Literature Study Groups with At-Risk Readers: Extending the Grand Conversation

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As schools heed the ever-widening call to involve students with quality literature, we are forced to confront two questions. The first refers to the grand conversation (Eeds and Wells, 1989) alluded to in the title of this article: How do we enable literature study groups to engage in mutual discussions of ideas (which constitute the "grand conversations" described by Eeds and Wells) rather than teacher-led inquiries about surface meaning (which Eeds and Wells characterize as "gentle inquisitions")? The second refers to an issue of equity: How do we provide equal access to quality literature for students with limited reading ability? This article describes the attempts of one school district to extend the grand conversation of literature study groups to students with reading difficulties.

Importance of extending the grand conversation

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of extending the grand conversation of literature to students of low reading skill. Involving poor readers with quality literature should be viewed as an integral piece of their reading instruction. Considerable evidence indicates that, in addition to their lower reading skills, students who have reading

difficulties often have less exposure to print than their peers, especially exposure to high quality literature (Chall, 1983; Stanovich, 1986). Stanovich (1986) contrasts the reading experiences of good and poor readers, characterizing the contrast as a situation in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Poor readers rarely get opportunities to read the books that spark the imagination of their peers who read well. Because their limited reading abilities lock poor readers out of age-appropriate literature, their interest in reading declines and their motivation to read decreases. In this way, motivational factors combine with skill factors, with the result that poor readers read less than their peers.

To the extent that reading is a skill that increases with practice, poor readers are denied even the simple opportunity to practice that skill with good literature. Moreover, to the extent that reading is an active engagement with an author, poor readers are denied access to the vocabulary, the ideas, the perspectives and the knowledge of the world that their peers gain through books. Thus, the gap continually widens between good and poor readers. To close this gap, reading instruction must be embedded within a broader communicative context that includes quality literature.

Project history and general goals

The instructional program described here, the "Extended Classic Books" program, was developed by one school district as an attempt to close the gap between the reading experiences of good and poor readers. It emerged from the district's existing program, "Classic Books," which was directed toward above-average readers in upper elementary and middle-school grades.

The Extended Classic Books program was procedurally and philosophically rooted in the district's original Classic Books program, which had a ten-year history of success in the district, and was based on the belief that meaningful discussions of literature revolve around questions of interpretation, not questions of fact (e.g., not *what* a character did, but *why* the character might have done it). Community volunteers led discussion groups, meeting weekly with children for six to eight weeks. The general format was much like a typical book club: children were expected to read a selected book over the course of a week and then discuss the book when the groups convened. Discussions lasted 40 to 50 minutes.

In order to help the volunteers foster grand conversations of interpretation rather than inquisitions of facts (however gentle), prospective group leaders participated in five weeks of training before meeting with students. During this training, group leaders read and discussed several classic children's books (e.g., *Charlotte's Web*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *James and the Giant Peach*), with rotating teams of two volunteers leading the discussions. Experienced discussion leaders modeled ways to pose questions that invite discussion, and they critiqued the questions posed by the volunteer leaders, distinguishing open-ended questions that spark conversation from single-answer questions that thwart verbal exchange.

The Extended Classic Books program adopted the same philosophy and the same procedures for training volunteers. Volunteer leaders (who generally worked in teams of two) were selected primarily from a pool of volunteers who had training in the original Classic Books program, and most leaders had experience actually leading Classic Books sessions before they participated in further training

designed for the Extended Classic Books program. This training also emphasized student expression of ideas, with additional emphasis on the special needs of at-risk readers (e.g., their need for opportunities to develop reading ability and expand their vocabulary), and their need to have positive literacy experiences.

Thus the main instructional goal of the Extended Classic Books project was to provide additional reading opportunities and opportunities to read and discuss quality children's literature to students at-risk for reading failure. As was the original program, the Extended Classic Books program was extra-curricular and voluntary, with no grades attached. Through the use of trained volunteers as discussion leaders, the project provided supplemental reading support to at-risk students with little added strain on existing school staff.

