



Meet Katie Plesec, Parkside Elementary School

Katie Plesec is an energetic and thoughtful fourth-grade teacher in a suburban public school in Solon, Ohio. She began her teaching career in Solon in 1999 and has recently become a literacy coach and curriculum specialist where she shares her passion and knowledge of language arts teaching with district colleagues. Katie teaches and coaches at one of the four elementary schools in the district.

The Solon City Schools, located near Cleveland, Ohio, have 5,100 students that represent a diverse population with 31 percent of the student population being African American, Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, or multiracial. Currently, Solon serves double the state average of English language learners and, as with many school districts across the country, the number of English language learners and economically disadvantaged students in Solon continues to grow. Based on factors related to state achievement tests, such as meeting AYP goals with all groups in all subjects and grade levels, Solon is consistently ranked to be one of the top three school districts out of the 611 districts in Ohio.

A typical K–4 classroom in Solon has twenty-four students that represent Solon’s diversity equally. Special education students are served through an inclusion model by a special education teacher who is in the room daily for language arts. All K–6 teachers have 120 minutes of language arts taught through a Reading and Writing Workshop approach, with K–4 teachers being self-contained for all subjects. To emphasize the importance of literacy, *all* of Solon’s fifth- and sixth-grade teachers teach their own language arts block and then students are rotated into the other content areas of math, science, and social studies.

Who Needs What? Katie’s Classroom

Katie uses formative assessments at the beginning of each quarter to determine the needs of her students in relation to standards. Teams of teachers analyze their grade-level performance on these common assessments to determine what kind of instruction and how much instruction students need on given topics from the curriculum.

With this in mind, they collaboratively plan mini-lessons and guided reading sessions to address the needs of all students, differentiating to support these students within the workshop approach.

Katie identifies that many of her students need a deeper understanding of author themes, and she works to create meaningful experiences with identifying and supporting these themes for her students. Through a series of mini-lessons that span a week, Katie models and explains the concept of theme and engages her students using many formative assessment techniques such as turn-and-talk partners, Popsicle sticks, and ABCD cards. Toward the end of a mini-lesson, Katie poses a multiple-choice question about the theme of a book she has read aloud to her students. Students hold a set of 3" × 5" cards in their laps, each with a letter—A, B, C, or D—written on it, and Katie asks students to choose the best answer and then flash the letter on the count of three. Using this strategy, Katie is able to determine in only a few seconds that the majority of her students have flashed the letter B, the answer which is most correct, which tells her that her students understand the concept. Because getting correct answers is not the only goal of this activity, Katie chooses from a jar of Popsicle sticks, each with a student's name written on it, to randomly call on students to share their thinking about the process they went through to choose a certain answer. Katie also demonstrates, by thinking aloud, why answer C was close but did not express the main theme of the text.

Each day after the mini-lesson, Katie's students either read independently or meet with her in a small guided reading group of four to six students. Students who are reading independently are asked to respond weekly to a question that usually pertains to their current focus of instruction, which in this case is theme. In guided reading (Biddulph, 2002; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2001, 2006), Katie works with students to guide them toward deeper application of theme in a meaningful context using authentic literature of a sufficient challenge for each group.

One of Katie's groups (which contains students who have had the most difficulty with this concept) is reading the novel *Because of Winn-Dixie*, by Kate DiCamillo, and they are near the end of the book. Katie selected this text knowing that it contains rich language and multiple opportunities for students to notice and note themes with her support and guidance. Katie asked the group in a previous guided reading session to locate a place in the text where they think they have identified a theme. Each student comes prepared with not only a theme but also vigorous support for the theme they have chosen. As Katie listens to the following exchange, she records anecdotal notes to document



Honoring Diversity

Teachers with learning technologies such as SMART Boards could use polls in the same way Katie uses ABCD cards. Such techniques also engage students in sharing the thinking that went into how they arrived at an answer and helps to demonstrate that there are often multiple ways of understanding.



