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The Role of Discourse and Its Effects on Reading Comprehension in the ELA Classroom

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College of Education

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The Role of Discourse and Its Effects on Reading Comprehension in the ELA Classroom

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Abstract

Researchers have consistently found a link between quality classroom discourse and the increase in student reading comprehension. Classroom discussions help students make sense of fiction and nonfiction texts while deepening their understanding. Incorporating the principles of Vygotsky's social constructivism as the theoretical framework, the aim of this study was to examine the relationship between the use of *accountable talk* sentence stems and the quality of discussion using the *fishbowl* discussion strategy as a means of increasing student comprehension of a text. Observation of the effects of student discourse of 18 students over the duration of six weeks yielded measurable differences in the quality and the quantity of discussion. Students were arranged in two circles: an inner circle that conducted conversation and an outer circle that observed and commented on the behavior of the inner circle. Pre and post assessment results were tallied and scored using a rubric. The evaluation criteria included the number of student comments, use of textual evidence, elaboration upon another student's response, and the use of sentence stems. The results indicated that using sentence stems and engaging in discourse that required students to respond, question, clarify, and further develop what others said in a discussion increased student comprehension of a text and the use of textual evidence to support their comments. Specifically, the use of *accountable talk* stems encouraged students to take ownership of the conversations by thinking and reasoning together, building on one another's ideas, and holding one another accountable for the comments being made in a discussion. Therefore, accountable talk was an effective strategy to increase classroom conversation and comprehension, and should be considered to be a viable strategy for supporting students in achieving literacy goals.

Keywords: *classroom discourse, classroom discussion, accountable talk, discussion stems, discussion strategies.*

Table of Contents

Introduction

From birth, children are sensitive and enthusiastic communicators. They learn to communicate to fulfill their basic needs as infants, learn about the world around them, and, eventually, to share their ideas through language. It is this expressive language that inevitably allows their inner thoughts and opinions to be communicated to the world at large. In other words, language is how we think (Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008). Vygotsky (1962) viewed language as developing thought, suggesting that thinking develops into words. Therefore, talking is how we share that thinking. Since the purpose of being in school is thinking, it only makes sense that classrooms should be filled with talk (Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008). The most effective classrooms are not always quiet classrooms and nor should they be (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). Students learn from actively engaging with each other and with their instructor (Applebee et al., 2003; McLeod, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978).

Furthermore, Alexander (2004) argued that children need to talk and experience a rich repertoire of spoken language to think and to learn. Reading, writing and arithmetic may be the acknowledged curriculum basics, but talk is the true foundation of learning (2004). Inarguably, everyone wants to have his/her voice heard, and students deserve to have a prominent voice in the classroom. Studies have found that when students participate in scaffolded, interactive discussions in the classroom, their comprehension of a given text is significantly deeper (Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008; Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2006).

Additionally, when teachers lead learners in discussions of texts, they are also, whether their students realize it or not, teaching fundamental reading skills (VanDeWege, 2007). Conversations in the classroom can help students make sense of texts and topics, whether they be

literary or non-literary, and encourage students to deepen their understanding of what is being studied.

With the pressures of state testing, curricula that are standards-driven, and the need to "cover the curriculum," it is even harder for teachers to include discussions in their lesson planning (Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008). Furthermore, establishing discussion in the classroom requires a climate of trust and risk-taking (Mills, 2009). It takes time to create a classroom environment where students feel respected and their ideas are valued. If teachers want their students to "float upon a sea of talk," (Britton, 1970, p. 164), then opportunities to collaborate and build meaningful social interactions through purposeful discussion must play a crucial role in their learning.

Background

Historically, students have been passive recipients in receiving information from the teacher. Fisher, Frey & Rothenberg (2008) found that teachers talked for most of the day while students were quiet and completed their assigned tasks, through memorization and recitation. However, over time, educators realized that students needed to use language to deepen their education. With the 2010 release of the Common Core State Standards, which include Speaking and Listening standards, the emphasis on academic discussion in the classroom in one-on-one, small-group, and whole-class settings has become became an expected, necessary, and significant component of the classroom environment (Common Core State Standards, 2010, p. 22).