The research component of the project entailed evaluating the effect of the program on the students who participated. Details of procedures are provided in the description of the second year of the project, which follows; however, a brief account of the first year is also warranted. During the first year, we had taken a quantitative approach and examined the effects of the Extended Classic Books experience on students' reading skills. We assessed students' reading both before and after their participation in the six-week program, using a published informal reading inventory (Woods and Moe, 1989). While we found slight improvements in the students' reading speed and word-reading accuracy after our intervention, the largest gain seemed to come in comprehension of age-appropriate text passages. None of these differences were dramatic, and none reached significance in a statistical analysis. Still, they were encouraging.

But more encouraging, we believed, were the affective changes we noticed in students. Students seemed to adopt a new view of themselves as readers, and many beamed with pride as they left discussion sessions carrying the book for the next week. Participation in the original Classic Books program had become something of a status symbol in the schools — since it was limited only to better readers — and these at-risk students appeared to view the Extended Classic Books program in a similar way.

This change in students' affect was noteworthy. Stanovich (1986) suggests that ability and affect usually conspire against the poor reader. Just as students at-risk for reading failure have little access to quality literature, so they have little opportunity to view themselves as adequate readers. Remedial reading instruction frequently focuses on specific skills such as decoding and oral fluency, which may accentuate the weaknesses of slow achieving readers and conspire against their feelings of even minimal competence. Was their participation in Extended Classic Books providing these students with their first opportunity to discuss a work of literature like a competent reader?

During the second year we attempted to examine the nature of the students' experiences during the literature group discussions. There is evidence that poor readers can come to view themselves as competent communicators about books and that group discussion can play a key role in this transition. Palincsar and Brown (1984) describe an instructional technique that leads to substantial student growth, both in reading skills and in attitudes toward reading. Central to their approach, which is organized around small groups, is the idea that teachers and students take reciprocal roles during discussion, with the teacher modeling how to answer questions as well as how to ask them.

Donato and Lantolf (1991) further emphasize that the language of discussion groups can become an important tool for forging, not just encoding, knowledge. When speech is kept private (that is, within the thoughts of the individual), it serves primarily to regulate the individual's behavior and cognition; however, when speech becomes public during group discussions, it provides opportunities to develop and extend the knowledge of all participants in the discussion (Vygotsky, 1972). In the context of literature groups, the group dialogue could serve as a model for the internal dialogue that good readers have with books, providing poor readers with important insights into the goals, and the benefits, of reading literature.

In light of these studies, we looked closely at the group interactions within the Extended Classic Books program to see how the discussion groups might be contributing to the affective change we saw in students. Because of evidence that students are more likely to participate when discussion topics are negotiated by group members rather than imposed by the teacher (Barnes and Todd, 1977), we were interested in describing the ways students explored and discussed the books they read, as well as the elements of leadership style that may contribute to student exploration of books. We were particularly interested in how leaders responded to students' comments during these discussions. What kind of responses appeared to facilitate student engagement, and what kind, if any, seemed to hinder it?

Program procedures

Forty fourth-grade students from six elementary schools participated in the Extended Classic Books program during the second year. Student selection was based on Metropolitan Achievement Test reading scores of the third stanine and below, together with teacher judgments.

Students who met these criteria were invited to participate, and all students from a given school met as a single group. Sessions involved from four to ten students and lasted approximately 40 minutes. The discussion sessions were scheduled independently by each school, all during the regular school day. Most of the group discussion sessions were audio-taped.

Because the previous year's students had difficulties completing the reading, we made clear to students the importance of finishing the books before discussion, and we were explicit about ways they could do it. In the first two sessions with students, leaders provided students with some strategies for getting the reading done and for discussing literature. Leaders suggested ways that might help students finish the books, even when they had some difficulty (e.g., reading along with a parent or with a verbatim tape that we provided, asking questions of a parent, writing down a key question to bring to discussion group). To encourage students to finish their reading, we developed colorful charts with stickers corresponding to strategies, and students were to note on the chart any strategies they had found helpful with a particular book. In these initial sessions, the groups also read and discussed short poems and leaders modeled for students what it means to discuss literature. The discussion strategy training involved acquainting students with the distinction between questions that call for personal opinion and interpretation — in-your-head questions — and those that seek specific answers found in the book itself — in-the-book questions (Raphael, 1982; 1986). This training was in many ways analogous to the training that discussion leaders experienced. Students were taught to identify questions of both types. They were told that discussions involved mainly in-your-head questions but that

they could ask questions of either type to clarify their understanding.

