meet Aleah, another five-year-old, who can help us understand how returning again and again to favorite books actually supports children’s move to this “real” reading.

**Arrhythmic reading**

Aleah is making the shift from joyfully engaging in “‘fluent’ reading-like behavior, in which children her age retrieve stories with little or no attention to the print on the pages,” to “‘arrhythmic’ reading-like behavior, where they begin to slow the process down and commence to match what they are saying with what they are seeing on the printed pages of their books” (Doake 1988, 27). And Aleah’s favorite books support her in this transition. She uses her knowledge of the story and her intuitive sense of how language works as she more carefully attends to the print on the page and the sounds that correspond to the letters.

Like Joshua, Aleah gathers a wide variety of books to share with us, some of which she says “I can read all by myself” and others that she reads *with* us, mumble reading a half step behind us. With each book, she pauses periodically to share what will happen next, sometimes summarizing key events for nearly the entire text, showcasing her fundamental understanding of and personal connection with the meanings of each of them.

One of Aleah’s current favorites is Jan Pienkowski’s *The Monster Pet*, and she finds the perfect pointer, a bright blue hand on a stick, which she slides left to right under each word as she reads. She approaches the reading of the text as she has the others she’s already read to us: enjoying its rhythm and rhyme, reading with lively intonation, and providing a running commentary of upcoming events. But with this book and her growing attention to words and their letters, Aleah is occasionally caught off guard.
The story begins, “Five little monsters have a pet.” Note what happens.

**Text**

It hasn’t had its supper yet. The yellow monster gives it peas. The purple monster gives it cheese.

**Aleah**

It hasn’t had its supper yet (read rhythmically). (“It ain’t gonna eat them.”)
The yellow monster fed it peas. (“The peas are goin’ down to his tail.”)
The purple monster fed . . . (“Where’s the ‘fed’ part?” Clearly surprised by the “missing” word, she points at gave. “It’s not an F!” Aleah slows her pace and rereads.) The purple monster gave it cheese.

Aleah discovers a mismatch and solves the problem by orchestrating three types of information—the same three types of information that proficient readers use while reading. She combines meaning clues (what makes sense) with grammar or structure clues (it has to be a verb in order to “sound right”) and visual clues (whatever it is must also start with a G sound). And she’s very nearly accurate, substituting a past tense version of the word in question (gave for gives). Now watch how that decision affects Aleah’s reading of the next page.

**Text**

The orange monster cooked a stew.
The little red monster tries shampoo.

**Aleah**

The orange monster cooked a stew. The (pauses for five seconds) red monster . . . (“I don’t know what this” [pointing to tries] says. I don’t know what that [pointing to little] says and I don’t know what that [pointing to tries] says. It’s gotta have a G, ‘cause I don’t know what it says if it don’t got a G. [She tries rereading again.] The red monster . . . It has to have gave! [in an exasperated tone].)

Aleah knows what she doesn’t know and shares her confusion, then applies a series of strategies to figure each word out. Again she searches for a word that makes sense, that sounds right, and that looks like the word that is baffling her. She knows that fed has to have an F and that gave begins with a G. Note, though, that her understanding of the deep meaning is unshaken. Whatever the word is, it has to do with giving the pet something to eat. We suspect that tries isn’t yet a familiar term when describing eating, hence her confusion.

So solid is her understanding of the basic story that Aleah continues reading, apparently abandoning attempts to solve this problem. But three pages later, she makes another discovery. Watch what happens:

**Text**

Five little monsters have a pet.

**Aleah**

Five little monsters have . . . (“Oh, I gotta go back to this one page” [flipping back to the red monster on the earlier page]). The li— [reads little with a long i] . . . (“Oh, I gotta go back to that one page” [she flips back once more to review the pages, then quickly returns to the red monster page]). The little red . . . The little red monster . . . (“I didn’t know what that was, and then I looked at that one” [reading the current page again]) Five little monsters have a pet.
Fidelity to the text is becoming an issue for Aleah. She has begun to self-monitor her own reading, observing when there is a mismatch between the words she reads and the print on the page. She then marshals all of the strategies she knows in an effort to self-correct:

- considers what makes sense in the text;
- attends carefully to the illustrations for clues;
- uses rudimentary knowledge of letter sounds to eliminate possibilities and consider alternatives; and
- rereads to preserve the flow of the story and sentence.

