

Preface

Unison Reading defines reading as a fundamentally social experience in which the meaning that an individual makes of a text reaches its full potential through a collective experience. This is common sense for most people outside of schools, where the underlying purpose of the social situation determines how we read and what we make of texts. Whether we're scanning menus or subway maps, studying textbooks or religious texts, or reading income tax instructions, we often consult with others to determine what meaning we should make of texts and how those meanings should shape our actions and understandings. All authentic reading—or reading that we do with real purpose—is shaped by the intentions, goals, and beliefs we bring to the larger task at hand. But the history of reading instruction, with its focus on best practices and balanced instruction, has nearly always concentrated on which aspects of the text to emphasize in *teaching*. Should teachers emphasize the process of meaning making or the particular cognitive skills involved in reading? The persistent debate over the relative merits of instruction that emphasizes *skills* over instruction that emphasizes *meaning* is familiar to most teachers of reading. In the field of reading instruction, the parameters of this debate are set by a conventional understanding that reading is a process that involves one person in the act of deciphering a text to achieve meaning.

While it is true that reading is ultimately a process of making meaning from symbols, it is also a commonsense fact that the very essence of what meanings are made in the act of reading has everything to do with the reader's subjective experiences. It is also true that it is a peculiarly human capacity that allows us, through social experiences, to engage with others and think about things from the perspective of what they might be thinking about those things. These intersubjective experiences allow us to expand and deepen our personal understanding. These insights play out in our relationships with others and are fundamental to the process of reading and learning to read. When reading teachers overlook the relational dimensions of pedagogical situations and the subjective experiences they cultivate—as traditional reading methods have tended to do—they miss opportunities to nurture the most significant dimensions of the act of reading through children's connections to their peers.

Unison Reading is based on the belief that the reader's intentions are every bit as significant to the experience of reading as the features of the texts themselves and that interactions with others play a pivotal role in shaping intentions. Children's intentions and the social interactions that foster them deserve strong emphasis in instruction. The term *unison* in the name of this approach recognizes the idea that reading is fundamentally a social process and that children best acquire desired dispositions as readers in the company of others. The Unison Reading protocol creates a communal situation in which children can learn from one another.

This book responds to a demand for reading instruction that provides children with opportunities to integrate multiple skills and strategies in the context of authentic reading experiences. There have been recent calls to end the intractable debate about how best to teach reading by suggesting that skills and meaning should be balanced through an *integrated* approach to the teaching of reading. While this view recognizes that good reading instruction combines attention to letter-sound relationships with an emphasis on meaning, the locus of

integration is typically within the teacher's instructional plan. Unison Reading presses the point that it is the reader's interaction with the text that dictates which reading cues deserve attention. So far, what has been lacking is an approach to reading instruction that places the locus of integration with the *child* rather than the teacher. Unison Reading is a method that shifts responsibility to children for determining which information sources to attend to during the reading process and how these should be integrated.

Unison Reading is also based on a commitment to social justice. Ironically, in spite of over 50 years of commitment to racial integration in schools since the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, common instructional practices such as leveled reading groups (or ability groups) still continue to function as sorting mechanisms within the classroom. These practices establish and secure patterns of inequality that mirror inequities found outside of school.

Unison Reading interrupts this cycle by defining literacy as an outcome of a reader's participation in widening circles of social experience that foster new cognitive competencies. Based on the Vygotskian principle that understanding often develops first within the social context before being internalized as a private psychological skill, Unison Reading involves all members of a small group in a joint oral reading of the same text. This process brings to communal consciousness any aspect of the text that caused confusion for one of its members and allows for critical analysis and understanding. Ability groups are abandoned together with the notion that knowledge can be transmitted from teacher to student through a linear sequence of skills to be practiced and mastered. Instead, children are integrated into groups based on interest in texts that they themselves have chosen—groups of common interests and varied talents. Children with comparatively limited or delayed reading literacy enjoy a strong scaffold of support for their participation, and higher-functioning readers have opportunities to foster critical comprehension.

During its piloting as the schoolwide reading program in a Pre-K–8 Title I school in Manhattan, Unison Reading was associated with dramatic gains in reading achievement. After one year of implementation, the average rate of growth of students at every level in the school from second to eighth grade, outpaced the national average rate of growth on the Degrees of Reading Power assessment, the progress monitoring system used in the school. These gains are addressed fully in the Conclusion section of this book. I hope one major message this book delivers is that equity is more than a lofty democratic ideal. When classrooms exemplify the values of democratic society, children flourish.

Unison Reading has grown out of a broader pedagogical approach that I have developed over two decades as a teacher and researcher, which I call Genre Practice.¹ This progressive approach to literacy pedagogy is founded on the idea that children are naturally inclined to grow and learn, and that schooling should nurture these instincts while at the same time providing all children with sufficient opportunity to learn what society expects them to learn. It is based on the belief that children learn most when they have freedom to read and write texts of their choosing, to collaborate with peers of their choice, to hold themselves accountable to high learning standards, to size up their own strengths and needs, and to make commitments to things they need to improve upon.

Founded on the idea that school should enhance children's flourishing and well being, Unison Reading and other Genre Practice methods are designed to instill confidence, pride, and a sense of engagement in children. These aims have roots in my own vivid memories of primary school, sitting beside my beloved first-grade teacher, Mrs. Wise, during our regular Round Robin reading lessons. The intense feelings of existential discomfort I experienced during these meetings are etched into my memory: I can see myself in my mind's eye, face flushed, palms sweating, heart racing, and intently focused on trying to identify the place in the text when it would be my turn to read aloud, alone, to my group, exposed to their critical scrutiny. Though I learned how to read, I also

¹Genrepractice.org was created as a source of information for those interested in learning more about the Genre Practice model. Visit genrepractice.org to learn more.

learned to dislike reading. My reading competence was achieved at the cost of my compromised sense of identity as a reader. Those early memories turned into gut-level instincts about the generative power of positive school experiences.

Unison Reading transforms what, for many children, are alienating and tedious routines into pleasurable and engaging social rituals. Unison Reading is an antidote to the humiliating and soul crushing methods of old, and strives to support flourishing and well being in children. But perhaps more importantly, the Unison Reading method provides a method for teachers to support the mission of literacy development as means for children to begin to access their basic civil and human rights. In his speech commemorating International Literacy Day, U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan (2009) stated,

Literacy is essential to the development and health of individuals, communities, and countries. It is a condition for people's effective participation in the democratic process. It is the basis for the written communication and literature that have long provided the main channel for cross-cultural awareness and understanding. And, at the same time, it is the most precious way we have of expressing, preserving, and developing our cultural diversity and identity. Literacy, in short, is a prerequisite for peace.

More than the acquisition of reading and writing skills, literacy is a means through which children learn to take from and participate in their culture. Founded upon the principle that reading is a cultural practice, the Unison Reading method provides a context for children to exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens.