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Book Talk: Continuing to Rouse Minds and Hearts to Life

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Abstract

During the spring of 2004, we conducted research exploring the emotions of struggling readers. Specifically we were interested in finding out how school contexts, curriculum, and relationships influence students' experiences of struggle. Students in this study were 14 first, second, and third graders identified for reading intervention at their school. As we analyzed data sources, including field notes, interviews with students and teachers, we concluded that the literacy activities that engaged these students cognitively, motivationally, and emotionally were the book discussions that took place in their reading classroom. However, book discussions were not a part of reading instruction in their regular classrooms, which contributed to their experiences of struggle. In this article we share the stories of several young readers in order to articulate our developing understandings. Likewise we discuss how these understandings concur with and enhance the growing body of evidence that book talk rouses minds and hearts to life.



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The purpose of this article is to revisit some of the research conducted during the past 25 years that supports the use of book discussion in elementary classrooms. Why is this an important and timely issue? Based on our own recent research, exploring the emotions of struggling readers, we discovered that book discussion was not being practiced by many teachers and that the absence of this practice was a source of cognitive and affective struggle for young readers. Seven teachers, in this study, reported that their adopted curriculum and recent countywide staff development emphasized phonics and phonemic awareness training for young readers and for struggling readers -- not comprehension and not discussion. Teachers also reported that they did not have time for book discussions because they had to keep pace with the county's pacing guides, which allowed only enough time for reading the story and answering the questions at the end of the story. Their comments echoed the tone in several surrounding counties. The resounding message: book discussion was a waste of time for young struggling readers! In essence, literacy educators were abandoning a practice supported by over twenty years of research because of pressure to keep pace with recent accountability agendas. Ironically, the original studies of experience-text-relationships, done with Native Hawaiian children, revealed that students who participated in instructional conversations about texts achieved at higher levels on standardized reading tests (Au & Jordan, 1981).

Previous Research

During the 1980's, literacy researchers (Tharpe & Gallimore, 1988) suggested that discussions about text could "rouse minds to life." Integrating the cognitive and cultural interpretations of Vygotsky, Tharpe and Gallimore described how teachers could help students weave together their own past experiences with texts in an experience-text-relationship (ETR). Originally developed by Au (1979; Au & Jordan, 1981), ETR is an instructional conversation strategy meant to help teachers integrate cultural relevance into comprehension instruction. There is evidence that these types of instructional conversations benefit non-mainstream, culturally diverse students because discussion more closely matches the interaction styles of non-mainstream students than the typical recitation format where teachers ask and children answer

comprehension questions (Au & Mason, 1981; McCarthey, 1997; Perez, 1996; Pransky & Bailey, 2002).

A missing piece in these interpretations of Vygotsky's (1986) work was the notion that cognition and affect are simultaneous processes, in fact he stated:

When we approach the problem of the interrelation between thought and language and other aspects of the mind, the first question that arises is that of intellect and affect. Their separation as subjects of study is a major weakness of traditional psychology...[thought is] a dynamic system of meaning in which the affective and the intellectual unite (p. 10).

During the 1990's, literacy research emphasized affect by exploring the processes of motivation and engagement. An engaged reader was described as "motivated, knowledgeable, strategic, and socially interactive" (Gambrell, 1996, p. 109). During this decade, several researchers explored the motivating aspects of book discussion including student-generated discussion (O'Flahavan, 1989; Raphael & McMahon, 1994), student generated questioning (Commeyras, 1994), and the overall benefits of peer interaction (Gambrell, 1996).

Recent research revealed that elementary students can have discussions that promote higher order thinking. For example, McCarthey (2001) discovered that book discussions can promote critical thinking when topics are related to children's developing identities, including race, gender, and class. Likewise, Chinn Anderson and Wagonner (2001) discovered that collaborative reasoning discussions about texts increased elementary students' engagement and enhanced their ability to elaborate, predict, and develop persuasive arguments. Thus, we have a growing body of evidence that whether identified as experience-text-relationship (Au, 1979), book club (Raphael & McMahon, 1994), collaborative reasoning (Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001) or literature circles (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996), book discussions benefit elementary students.

Our Research in Spring 2004

In our recent research, we discovered a range of findings that support previous research, extend previous research, and add to our understandings of book talk -- including the socio-emotional advantages of book discussion. During the spring of 2004, we conducted research exploring the emotions of struggling readers. Specifically we were interested in finding out how school contexts, curriculum, and relationships influence students' experiences of struggle.

