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Seeing and Nurturing Young Children's Reading Identities

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Abstract: Many approaches to reading that are common in schools focus narrowly on the skills and strategies that comprise the technical ability to read. In contrast, attention to reading identities prompts teachers to center children's ideas about what reading is and who they are as readers. In this article, the author draws on his own experiences with children in prekindergarten to examine the various aspects of children that together make them a reader, including how children conceptualize, perform, and experience reading, and how they connect reading to understandings of language and other aspects of their identities. The author describes approaches to learn about and assess children's reading identities that are based on his work in a prekindergarten classroom. These include intentional talk about reading, drawing about reading, observation during play and classroom activities, and family questionnaires. The author then provides guidance on how these assessments can inform classroom practices, and how teachers can account for the role of identities as they plan instruction for and support early reading.

Keywords: early childhood, identity, reading



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Introduction¹

Jaylen and I sat together in the library nook in his prekindergarten classroom reading a book he had picked on snakes. As we read and talked about the book, we talked about reading more broadly, including the people Jaylen liked to read with. As we spoke, Jaylen made some observations about these people, and what made a good reading partner:

Jaylen: Ms. P, and my teacher. They're girls. They're all girls.

Interviewer: Is it important that they're girls?

Jaylen: Yes.

Interviewer: How come?

Jaylen: Cause, cause, girls they, boy teachers just let you have fun for a long time. A long, long, long, long, and never let you work, so that's why I have girls.

Interviewer: Can you read with a boy teacher?

Jaylen: No, they just, just have fun.

Interviewer: They just have fun?

Jaylen: Yea. They just let you play on their phones, and just do stuff that you want to do.

Jaylen shared these ideas about gender, reading, and the differing roles of male and female teachers as part of my effort to learn about how Jaylen thought about reading. Our conversations and my

observations of him revealed the many ways he was developing a conception of who he was as a reader in his first year of school. This excerpt from one of our conversations shows how even at the age of four, his understanding of reading was intertwined with his understandings of identity, including gender. Jaylen's gendered view of reading in this excerpt positions reading as a task that is done with girls. Perhaps more worrisome, he views reading as at odds with his conception of being a boy. Boys, as Jaylen sees it, "just have fun." The unspoken conclusion is that reading is not fun and is not for boys. Compton-Lilly (2006), in her work with another young boy learning to read, noted that all children are "learning to read within raced and gendered contexts that tend to offer children from different social groups different opportunities and options" (p. 73). These contexts shape the social relationships and the experiences that children have as readers, and in the process, the identities they build as readers in gendered, racialized, and other constructed spaces.

For now, Jaylen is able to maintain the idea that he is a reader and a boy. But none of the reading assessments typically used in schools would have revealed Jaylen's beliefs about reading, or the ways Jaylen might struggle in ways that go beyond the common focus on reading skills. No matter how much we had worked on his decoding or built his fluency, these skills would not have helped Jaylen resolve this identity conflict about who can, and does, read. By paying attention to children's identities as readers, we can learn about conflicts like this one well before they risk derailing a child's success as a reader (Hall, 2010; Kabuto, 2011; Rogers & Elias, 2012). Starting early with attention to reading identities can help to prevent reading difficulties before they become serious challenges to

pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

¹ I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this article I use

the reading and academic achievement of children. Reading is more than skills, and if teachers pay attention only to what common reading assessments tell us about Jaylen, they are missing what may be some of the largest reading challenges Jaylen faces, and the best assets he has to overcome them. This article explores what can be learned about young children’s identities as readers and provides guidance on how teachers can learn about how young children are developing an understanding of who they are as readers. Though the guidance and lessons reported here come from a prekindergarten classroom, they are consistent with broader research on reading identities and can be applied with children as they are learning to read across the early childhood and elementary grades.

What Are Reading Identities?

Children appropriate concepts, practices, ways of talking with others, and ways of doing with texts by interacting with others. Children draw on all of these resources to construct ideas about what reading is and who they are as readers. These ideas about who they are as readers are *reading identities*, and they reflect the range of ways that children construct meaning from their early experiences with reading and language (Wagner, 2018). Reading identities are informed by post-structural and constructivist theories that imagine identities to be constructed through social interactions with other people (Bakhtin, 1984; Norton, 2013). Identities are fluid and are constantly being negotiated and shaped within communities of readers (Block, 2007; Wenger, 1998). When applied to children, these theories portray children as continually making and re-making their ideas about who they are as readers as they learn to read and

become readers in school and other spaces (Cummins, 1996; Moje & Luke, 2009).

