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Research Paper



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“If we wish to help children and adolescents become thoughtfully literate, classroom talk around texts is critical.”

—Dr. Richard Allington, 2012

The “literacy club” is a long-standing metaphor that captures the social nature of language and literacy learning. It carries with it the understanding that we learn from other people—by joining the club of like-minded people and engaging in their activities (Smith, 1987). Literacy researcher Peter Johnston (2004) notes that, “Children, just like adults, learn better in supportive environments in which they can risk trying out new strategies and concepts and stretching themselves intellectually.”

Comprehension Clubs fosters dynamic, intellectually charged conversation about books—or “text talk”—as students and teachers come together in collaborative comprehension clubs to discuss and engage with books. Through reflective, academic conversation about books—the hallmark of the Common Core State Standards (2010)—teachers and students create the vibrant, literate classroom community that best supports high-level, quality comprehension. The collaborative, interactive nature of the club enables *all* students—including struggling readers and English Language Learners—to find the support they need to fully engage with the books (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, 2012; Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011). Each student gains access to more-expansive, deeper comprehension as he or she participates in shared talk about books. As a result, each student has the opportunity to become a more proficient reader and confident learner.

Comprehension Clubs features two supportive and instructional “talk structures”: interactive read-alouds and book clubs.

The Interactive Read-Aloud

Reading aloud with children is known to be the single most important activity for building the knowledge and skills they will eventually require for learning to read.—Marilyn Jaeger Adams

Just at the name suggests, the read-aloud is truly interactive; as the teacher reads aloud to the students, she invites them to participate: to make comments, extend the ideas of their peers, and ask and respond to questions. In this way, the

teacher helps children build deeper meaning than they could have accomplished on their own (Hoyt, 2007; Laminack and Wadsworth, 2006; Whitehurst, et al., 1988; Purcell-Gates, McIntyre & Freppon, 1995).

The Research Behind the Interactive Read-Aloud

Known as *dialogic* or *interactive*, these read-alouds result in student gains in vocabulary (Bennett-Armistead, 2009), comprehension strategies and story schema (Van den Broek, 2001), and concept development (Wasik & Bond, 2001; Fountas and Pinnell, 2012). However, simply inviting children to talk during interactive read-alouds doesn’t provide the needed learning boost. It’s the *close reading* and *textual analysis*—deep, intentional conversation about the text (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; 2012; Serravallo, 2012; and Shanahan, 2012)—that makes the difference. Shanahan explains:

Close reading requires a substantial emphasis on readers figuring out a high-quality text. This “figuring out” is accomplished primarily by reading and discussing the text . . . close reading [means] intense emphasis on text, figuring out the text by thinking about the words and ideas in the text, minimization of external explanations, multiple and dynamic rereading, multiple purposes that focus on what a text says, how it says it, and what it means or what its value is.

These are the textual investigations in which students engage as they use the Fountas and Pinnell (2006) framework for thinking about text: thinking within the text, beyond the text, and about the text.

Academic Vocabulary

Thinking within the text during an interactive read-aloud is an effective structure for exploring new vocabulary words. According to Marzano and Pickering (2005), the best way to ensure that

students have the academic background knowledge to understand the content they will encounter is to teach them the meaning of the words embedded in the text at hand. When students understand these unique academic words, it is easier for them to comprehend the material that features the words. The Common Core is very clear about the critical importance of academic vocabulary, and we have decades of research that demonstrates the extent to which students' vocabulary knowledge relates to their reading comprehension (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding, 1988; Biemiller, 1999; Hiebert, 2011). And since students' success in school and beyond depends in great measure upon their ability to read with comprehension, providing instruction that equips students with the skills and strategies necessary for lifelong vocabulary development is both urgent and essential.

Recognizing that students who are successful in acquiring vocabulary are generally better readers, researcher Dr. Isabel Beck believes strongly that vocabulary instruction should be a high priority in every classroom. Beck found that words are learned best in the context of reading followed by rich discussion. One of her most significant contributions is organizing words into three tiers based on their usefulness and frequency of use. Beck et al. (2002) suggest that for instructional purposes, teachers should concentrate on "Tier Two" words—also known as academic vocabulary—that:

- reflect mature language use and appear frequently across a variety of contexts;
- lend themselves to instruction, helping students build in-depth knowledge of them and their connections to other words and concepts;
- and provide precision and specificity in describing a concept for which the students already have a general understanding (Beck et al., 2002).

Nell Duke (2011) also cites the high correlation (0.86) between academic vocabulary and comprehension and offers several strategies that students can use again and again to lock down the meaning of more-sophisticated content words, including relating words to themes and to other related words. These word associations help build networks of meaning that support reading comprehension.

Student Book Clubs

Children grow into the intellectual life around them.—Lev Vygotsky

Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell (2006) characterize the book club as a literature "investigation," in which participants, with guidance from the teacher, "try out tentative ideas, search for information to confirm or refute their thinking, and build on one another's ideas." The goal, Fountas and Pinnell (2006) instruct us, is to think of book clubs as *shared inquiry*. The text talk inside a book club doesn't center around finding the one right answer; it's about investigating and analyzing the text and, to this end, the benefits are great as club members come together to share their perspectives, insights, and understandings.

The Research Behind Student Book Clubs

Day, et al., (2002) identify five primary benefits of student book clubs; They:

- *Help teach—not merely check—comprehension.*
Listening in on book clubs helps teachers pinpoint their instruction and deliver what students actually need to move forward in their development as proficient readers.
- *Enable teachers to teach multiple facets of comprehension.*
Book clubs help students move beyond superficial facts about a book; the analytical talk that book clubs make possible fosters deep, multi-faceted comprehension.
- *Encourage students to learn from one another.*
The rich, analytical talk of student book clubs supports all members, including those who are English Learners and those who find reading a challenge.
- *Motivate students naturally.*
The clubs give all students an opportunity to share their thoughts, questions, and theories, and, in the process, they are ultimately led to think much more deeply about the book than they could have accomplished on their own.
- *Promote discussion more effectively than whole group discussions do.*
Small groups offer certain advantages that whole-class discussions don't. Book clubs:
 - provide more opportunity for all children to talk; since there are typically only six or so students in a group, there is more time for each student to talk.

- foster a more natural, easier context for text talk; it's simply easier to talk in a small group than in an entire class.
- encourage responsibility and independence. In order to participate in their club, students have to read the book on their own, think about what they want to discuss, and come prepared to share and question.

Research Studies Case in Point

Harvey Daniels (2002), a long-time champion of book clubs, outlines his convincing research as well as the research of others that demonstrates the promising results made possible by book clubs. Between 1995 and 1998, he worked to implement book clubs in a group of struggling Chicago schools in as many classrooms as possible. The school-wide results were encouraging.

- In reading, his “book club” schools outstripped citywide test score gains by 14% in 3rd grade, 9% in 6th grade, and 10% in 8th grade.
- In writing, they topped citywide gains by 25% in grade 3, 8% in grade 6, and 27% in grade 8.

Daniels explains: “The Chicago teachers were convinced: their book clubs were working, not just to help kids become readers, but also to prove they are readers on the mandated measures of proficiency.”

As Daniels notes, other researchers have found similar results. A 1998 study of 4th graders by Klinger, Vaughn, and Schumm found that:

- Students in peer-led groups made greater gains than control groups in reading comprehension and equal gains in content knowledge, as measured by standardized tests, after reading and discussing social studies material in peer-led groups.
- Most encouragingly, student small-group talk was 65% academic and content-related, 25% procedural, 8% feedback, with only 2% off-task.

Martinez-Roldan and López-Robertson (2000) examined the effect of book clubs in a first-grade bilingual classroom. They found that:

- “Young bilingual children, no matter what their linguistic background, are able to have rich discussions if they have regular opportunities to engage with books.”

And Dana Grisham of San Diego State University has catalogued book club research documenting benefits for inner-city students (Garbarino, et al.,

1992); incarcerated adolescents (Hill and Van Horn, 1995); resistant learners (Hauschildt & McMahon, 1996); homeless children and children living in poverty (Hanning, 1998); and English Language Learners (MacGillivray, 1995). Various versions of book clubs and literature study circles have:

- increased student enjoyment of and engagement in reading (Fox and Wilkinson, 1997);
- expanded children’s discourse opportunities (Johnston, P., 2004; Nichols, 2009);
- increased multicultural awareness (Hansen-Krening, 1997; Lehman, et al., 2010);
- promoted a range of perspectives on social issues (Noll, 1994);
- provided social outlets for students (Alvermann et al., 1996); and
- encouraged gender equity and an enhanced sense of self (Bettis & Roe, 2008).