Shernoff (2013) found that middle and high school students are not often highly engaged in class and tend to be least engaged when listening to lectures (Shernoff, as cited in Collier, 2015). However, lectures comprise 21% of students' classroom time (2015). Shernoff (2015) also

found that students think about topics unrelated to academics during 40% of the instructional day. Furthermore, Nystrand (1997) reported that many teachers limit discussion of material read to an average of 50 seconds per lesson at the eighth grade level and an even briefer 15 seconds at the ninth grade level, and that 85% of the instruction observed was some combination of lecture, recitation, and seatwork (Blanton, Wood, & Taylor, 2007, p.76). If discourse in the classroom has been proven to increase student engagement and comprehension, then these numbers need to change.

The importance of discussion for comprehending the text has been emphasized in a number of studies (Applebee et al., 2003; Beck, McKeon, & Kucan, 1997; Brown, Ash, Rutherford, Nakagawa, Gordon, & Campione, 1993; Goldenberg, 1992; Hiebert & Wearne, 1993; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994, as cited by Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2006). For example, Applebee et al. (2003) "provided empirical evidence that discussion-based activities coupled with academically challenging tasks are positively related to develop students' literacy skills" (Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2006, p. 2). The use of collaborative dialogue during the reading comprehension lessons was positively associated with the students' gains in building knowledge and comprehension (Brown et al., 1993 as cited in Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2006).

Classroom discussions help students make sense of fiction and nonfiction texts, encourage students to deepen their understanding of their reading material, challenge or improve their interpretations of the text all the while ameliorating achievement in reading comprehension (VanDeWeghe, 2007). Students need to develop the skills and strategies that will lead to deeper and more productive discussions (Mills, 2009). Therefore, classroom conversation and discussion must be made a priority considering it has the potential to improve reading comprehension and support students in achieving literacy goals.

Rationale

With the implementation of the Common Core Speaking and Listening Standards in 2010, classroom instruction in the facilitation of student discourse has become not only beneficial, but required. The Speaking and Listening standards require students to "participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively" (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 22)) Yet, in the majority of classrooms, it is significantly lacking (Nystrand, et al. 2003; Reznitskaya & Glina, 2013). Students are still forced to sit idle listening to the teacher. This needs to change.

A discussion-based classroom where teachers and students act as co-inquirers into complex issues, sharing responsibilities for managing group participation, asking questions, and evaluating each other's judgments through reasoning and reflection, promotes critical thinking and deepens comprehension (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003; Reznitskaya & Glina, 2013; Soter et al., 2008). This project will analyze the benefits of discourse in the classroom for growth in reading comprehension as well as provide a variety of research-based strategies that should be implemented in every 21st century classroom to ensure student success.

Problem

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2015), 57% of Connecticut's eighth grade students scored within the Basic or Below Basic range on standardized tests. Even with the implementation of the CCSS in 2010, students struggle with comprehending complex texts. Determining central ideas and themes, citing textual evidence, making inferences are just a few of the rigorous demands of the CCSS (NGA & CCSS, 2010, p.10). In addition, the Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening require students to "prepare

for and participate effectively in a range of conversation sand collaborations with diverse partners, building on each other's ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively" (NGA & CCSS, 2010, p.22). Therefore, teachers must find a way to increase comprehension of difficult texts in order to raise reading levels as well as integrate the Speaking and Listening standards into daily practice.

Research has proven that students need to engage in discussion to learn and develop their ideas, not have the conversation dominated by teacher talk. Unfortunately, classroom talk is frequently limited and is used to check comprehension rather than develop thinking (Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008). Therefore, students need more opportunities to enter into dialogue within the classroom, and teachers need strategies to incorporate discourse into daily classroom interactions. With this implementation, the results could have profound impacts on Connecticut reading scores.

Solution

In order to have less teacher-directed instruction and talk in the classroom, awareness of and training in the importance of discourse in their classrooms is essential for teachers (Blanton, Wood, &Taylor, 2007). Research has also found links between discussion and engagement. McElhone (2012) stated, "It is essential to develop and refine approaches to classroom discourse that support both engagement and achievement in reading" (p.527). Therefore, teachers must implement highly effective instructional methods and strategies for classroom talk to assist students in deepening their understanding of texts. Throughout this project, research will be discussed to identify the most effective strategies.

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical rationales used to explain the role of discussion in promoting students' reading comprehension derive largely from Social Constructivism theory. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the fundamental role that social interaction plays in the development of cognition. It is that social interaction that encourages students to fully develop as learners and thinkers. Further, an important concept within Vygotsky's Social Constructivism is the Zone of Proximal Development, which refers to the ideal level of task difficulty to facilitate learning and the level at which a child can be successful with appropriate support (Tracey & Morrow, 2006).

