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RESEARCH DIRECTIONS: LITERATURE AND DISCUSSION IN THE READING PROGRAM

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Department Editor's Note: More and more students and teachers are excited about their school literacy programs. Two activities in particular can be found in classrooms that generate enthusiasm for literacy—an abundance of high-quality literature and opportunities to talk with one another about this literature. The project described this month by Raphael and colleagues illustrates how social interaction with high-quality literature can foster an often-forgotten literacy process—responding to literature with one's own voice. The push to get the author's meaning has often usurped the meanings that students give to the text based on their experiences. There is a place for both the author's, or "shared," interpretations of text and those that are unique to students' lives.

Raphael, et al. have developed "Book Clubs" in intermediate-level classrooms, where expertise at both types of interpretations can be fostered. The Book Club format is similar to that used by avid readers of all ages: talking with their friends and colleagues about literature. When students have spent prior grades in more prescribed classroom literacy events, their teachers can support meaningful conversations in a variety of ways, including guidance in literature selection and guidelines for group interaction. This month's column demonstrates ways that particular instructional processes can foster critical literacy processes as students share their interpretations of outstanding literature.

(EHH)

When reading was considered to be primarily a process of decoding, as it was for centuries

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(Mathews, 1965), it made sense to emphasize in instruction the words frequently encountered in print and the sound/symbol relationships that make up our language. When the definition of reading moved to emphasize comprehension, as it has during the past 2 decades, it made sense to emphasize strategies such as predicting or identifying the central theme in a story to help readers understand the meaning of the text. Now, however, as we move toward literature-based instruction, we must also consider the reader and a related debate among those who study literature, the literary critics.

Harker (1987) describes the century-old question of the source of the meaning associated with any given selection. Since the 1930s, theories of literature (e.g., Welleck & Warren, 1956) suggest "the text as the carrier of meaning and a corresponding insistence on limiting the reader's role to explicating this meaning . . . through close textual analysis" (Harker, 1987, p. 242). Thus, literature instruction had focused on learning the "correct" interpretation, understanding how texts were structured and how they communicated their meaning. More recently, reader response criticism has favored emphasizing the readers' experiences as the source of meaning (e.g., Iser, 1978). In effect, these views support what Rosenblatt (1978) has argued for years, that reading is a transaction between reader and text, transforming both but influenced by the readers' interpretations.

Beliefs about the importance of the reader in literature response call into question current satisfaction with comprehension as our instructional goal. An explosion of research has provided sig-

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nificant insights into how readers identify important information contained in the text (Duffy, Roehler, & Mason, 1984; Pearson & Johnson, 1978). Yet, they are relatively mute in terms of the readers' role except as related to background knowledge and comprehension strategies. If we take seriously current views of where meaning resides, we must reconsider even our best practices of comprehension instruction. Teaching students to predict or to identify a central theme seems to presuppose that there is meaning *in the text* and students need to develop strategies to "get" this meaning. If this is our focus, we fall short of providing students with the kind of literate environment in which *their* voices, as well as the

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author's, may be heard. As well as current practices of helping students learn basic sight word vocabulary, sound/symbol relationships, and comprehension strategies, we must help students develop their abilities to respond to the text in a variety of ways, to add their voices to the community in which a text and its author(s) have been introduced. In this column, we explore the bases for related changes in the way we approach reading instruction, focusing on the Book Club project, a 3-year research program at Michigan State University.

Book Club: A Research Agenda

Against the backdrop of the debates previously described, we began the Book Club project. Our broadest question was: How might literature-based instruction be created to encompass instruction in both comprehension and literature response? This question spawned a number of related questions, including: What is the nature of classroom talk and students' perception about discussion? What are the relationships among reading, writing, and talk? What characterizes literature-based instruction and discussion in non-mainstream classrooms?

Based on pilot work in 2 fourth-grade classes,

we identified two areas of knowledge that seemed important to students' growth in their ability to read, comprehend, and interact with and about text: knowledge about *what* to discuss and *how* to discuss it. The development of an instructional program to support students' growth in these two areas was the focus of the 2nd year.