Common Core State Standards

The standards place a lot of emphasis on theme and require that students be able to use evidence from texts to support their claims; here, Katie addresses both of these requirements by guiding her students with scaffolded questions.

student thinking about the learning focus of theme and uses the student exchange to scaffold learning:

KATIE: Arrika, did you have something that you wanted to say?

ARRIKA: Um, on page 159, when Opal and Gloria was looking for Winn-Dixie . . . how um, Gloria says, "There ain't no way to hold on to something that wants to go. You understand? You gotta love what you got while you got it." And I thought that was a theme.

KATIE: I think that's a huge piece, Arrika, that you just tapped into. Reread that, guys, and think about it.

Arrika reads aloud the paragraph where her evidence is located. As she does, another student visibly has an aha moment and says quietly, "Oh!"

KATIE: What else could that be talking about?

EMMA: Like about her mom, 'cause when she left . . . and she wants to try to find her. But, um, Opal is trying to find her and she's saying you only have what you got.

KATIE: How do you see that as the lesson, Arrika?

ARRIKA: 'Cause when someone goes, you have to move on. You can't just keep thinking about it.

KATIE: So, what I'm hearing, Arrika, is that you're seeing a theme, and I'm going to use just one word to sum it up [writes the word *acceptance* on the whiteboard], but I see you saying you see a theme of acceptance in the book . . . you kind of have to accept what happens. . . .

EMMA: Yeah, accept what you have. . . .

KATIE: . . . and love what you have when you have it but understand that sometimes things change and you can't control that.

ARRIKA: Yeah.

KATIE: [turns to other students] Do you think that is possibly a theme in this book? [Students nod yes.] Did you have the same theme?

EMMA: No, I had a different one.

KATIE: Okay, let's look at a different one because I think there are multiple themes in the book, but really nice job, Arrika, of giving us that piece of text to support what you thought the theme was.

Each student goes on to give and support, with evidence from the text, other themes such as the importance of family relationships/love and of friendships.

At the end of her guided reading session, Katie has ample evidence that this group of students understands the concept and can apply the concept in their reading. Another group of students who demonstrated a good understanding of theme in the mini-lessons and formative assessments early on are working with Connie, the special education teacher. Both teachers recognize the need to stay deeply connected to students at all levels; they often switch roles, working with students at all ability levels within the classroom. As Connie works with more proficient students, she also engages the readers in her group by requiring them, with her guidance, to go beyond identifying and talking about themes. She uses some of the small-group time to teach students how to write an extended paragraph about themes with support from the text, helping them to synthesize concepts learned in the mini-lesson with ideas they glean from the example text itself.

Because Katie feels confident that her students are able to find and discuss themes, as a final reflection, Katie uses an “exit slip” to ask her students to reflect metacognitively on what they now understand about theme and how knowing this will help them as readers. With these student reflections, what she has observed and recorded during the performance assessment setting of guided reading, and her use of exit slips and other formative assessment data (Clarke, 2001), Katie makes further instructional decisions regarding whether students understand this concept and are ready for more or whether she needs to teach in ways that will deepen or extend student learning.

Katie’s Journey: Pathways to Enact These Practices

As Katie reflects on her eleven years with the Solon City Schools, she concludes that her career has been shaped largely by in-district forces—particularly by the strong, collaborative professional learning community and the instructional leaders in her district. Katie feels that the ongoing learning opportunities offered by the district literacy teacher leader had great impact on the shape of her reading and writing workshops. Additionally, her curriculum director has been and still is a tremendous influence because she constantly challenges Katie to be innovative and intentional with her work. In addition to her district resources, Katie also relies heavily on professional readings, with *Language Arts* and *Educational Leadership* being two publications that have helped her over the years, both as a classroom teacher and as an instructional coach.

As a teacher and literacy coach, Katie is continually reflective about many aspects of her teaching: she sets professional goals for herself and reflects on her progress toward them; she anticipates the needs of the stu-



Honoring Diversity

Some teachers may not have the ability to engage multiple adults in work with smaller groups. However, teachers can still provide this differentiated learning environment through the choice of different texts for different learning/reading abilities or through the incorporation of different activities—such as the synthesis paragraph Connie does here—for different groups of students.