The children involved in this study were 14 first, second, and third graders identified for reading intervention at their school. Most of the students were from non-mainstream or culturally diverse homes. Likewise, most of the students were from low-socioeconomic neighborhoods, including a nearby trailer park and a new Section 8 Subsidized Housing complex. Field notes were taken as these students interacted in their reading classroom and in their regular classrooms. Likewise, the students were interviewed both formally and informally throughout a four-month period. Six classroom teachers and the reading teacher were also interviewed formally and informally across the four-month period.

Constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) resulted in the construction of five major categories. These categories were discussed in the larger study (Author, 2004). However, book discussion was such a complex and interesting theme that we chose to look more closely at the data representative of "Book Talk" in order to better understand this phenomenon. In formal interviews and informal interactions the elementary students reported that book discussions were the most important aspect of their motivation and comprehension. As we looked across other data sources, including field notes and interviews with seven teachers, the literacy activities that engaged these students cognitively, motivationally, and even emotionally were the book talks that took place in their reading classroom. However, in the contexts where book discussions were not a part of literacy instruction, students struggled cognitively, motivationally and even emotionally. As a research team, Ms. B (their reading teacher) and I were determined to take a look at the overall advantages of book talk. We discovered that our

developing understandings concurred with and enhanced the growing body of literature that book talk rouses minds and hearts to life.

Findings and Discussion

We chose to present the stories of six focus students in order to highlight how book discussion benefited individual children. In Ms. B's room, students participated in book discussions every day. These often included prior knowledge discussions and personal connections before, during, and after reading or other discussions, such as making predictions and making inter-textual connections. Ms. B believed that book discussion was the primary way that she got to know her individual students both cognitively and personally. In fact, when I asked Ms. B why she continued to do book talk even though it was not encouraged by the recent textbook adoption or the recent teacher training that was held, she replied:

It's a way for me to assess if they are understanding the story as we read and it's a way for me to see what kind of knowledge they are bringing to the story ...I guess I see it differently than the questions at the end of the story...those questions seem to want a black or white answer...kids want to talk about the gray.... you know Martin may not be able to relate specifically to a story, but he usually understands it with just a twist to it and that is his interpretation, that is his perspective... (long pause)... I really want to hear that...I want to hear their voice, what they are thinking...

The Students' Voices

Through book talk, we were able to hear what students were thinking. For example, Kayla, a first grader, seemed quiet and shy in her regular classroom. She did not initiate discussion, she did not volunteer to read, nor did she respond to the teacher's comprehension questions. However, what we noticed about Kayla's interactions during book talk (in her reading classroom) was her sense of humor. Kayla would giggle out loud if there was a funny part in the story; she would whisper "that's funny!" to those seated beside her; and she would often reread the funny

parts of a story before returning her book. Ms. B began to tap into Kayla's sense of humor by inviting her to read just when she laughed, "Kayla why don't you read that funny part?" or by inviting her into the discussion just when she giggled, "Kayla, why do you think that's so funny?" Not only was Kayla more motivated to read than ever before, she began to exhibit her comprehension. For example, one day when asked to explain why something was funny in the book *Cookies Week* she replied, "All of it is funny, she keeps getting in trouble...but a *bad fur day* that is so funny because she is having a bad hair day!" Ms. B commented, "When I used to ask Kayla questions she would say, I don't know...but now that I'm looking for her laughter ...it's like inviting her in at just the right time, when she is really with us and engaged."

We saw a change in Kayla's engagement with text when discussions included her interest in humor. Other researchers have likewise concluded that book talk focused on students' interests influenced their motivation and participation (Frank, Dixon, & Brandts, 2001; Gambrell & Almasi, 1996; Ganske, Monroe, & Strickland, 2003). Likewise it is important to note that these conversations were over pre-primer and primer leveled texts. For example, Ms. B often began a discussion about prior knowledge before reading, such as "Have you been to the beach before?" or "What do you already know about elephants?" After this initial discussion, students often continued to share their own personal experiences and knowledge throughout the reading of pre-primer or primer leveled texts. Although, Kayla's classroom teacher reported that "you really can't talk about these easy books, they just don't lend themselves to any sort of discussion," other educators suggest that discussions focused on comprehension can benefit even the most novice readers (Ganske, Monroe, & Strickland, 2003). Research also suggests that discussions with novice readers during interactive read alouds (Barrentine, 1996; Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004; Ganske, Monroe, & Strickland, 2003) and picture talks (Bromley, 2001; Schifini, 1996) begin the types of conceptual conversations that benefit students' comprehension and models for them the kinds of thinking that accomplished readers do.