Unlike many approaches to reading instruction that are common in reading curricula, reading instruction that centers reading identities considers not only the skills that comprise the technical ability to read, but also the ways these skills are mediated by children’s beliefs about reading, language, and the self. Reading and learning to read are, in this sense, not just knowing about texts, but “ways of being in relation with” texts (Lysaker, 2006, p. 34). By taking a wider view of reading and learning to read, a focus on reading identities requires teachers to take a more holistic view of children as readers, including how children engage with texts, reading,

and the process of learning to read (McCarthy & Moje, 2002). When teachers focus on reading identities, they integrate information about children’s cognition, language, and social development, and draw on well-developed ways of understanding early reading and identities as negotiated social practices (Gee, 2002).

“...reading instruction that centers reading identities considers not only the skills that comprise the technical ability to read, but also the ways these skills are mediated...”

Context

The guidance and examples from Jaylen are drawn from my time in a prekindergarten classroom as a literacy coach and researcher. I worked with Jaylen and other children in his classroom in various instructional and play activities, and I worked with Jaylen’s teacher and other teachers in his school to support literacy instruction. This elementary school was located in a large city in the United States and served a diverse language community where two-thirds of the children spoke a non-English first language. Jaylen came from a family that spoke Haitian Creole, though he only used English in school and his mother reported that he understood

but did not speak Haitian Creole at home. Instruction in school was delivered only in English, and I worked with Jaylen only in English. I spent time with Jaylen and the other children in his classroom as a participant-observer. My interactions with Jaylen and the other children in his classroom focused not only on coaching their teacher and collecting data, but also on facilitating the children's own development of a reading identity. I took a reflective stance to continually and critically evaluate my own position, challenge my own view of Jaylen, and draw on the perspectives of others who knew Jaylen well to frame his actions and responses.

Using Identity as a Lens to See Children as Readers

Putting together the various parts of children that, together, make them a reader requires teachers to see children as complex and different, and to see reading as comprised of a wide range of skills, actions, and dispositions that come together to make the practice of reading (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Lysaker, 2006). Conceiving of readers and reading as complex is key to successfully teaching all children to be readers, and to recognizing and supporting the diverse ways that children become a reader. Adopting identity as a lens to see children as readers means being aware of how children construct reading identities and committing to learning about the different ways that children express and draw on their identities as readers. Foregrounding identity requires understanding how children conceptualize, perform, and experience reading, and how they connect reading to their understandings of language and culture (Wagner, 2018). Each of these aspects of reading identities is explored in the sections that follow to provide guidance on what to look for to learn about children's reading identities, and to inform classroom practices that can help children to develop positive reading identities.

Children Conceptualizing Reading

Children construct a concept of reading by connecting and making sense of various materials, ideas, and procedures that are related to the act of reading (Lysaker, 2006; Moje & Luke, 2009). Even children who are not yet decoding text, like Jaylen, actively construct ideas about what reading is. These ideas about reading vary in their complexity and make-up, and often start with a basic understanding of reading materials and individual parts of the reading process. As their experiences with reading grow, children construct more complex views of reading that integrate texts, letters, and words, and grow to include related concepts and practices like intonation and shared readings (Wagner, 2018). In demonstrating how he conceptualizes reading, Jaylen described a specific reading process he called *look reading*:

Interviewer: When you read a book like this, do you look at the pictures, or do you look at all the words? Or do you look at both?

Jaylen: I just, I just look read. See?

Interviewer: Oh, what's look reading?

Jaylen: You just have to look at it, and just read in your mind. Like this. [*Jaylen stares intently at the page again.*]

Interviewer: [*Interviewer points to the page.*] So do you know what this says, or is that the part that Ms. P has to read to you?

Jaylen: I know how to read it.

Interviewer: You do?