Again she reveals she is using the very same strategies proficient readers use. Aleah moves on to finish the text. In the story, the monsters all go to sleep, but their pet stays awake. The next morning, each monster discovers that one of its belongings is missing: a hat, a bat, a coat, a boat, a ball.

Then, a couple of pages later:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Aleah</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who do you think has got them all? (All of the items the monsters’ pet has swallowed are visible in its tail.)</td>
<td>Who do you think has got them all? (“The monster. Look at all those things!” [she launches into a review of items eaten, then rereads the text.] ) Who do you think has got them all?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

> Five little monsters have a pet. (“Watch this. He’s gonna chase them.”) It hasn’t had its breakfast . . . yet. (“They’re running away, ‘cause he’s tryin’ to eat ‘em!” “What would you be thinking?” we ask. “I’d be running so fast! I’d be thinking, he’s trying to eat me and swallow me forever!”)

It’s great fun watching Aleah interact with the text and share her delight with us—additional qualities of good reading. In the end, with the pet in hot pursuit and Aleah clearly having internalized the central meaning of the text (Doake 1988), she is running alongside her beloved little monsters in mock fear of the book’s outcome.

Aleah approaches reading joyfully, savoring each of her favorite books and new ones she finds interesting. While some adults might say her use of illustrations and repetitive texts is simply a matter of memorizing, it is evident that it is precisely the structure of the texts and their illustrations and her familiarity with them supports her in making discoveries about sound/letter relationships—that is, phonics. Aleah’s ability to reproduce these texts “with a high degree of confidence at the word level” frees her to concentrate “on learning to match word-space-word and to build [her] knowledge of the complex array of patterns and relationships among letters that are used to represent words” (Doake 1988, 64). Aleah is well on her way to becoming a proficient reader.
But what about children who haven’t had such book experiences?

While many children enjoy bedtime stories and other rich forms of literacy in their homes, others have not had extensive experiences with books. Those children are usually the ones who wiggle during story time, don’t readily or frequently engage with books (they don’t yet have a favorite) or other printed material, and struggle to write their letters and names. When we parents and teachers conclude that children have missed rich opportunities with books, we often rush to provide them with letters of the week, alphabet practice, and the small, apparently manageable, and necessary parts of reading.

These days, many early childhood programs claim to “meet young children’s literacy needs.” They offer scads of games and drills and worksheets and other cures for the child who lacks phonemic awareness, the ability to hear and manipulate sounds within spoken words. They buy computer games to assist children with letter recognition, with sound-letter correspondence, with blends. It makes sense, doesn’t it? Small pieces—bits of reading—are easier for young children, right? Not necessarily.

For children like Joshua and Aleah, who have learned through sharing books with caring adults that reading is all about meaning, who have sorted out the “big picture,” such strategies might make sense. But for children without rich and delightful experiences sharing meaningful texts with those they love and trust, those small pieces—letters—are nearly impossible to understand. They are actually the most abstract part of the reading process. It’s rather like sitting down to assemble a jigsaw puzzle without the benefit of an illustration or photo of the final product. “What are we making?” we mentally ask, eager to get a sense of the “big picture” before sifting through the innumerable cardboard shapes in the box. The same thing is true for little ones who lack the experiences that Joshua and Aleah bring to reading.

One thing is certain: young children have little tolerance for what appears to be meaningless. Meaningfulness comes from stable connections between current experience and prior knowledge, and there is nothing more meaningless to those with scant knowledge of the processes, products, and power of books than isolated letters and skill sheets.

So, what can be done to help children who lack experience with print to see the big picture?

Shared reading: The school equivalent of bedtime stories

To understand what reading is all about, there is simply no substitute for emotionally satisfying experiences with great books. Only within this engaging context can we provide the demonstrations that inexperienced learners need: We must show that reading is about making sense of text and most important, that reading is worth doing alone and with others. Shared reading is also the perfect context within which skill instruction can take place.