The project directors, Sue McMahon and Taffy Raphael, were joined by three research assistants, Jessie Bentley, Fenice Boyd, and Ginny Goatley, and two teachers, Laura Pardo and Deb Woodman. We made a commitment to create a literacy environment in Laura's fifth-grade and Deb's fourth/fifth-grade classrooms in an urban neighborhood school, using high quality children's literature and teaching students strategies for both comprehending the selections and for interacting with their peers about what they had read. We met weekly and developed a series of units based on themes (e.g., war) and genres (e.g., folktale, biography). We generated ideas for helping students develop strategies that could: (a) support their reading (e.g., character mapping, critiquing), (b) help develop personal response (e.g., feelings associated with the reading experience), and (c) facilitate related talk about text (e.g., how to listen, build upon each other's ideas). We explored how to relate students' success and areas for growth to parents and administrators in a district with traditional report cards and parent conferences.

Now in our 3rd year, we are considering questions about how teachers and students draw on their experiences in new contexts.

What Is Book Club?

Book Club encompasses a four-component program designed to help students develop abilities in both **what** to share about the literature they read and **how** to share it (Raphael, Goatley, McMahon, & Woodman, in press). Book Clubs, small student-led discussion groups of 3 to 6 students, were the central focus of the program and the basis for the name of the intervention. The intervention included: (a) reading, (b) writing, (c) discussion (i.e., Book Club & Community Share), and (d) instruction. All components interacted to support each other and to develop students' abilities to both comprehend and respond to their selections. We describe each in turn, followed by a description of related changes in accountability procedures.

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The Book Club Components

Reading was a central component since it was essential to engage in later discussion about a reading selection. The teachers provided different opportunities for students to read, depending upon the difficulty of the selection, the amount of background knowledge students had, and the amount of support they needed. These included silent reading, partner reading, choral reading, oral reading/listening, and reading at home. **Writing** was a second important component for students' preparation for and reflections on Book Club discussions. A reading log was used with blank pages for representing ideas through pictures, charts, and maps, and lined pages for writing reflections about elements such as story events and characters, interesting language used by the author, favorite dialogue, and so forth.

Discussion formed the essence of the intervention and included Community Share and Book Clubs. Community Share, a term borrowed from the literature on process writing, describes the large group discussions particularly useful for raising students' awareness about what they would be reading, and for providing a place to share what they had discussed in their Book Clubs, to learn from each other, and for teachers

Book Club encompasses a four-component program designed to help students develop abilities in both what to share about the literature they read and how to share it.

to see where gaps in students' knowledge may exist (e.g., attributing World War II to problems with oil rights in the desert, a belief that coincided with events in the Persian Gulf).

Book Clubs were small, student-led discussion groups. Participation varied from teacher-assigned to student-selected groups, always with a heterogeneous mix of students. Roles of facilitator or mediator were not assigned but emerged in the Book Clubs. Students generally began by sharing written responses from their reading logs as starting points for broader discussions.

Instruction was a crucial fourth component, focusing on what and how to share. What to

share included modeling various rhetorical (e.g., text structure, story elements); comprehension (e.g., question-asking, drawing upon prior knowledge and related texts, mapping); and synthesis (e.g., overarching themes, time lines) activities with the whole group. How to share instruction focused on both general interactions such as taking turns and listening to each other and specific interactions including asking follow-up or clarification questions or relating comments to ideas raised by another student during discussion. Students watched and critiqued audiotaped and videotaped Book Clubs, as well as written transcripts.

All four components were present each day, though the amount of time in each varied considerably depending upon the text, the previous day's activities, the time in the academic year, and the goals for the particular day. Laura and Deb led most of the instruction in their classrooms, while other members of the research team observed and took field notes 2 to 4 days a week over the course of the year. Data sources included: (a) student reading logs, (b) transcripts, (c) audio- and videotaped instruction and discussion, (d) field notes, and (e) teachers' comments and interviews. Students became active members of the research team as well, participating in interviews, volunteering to save writing samples for us, labeling their group's daily audiotapes, and (in the case of 2 students) keeping occasional field notes, "when someone says something important that I think we should remember" (Randy, field notes, March 25, 1991).

What Have We Learned?

We focused on a number of related questions that seemed fundamental to understanding the nature of our findings as we addressed our overall question: How successful was Book Club as a literacy instruction environment? We explored the nature of classroom talk, students' perceptions about their Book Club experiences, relationships among the components, and nontraditional learners' experiences with Book Club.

What Is The Nature of Classroom Talk About Text?