One of the best ways to foster reading engagement is to have students write about their reading.

Judith Langer (2000) has spent more than two decades investigating the relationship between reading and-writing. She characterizes the learner as an active problem-solver who is influenced by background knowledge, text, and context.

[W]hen people use their literacy skills to think and rethink their understandings of texts, themselves, and the world, it promotes “personal empowerment.” It gives importance to individuals and the oral and written texts they create and encounter and fosters the kinds of language and thought that mark good and sharp thinking.

We have known for decades of the mutually beneficial interrelationship among the four primary language processes: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. And recently, we have recognized that “visual literacy” also makes a unique contribution to our meaning-making tools (Common Core, 2010).

In the landmark Carnegie Institute report, *Reading Next*, literacy researchers Gina Biancarosa and Catherine Snow (2004) showcased 15 instructional recommendations for improving middle and high school adolescent achievement based on the professional knowledge and research of nationally known and respected literacy researchers. Their recommendations include an emphasis on writing intensively, summarizing, and keeping track of one’s own understanding—all of which relate to the reader’s notebook. The Biancarosa and Snow recommendations for effective adolescent literacy instruction align with the Common Core State

Standards, particularly their common vision of an integrated model of literacy.

The Common Core State Standards promote an integrated model of literacy. The language arts—listening, speaking, reading and writing—should be integrated across the curriculum. Students are asked to read and/or listen to texts read aloud and respond critically through discussion and in writing. Their responses may take the form of written or oral explanation and argument. And they are invited to engage in critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration with their peers (Common Core, 2010, p. 4).

A reader's notebook is a powerful tool for supporting students' reading across the year. Students can use the notebook to organize and collect their thinking about each book they read. Students can use the notebook for multiple forms of writing, including open-ended thinking about the text, responding to teacher-assigned prompts, and formal essay writing for assessment purposes. Regardless of the format the writing takes, the research is clear as to the benefits of writing about reading. The Common Core State Standards (2010) call for integrating the language arts: reading, writing, talking, and listening. The reader's notebook makes this integration possible.

Writing to Read

Two of the most comprehensive studies about the reading-writing interrelationship are the Graham and Perin (*Writing Next*, 2007) meta-analysis based on Grades 1-12 empirical evidence—which identifies specific writing practices that enhance students' reading abilities—and the 2010 Graham and Hebert *Writing to Read* meta-analysis. Graham and Hebert show that asking students to write about texts they read, explicitly teaching writing skills and processes, and having students write more improves reading skills and comprehension.

Summarizing the Graham and Perin report, Timothy Shanahan (2012) lists key findings that demonstrate how writing about a text provides students with a way into the text that enables them to crack it open and construct meaning and knowledge in ways that are more effective and precise than would be possible if they were only reading and rereading the text or reading and discussing it. Writing about a text benefits students in ways that are both abundant and profound:

- It encourages deeper thinking about ideas.
- It requires students to draw on their own knowledge and experience.

- It helps them to consolidate and review information.
- It inspires the reformulation of thinking.
- It requires students to organize and integrate ideas.
- It fosters explicitness.
- It facilitates reflection.
- It encourages personal involvement.
- It requires translation into the student's own words.

In sum, both the Graham and Perin (2007) and Graham and Hebert (2010) meta-analyses provide empirical support for another important role for writing: as an effective tool for improving students' reading.

The Common Core State Standards center on this key goal: "Upon graduating high school, students must be able to read and comprehend independently and proficiently the kinds of complex texts commonly found in college and careers." What seems to distinguish students who succeed from those who don't is the ability to engage independently in a close analysis of demanding text—and there may be no better way to accomplish that goal than through writing (Graham and Hebert, 2010).

Support for Challenged Readers and English Language Learners

As many as one in three American children finds learning to read challenging (Adams, 1990). This makes our goal—to help all readers achieve grade level independent reading—all the more urgent and essential. Typically, the children who get off to a poor start in reading rarely succeed in catching up. On this point, the research is both extensive and unequivocal (Neuman and Dickinson, 2001; Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998). As Juel first noted in 1988, a child who struggles to read in the first grade is 88% more likely to struggle in the fourth grade as well. Clearly, the early prevention of reading difficulties is critical (Clay, 1991; Pinnell and Fountas, 2009) and, to that end, we need always to keep in mind those students in our classrooms who find reading challenging.

