



# Dragonflies White Paper

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*["Learning to read should be a glorious adventure."]*

*"Learning to read should be a glorious adventure, as exciting for youngsters, their families, and their teachers as when children learn to walk and talk. The key to making the journey a happy one is that we provide appropriate support."*  
(Margaret Moustafa, 1997).

## Series overview

From their earliest days and weeks at school, learners need to be fully engaged in the exciting process of learning. Teachers need sound, research-based materials and advice as they take responsibility for providing young minds with the most important learning they'll ever do: learning to read.

Dragonflies Literacy gives students and teachers the materials and support they need as they embark on this exciting and challenging journey. With these materials, students can enjoy success in the critical dimensions of reading as well as developing their oral language and writing skills. Teachers can have confidence that they are introducing and reinforcing the knowledge, skills, and strategies that young readers need.

*Dragonflies Literacy offers:*

- Rich texts that motivate and challenge students
- Stories with strong plot and character development, humor, and thoughtful connections with students' interests and experiences
- Nonfiction books with vivid photographs that support text and graphics
- A standards-based framework focused on four content areas: science, social studies, health, and the environment
- Consistent look and feel with strong visual appeal
- Careful developmental sequence that builds skills and strategies
- Design features to support early readers
- Audio support for every student book to develop fluency and oral language
- Instructional supports inside the front cover of every student book for quick reference
- Preview question on the back cover of every student book to support instruction
- Comprehensive teacher support in CD-ROM to support balanced instruction, including assessment passages.

## Essential dimensions of reading

### Phonemic awareness

*["Dragonflies Literacy has a strong focus on promoting phonemic awareness using rich texts."]*

Phonemic awareness is a key element in beginning reading instruction and is the best predictor for success in learning to read (Ehri and Nunes, 2000). To learn to read and spell, students must understand that spoken words are composed of phonemes (units of sound) that can be manipulated and that these phonemes correspond to letters in written alphabet script (Ball and Blachman, 1991).

Some students come to school with well-developed phonological-analysis skills, while others acquire it over a number of years (Snow, Griffin and Burns 2005). When phonemic awareness is taught through reading and listening to stories, the success rates are dramatic (Willams, 1980).

Dragonflies Literacy has a strong focus on supporting phonemic awareness by using rich texts that draw the reader into playful language experiences. The rhythm and sounds of the repetitive language patterns engage children's interest and draw attention to the sounds in words. Playing with sound builds a foundation for greater phonological awareness.

Throughout the program, children engage in activities that foster this awareness. Early activities such as substituting initial sounds, matching initial and final sounds, and creating word families help set the foundation. Further activities, such as clapping syllables and listening to beginning, medial, and ending sounds, progress children to a higher level of phonological awareness – that of blending and segmenting syllables and phonemes. Children who can blend and segment speech sounds have an awareness of speech sound units, which enables them to learn how alphabet letters correspond to sounds (Yopp, 1988).

After reading each book, emergent and early readers use word and punctuation cards to reconstruct sentences. Phonemic awareness is supported when students work with words and sounds within phrases or sentences (Ericson and Juliebo, 1998).

## Phonics

*["Dragonflies Literacy provides teachers with support for a variety of instructional practices that include letter-level decoding, analogy, semantic and syntactic clues, and the reader's own experience."]*

The case is strong that teaching the alphabet, letter-sound associations, and sounding out of words has a positive impact on progress in early reading. Phonics instruction focuses attention on the relationships between sounds and symbols – an important strategy for word recognition (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Pressley and others have suggested a balanced approach to early literacy that includes explicit phonics skills instruction (decoding by "sounding out" and by using analogy) as well as holistic, meaning-driven reading experiences in the classroom. By using careful assessment processes, teachers can select the mix that's right for individual children as they start to make sense of the written word (Pressley, 2006).

Dragonflies Literacy provides teachers with support for a variety of instructional practices that integrate phonics instruction with other word study activities: letter-level decoding, semantic (meaning and thematic structures), graphic (visual perception of letters and symbols), and morphological features (root words, prefixes, suffixes, and compound words).

Systematic, explicit teaching of phonetic activities is provided in the teachers' guide. Through this, students can learn strategies to interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. Activities progress from initial sound and letter combinations to two- and three-consonant clusters, digraphs, and harder vowel combinations.

Systematic phonics instruction also promotes growth in reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). The Dragonflies philosophy is based on the premise that students will hear and read the words in context first. The words are then taught in isolation to focus on a particular phonic skill, such as matching individual sounds with letters, and then read again in the context of the story or a sentence. Children in classrooms where skills are taught in the context of reading whole texts get a better start at becoming proficient, independent readers, beyond becoming word callers (Freppon and Dahl, 1991).