It was during a picture talk that we discovered Courtney's developing issues with race and ethnicity. Ms. B asked the first graders

to take a look at the pictures in order to get an idea of what the story was about. "I want you to make a prediction or talk about what you notice," Ms. B reminded the group. As Courtney flipped the pages, she commented on one of the pictures, "I noticed that this boy has brown skin." She paused briefly to listen to what other people were noticing, then she leaned toward Rosa, a Hispanic peer, "My sister says I can't play with you because you have dark skin." Rosa replied, "No it's the black kids you can't play with...I have brown skin." Ms. B allowed the students to talk about "who can play with who" and then responded, "I think it's pretty great that everyone is so different. How boring it would be if we all looked alike!" This concurs with previous research (Moller, 2002) that book talk can help elementary students to have meaningful discussions about social issues. Likewise, this concurs with McCarthy (2001) who concluded that book discussions with elementary students can provide opportunities to discuss their developing awareness of racial, ethnic, and gender issues.

A picture talk also revealed Courtney's interest in animals. Although Courtney did not display any emotional response to most texts, her entire countenance was enlivened when Ms. B introduced a book about elephants. Ms. B led students in a picture talk asking "What do you already know about elephants?" While students flipped through the pages, Courtney excitedly blurted out every thing she knew about elephants. She was quite the expert. She also shared that she wanted to be a veterinarian when she grew up. Not only did we recognize that Courtney was motivated by an interest in animals, but we also began to notice that information books, in general, motivated her. Book discussions are enhanced by the use of multiple genres. Not only is it motivating to explore many genres during book talks, students can learn an important aspect of comprehension—the many text structures that they will encounter as readers (Raphael & McMahan, 1994). Moreover, Frank, Dixon, & Brandts (2001) found that when second graders selected their own books for book discussions they often chose from multiple genres.

Genre was important to Martin. Although Martin was in third grade, picture books were still very important to him because he loved art. He often raised questions and initiated discussions about how the pictures

helped to portray meaning. For example, he suggested that the illustrator was portraying the counselor as a werewolf, with "a long gruff beard, hairy knuckles, and a snarling grin." Ms. B suggested that they read on in *Werewolves Don't Go to Summer Camp*, to find out if Martin was right. The group read on and continued to build evidence to support Martin's original prediction. Soon everyone was convinced that the camp counselor was a werewolf. Martin reported that the book discussions in his reading class were the most important part of learning to read because "I get to say what I think it means." Martin explained that in his regular classroom, the teacher asked questions at the end of the story and that if you didn't get the answer right, "Ms. R just tells us the correct answer." Ms. B reported that Martin needed to talk about the gray because he never saw answers as black or white.

Kate, an ESOL student from India, likewise thought discussion was the most important difference between her regular 3rd grade classroom and her reading classroom. She reported, "I just don't understand if I don't talk about it and we never talk about books in Ms. M's class...we just answer the questions...and mostly I can't answer the questions." Kate often raised her own questions about vocabulary. For instance, Kate gasped in disgust upon reading the phrase, "*sitting in the nose bleed section*, ooooooh! What does that mean?" Ms. B invited other students to discuss the meaning of *nose bleed section* until Kate seemed to understand, replying, "I get it now...it just means high up." Another day, a student was reading aloud when Kate interjected, "I don't understand that...having a *first class trip*?" However, most of the students did not know what that meant, so Ms. B explained what "first class" means when you fly in an airplane. Ms. B often mentioned to me that vocabulary discussions were very important because the students' background knowledge was varied and they could provide each other with a better understanding of words.

Asking each other questions and sharing their thoughts were keys to the third graders' motivation and comprehension. This concurs with Commeyras (1994) who discovered that students were more motivated to read when discussions were focused on their questions. Likewise, O'Flahavan's (1989) research with second graders revealed that students were more motivated when they generated much of the book discussion.