Jaylen: Yea, I'm gonna do it with my mind. [*Jaylen stares intently at the page again.*]

Interviewer: So reading isn't something you have to say out loud?

Jaylen: No.

In this exchange Jaylen offers an understanding of reading that is both unique and grounded in several specific features of texts. His concept of *look reading* values the pictures and words on the page and recognizes that reading happens “in your mind.” This conception suggests an emerging understanding of the internal mental processes involved in reading. Jaylen presents *look reading* as a strategy to make meaning from texts and understands that this process requires active use of his mind. This strategy gives him the confidence that, “I know how to read it.”

Children Performing Reading

Children perform reading by enacting or interacting with the materials, ideas, and procedures that comprise reading (Gee, 2002; Wohlwend, 2011). For many children, this process centers on verbal interactions with others during readings, including participating in choral responses, answering questions, sharing personal connections, and retelling information. This talk is often how children first participate in readings, and it supports children as they learn to make meaning of written language (Genishi, Stires, & Yung-Chan, 2001; Moses & Kelly, 2017).

Reading performances often mimic the behaviors of more advanced readers (Gee, 2002; Wenger, 1998). Even before they can decode text, children use tools and clues to approximate the act of decoding, including memorizing words on a page or recalling text that another reader has recently produced. Through these performances, children construct identities by behaving like the more advanced

readers they see, such as teachers, parents, or older peers (Flores-Dueñas, 2005; Willett, 1995).

Jaylen engaged in this kind of performance when he sat down to read a book about reptiles:

Interviewer: Can you read this book all by yourself?

Jaylen: Yes. Snake book, snakes, all about it.

Interviewer: How do you know it's about snakes?

Jaylen: It says it over here, see? [*Jaylen points to the title.*]

Interviewer: What does it say?

Jaylen: Snakes. All about the snakes. [*Jaylen traces the title with his finger.*]

Interviewer: What does this say? [*Interviewer points to the subtitle.*]

Jaylen: Snakes. Snakes. Um, all about snakes. See the snake? [*Jaylen points to a snake.*] That's a real snake. Some snakes are really bad, some can't kill you, and some could. Some cannot kill you. It's okay if they bite you. The one can, if one, if one can kill you, they'll run away from you. If it kills you, you're gonna have to go to the nurse and get a shot and stay there forever and your mother has to give you to heaven.

Though Jaylen could not yet decode print, he demonstrated other tasks he observed readers do. These actions included holding the book upright, starting with the title, and providing an introduction to the book. He then began to share his knowledge about snakes. Jaylen showed both procedural knowledge about one method for reading a text, and

an understanding that the purpose of reading is to share knowledge about the world around him.

Children Experiencing Reading

Children’s experiences of reading are informed by the social and emotional responses they have to texts, their recollections of these emotions, and self-assessments of their reading ability (Brummelman & Thomaes, 2017; Wagner, 2018). Many children show excitement and pleasure when reading, and welcome invitations to read with others. Other children may express that they dislike reading, or that they find it boring or hard.

Jaylen often showed excitement when he was invited to the classroom reading area. He readily selected a book from the bookshelf, showed off his favorite books, and made pleas such as “Can I have two of them? Please can I have two of them?” These appeals for “more” reflected an excitement and enjoyment of reading with others.

By prekindergarten, children also engage in self-assessments (Cimpian, Hammond, Mazza, & Corry, 2017). For early readers, evaluations are typically positive and reflect a belief that they are capable of reading. For Jaylen, this self-assessment included short descriptions of the self as a “good reader,” though these descriptions often grow more nuanced as children grow. Children may also evaluate their reading by making comparisons to peers or talking about what more advanced readers can do (Wagner, 2018).

Children may also align or distance themselves from pre-existing, socially-constructed ideas about reading and who they are (Brummelman &

Thomaes, 2017). This positioning is often done through the expression of preferences that allow children to describe themselves by using existing labels of genres, people, or places they associate with reading. Preferences serve as a way of identifying with specific reading communities based on the content or people involved in reading, and to express these inclinations to others.