## Fluency

*["Dragonflies Literacy supports fluency instruction and practice by providing texts that have memorable characters and appealing visuals. Students will want to read them again and again."]*

Fluency is the freedom from word identification problems that might hinder comprehension (Harris and Hodges, 1995). There is a positive relationship between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension – fluency has a reciprocal relationship with comprehension, each fostering the other (Samuels, 2002).

Fluency is multidimensional. Accuracy is important, as is automaticity (the ability to instantly recognize words). Fluency also involves prosodic features such as reading with appropriate pace (rate of reading), phrasing (also known as chunking of text), intonation (use of stress and pitch), and loudness. Monitoring comprehension, checking syntax (that the message makes sense), and having a feeling of confidence also contribute (Kuhn and Stahl, 2000).

Automaticity develops through reading a wide variety of texts at instructional and independent levels, including rereading familiar texts. All Dragonflies student books are leveled from emergent to fluent. In the nonfiction series, differentiated text gives students access to the same content, regardless of reading ability. Progress can then be made through the leveled texts. The Dragonflies program recognizes that repeated and monitored oral reading, with a teacher's guidance, improves reading fluency and overall reading achievement, including comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). At the conclusion of the guided reading lesson, students revisit the text to practice oral reading for fluency. For repeated readings and follow-up practice, each student book has a read-a-long CD.

The Dragonflies program places strong emphasis on word solving skills, with strong links to decoding and word recognition skills. Word meanings and decoding skills are introduced and taught together in the context of the story. Activities such as creating word walls enable students to build a repertoire of words that they recognize instantly as part of their sight vocabulary. Fluency is achieved when students are able to instantly recognize words, familiar patterns, and meanings (Piluski and Chard, 2005).

A major way in which Dragonflies Literacy supports fluency instruction and practice is by providing texts that have memorable characters and stunning visuals. Students will want to read them again and again. Throughout the program, students are encouraged to be reflective readers. Following the guided reading lesson are suggestions on how teachers can monitor and assess oral reading for fluency and how to help students learn metacognitive strategies when fluency breaks down.

Finally, Dragonflies has a comprehensive program for assessment of fluency. Each book in the fiction series and in the emergent and early levels of the nonfiction series has a running record for teachers to note miscues that interfere with understanding and fluency. A checklist can be used to record the degree of fluency (reading word by word to appropriate intonation and expression) and inform future instruction.

## Vocabulary

*["Dragonflies student books are all rich texts – right from the start. They provide teachers with plenty of opportunities to develop conversations that builds vocabulary well beyond the words that students would be able to read for themselves."]*

Vocabulary instruction plays an important role in learning to read. Vocabulary knowledge in kindergarten and first grade is a significant predictor of reading comprehension in the middle and secondary grades (Scarborough, 1998).

*"What it means to know a word is clearly a complicated, multifaceted matter and one that has serious implications for how words are taught and how word knowledge is measured ... the goal that teachers have is for the students to be able to use the instructed words in understanding a text containing those words, and to recall the words well enough to use them in speech or writing. That calls for a deep kind of knowledge."*

(Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002)

Dragonflies student books are all rich texts – right from the start. They provide teachers with plenty of opportunities to develop the conversations that build vocabulary well beyond the words that students would be able to read for themselves. They use a semi-controlled vocabulary, and commonly known and high-frequency words are introduced sequentially across the three levels.

Nonfiction texts provide fertile ground for the learning of new words: new meanings for familiar words, and new words for new concepts (Graves, 1987). In the Dragonflies Nonfiction series, words chosen for vocabulary instruction are content words, which are specific to a topic, and anchor words, which convey the central concepts or the big ideas.

Children learn vocabulary naturally through listening and speaking. However, vocabulary learning isn't always achieved when students engage with words on their own, and in many cases, it will not occur. Students need explicit teacher guidance to help develop an interest in words, relate new words to their experiences, build relationships among words, and develop deep meanings of words (Gunning, 2004). Knowing a word means being able to use it as a direct result of direct instruction (Spencer and Guillaume, 2006).

Dragonflies Nonfiction uses the sequenced approach as described by Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002). The content words chosen for explicit instruction are considered Tier 2 words. Each lesson plan includes a six-step process for teaching these words:

1. Talk about the word in the context of the story.
2. Say the word.
3. Explain the meaning of the word, using a child-friendly definition.
4. Give examples of different ways to use the word.
5. Have the students use the word in a way that has them interact with it.
6. Say the word again.

These activities provide opportunities for students to use new vocabulary in many contexts. In this way, they can build rich representations of words and make connections with other words and concepts.