Collaboration

The support systems in place at Katie’s school challenge her to continue reflecting and transforming her teaching. Consider what motivates you to do the same or who you might collaborate with at your school to accomplish similar goals.

dents or adults that she works with and reflects on her approach toward helping them grow; and she considers research and her own new learning, thinking of possibilities for incorporating them into her work.

Literacy assessment is one particular area about which Katie is deeply reflective. When asked if the types of assessments used now are different from when she first started teaching, and how assessment has changed for her across her career, she smiles and nods. When she first began teaching, the assessments were comprehensive and were given to assess student learning at the end of a learning cycle. Today, there are many different ways that she assesses learning, with more of them being formative—short, focused assessments used to measure learning during the learning cycle so that teaching can be adjusted as needed. These assessments vary in format but all serve the same idea—to help Katie determine how well students are learning concepts and to assist her in planning next steps. She does rely on a few more comprehensive summative assessments, which are used periodically to measure how students are retaining learning, but these are still given with the purpose of planning instruction. As her district has embraced formative assessment, Katie has learned firsthand about the power of this type of assessment. She now sees students being much more successful on the summative assessments because she has used formative assessments to adapt instruction along the way.

As mentioned earlier, Katie is part of several deeply involved professional learning communities in Solon. Her district has scheduled time into each day for teacher collaboration—time for teachers to analyze data and/or plan instruction. Katie considers the work done in her professional learning communities to have immense power in shaping her as a teacher and a learner: “This collaboration is the only way to fulfill our district mission of helping each student succeed. We need to collaboratively develop our best instruction and share our strategies for reaching all students. This certainly helps us as teachers, but students really benefit because instead of one teacher being responsible for their learning, it’s all teachers on the team sharing responsibility. This collective responsibility and accountability ensures all students get what they need to be successful.”



Meet Scott Hutchinson, McKean Elementary School

Scott Hutchinson’s classroom is vibrant with the activities of fourth-grade students busily interacting with one another during a discussion period at McKean Elementary School, part of the General McLane School District, located in western Pennsylvania. This rural district of 2,100 students has a demographic profile like many rural districts throughout the country—lower numbers (4 percent) of

African American, Hispanic, and Asian students; typical numbers (13 percent) of special education students; and larger numbers (25 percent) of students from low-income families. Scott’s building has approximately 10 percent more low-income students than the entire district average.


Scott works diligently to ensure that his students are meaningfully engaged and that they are well-prepared to go to the next grade level. He uses technology thoughtfully and builds community around shared experiences and knows that engagement is paramount to learning. Scott has established classroom routines and structures that allow students to share thinking with one another in focused ways and use technology to extend classroom conversations beyond the school walls and day. This vignette exemplifies one way that Scott uses his expertise to teach students about the language and structures of fiction and demonstrates how he creates understandings that go beyond standards to create readers and thinkers.

Using Technology to Enhance Learning: Scott’s Classroom

Scott plans collaboratively with teammates to develop units of study for reading—he and his colleagues use a series of lessons centered on a concept in reading or writing that is built using the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), wherein the concept is modeled first and then shifts toward guided or shared experiences, until finally students can apply the learning independently. One such unit developed in Scott’s grade level is about theme.

At the beginning of the unit, Scott models the interactive read-aloud process for his students. Scott has identified many “mentor texts” for this unit, texts that have many examples of the concept that he is currently teaching to demonstrate the concept and texts to be used for guided practice. Some texts are used repeatedly for different purposes across a school year, which allows the children’s attention to go toward new or deeper understandings about a literary element such as theme. At the beginning of the unit, Scott reads aloud from *The Fabled Fourth Graders of Aesop Elementary School* by Candace Fleming because the book has qualities that engage and delight readers and because each chapter happens to have a particular theme or life message. By thinking aloud for students, Scott demonstrates not only what theme is but also how a reader goes about noticing themes that can be stated directly by the author or that can be inferred by readers.