One of our goals was to better understand what students chose to talk about, given the opportunity to discuss books without an adult facilitator. To explore this, we have transcribed

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approximately two Book Club sessions per week from units about World War II/Japan, folktales, World War II/Europe, and biographies. The content of the Book Club discussions, or *what* the students shared, is being analyzed to determine the purposes of the discussions and the range included within each session (see also Gilles, 1991). Preliminary analyses reveal that students engage in talk for at least nine purposes.

Share Written Responses From Reading Logs

Students brought their reading logs to Book Club groups and often referred to them during discussion. Early on and occasionally throughout the year, children took turns reading from their logs without significant interaction. This segment from a Book Club meeting in early December about *The Painter and the Wild Swans* (Clement, 1986) illustrates what was shared and the students' awareness of their approach.

Angela: I would like to share about the book [reads from log]. The book was nice. I like it very much but at the end when . . . Teiji turns into a swan, I wonder how he did turn into a swan when he was a person and I like when he was thinking of the swans at the end when he said I'm going to find my brother. At the beginning I like when he was painting and saw the swan. I think he was going to paint a picture of a swan and then go look for them . . . I like the book.

Jason: I am going to be reading in my reading log.
Richard: So did the rest of us.

Angela followed the pattern set by the 2 previous students, simply reading the log exactly as written. As Jason and Richard note, they were consciously using this pattern and evidently saw no reason to change at this point.

Clarify Point of Confusion

Students turned to their peers if they were confused by segments of a selection or words used by the author. For example, in the same Book Club above, after taking turns reading from their logs, Jason indicated his point of confusion.

Jason: I'm going to talk about the end because I don't know if he died.

Angela: He did.

Monte: [interrupting] He did die, his veins are froze, but then he made it out of the water, but then he sat there so long when it started snowing and all that, that it all covered him up. But then through his reflection in the water, it was still his body, but when you looked at him without the

reflection, his normal thing, it looked like, like he had swan feathers.

Jason: Was he a swan?

What began as turn-taking to read aloud from their logs moved into a clarification exchange, a typical process seen in most Book Clubs as students grew more experienced.

Discuss Main Theme of Story/Text

Often students used their Book Clubs as a way to share their ideas about what was important in the selection they had read. For example, during a discussion of a short selection, "Will Rogers and the Power of Humor" (Hand, 1990), during the biography unit, students in several Book Clubs discussed how Will Rogers had used humor to enhance people's lives.

Relate to Other Texts

A fourth purpose of Book Club was opportunity for students to relate ideas from the current selection to those from previously read books. The following discussion occurred after students had read two versions of a folktale, *The Weaving of a Dream* (Heyer, 1986) and *Enchanted Tapestry* (San Souci, 1987). Prior to coming to Book Club, they had written about similarities and differences in the two versions in their reading logs. Crystal notes similarities between the books.

Crystal: I would say most of it was the same as *Weaving a Dream* [sic]. They told almost everything just like the other story. The characters were the same, except for the names. It was a good book. It was almost, almost the same.

Eva: What do you mean by "It was almost the same"?

Crystal: *Weaving the Dream* [sic] was almost the same as the *Enchanting Tapestry* [sic], um the other book had a copyright . . . all the . . . [pauses]

Leanne: [jumping in] . . . Do you think the same person that wrote that book wrote this? I don't really think so.

Crystal: I don't think so either . . . [overlapping speech]

Leanne: [overlapping speech] . . . I think something should be done about . . .

Eva: [Interrupting] It's like a different story, the same story but different people brought it up and made just part of different stuff in it

Leanne: Do you think, Crystal, the author of *The Weaving of a Dream* knows about this?

Crystal: I think so, yeah,

Leanne: Do you think he's mad?

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The links across the two texts made by these children reflect those of more mature readers (e.g., Hartman, 1991). After they focus on specific similarities between the two selections using examples from both folktales, children explore a dilemma underlying what they apparently view as copying. Because these were both folktales, it is possible that the students had difficulty understanding how such similar plots could evolve unless one of the authors had "copied" from the other.

Critique the Author's Success

A fifth purpose of the Book Clubs allowed students to critique the books they had read. They often talked in terms of what the author had done well and what the author might have done to improve the selection. For example, after reading

When instruction focused on broad personal issues of reader response, discussions and written response were more broad-based and personal.

Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes (Coerr, 1977), students discussed how well the author had told the story of Sadako and how much she had made Sadako real to them. Yet, many were critical of a lack of information about other family members (e.g., needed to tell more about the grandmother, explain how her brother felt when he learned his sister was dying) as well as more about World War II.

Identify Author's Purposes

Students used Book Clubs to discuss why an author had written a particular story. For example, many students talked about the author's purpose in writing *My Hiroshima* (Morimoto, 1987), a nonfiction selection about the day the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. The author at the end explicitly describes her desire to have children know about the horrors of war, since her own society had tended to value and associate honor with fighting. This thought intrigued students who applied it to their own playground activities and getting along.

Discuss the Process of Response

Often a brief exchange between 2 students focused on the process of response itself. This included brief exchanges about how students should use their logs to share a particular kind of idea or who should have a turn to speak.

To Relate Ideas from the Text to Personal Experiences or Feelings

A powerful role of the Book Club was to provide a small group forum for students to share personal feelings and experiences. One such Book Club followed the reading of *The Wall* (Bunting, 1990), a story of a father and son finding the grandfather's name on the Vietnam War Memorial. Mei was a student who had arrived the previous year via Thailand and New York from Vietnam. After this story, she was involved in an exchange that drew heavily on her personal and her family's experience. This discussion occurred in January, on the eve of the Persian Gulf War, so the issue of war was in the minds of many of the students. After briefly talking about relatives going to war, Leanne introduced the next topic.

Leanne: I don't think war is really necessary, letting people die and get killed and everything, there are some things that can just be talked out.

Helena: I agree.

Mei: I think about the war, too, the people.

Helena: That's because you've been through a lot.

In Vietnam you went through a lot. Did you used to cry a lot when it happened?

Mei: Yeah, I was, uh, scared . . .

[inaudible exchange]

Helena: . . . Did they kill a lot of children in Vietnam for that?

Mei: Some, um, some American guys? They come to Vietnam and they help us . . . [pause]

Eva: Come out? Get out?

Helena: They helped you guys get out? Get out of Vietnam? That was very nice of them.

Mei: Yeah, and um, and some bad guys, they killed their place? They go, they, they go back to dam place again, because . . . American guys, they kill all of them, but, um, but they don't kill all of them. Um, bad guys are smart. They kill a lot of American guys. So they fight there. They tell them, have to give for them their money, when you get money, so have to give for them.

Helena: Oh, it's like, I see, it's sort of like here, we have to give them money for the war to begin . . . our taxes get raised because they need money for more nuclear bombs. So it's dumb. What do you think, Eva?

During this exchange Mei, who was usually rather quiet, drew on her personal experiences

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related to Vietnam to contribute to the discussion of war. Though the themes or content of the Book Clubs were similar in relating to the books they had read, the specifics of the discussions usually varied as events or interactions triggered students' memories.

Relate to Prior Knowledge

The last function of Book Club discussions focused on relating to previous knowledge. For example, in a discussion at the end of March after the reading of *My Hiroshima*, a group of students considered what they knew about the day the bomb had dropped. They drew upon a visit to the classroom by a Japanese American whose family was from Hiroshima. She had taught them how to make paper cranes and had described what had happened to her family on the day the bomb was dropped. Much of the knowledge they applied to interpreting the current selection was based on what they had learned from their visitor.

We are continuing our analyses to examine whether these purposes remain constant or change over the course of the academic year;

The effect of the activities and related instruction could be seen in their growth in ability to discuss the books in meaningful ways.

how changes relate to the selections' content, the reading log activities, and reader factors (e.g., group membership, students' interests); and the relationship between purposes defined in small group discussion and those described by students in one-to-one conversation with an adult (e.g., Hickman, 1983).

Students' written response and conversation indicate they were involved in many levels of literacy: comprehension and learning, going beyond merely understanding the words on the page, recognizing the importance of sharing ideas, relating to the characters in the text, and responding in genuine ways to their selections.

What Are the Interrelations Among the Components?

To address a second question of the Book Club project, Sue McMahon analyzed the relationships

among the four Book Club components in three studies: (a) how reading and writing influenced discussion and vice versa (McMahon, 1991); (b) how themes or patterns emerge through students' writing and oral discussions (McMahon, Pardo, & Raphael, in press); and (c) the relationship between instruction and the nature of the students' written and oral response (McMahon, 1991).