A second theorist that anchors this research paper is Paulo Freire (1970). Freire believed that "Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people--they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress" (Freire, 1970, p. 72). He viewed education as an"act of depositing" piecemeal information by teachers to passive recipients: students. The role of the student, thus, is limited to "receiving, filing and storing the deposits" (p. 72). Freire calls this the "banking concept"(p.70) of education, which consists of the teacher talking at students while students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat that information. This regurgitation, then, leads to students accepting this passive role and accepting their leaders deposited view of reality. However, Freire stresses the best way students learn is to have dialogue with the teacher and with each other to problem solve and be "co-investigators"(p. 81).

Friere (1970) and Vygotsky (1978) see social interaction as being integral to students' knowledge construction. Vygotsky argues that intellectual growth and development is fostered "when one is required to explain, elaborate, or defend one's position to others, as well as to oneself" (p. 158). Freire emphasizes that "knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry, human beings pursue in

the world, with the world, and with each other" (p. 70). This action research project will be guided by these theories which will be expanded upon in the review of literature.

Research Questions

The following research questions have guided and provided focus for my paper:

1. How does classroom discussion affect overall literacy achievement?

2. How does discourse connect to student engagement and motivation?

3. What are effective discussion strategies to encourage student discourse in the classroom?

Literature Review

This literature review examines the role of classroom discourse as it relates to and affects students' reading comprehension. Beginning with a discussion of the traditional roles of students and teachers in the classroom, the underlying theories of Freire and Vygotsky inform instructional pedagogy, supported by a variety of studies that have proven to be the most successful. Researchitct.org, ERIC, GoogleScholar, and Education Research Complete databases provided essential indexed and full-text education literature and resources for this research. I referred to the following keywords when investigating sources to support my research: discourse, classroom discussion, reading comprehension, discussion strategies, and literature discussion.

Historical Perspectives and Learning Theories

Traditionally, the roles of teachers and students had been clearly defined. Student learners were passive absorbers of information and authority, and teachers were sources of that information and authority. As early as 1860, there are documented complaints that young teachers were confusing rapid questioning and answers with effective teaching (Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969). Even 100 years later, Belleck, Kliebard, Hyman, and Smith (1966), as well as

Hoetker & Ahlbrand (1969) found that teachers talked about two-thirds of all instructional time, and that more than 80% of all teacher questions sought to test student's recall of textbook information in recitation format. More recently, Nystrand (1997) reported that 85% of the instruction observed in a large study of 8th and 9th grade English language arts classes was some combination of lecture recitation, and seatwork.

Cazden (2001) provided a modern-day example of traditional instruction with Initiation, Response, and Evaluation (IRE), which has characterized the instructional routine since the inception of instruction. With this model the teacher asks a question, the student answers, and then the teacher says if the answer is right or provides the correct answer. Even as cutting-edge pedagogy espouses the benefits of active constructive learning (Vygotsky, 1978), teachers continue to be locked into this pattern of talk in the classroom, thereby simply checking for understanding and discouraging critical thinking skills or collaboratively building meaning from a text.

The Teacher and Freire

In his seminal work, Freire (1970) refers to this traditional relationship of teacher and student as "the banking concept" of education (p.70). In this dysfunctional, oppressive system, the teacher retains control and takes on the role of an oppressor, while the student is expected to be a passive, unthinking follower. The teacher deposits information into the student, who is an empty receptacle for these deposits. The more students work at receiving, memorizing, and repeating these deposits, the more completely they accept the passive role imposed upon them. This banking concept of education, consisting of monologues by those in charge, was designed to make the students passive receptors prone to a view of reality created by the teacher. Instead of communicating, the teacher imposes his/her knowledge onto the students.

However, Freire (1970) argued that communication must occur in order to end this cycle of oppression. It is through dialogue and the collaboration between students and teachers that this oppression ends. They become jointly responsible for both teaching and learning. In this form of education, the teacher and the student enter into partnership and join in a dialogue to jointly come to conclusions about problems. The solutions must not be predetermined by the teacher, but instead must be determined together during the process of dialogue where the teacher and students learn from each other. This emphasis on the student actively constructing knowledge through social interaction, however, is in direct opposition to traditional models of education, which view teachers as bearers of objective knowledge and students as passive receivers.

It has been widely accepted for several decades now that learners' cognitive development is driven by interactions between children, adults, and society (Brunner & Haste, 1987; Halliday,1993;Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, it is arguable that students can use "talk" to engage with new knowledge. Through interactions with their peers and teacher(s), learners become equipped to better understand that new knowledge within their own personal frameworks.