Children Connecting Reading and Language

Many of Jaylen’s peers in his prekindergarten classroom were either exposed to more than one language at home, as he was, or were actively learning to speak and read in more than one language. Multilingual children’s participation in

various language communities helps them to develop knowledge and experiences with reading that reflect their multilingualism (Gort & Bauer, 2012; Martínez-Roldán & Sayer, 2006). As multilingual children construct reading identities, they are influenced by social attitudes toward multilingualism, choices about languages use, and

differences in reading across languages (Martínez-Roldán & Malavé, 2004; Norton, 2013).

Though children are capable of flexibly constructing reading identities in response to various language contexts, schools often lead children to interpret multilingual reading identities as an obstacle to the construction of an identity as a good reader in school (Kabuto, 2011). Supporting multilingual children as they come to understand reading across languages means supporting reading in and across all of their languages.

Even children who are not multilingual, but who are exposed to multilingual speakers at home or in

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classrooms, will come to grapple with the connections between language and reading. For Jaylen, having Spanish-speaking friends inspired him to “read” in Spanish even though it wasn’t a language he knew.

Interviewer: So you read in English?

Jaylen: Yes. And in Spanish.

Interviewer: You read in Spanish? Do you speak Spanish too?

Jaylen: *[Speaks in invented sounds.]* Look look look. I know how to read. *[Jaylen follows some words on a page of the book as though he is reading them, but he is speaking invented sounds.]*

Interviewer: Are you reading in Spanish?

Jaylen: Yea. *[Continues “reading” in Spanish by speaking invented sounds.]*

Through this exchange reflects only a rudimentary understanding of Spanish as a language that is different from English, for children like Jaylen, an exposure to peers who speak multiple languages can broaden their awareness of languages. Children who are exposed to and learning to read in multiple languages may also develop language preferences that reflect affective, personal, or practical desires to use a certain language to read. As children grow as multilingual readers, they develop an awareness of how languages may share certain characteristics for reading, how they can make choices about how and when they move between languages when reading, and how a language user can apply their cross-

linguistic knowledge and skills to reading (Wagner, 2018).

Learning About and Assessing Children’s Reading Identities

Learning about children’s reading identities starts with viewing children as meaning-makers about their own identities (Albon & Rosen, 2013; Genishi, Stires, & Yung-Chan, 2001, Walgermo, Frijters, & Solheim, 2018). This requires moving away from an over-reliance on skills-based assessments of reading and learning from children as they work toward understanding and enacting different ways of being a reader.

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Interest inventories and surveys are already used by some teachers to better understand children as readers (Flippo, Holland, McCarthy, & Swinning, 2009). Although a good start, these approaches often fall short of centering the child as a reader throughout the process of instructional planning, teaching, and assessing children. Walpole

and McKenna (2006) note that to be truly useful to children, these tools must be followed by more specific assessments that can appropriately inform instruction. Yet for many teachers, identifying appropriate follow-up assessments can be challenging when resources or support are not available from a literacy specialist or other trained staff. The approaches described here, which are informed by my work with children in prekindergarten, provide additional ways to learn about children and, in turn, to inform classroom practices that help children to develop positive early identities as readers.

Intentional Talk About Reading

Intentional, planned talk with children about reading can be used as a holistic approach to assessing reading (Parkinson, 2001; Westcott & Littleton, 2005). This talk can occur immediately preceding, during, or following readings, and should extend to topics beyond the book or text being read, including talk about home reading practices, reading preferences, and differences in reading across languages, among other topics. This kind of talk can be planned in advance or spontaneous and is already done informally by many teachers. If this is the case, teachers might try documenting their conversations by recording them or taking quick notes during or after the conversations.

Talk about these topics can elicit broader responses about how children read, view reading, and situate themselves among reading practices and other readers. Productive talk can occur in one-on-one contexts, small groups, or large group discussions. When I use this approach, I often group three to four children together. Often one child's responses to questions about reading will fuel responses from other children, leading to even richer conversations. For some children, group conversation may be hard to enter, and follow-up conversations can provide a calmer and safer space for sharing. Some effective questions for talking with children about reading are shown in Figure 1.