“Shared reading, when the teacher demonstrates and the children participate in literacy experiences, corresponds to the bedtime story, when the parent reads and the child joins in by commenting, questioning, and reading along” (Fisher & Fisher Medvic 2000, 4). This practice, developed by Holdaway (1984), simulates within a classroom context the intimate bedtime story experience early readers enjoy at home. Here are qualities shared by both:

• Cozy, positive experience where children can actually see the text.
• Texts are meaningful and contain memorable language.
• The children participate in the reading, reading along, pointing, discussing.

Meaningfulness comes from stable connections between current experience and prior knowledge, and there is nothing more meaningless to those with scant knowledge of the processes, products, and power of books than isolated letters and skill sheets.
Reading skills and strategies have more meaning for children when the skills are embedded within the reading-together experience. Ongoing demonstrations of how to make personal connections; self-monitoring; cross-checking one information source against another (as Aleah did); self-correcting; noticing patterns in spellings; making personal connections to words, letters, and sounds, and more are all part of the experience. All of this sets the stage and beckons children into the powerful complement to reading: writing texts of their own! Those who are exposed to lively texts, who—through read-alouds—breathe in interesting and engaging language, will produce lively and interesting texts (Harwayne 1992, 2001; Ray 1999, 2004). Through shared reading experiences, we can ensure that all our young readers discover the most significant of all discoveries about this complex act we call reading: that true literacy is always about the reader or writer. Literacy offers each of us opportunities to learn about new things and experience the lives and lessons others can share through print and images.

Celebrating young readers’ approximations

As we can see with Joshua and Aleah, children’s attempts at reading provide glimpses into their theories about print—what they have figured out so far. Just as they sort out how the rest of their world works, so too must children construct understandings about the nature of literacy and how it works, making connections between their latest encounters with print and their previous experiences. “Children learning to read are active agents [italics ours], initiating and assuming responsibility for their learning. They continually integrate new findings into their framework of knowledge about language and texts, replacing what no longer works with revised theories and fresh information. . . . The children are the meaning makers” (Taberski 2000, 3). Through careful observation we can learn to identify and assess children’s strengths and plan literacy experiences that build on—not ignore—them.

Questions to help identify young readers’ strengths

We hope our analyses of Joshua and Aleah will help educators and parents alike recognize the very real progress that early readers make as they engage in reading-like behaviors. If you’re looking for help in identifying and valuing what it is that your young readers have already discovered about print, here are some helpful questions:

• Do they use illustrations to help them make sense of the meaning of the text?
• Are children making sense of the story, adding comments regarding their personal connections to the text?
• Do children’s renditions of the story sound like they are really reading, with appropriate oral interpretation and expression?
Additional Resources on Early Readers and Reading-Like Behavior

For more information on early readers and “fluent reading-like behavior,” we recommend David Doake’s (1988) *Reading Begins at Birth*. Two of our favorite books describing young children becoming reader/writers are written by parents: Lester Laminack’s (1992) *Learning with Zachary*, and Prisca Martens’s (1996) *I Already Know How to Read: A Child’s View of Literacy*. Each documents the growth and development of a single child over time, helping readers to see how young children are constantly making sense—their own sense—of the literacy that pervades their world. We also see how families learn alongside their children.

*Predictable* books—like *The Wide-Mouthed Frog* and *The Monster Pet*, which Joshua and Aleah read—offer rich pictures, cadence, rhymes, alliteration, patterns of words, and story sequence. This structure allows children to connect with and feel successful in enjoying the book.

Gallaudet University provides a brief online list of excellent predictable children’s books at [http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/Literacy/readit43.html](http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/Literacy/readit43.html)


Good online guides to selecting predictable books can be found at

[http://www.earlyliterature.ecsd.net/predictable_books.htm](http://www.earlyliterature.ecsd.net/predictable_books.htm)
[http://www.earlyliterature.ecsd.net/predictable_books.htm](http://www.earlyliterature.ecsd.net/predictable_books.htm)

For more advanced readers, check out recommendations for books from the New York Public Library at [http://kids.nypl.org/reading/recommended.cfm](http://kids.nypl.org/reading/recommended.cfm).


References
