

## ILLUSTRATING THE READING STANDARD

**“Drought”** *School Journal*, Part 3 Number 2, 2010

Noun frequency level: 9–10

By the end of year 5, students are required to use a variety of fiction and non-fiction texts to locate, evaluate, and integrate information and ideas in order to meet the reading demands of the curriculum, drawing on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes described for the end of year 5 in the Literacy Learning Progressions. The curriculum tasks will also involve the students in generating their own questions as well as answering questions from the teacher.

The students in a year 5 class are involved in a health inquiry into how people respond to and cope with difficult circumstances. They are identifying ways to express feelings about loss and grief and are building on the key competencies of managing self and relating to others.

“Drought” is told through the eyes of a girl whose rural community is dealing with a drought. Her mother has died

some time before, and she lives alone with her father. An underlying tension builds throughout the story, paralleling the community’s desperate need for rain with the father’s need to come to terms with the death of his wife.

The teacher chose “Drought” because the text is a first-person narrative that provides opportunities for the students to make connections with the characters’ sense of loss, to identify how this loss affects the characters, and to find out how they deal with it. The abstract ideas of loss and grief are conveyed indirectly, which requires students to make inferences and to integrate information within the text.

*The following example illustrates aspects of the task and text and demonstrates how a student engages with both task and text to meet the reading demands of the curriculum. A number of such examples would be used to inform the overall teacher judgment for this student.*

Every classroom window’s open – even the doors – yet I’m drowning in sweat.

But all I see is a swimming pool – deep ... cold ... blue. I open my eyes to a dusty playing field and a square of dead grass. Drought. The dreaded word that flashes on our TV screen night after night along with pictures of sheep with their ribs poking through.

I wait for him to tell me to use my imagination – but I guess it was Mum who said things like that. Dad still hasn’t eaten anything, and there are big black bags under his eyes. He drives the town’s only water tanker, and he’s worked every day for weeks.

This time the story comes, but the drought in the story is Dad’s. Like the ever-blue sky, he’s holding back tears. From time to time, a small cloud drifts by, but he blinks it away.

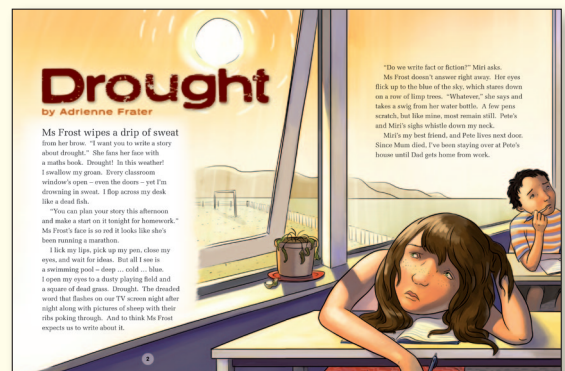
Then one night, he falls into such a deep sleep, a cloud creeps by without him noticing.

Fat white clouds at first, then grey ones, then black – and the blackest clouds are bursting with rain. The moment they burst, Dad cries.

The moon’s up now, and the sky’s littered with stars. As I stand awhile, thinking about the story, a wisp of cloud passes in front of the moon. Then, as more and more clouds start to block out the stars, I run inside and wake Dad.

The student locates information to understand that a drought is part of the setting of the story. She makes connections to her own knowledge of droughts and experiences of hot weather. She integrates information within the first page to infer that the situation in the story (the drought and its consequences) is very serious and affects all aspects of the narrator’s daily life.

With support, the student locates, evaluates, and integrates information about Dad to understand that while Dad is physically tired, he is also not his usual self in other ways. She infers that Dad may also be overworking because he is unhappy about his wife’s death.



The student integrates the idea of Dad “holding back tears” with the statement “The moment they burst, Dad cries” and relates it to her earlier evaluation about how Dad isn’t coping. She connects the need for Dad to let go with the need for the rain to come. The student discusses the abstract idea of “drought” and, with support, relates the idea of an emotional drought (Dad’s) to the physical drought affecting the community.

The student notices how the final paragraph reflects what happened in the story that came to the girl – more and more clouds are coming, so the drought could end. This also gives the girl a positive action to take for her father. The student evaluates this low-key but positive ending and judges it to be effective and moving for this story.

The student refers to the purpose for reading, and with teacher support, connects the scenario in the text with her own experiences or other situations she has read about, such as when people have been involved in a disaster or tragedy. She concludes that it’s often useful for people to find a way to express their grief or worry (perhaps by crying or perhaps in a creative way – like the girl’s cloud story).