Kate and most of the other non-mainstream students in this study were not successful in the recitation format, where teachers ask and children answer comprehension questions. Nor were they successful with reading the text silently and writing answers to the comprehension questions. In fact, most of the students were failing at these tasks in their regular classrooms. However, when the students participated in book talk, their comprehension was evident through their responses, questions, and discussion: These experiences with discussion concur with 20 years of research with non-mainstream students reporting that discussions are cognitively essential for students to bridge the gap between home and school experiences, which in turn is essential for comprehension of text (Au, 1979; McCarthey, 1997; Perez, 1996; Schifini, 1996).

Denny, another 3rd grader, needed a different kind of bridge between home and school – a socio-emotional connection. Denny was constantly in trouble in his regular classroom and around the school. He had a reputation for being angry and defiant. What we discovered through book discussions, was that Denny's mom had recently been put in jail and he had moved in with his father and his father's new family. We often noticed Denny's tears when we read a book with a strong mother figure. One day when students were discussing a book about brothers and sisters, Denny shared his anger, explaining that he was now living with his dad and stepsisters and that he did not like his new family at all. The next day, Ms. B brought in *The Pain and the Great One* to generate a discussion about having angry feelings toward brothers and sisters. When other students (and Ms. B) shared their own thoughts about feeling angry toward their family members, Denny seemed comforted by their empathy. In fact, he reported later that "I'm glad Ms. B lets us talk about stuff in here...they're my friends in this class...all of them...they're my friends."

Ms. B was able to use book talk to provide Denny with socio-emotional support. Bibliotherapy has long been a part of counseling experiences for children both in school and out. Now, it is being used in classroom settings to help students deal with socio-emotional difficulties, including managing stress and controlling aggression (Sullivan & Strang, 2002). Sullivan and Strang (2002) emphasized the careful selection of appropriate texts and the importance of integrating these types of

conversations into the regular curriculum. Likewise, we noticed that these types of conversations were creating a socio-emotional bond between this group of 3rd graders. Frank, Dixon, and Brandts (2001) discovered that meaningful peer relationships were built through book clubs in their second grade classroom.

Conclusions

The findings from this study concur with and enhance our understandings of the benefits of book discussion for elementary students. This article specifically highlights the advantages of using book talk with young readers and those who have been identified for reading intervention programs. The reading teacher in this study encouraged a wide range of comprehension discussions, including picture talks, predictions, prior knowledge, personal connections, and vocabulary meanings. These discussions took place with even the most novice readers using pre-primer and primer leveled texts. She also provided opportunities to read and discuss multiple genres. This allowed these young readers to become familiar with multiple text structures, which is essential for becoming an accomplished reader. She invited students' questions and comments because this motivated them and gave them a chance to talk about the gray. Even comments about "people with brown skin" gave the first graders an opportunity to discuss and critique their social notions about who can play with whom.

When assessing students' comprehension, Ms. B recognized that they were not successful in answering the comprehension questions at the end of a chapter. Thus, she assessed before, during, and after reading and accepted a range of student responses, such as laughter, interest, engagement, increased interaction, or questions about vocabulary as evidence of their comprehension. The classroom teachers and the students likewise reported that these young readers were not successful at answering comprehension questions. Thus, they were not being successful in their regular classroom. Students reported that they just did not understand if they did not talk about the text. Teachers reported that they were struggling with comprehension. However, when students participated in book discussions, their comprehension was evident.

In this study, students were motivated by book discussions that revolved around their questions and comments about pictures, vocabulary, and personal connections to text. Likewise students were motivated when book talk included their personal interests, such as humor, art, and animals. Personal relationships were also built among the entire group of 3rd graders -- they benefited from the socio-emotional bonds that were created through book discussions. One child in particular experienced empathy and friendship as he shared his recent family sorrows with the group.

Although we witnessed numerous benefits in using book discussion, we also observed as classroom teachers abandoned this practice because of time constraints, accountability requirements, and their county's recent emphasis on phonics programs for young, struggling readers. Students appeared to be struggling cognitively, emotionally, and motivationally in these contexts where they were not invited to talk about what they were reading. However, because students were successful with comprehension, motivated, engaged, and interactive in their reading classroom, they did not appear to be struggling at all. In fact we discovered that these book discussions were rousing students' minds and hearts to life in a way that no other literacy practices did.

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