At the close of the second session, and each session thereafter, students were given a copy of the book to be discussed the following week, together with a verbatim audiotape to help them get through the book if they wanted such help (Chomsky, 1976). Over the next week, students were expected to complete the assigned book. Books were selected from a list of books approved by the district for classroom and library use, and included *Cam Jensen*, *Stone Fox*, *How to Be a Perfect Person in Just Three Days* and *Arthur for the Very First Time*. When the groups met, leaders came prepared with a series of open-ended questions intended to initiate discussion. Leaders were discouraged from viewing their questions as scripts, however, and instead were encouraged to follow student leads whenever possible. Leaders were also asked to direct students' comments to one another, rather than just to the adult leaders.

Life within two discussion groups

As we observed the discussion groups, we intuitively felt that some groups were more successful than others, and we chose to examine two groups more closely — one in which students seemed successfully engaged in the books, the other less so. In order to convey a sense of the different nature of these two groups, we provide some brief excerpts. These excerpts, however, do not constitute a complete analysis, but are intended only to convey a feel for the discussions. The excerpt in Figure 1 came from the less successful group.

In this interchange we see the leader begin with a question regarding strategies for completing the reading, as

well as for generating ideas for discussion (leader question #1). Because we had developed the charts and stickers to help motivate students to finish the books and prepare for discussion, many leaders began in a similar fashion, using the charts to emphasize the point that completing the books facilitates discussion. In this group, however, we see the leader stick too closely to her pre-set agenda. She mistakes the means (strategies for finishing books) for the end (discussion of ideas), to the extent that she avoids discussion when the students initiate it too early. For example, after leader question #3, the students launched into a discussion about the grandfather, a key character in the book *Stone Fox*. Rather than following the students' lead and extending the discussion, the leader effectively squelched it. As she tried to direct students back to their repertoire of strategies for completing their reading, they responded with irritated sarcasm.

Figure 1
Excerpt illustrating a directive style

Leader 1: Okay, we're going to put up all these stickers, what about reading, and jotting down your questions or ideas, as you went. Did you have any thoughts, remember, we had our index card in the book, to, to think up, one idea, M?

S1: I did.

Leader 1: What did you write down?

S1: Oh I didn't write it down. (students laugh)

Leader 1: What was your idea, then?

S1: Well I thought, well I thought he was kind of strange. I mean the, mean the grandpa, was kinda weird, was worried or something?

S2: Or old, or something.

Leader 1: All right, we'll talk more about that later. And, how many of you, did anybody ask for help, if you had trouble.

S3: Nope, I can read, I'm a big boy now. (sarcastic tone of voice)

S4: Yeh, so am *I*.

S5: I'm a big *girl*. (students laugh)

In contrast, consider the excerpt from the more successful group in Figure 2. In this discussion of *Arthur For The Very First Time*, the leader was consistently responsive to students' choice of topic. Repeatedly, the leader asked questions closely related to issues that students introduced. Student responses to leader questions #1 and #3 moved the discussion to different topics. The leader followed the students' lead, asking provocative questions about the student-suggested topics. This allowed the discussion to develop along a path initiated by students.

Figure 2
Excerpt Illustrating a responsive style

Leader 1: Do you think Arthur felt comfortable?
S1: Yeah.
S2: I think he, after, after he'd seen what his aunt and uncle were like, he thought they were really fun, 'cause they come out and, well, when they got there, his mom was scared of the chicken, 'cause the chicken was pecking at her feet.
Leader 1: What was his dad's reaction when they arrived?
S2: Um, well, he wasn't scared of Pauline the chicken, 'cause he knew the chicken.
S3: He knew the chicken wouldn't bite.
S4: He just ignored it.
Leader 1: How do you think he got to know the chicken?
S2: Um, he probably, he probably, he'd probably gone there for awhile, been there for awhile.
S4: Of course, that's his father.
S3: I think, um, right when, right when he got there, when he got to pick his room like.
S5: Oh man, it was real cool, like he got to pick his room, it was probably before like he'd probably moved, or something like that, probably before.
S1: Oh yeah.
S5: Hmm. Bet they probably didn't have a really big house, and he always had to stay in one room.
S3: He got to pick out of a bunch, like nine rooms.
S1: He got the top, where the window was.
Leader 1: What do you think, out of all those rooms, how did his uncle figure out which one he was going to choose?

Through their own initiative, students broached an important issue of the book (the uncle's relationship with the boy), which the leader then capitalized on and began to develop in question #4.

In Figures 1 and 2 we see two different leadership styles in action, and those two styles led to different experiences for the students in the groups. In the first, the leader directs the discussion; in the second, the leader responds to leads from students, who in turn remain engaged and focused on the book. To illustrate how the two styles of leadership cannot comfortably co-exist, we return in Figure 3 to the less successful group somewhat later in their discussion of *Stone Fox*, after a second co-leader had joined the conversation. Leader 1 maintained a directive and Leader 2 a responsive style. Notice how the two leaders differed even in the way they attempted to elicit responses form students: Leader 1 by calling on students by name (in the figure, only an initial letter is given), Leader 2 by more gentle means.

In this interchange, the group was developing an important dialogue and exploring ideas about death, largely under the guidance of Leader 2. At one point, Leader 2 asked Student 3 to expand a response, thereby attempting to enlarge the student's role in the dialogue. Rather than allowing Student 3 time to articulate any underlying reasoning, Leader 1 quickly redirected the conversation to another student. Later, when Leader 2 probed for additional comments on the sensitive topic of death, Leader 1 did not wait for a response and instead interrupted with a command to describe the book's setting. After the extended silence that followed, Leader 1 defined the word *setting*; and when a student attempted a response, she interrupted with a clarification of her direction. By the time a student again tried to respond, the vitality had evaporated from the discussion.

Rather than helping students explore their feelings about the emotionally charged topic of death, Leader 1 redirected the discussion to the sterile terrain of the book's setting.

We should note, however, that Leader 1 did not intend to sabotage the discussion. On the contrary, she seemed genuinely interested in whether the students comprehended the book, and her comments could be viewed as instructional checks for comprehension: asking about students' predictions about the book's end, calling attention to the setting (even defining the term), and giving students more information about the kind of question she asked (e.g., "This could be an in-the-book question or an in-your-head question"). Still, this directive behavior in the midst of the discussion ultimately disrupted it. Leader 1 repeatedly turned grand conversations into inquisitions, despite the best efforts of Leader 2.

Of course, these two styles of leadership — responsive and directive — do not fully describe the nature of leader-student interaction, and leadership style is not the only factor that influences the quality of discussion. Still, there are clear differences in the way that leaders interact with students during literature discussions, and these differences may influence how engaged the students become with the deeper issues of the books. These portraits of discussion groups help us see that realizing the potential of discussion groups is indeed a delicate matter.

The main point we wish to make, however, is that these at-risk students were capable of high-level discussions when properly engaged. We saw considerable evidence of aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), in which the reader moves beyond the literal recall of fact and explores the personal interaction between self and text.