Influence of Vygotsky and Sociocultural Theory

Similarly,Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978)stresses the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition. Vygotsky (1962) believed humans learn through interactions and communications with others, such as peers and teachers. He believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of "making meaning" (p.158). Based on this framework, learners acquire strategies and develop understandings through dialogue in social contexts (Many, 2002, p. 376). Vygotsky argued that intellectual growth and development is fostered "when one is required to explain, elaborate, or defend one's position to others, as well as to oneself" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 158).

Students often do not fully understand the position they are arguing for, or the concept to which they are attempting to relate, until they are forced to provide an explanation or justification to their peers. "[S]triving for an explanation," wrote Vygotsky, "often makes a learner integrate and elaborate knowledge in new ways" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.158). This indicates that social cooperation and classroom discussion are not only beneficial for growth and learning, but also for generating new knowledge and integrating multiple interpretations of texts. Consequently, teachers can and should create a learning environment that maximizes the learner's ability to interact with each other through discussion, collaboration, and feedback.

Deepening Comprehension

The importance of discussion for comprehending the text has been emphasized in a number of studies which demonstrate that students reach higher levels of thinking and comprehension through thoughtful elaboration and co-construction of meaning about and around the text (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Beck et al., 1997; Brown et al., 1993; Goldenberg, 1992; Hiebert & Wearne, 1993; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994; Wolf, Crosson, &Resnick, 2006). A central finding within the literature on student learning is that the quality of classroom talk is strongly associated with the depth of student learning, understanding, and problem-solving (Li, Murphy, & Firetto, 2014; Mercer, 2002; Nystrand et al., 2003; Wegerif, Mercer, & Dawes, 1999). Purposeful discussion, meaningful exchanges between students, and discussion-based classrooms where the instructor manages the discourse can lead each student to feel like their contributions are valued. This results in increased student motivation and understanding.

Researchers and experienced classroom teachers alike know that simply getting students to talk out loud or talk to one another does not necessarily lead to learning. What matters is what

students are talking about and how they talk. Wolf, Crosson, and Resnick, (2006)examined the quality of classroom talk and academic rigor in reading comprehension lessons in a study aimed to characterize effective questions to support rigorous reading comprehension lessons. Twenty-one teachers from ten schools and 441 students in grades one to eight from three urban school districts were observed during a reading comprehension lesson. Wolf, Crosson, and Resnick (2006) collected data using Accountable Talk and Academic Rigor rubrics.

Resnick (1999) defined Accountable Talk (AT) as talk that seriously responds to and further develops what others in the group have said. It puts forth and demands knowledge that is accurate and relevant to the issue under discussion. Additionally, AT uses evidence in ways appropriate to the discussion and follows established norms of reasoning (1999). In AT classrooms, student's reason, think together, build on one another's ideas, and are held accountable for the knowledge they share with peers.

Teachers encourage AT through a variety of "talk moves" that include re-voicing, restating, reasoning, adding on, and wait time (Chapin, O'Connor, & Anderson, 2009). Accountable Talk rubrics consisted of seven dimensions of classroom talk: (a) participation rate;(b) teacher's linking ideas; (c) students' linking ideas; (d) asking for knowledge; (e) providing knowledge; (f) asking for rigorous thinking; and (g) providing rigorous thinking. The Academic Rigor rubric included three dimensions: (a) rigor of the text; (b) active use of knowledge: analyzing and interpreting the text during the whole-group discussion, and (c) active use of knowledge during the small group or individual tasks (Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2006).

Quantitative analyses results suggested that students' participation in classroom talk contributed to a rigorous lesson (Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2006).First, raising awareness of explicit use of linking talk moves was necessary for building a learning community. The

effective use of linking talk moves created a setting that invited more active interaction between all participants and deeper understanding of important concepts. Further, conclusions highlighted that teachers' questions, the use of wait time, listening to others, questioning others' knowledge, and exploring ones' own thoughts had a positive relationship with the academic rigor of reading comprehension and helped to engage students in higher level thinking and discussion (Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2006).