### **Comprehension**

*["Comprehension doesn't come automatically for all students. It needs to be taught actively from the start."]*

Good comprehension is not just word-level processing. Good readers construct images, capturing the big ideas of a text as well as the critical details. But comprehension doesn't come automatically for all students. It needs to be taught actively from the start. Explicit instruction is effective in helping readers learn specific comprehension strategies (Gambrell and Dromsky, 2000; Pressley, Johnson, Symons, McGoldrick, and Kurita, 1989). Dragonflies teachers' guides provide strong support for the teaching of comprehension strategies, which include making connections, predicting, questioning, visualizing, understanding the author's purpose, inferring, identifying main ideas, analyzing and synthesizing, evaluating, and summarizing.

Comprehension strategies are identified on the inside front cover of every Dragonflies student book, providing a quick overview of the book's focus. A preview question on the back cover engages students in discussion by activating prior knowledge and asking them to make connections and predictions. Guided reading activities also encourage students to become metacognitive learners – they learn to discuss the comprehension strategies they are learning, how they are learning them, and why those strategies are important.

To assist their comprehension, students must be able to use strategies flexibly (Adler, 2001). In the Dragonflies program, students use multiple strategies as they progress through guided reading lessons. They may ask questions of the text, summarize parts of the text, clarify words and sentences, and make predictions. The settings, storylines, and characters of the fiction titles and the content of nonfiction titles also encourage students to find out more, discuss new ideas, and deepen their understandings. The teachers' guide supports instruction

on teaching students the purposes and usage of nonfiction graphic features such as photographs, captions, graphs, and timelines.

## Supporting oral and written language

*["Dragonflies Literacy includes books that will encourage discussion, audio tapes for listening and reading along, ideas for instruction, and activities that draw students into paired, group, and whole-class talking and listening."]*

A strong foundation in oral language plays an important role in promoting fluency. Students use their oral language knowledge to predict and understand as they read (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). The characters, storylines, and in-depth information of Dragonflies student books provide a context for lively discussions that help build this oral language base.

Learning to read is a social as well as an individual pursuit. Through studies and theories of language learning, it is well established that oral language underpins written language; the two are closely interrelated (Sulzby, 1986). In the Dragonflies program, students are encouraged to think critically and discuss their ideas. They are prompted to make connections with their lives and other texts, support their opinions, dramatize, and discuss their feelings. Activities draw them into paired, group, and whole-class talking and listening.

Writing helps raise the level of talking and thinking about texts (Calkins, 2001). Research shows that writing leads to improved reading achievement, reading leads to better writing performance, and combined instruction leads to improvements in both areas (Tierney and Shahahan, 1991). It has been found that engaging learners in combined reading and writing experiences leads to a higher level of thinking than when either process is taught in isolation. Thinking is critical to constructing meaning, and students become better thinkers when they are taught in classrooms where meaning is actively constructed through reading and writing (Sweet, 1993).

The stories in the Dragonflies Fiction series provide students with inspiration and models for their own writing. In the Nonfiction series, vivid photographs and exciting concepts encourage students to ask questions about the world. Writing to explain, describe, and instruct are some forms of informational writing that students can compose to make the information they have gathered their own.

## Differentiated instruction

*["By differentiating instruction, teachers can meet the needs of every child."]*

By differentiating instruction, teachers can meet the needs of every child. In differentiated classrooms, teachers begin where students are. They accept and build upon the premise that learners differ in important ways and engage

students by using varied instruction along with varied degrees of complexity. They ask, "What will it take to modify that instruction so that each learner comes away with understandings and skills that offer guidance to the next phase of learning?" (Tomlinson, 1999).

In the Dragonflies program, guided reading lessons allow teachers to scaffold learning. Shared reading and explicit teaching help readers to decode and create meaning. Once students are able to read independently, teachers can fill in only when needed so that students can succeed on their own with texts and words they have never seen before (Snow, Griffin, and Burns, 2005).

It is precisely this careful development of reading competence that Dragonflies Literacy supports. All student books increase levels of challenge in decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension. They are carefully leveled to well-known benchmarks, such as Reading Recovery, with a color band on the back cover of each book to indicate appropriate levels for independent and guided reading.

In the Nonfiction series, anchor books introduce key vocabulary and concepts in science, social studies, health, and environment at each of the three levels, emergent, early and fluent. The visuals remain the same across the levels, enabling a whole-class introduction to the topic, regardless of reading ability. All students have equal access to the core content and are able to orally share a common experience. They can then read the text at their own level to develop their literacy skills. The lesson plans guide teachers to deliver appropriate support so that students can develop their competence and confidence.