Figure 3
Excerpt Illustrating Inadvertent sabotage

Leader 2: How did you feel about the end of the story?
S1: (Whimper)
S2: She didn't like the grandpa dying.
Leader 2: No? The dog dying?
S2: Oh, yeah, the dog dying.
S1: Yeah.
Leader 2: So, H didn't like it that the dog died?
S1: Noo, it was such a good little puppy.
Leader 2: I know, it was hard for me to read that too. K, how did you feel about the end of it?
S2: Fine. I, I had three dogs that died, so it was OK.
S3: I had two.
Leader 2: Did you feel, did you feel happy that Stone Fox left little Willy in the rain? Did you like that OK?
Leader 1: Did the story turn out like you thought it would?
S4: Uh uh.
S5: Uh uh, I didn't, I didn't think the dog would die.
Leader 1: What do you think, M?
S3: I thought the dog would live.
Leader 2: Mmm. What made you think the dog might live?
S3: I don't know. It seemed like it was going to live.
Leader 1: What were you going to say, H?
S1: Uh, the doggie was a good dog, and I mean, if he would have stayed around, Grandpa wouldn't, wouldn't...
S3: Maybe the grandfather was a little bit happier when he stayed alive.
S4: You don't know if the grandfather stayed alive. You don't know if he dies at the end.
S5: He doesn't, because he sat up in bed.
S4: But you don't know if...That really doesn't mean, that he could live. (laughter)
Leader 2: Do you have some thoughts on the story you'd want to share with us? Gee, I thought you were going to say something.
Leader 1: Tell me about the setting of the story. (pause) The setting meaning where, and when, it took place.
S4: Where and when, I like —
Leader 1: Some comments. This could be an in-the-book question or an in-your-head question.
S5: Uh...like the forest, or something, over the mountains.

In their study of literature groups, Eeds and Wells (1989) identified four major categories of student response

that indicate aesthetic reading — constructing meaning, sharing personal stories, inquiring and evaluating — and the discussions we observed were filled with such talk. Through discussion, students were continually helping one another to construct meanings of what happened and why.

For example, in Figure 2, Students 2, 3 and 4 clarify that Arthur's father knew chickens do not bite because, by virtue of the family relationship, he had spent time on the uncle's farm. Even in the less successful group discussion, depicted in Figure 3, we saw students relating their personal stories to the book (e.g., "I had three dogs that died") and inquiring (e.g., actively questioning how one would establish, from the text, whether the grandfather had died). Later in the same session (see Figure 4), these students evaluated *Stone Fox* as "deadly" and requested a book with "more action," even suggesting the book *My Side of the Mountain* (which, interestingly enough, we had included in the first year of the project but abandoned in the second because we thought the language was too difficult for these readers).

Figure 4
Excerpt Illustrating a literary conversation

S1: Could you, um, get a book that's like…
S2: It's deadly.
S1: Yeah, more action in it?
Leader 2: Oh, more action, oh.
S3: *My Side of the Mountain! My Side of the Mountain!*
S4: Let's not…
S3: No, it's a good book!.
Leader 2: Well, we could look at, uh, suggestions that you have. You want more action, is that what you're telling me?
S1: Yeah!
S4: I want a, I want a book that, uh…
S5: *Skateboard Man*, something…
S4: *Skateboard Man!* (in a disapproving tone)

Such debates over the respective merits of books by at-risk readers (some of whom may never before have *finished* a book), as well as the other indications of their aesthetic reading, represent for us dramatic evidence that these students considered themselves true participants in the world of literature.

Conclusions

On the basis of our observations, it seems that the Extended Classic Books program successfully provided at-risk students with opportunities to read and discuss quality children's literature. While variability existed in leadership styles and effectiveness, most of the leaders successfully engaged students in the books they read. It is true that engaging these students may require some flexibility on the part of the discussion leader, a willingness to follow student leads, as well as considerable faith that students will eventually focus on meaningful issues. Students did focus on important issues, and their new status as readers of literature engendered affective changes in them. They carried the assigned books with pride, and they argued about the merits of others books that might be included. These at-risk students, for whom motivation is typically such a problem, actually argued about books *they* wanted to read.

This point is worth emphasizing because the issue of motivation is central to effective remediation. Remedial reading instruction too often focuses exclusively on isolated skills training, without integrating those skills into the complete act of reading. Effective instruction will help students read, and help them want to read. It may well be that we can help students improve their reading only when they see that reading opens up worlds that they otherwise could not enter. In this way, perhaps changes in reading skill must be

preceded by changes in reading attitudes. Thus, as we extend the grand conversation to all readers, we may finally begin to close the gap between good and poor readers.

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