After a day or two of this, Scott begins to shift toward shared/guided practice by inviting students to work collaboratively in what he calls “RW Partners”—designated student pairings who know to sit close to one another for the purpose of think/pair/share or turn-and-talk opportunities. Using this predictable



Integrated Teaching and Learning

Because children in Scott’s classroom are involved directly in providing some of the language for these charts, interaction with and reference to these charts is frequent. Often, the charts can be added to or amended over time as new understandings about the concept develop. Lists of examples from read-aloud or independent reading are often helpful touchstones that remind students of concrete experiences they have had with the concept.

routine affords Scott ample time for student collaboration, because time is not wasted finding a partner or in getting to the task. During the read-aloud, Scott periodically stops and poses a question or statement for pairs to discuss quickly and then share out with others. Scott has taken time early in the year to build a reading/writing community that uses “grand conversations” (Eeds & Wells, 1989), specifically teaching students how to share their thinking with others, how to disagree without judgment, and how to add into a conversation. Because these routines and structures are employed early and consistently, Scott is able to maximize time in his classroom for these important interactions around complex concepts.

Another form of shared/guided practice is the use of a classroom blog to continue conversations about the concept at home. Scott uses a free format called School Fusion Classroom, which provides some unique features ideal for the elementary classroom. The site is secure, private to students, and free from advertisements. One beneficial feature is that students are randomly assigned the name of a color and animal, like Red Cheetah, each time they post or add comments to the posts of others. This anonymity for students (although the teacher’s version shows real student names) eliminates issues of competition, popularity, and/or reluctance to participate due to shyness or learning differences. Another feature allows students to give others awards for the quality of their comments, for example, a Visionary Award for insightful posts or a Scholar Award for informative posts. On one such blog, Scott is able to see how his students are beginning to get the idea of theme represented in his read-aloud from *Chicken Soup for the Teen Soul* (see Figure 2.1). In this example, Scott quickly notes that his students are appropriately talking about theme and that they are supporting and challenging one another.

Scott also requires students to use sticky notes in their independent reading books to capture thinking about themes. He routinely meets with small groups of students or with individuals to check on and confirm their understandings of theme, offering feedback, guidance, or corrective instruction as necessary. By recording anecdotal notes and collecting artifacts of student thinking, Scott gains useful insight into the understandings of his students. He also reflects on his own practices—questioning and refining his teaching moves, examples, and use of gradual release. Scott and his teammates debrief and share with one another any new understandings they have as teachers about theme in general or about the design of their unit of study so that adjustments to future teaching can be made.

Scott’s Journey: Pathways to Enact These Practices

Scott’s teaching career actually began in high school when he realized as a ski instructor that he loved “teaching others how to become successful



Honoring Diversity

For teachers with students who cannot easily access the Internet at home, teachers could use class time to engage students in “blogging” as Scott does here. If access to computers is limited, teachers could consider asking students to journal their thoughts on theme and share their journals with others. Students could do this anonymously by not including their names on their journals.

Carrot Chinchilla: I think that the theme is not to lie because if you lie you just get in big trouble then you just have to make up other lie to get out of it.

Pacific Alligator: I agree with you because I had to make up all kinds of lies to get out of one

Midnight Marten: i agree with u, but i want to add on. I think that if u lie someone is going to get in trouble and that is going to be the person that lies

Shadow Fox: I think the theme is a blend of not to lye and don't do something you don't know about because Franciso said that his grandpa knew about gardening but he didn't know so that led to lying.

Forest Chameleon: I agree with u because that totally makes sence

Brick Bat: Grandpa didn't lie though!

Desert Deer: I DISAGREE with you because, I don't think that you can blend.

Desert Deer: What to mean?

Brick Bat: I think the theme is that honesty is the more important than knowing how to do things.

FIGURE 2.1: An excerpt from students' blogs about theme in Scott's classroom.

at something." After finishing college, Scott found himself teaching first grade, where he says he learned a valuable lesson from a colleague who influenced him toward adopting the stance that "whatever is best for kids is the avenue that reaches the most kids."