## English language learners

*["Effective teachers of English integrate reading, writing, speaking, listening, and visual language activities as much as possible."]*

English language learners need support to develop English proficiency, especially their knowledge and understanding of grammatical structures and vocabulary and their ability to use them. Students are better able to learn English when:

- they are exposed to substantial spoken or written English that is within the zone of proximal development (Diaz and Flores, 2001);
- their teachers help them to notice language items and language patterns in the English that they hear and read (Cazden, 2001);
- rich language interactions encourage thinking, social relationships, and expanded language use (Stipek, 2002).

The "ELL support" section of the Dragonflies Nonfiction teachers' guide provides general information on how ELL students learn and process language. This is followed by a detailed, step-by-step lesson with a specific language objective. This activity elaborates on the general lesson plan, giving ELL students practice around the content and language of each. Effective teachers of English integrate

reading, writing, speaking, listening, and visual language activities as much as possible.

Dragonflies student books are leveled at emergent, early, and fluent, making them accessible to ELL students whilst helping to build vocabulary and comprehension skills. The comprehension skills and word recognition activities are sequenced to increase in difficulty, and the read-a-long CD that accompanies each student book allows for repeated readings, supporting ELL students in language acquisition.

To become proficient and productive students, ELL students also need to interact in social and academic situations. Effective teachers encourage their students' participation in classroom discussions, welcoming their contributions and motivating them by such practices (Cazden, 2001). Whole-class and small group discussions help develop concepts, vocabulary, and understandings by activating prior knowledge; and peer discussions provide many opportunities for ELL students to extend their learning.

As they progress through the Dragonflies Nonfiction series, ELL students can deepen their knowledge of the world by connecting with the topics in science, health, social studies, and the environment. ELL students are also able to learn literacy skills more readily through nonfiction texts, which are without cultural barriers. These texts help ELL students to connect their world of knowledge to reading and writing activities, supporting the development of vocabulary in a meaningful way.

While instructional talk should be engaging, there is a place to use direct rather than indirect questions to promote clarity in responding to texts (Echevarria and Graves, 2003). Explicit questioning techniques in Dragonflies guided reading lessons are designed to scaffold and build oral language and comprehension.

## Teacher support

*["It is what teachers do, moment by moment, that makes a difference to student achievement."]*

It is what teachers do, moment by moment, that makes a difference to student achievement. Teachers matter, and what they do matters. The dimensions of effective literacy practice include:

- Expectations – a belief that all students can learn to read and write
- Knowledge of literacy learning – an understanding of reading and writing development
- Knowledge of the learner – continual assessment of progress and providing instruction that relates to previous experiences
- Partnerships – providing help strategically by using good reading “coaches”

- Instructional strategies – knowledge of a variety of teaching methods, when to use each method, and how to combine methods as an effective instructional program
- Engaging learners with texts – providing books that are both interesting to students and within their reading capabilities.

(Excellent Reading Teachers. A Position Statement of the International Reading Association, 2000)

The Dragonflies Teachers' Guide CD-ROM provides comprehensive support for teachers, including how to deliver strategic comprehension lessons, tailor instruction to individual needs, and monitor students' progress through formative and summative assessment techniques. Each lesson plan includes a selection of meaningful and creative follow-up activities. As the text is available in Word as well as PDF format, teachers can customize each lesson by adding their own notes. Assessment forms are provided for recording and tracking student progress.

The Professional Reading resource on the CD-ROM also offers ideas and background information for pedagogical literacy practices, including guided and shared reading, language experience, spelling, word study, and writing.

## Assessment

*["Assessment should be focused and lead to new learning."]*

Assessment should be focused and lead to new learning. Dragonflies teachers' guides include running record forms so that teachers can build a picture of students' reading behaviors and develop strategies to help them become independent readers (Wilson and Dash, 2003).

Formative assessment procedures provide opportunities for monitoring comprehension during reading and discussion. This monitoring gives teachers explicit information about students' learning needs. When used effectively, formative assessment has been proven to produce significant and often substantial learning gains (Black and William, 1998). The Dragonflies program provides many opportunities for teacher observation to guide student progress.

Teachers' guides include forms to assist:

- retelling, fluency, and fix-up strategies
- early reading skills and behaviors
- concepts about print
- letter and alphabet recognition
- emergent writing
- an understanding of literal, inferential, and personal opinion questions
- high-frequency word lists.

Dragonflies is a complete program. It ensures that students attain the skills outlined in the *Five Dimensions of Learning* to become strategic readers and writers. Students of all levels can share in the learning environment through the differentiated levels of the texts. Integration of comprehension, vocabulary, and word activities ensures a balanced program that motivates students to read, explore, and learn.

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