Findings of the first two studies show a clear relation between students' written and oral texts. Students' writing appears as part of their discussion, and issues raised in discussion relate closely to later written response. In the second study, Sue analyzed Bart's log entries and his recorded comments during Book Club in terms of emergent themes or patterns of discussion. Three consistent themes were evident: (1) a changing view of war, (2) the influence of Bart's own prior knowledge and interest in response to text, and (3) a gender influence on his reading. These themes continued to emerge as Bart read books with related settings and plots, recorded his reactions in his log, and discussed ideas in his Book Club and Community Share.

The third study demonstrated a strong connection between log entries, discussions, and instruction. When instruction focused on broad personal issues of reader response, discussions and written response were more broad-based and personal. When instruction focused on comprehension strategies (e.g., prediction), students were more likely to work merely to identify the "correct" message in the text. Together, this line of research provides a basis for understanding the nature of the interactions among the Book Club intervention's components.

How Can Book Club Be Extended to Other Populations?

The Book Clubs in Laura's and Deb's classrooms provided important insights into the development of literature-based instruction in mainstream classrooms but do not address how such work can be extended to nontraditional learners whose current instruction is often more extreme in its emphasis on discrete skills. Thus, two studies were conducted with nontraditional learners. Ginny Goatley began Book Club with a group of learning disabled students who receive their reading instruction in a special education classroom, while Fenice Boyd worked with a group of 16 high school students in a remedial reading class.

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Both explored the nature of students' discussions and potential inhibitors to their participation in reading, writing, and discussion related to Book Clubs.

Ginny's group consisted of 5 students (1 third, 3 fourth, and 1 fifth grader), documented as either LD or EMI in reading and/or writing, for whom Book Club was their first experience with literature-based reading instruction and student-led discussion groups. Introducing this group of students to Book Club paralleled that in the regular education classrooms, and the effects were seen in the nature of their questions and in authentic discussions in which students listened and responded to each other. Like the students in the regular education pilot, these students had problems with both *what* and *how to share*. For discussion of the story's content, the students often drew from literal information in the text (e.g., asking the name or age of a character or for the

Analyses of the field notes, transcripts, and student logs point to the difficulty of making significant changes in the patterns of teaching and learning that students have become accustomed to experiencing.

retelling of specific story events). As part of their Book Club activities, Ginny's group of students wrote daily to help them organize their thoughts and ideas by developing character maps, sequence charts, book critiques, and by generating questions.

The effect of the activities and related instruction could be seen in their growth in ability to discuss the books in meaningful ways. Within a 3-month period, their discussions reflected many of the same purposes as those of the regular education students, using less sophisticated selections. In Book Clubs, rather than merely reading their logs to each other without comment, they asked for clarification, expressed feelings, and related ideas from the book to their personal experiences.

Nowhere was the importance of beginning early with nontraditional learners more obvious than in the high school developmental reading

group with which Fenice worked. Her 16 students, a heterogeneous mix of abilities (i.e., Grade 3 to on grade level), were in a rural high school. Their program was typical of study skills, isolated practice in reading skills associated with comprehension (e.g., identifying main ideas, sequencing). The Book Club project afforded them the opportunity to read and discuss a novel and to embed any comprehension activities within the context of preparing for their Book Club discussion.

Analyses of the field notes, transcripts, and student logs point to the difficulty of making significant changes in the patterns of teaching and learning that students have become accustomed to experiencing. The students' previous experiences seemed particularly influential as they met in Book Clubs. They were not used to working in collaborative groups, and they resisted open-ended written response, indicating they would prefer to fill in the blank or select the correct answer to multiple choice questions. They also resisted the opportunities to engage in discourse about the novel. They seemed to believe that what they had to say was not significant. In short, they seemed to reflect the result of years of "remedial" efforts as described by McGill-Frazen and Allington (1990).

Closing Comments

Although the opportunities afforded by the Book Club project to learn about the nature of literature-based reading instruction and related issues and concerns have been numerous, like most research projects, our search for "answers" has rewarded us with far more questions than certainties. Perhaps the most important result from the studies to date is the reward from students' understandings about literacy. As Mei described in a letter to the author of one of the books she had read, ". . . we learn how to talk about this story and think about the story." Reading has become more than a place to read silently, say all the words right, and correctly answer the questions.

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