When Scott began teaching fourth grade in his present school district, he relied heavily on the teaching manuals that were available to him—partly out of being new to the grade level and partly out of comfort in doing what he thought was necessary. As time went on, Scott began to question some of his practices and reflected on the results he was dissatisfied with as a teacher. His district encouraged him to read professionally and to have dialogue with colleagues regularly. In doing so, Scott was exposed to the thinking of Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, who led him to a reading workshop approach that, in turn, helped to foster a genuine "joy of reading for kids." The work of Lucy Calkins has also influenced Scott in the realm of writing instruction—helping him to deepen his own knowledge of writing and writing workshop and, at the same time, helping him to instill a love of writing in his students that complements their love of reading. From these valuable resources, Scott says he went "from teaching based on manuals to teaching based on need." In his regular collaboration with colleagues, Scott felt empowered and believes that "my own school district was a strong factor in teaching me that my opinion counts."



Connections

Scott finds ways to connect with teachers in online communities and also conducts his own research to improve his practice; for ideas about resources connected to grades 3–5 reading instruction, see Appendix A. For more information on ways to connect with professionals outside your school, see Section III.

Scott was also influenced by finding other teachers on the Internet who were willing to share their creative ideas with others. “I talk with teachers in other schools as well as teachers within my school, regardless of the grade level. Experienced teachers who hold the same values as I do about kids should always be appreciated and utilized for their ideas.” Listening to and sharing with other teachers have had a positive effect on Scott: “My methods of instruction and classroom environment are always changing. I utilize the experiences of other teachers to open my mind to all options and to help guide my decisions.” Because of this openness to ideas, Scott feels his students “get the most meaningful instruction and the most productive and enjoyable work environment possible.”



Integrated Teaching and Learning

Scott changed his approach to assessment when he saw the benefits of frequent formative assessment for his students; his reflective approach to his teaching led him to reconsider his approach and employ more low-stakes, formative assessment in his day-to-day instruction.

As Scott’s views of teaching have shifted, so has his view of assessment. Instead of testing children’s abilities solely at the end of a cycle of learning, in a unit test or piece of writing, Scott is more comfortable with and reliant on various formative assessments. “I think I simply assess more now than I ever did. My assessments are every day—whether that be in my observations of students’ sticky notes, or anecdotal notes I’ve written about a student during a reading conference or as part of guided reading—these assessments guide my daily instruction. Assessments never guided me as frequently as they do now.” When asked why he thinks his view on assessment has shifted, Scott adds, “It is all about teaching based on the needs of the students, not the schedule of my lesson plans. My assessments guide me and assess me as a teacher, compared to being solely about creating a grade for a student.”

Scott’s journey is like that of many teachers—one of questioning and searching for answers, being open to new ideas, and of making decisions based foremost on the needs of students. “I have developed confidence in my teaching and in my ability to back up my choices. It is interesting that, at the same time, I really never have total confidence that I am doing everything I could be doing; I think that pushes me to always desire to grow as a teacher.”

Charting the Practices

As Katie and Scott illustrate, how we think and talk about learning speaks volumes about what we value. The teachers in these vignettes jointly value fostering students’ lifelong learning and their development as readers and writers. As we illuminate a range of pathways by which teachers plan with this goal in mind, we would be negligent if we represented planning as a recipe with the same steps for all. In fact, our individual planning processes vary widely across time, courses, and students. Figure 2.2 represents the range of pathways, or processes, by which