Drawing About Reading

Drawing and talking about reading combine children's verbal and visual languages by allowing children to draw and then explain their drawings (Angell, Alexander, & Hunt, 2015; Kendrick & McKay, 2004). Drawing allows children to add to and revise ideas, and can scaffold complex and abstract thinking (Fisher, Albers, & Frederick, 2014; Hopperstad, 2010). For those children who may not

- Do you have a favorite book, author, or topic you like to read about?
- Do you have a book, author, or topic you don't like to read about?
- Do you have a favorite place to read, or a favorite person to read with?
- Who do you know that is a good reader? What makes them a good reader?
- How do you become a good reader?
- Do you think you're a good reader? What makes you a good/not good reader?
- How do you feel when you read? What makes you feel that way?
- What would you like to read when you're older?

Figure 1. Questions for intentional talk with children about reading.

have much to say in group conversations, drawing can open new ways to develop and share ideas. Children's drawings and their explanations of them often reveal more complexity in children's understandings of their own identities than conversation alone.

To support children's drawing about reading, start by leading children in a discussion about what, where, and with whom they read. Posing open-ended, authentic questions to children signals that you are interested in them and what they have to say, and that there is no right or wrong answer. Then ask each child to compose a drawing of themselves reading. It's okay for children to look at each other's' work and share ideas. Copying and group brainstorming are how children support their thinking, and it doesn't mean they won't have ideas of their own to share. As each child finishes drawing, ask them to explain what is in their picture. Ask clarifying and prompting questions to solicit more information and extend the discussion. For children

who are quiet, the task of labeling their work can provide a more concrete context for talk. As the child explains their work, label their drawing by adding their words to the page. If children can write on their own, invite them to label their drawing. And, of course, inviting children to share their drawings with the class can be a great way to start more conversation.

Observation During Play and Classroom Activities

Play is at the center of how young children learn and practice language. Children draw on their knowledge of texts and construct and enact reading identities across contexts for play, including imaginative and dramatic play (Dyson, 2003; Wohlwend, 2011). Observing children during play and other classroom activities provide opportunities to gather information on children's reading-related behaviors and talk. Productive observations can focus on children's speech, language choice, and audience, and their interactions with other children, objects, or texts, though the focus and nature of observations may vary across contexts (Cohen, Stern, Balaban, & Gropper, 2015). These observations can be done informally by watching children from afar, by participating in play, or even by recording children as they play independently.

Paying attention to how children use characters, settings, and plots from texts can provide insights into how children are using, adapting, and applying what they know about reading. Most teachers will be familiar with the superheroes and other popular characters that are a staple of children's play as they reenact scenes and create new ones with characters they know well. Children's expression of who they

are as readers and how they value texts often surfaces in these peer interactions (Wagner, 2018). For many children, who they are as readers and how they use texts is evident in the narratives of their play, the arts they create, and the conversations they have with peers in these informal reading interactions (Compton-Lilly, 2006; Genishi & Dyson, 2009). Observing children's play activities through the lens of reading can tell much about who a child is as a reader.

Family Questionnaires

Family and parent questionnaires can be a reliable source of information on child language and reading practices (Gutiérrez-Clellen & Kreiter, 2003).

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Questionnaires can be sent home with children to be completed by a parent or family member and can provide an alternate perspective on a child. Family responses to questionnaires can confirm the teacher's perceptions of a child, raise questions or areas of concern for a child's reading development, highlight ways a

child responds to or uses reading in the home that may differ from what the teacher observes in the classroom, and reveal valued spaces for reading in the child's life or community.

Questionnaires can ask families to provide descriptions of their home language practices, access to books, the child's reading practices, the family member's view of the child as a reader, and descriptions of other home literacy practices, including oral storytelling. For teachers who are comfortable going beyond questionnaires, talking with family members during pick-up and drop-off times or inviting them into the classroom can provide opportunities to build trusting relationships

and learn more about children. These interactions don't need to involve big events—starting small with casual conversations or a parent book reading can go a long way to broadening family-school relationships that provide insights into how and what children read.

For families where English may not be the home language, questionnaires provide an opportunity to collect responses in multiple languages that can be translated later. Open-ended questions or prompts can often yield more information than questions that only request or provide room for brief responses. For parents who are responding in a language other than English, this approach can provide one of the few extended spaces to share information about their child in a language that is familiar and comfortable. Other colleagues or translation tools on a phone can help to provide basic translations. Many schools can provide more formal translation services when requested. Sample questions that provide more space for families to respond are shown in Figure 2.