Fortunately, the support we offer our students through *Comprehension Clubs* is exactly what *all* students need: text, talk, and teaching. These are the essential literacy experiences that all children need on their way to becoming proficient readers.

Let's examine each in turn:

Text: High Quality and Varied

Text matters—hugely—and we have long showcased text as a critical component of the reading process.

All texts share certain essential reading components. Readers must solve the words, recognize how the text is organized (the text structure), make sense of the sentences and paragraphs (language structure), and understand what they are reading. To skillfully comprehend, readers need exposure with teaching—to a wide variety of texts. Learning to make adjustments to accommodate different kinds of texts requires this exposure (Pinnell and Fountas, 2009).

Hargis (2006) discovered that the typical fourth-grade classroom reflects a reading range that spans 2nd to 9th grades. Teachers and kids need access to a wide range of texts—unleveled for independent reading and leveled for guided reading. As Dick Allington reminds us, “Good readers read with accuracy almost all the time.” If we want our kids to sprint ahead—to become reading champions on their way to college and beyond—they must read with 98% accuracy or higher. Not only do our kids miss out on accelerated reading when their accuracy rate slips to 90% or below, but also, even more alarmingly, they fail to make any reading progress at all (Allington, 2012). Our students grow as readers when they read books they can understand. It’s just that simple—and that critical. We can’t take chances with our students’ reading lives.

Audiobooks

Struggling readers and English Language Learners need help with fluency and comprehension as well as with building their confidence to handle both. One of the most effective strategies is to invite students to read along with an audio recording of the book. In this way, they learn about fluency, expression, and reading at an appropriate rate. They also learn about the role of punctuation and how the various punctuation marks they encounter while reading affect their reading style and pace. Fluency and pace affect comprehension (Rasinski, 2010), so reading along creates a winning cycle of support for challenged readers and ELLs. What’s more, with the aid of audio, students can read more challenging texts than they could otherwise handle on their own—and then they are able to participate in the student book club, which provides additional support.

Educator Margo Dill (2010) points out an essential advantage of giving challenged readers books on tape:

Using books on tape for struggling readers and auditory learners exposes these students to literature above their reading levels. Struggling readers . . . are often reading different books than their classmates, and these books are not on grade level. Sometimes students reading below grade level want to read the same books as their classmates, but they are not able to. Audio books can help students to feel self-confident and improve reading skills.

Talk: Intentional Conversation

The conversations we share with our students around texts aren’t incidental—they are essential! It’s through our rich and dynamic conversations about texts that *all* students, challenged and not, are helped to effectively construct meaning. Conversation, in general, is invaluable—the stories children bring from home, their thoughts about their learning experiences at school, and so forth—but it’s the deep, academic conversation about texts that packs the greatest learning punch. Our students need to converse about texts every day—during interactive read alouds, with their book clubs, and with partners or parents at home while they are completing their independent reading. All reading experiences should be grounded in talk about the text. And as our students hear new vocabulary and text structures that we can highlight through intentional conversation, they can incorporate them into their own language repertoire.

Teaching: An Exemplary Teaching-Assessing Loop

Intentional and intensive instruction, informed by continuous formative assessment, characterizes the daily routine of the thoughtful teacher. He or she continuously monitors students’ progress: Are they mastering the foundational skills of reading (Common Core, 2010)? Are they learning to control the powerful linguistic and cognitive understandings and strategies that enable mature, skillful, independent reading? Teachers recognize that intellectual and academic growth occurs across time, developmental benchmarks, and disciplines. But working with finely honed instruction and expertly selected texts gives teachers the best shot at maximizing the instructional leverage of every text (Pinnell and Fountas, 2009; Serravallo, 2012).

Remember—our struggling readers and English Language Learners need to spend more time actually reading than doing activities related to

reading. There's simply no better way to help challenged readers and new English speakers than to get them reading, writing about, and talking about a wide range of engaging texts.

Final Thoughts

In sum, books and reading—and conversation about both—are not only one of life's greatest pleasures but one of the primary ways in which we learn about life. *Comprehension Clubs*, comprising fiction and informational books, is life-stretching and life-enhancing and becomes even more so as the books are discussed, analyzed, written about, and enjoyed by all the members of the learning community. In this way, all members grow intellectually and academically in ways that far surpass what they could do on their own.

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