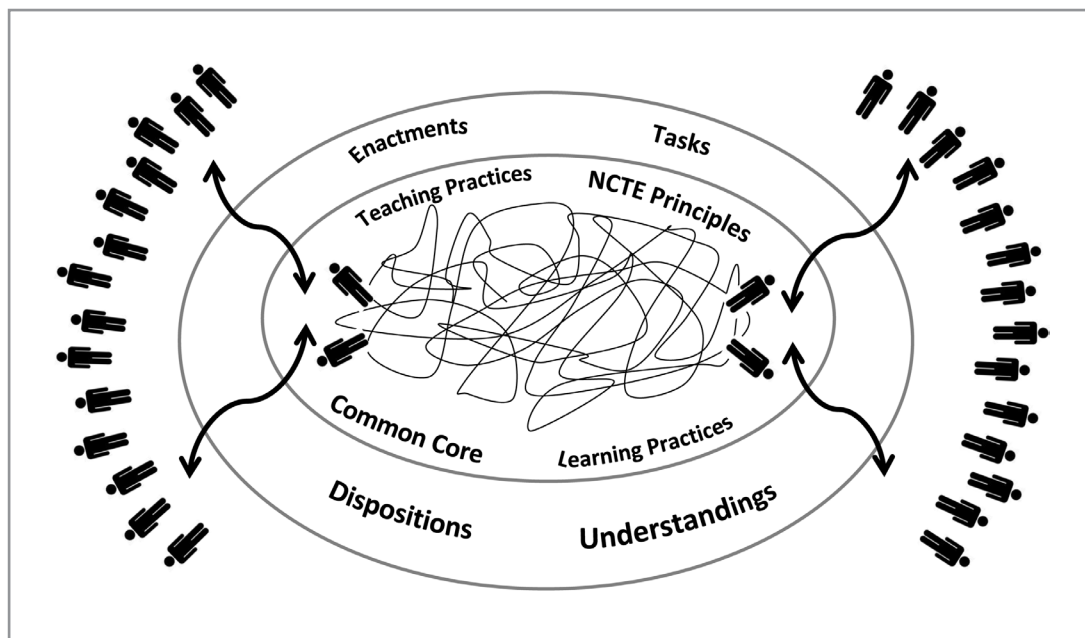


FIGURE 2.2: Pathways to planning and enacting instruction.

teachers consider the integration of their teaching and the learning they plan for students.

Through reflection or conversation, the teachers in these vignettes speak to some form of wrestling with chaos in describing their thinking about planning. Figure 2.2 represents the chaos that we all navigate, but it also seeks to honor the fact that how we enter this chaos—the pathways by which we get there—varies. Some teachers enter through knowledge about their students, which are represented in the figure as encompassing and informing our thinking. Some teachers enter by thinking about the ultimate goals they have for their students; these are represented in the language of the outer circle including the dispositions, understandings, tasks, and enactments teachers expect students to demonstrate or develop. No matter the entrance, once in the middle we ultimately navigate the chaos that involves considering importantly the meeting place and relationship between these goals and the CCSS, NCTE principles, our teaching practices, and the learning practices we personally develop as well as those we foster in our students. The narratives offered by Katie and Scott affirm that we meet these considerations through various pathways differently over time.

Figure 2.2 visually represents the way we conceptualize these inextricably linked considerations that are at the heart of our decision making as teachers. We intentionally chose not to represent them as linear, and one of our earliest versions of this figure actually included the words in the inner circle embedded within the chaos of

the nest at the middle. Given the difficulty of actually reading this chaos, we chose in favor of readability; however, the original visual may more accurately represent why at times it is difficult for us to articulate the complexity of our thinking, acting, and ongoing learning about how to work with and meet the needs of diverse learners. Still, we believe it is possible and quite critical that we work to identify our decision making as well as how we conceive of the elements that inform our decisions, especially as we remind ourselves and others that even as we prepare students to meet their standards, the CCSS do not dictate the path we choose.

We hope that you will keep Figure 2.2 in mind as you read the charts that follow and that you will find at the end of each vignette chapter. In these charts, we endeavor to represent how the instructional decisions that emerge out of the chaos are dynamic. For ease of representation, these charts read more linearly than the processes they depict. But they include the elements of our decision making and moving out of the chaos toward deliberate goals and outcomes. Therefore, our movement toward the CCSS is informed by the NCTE principles about what makes for strong ELA instruction and learning. With these principles in mind, we enact teaching practices that invite students to enact learning practices that will enable them to meet the CCSS. The relationship between teaching and learning practices is key. Our teaching opens the space and makes explicit for students how they can learn to enact particular tasks and to ultimately take on particular dispositions toward lifelong learning.

Therefore, the charts below highlight some of the key NCTE principles about and teaching practices for reading instruction that the teachers in this chapter's vignettes enact, connecting these to specific Reading Anchor Standards in the CCSS document, and merging how teachers expect students to evidence their ability to enact the standards in their learning.