Nurturing Children as Readers

Making use of these approaches to learn about children's reading identities draws teachers' attention to the broader needs of children as they are learning to read, and not only to the skills and strategies that comprise part of the work of reading. To better support children's early reading, teachers must acknowledge that children begin constructing reading identities from an early age and commit to learning about the ways that children understand who they are as readers (Rogers & Elias, 2012; Wagner, 2018; Walgermo, Frijters, & Solheim, 2018).

Teachers must then account for the role of identities as they plan for and support early reading. This starts with talking to and engaging with children

- Think about any conversations you have had with your child about books or reading. What does your child say when he/she talks about books or reading?
- Think about what happens when you read with your child. Describe what you do when you are reading. Describe what your child does when you are reading. What is the feeling or tone of the reading? For example, do you feel at ease, tense, nervous, loved?
- Does your child read or look at books by him/herself? Describe what your child does when he/she is reading alone.
- Other than books, what else is read with your child at home? Examples might include grocery lists, menus, recipes, or other texts.
- What languages do you use when you read with your child? Do you use only one language at a time while you are reading, or do you go back and forth between languages? Does your child respond differently to books in based on the language they are written or read in?
- What are your goals for your child? What do you want your child to know or be able to do at the end of the year? What languages is it important for your child to be able to read in?

Figure 2. Sample questions for family questionnaires.

around reading to provide opportunities for early explorations of identity. Creating successful spaces for the examination of identities starts with creating a community of readers that is welcome, is open to all children, and values and welcomes the identities children are constructing as readers (Flores-Dueñas, 2005; Wagner, 2019). This provision of a safe, inviting space can be achieved by:

- Ensuring all children participate in considering what reading is. This includes talking actively about reading and readers, and asking children to share about their own reading.
- Providing varied spaces and times for children to perform reading in the classroom.
- Ensuring all children have multiple opportunities to experience reading positively.
- Inviting parents and community members into the classroom to bridge home-school reading differences, connect reading across languages and cultures, and welcome all readers and ways of reading into the classroom reading community.

As teachers learn about children’s reading identities, it is important to resist the tendency to evaluate children’s identities with oversimplified labels like “good reader” or “bad reader” and to instead allow space for complex, nuanced, and even contradictory profiles of children to emerge (Taylor, 2017). Teachers can do this by observing and documenting the actions and words of children, drawing on varied and descriptive language to characterize children, including children in the process of describing their own identities, revisiting and revising their emerging profiles of children, and collaborating with colleagues, parents, and others to create more nuanced profiles of children that reflect multiple perspectives. Teachers should likewise be wary of attempts to define “correct” or “normal” paths of identity development. Teachers should instead embrace, celebrate, and support the different reading identities children create, and the many pathways children take to developing these reading identities.

Conclusion

In many classrooms, reading instruction loses sight of the broader joys of reading and the process of learning to become a reader. Attention to reading identities provides a robust reminder that reading is more than skills. Learning to see children’s reading identities can help teachers to construct a more holistic view of children that is more truthful to how they become readers. By looking at Jaylen, educators may see that what they can learn from these short excerpts goes beyond Jaylen’s skills or achievement of standardized benchmarks. They instead see what might make Jaylen a successful reader, including his excitement to engage with books, topics of interest that compel him to read, and his creative development of his own reading strategies. These examples also point to opportunities to better support Jaylen. His openness to Spanish reading presents a rich opportunity to explore reading across languages. Teachers might also see how he may struggle in ways that are missed by a focus on decoding, fluency, and other reading skills.

This paper shares the experiences of Jaylen as an example of how children construct and express reading identities from a young age. Other research has reported on how reading identities are constructed and expressed by other diverse young children (e.g. Moses & Kelly, 2017; Wagner, 2018). Teachers must consider the diversity of the children in their own classrooms, and how the needs, contexts, and experiences of these children may differ from the experiences and needs of a child like Jaylen. Though these differences are important to recognize, thinking about reading identities is an opportunity to see more of all children as readers. And when teachers see more of children, they can support them in ways that are more individualized and responsive to how they are making sense of who they are as readers.

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