In another study in which 45 middle school struggling readers participated in Literature Discussion Groups (LDGs) for a period of four weeks, Pittman and Honchell (2014) examined the effect of student collaboration on reading engagement and comprehension. LGDs consisted of small discussion groups who met together to talk about literature in which they had a common interest. These conversations were about book content, specific strategies used to comprehend the text, personal stories about real-life connections, or any combination of these. Students guided these discussions in response to the literature they had read. Discussions also included talk about plot, characters, and the author's craft, but the significant outcome was that students collaborate in order to make meaning from the reading (Pittman & Honchell, 2014).

Data collected from pre and post reading interest surveys, student-made booklets, audio recordings of student conversations, and student interviews revealed that LDGs made a significant positive impact on middle school readers and their feelings about reading. Students enjoyed reading more when they were engaged in literature discussion. Additionally, student comprehension deepened when they were able to share with peers. LGDs led to better understanding of the text, including text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections and schema (Pittman & Honchell, 2014).

In their seminal work of two instructional studies, Palinscar and Brown (1984) investigated a total of 58 students using the reciprocal teaching method. In reciprocal teaching, the teacher models strategies and then asks students to reciprocate in small peer groups, exchanging roles, taking turns leading discussions, asking and answering questions, and sharing their thinking with one another. Four comprehension strategies were employed throughout this interactive process: prediction, clarification, summarization, and questioning (Blanton, Wood, & Taylor, 2007).

The study proved that students made significant gains in standardized comprehension scores (Palinscar & Brown, 1984). Palinscar & Brown (1984) argued that the reciprocal teaching method was the prime reason for students' success. First, the teacher conducted extensive modeling of comprehension activities that helped students both foster and monitor understanding. This modeling provided students with a clear idea of what they needed to do when trying to understand texts.

Second, the reciprocal teaching routines forced the students to respond, even if they were not completely accurate in their responses. But because the students did respond, the teacher had an opportunity to gauge their competence and provide appropriate feedback. In this way, reciprocal teaching provided appropriate feedback and an opportunity for the students to make overt their level of competence, a level that in many activities was masked by students' tendency not to respond until they were confident that their answers were correct (Palinscar & Brown, 1984).

Additionally, at the conclusion of the study, teachers observed student progress not only in comprehension, but also in "general thinking" (Palinscar & Brown, 1984, p. 167) skills because of the reciprocal activities. The students appeared better able to locate important

information and to organize their ideas, which the teachers regarded as important "study skills."The students also reported that they were using the instructed activities, primarily summarizing and question predicting, in their content classes (Palinscar & Brown, 1984). Reciprocal teaching is a highly effective approach that enables students to internalize a common language that can be used for reading, comprehending, and understanding text (Rosenshine & Meister, 1994).

Other discussion strategies have proven effective in increasing reading comprehension. In a meta-analysis done by Murphy and colleagues (2009) of 42 empirical studies on nine classroom discussion strategies and their effects on students' comprehension and learning, results indicated a number of key findings. Researchers from these studies analyzed five to 720 students ranging in age from six to 17.5 from a diverse range of abilities, backgrounds, economic status, and locations. First, many of the discussion approaches were highly effective at promoting students' literal and inferential comprehension, such as *Questioning the Author* (Beck et al, 1997*), Instructional Conversations* (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1992), *Shared Inquiry* (Great Books Foundation, 2014), *Collaborative Reasoning* (Anderson, Chinn, Waggoner, &Nguyen, 1998), and *Book Club* (Raphael & McMahon, 1994).Secondly, most approaches were effective strategies for increasing student talk and decreasing teacher talk. Yet, increases in student talk did not necessarily result in accompanying increases in student comprehension, thereby emphasizing that "not all discussion approaches are created equal" (761). The techniques are discussed further.

Questioning the Author (QtA)

The QtA strategy (Beck et al, 1997) is based on the constructivist view of learning in which "learners need to actively use information, rather than simply collect pieces of

information" (Beck, et al., 1997, p. 8). QtA is geared to help students "consider meaning, to develop and grapple with ideas, and to try construct meaning" (Beck, et al., 1997, p. 6). This during-reading strategy allows teachers to ask specific questions of students to help them create meaning and reflect on the text while they read. Through the use of classroom discussion, teachers assist students in going beyond just sharing their opinions and ideas about a text they have read. Teachers engage students with queries that ask students to consider the meaning of the text and not just retrieve information (Beck, et al., 1997).

Instructional Conversations(IC)

ICs (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1992) are discussion-based lessons aimed toward creating opportunities for students' to express ideas and build upon information others provide. Teachers and students respond to what others say, so that each statement or contribution builds upon, challenges, or extends a previous one. Topics are picked up, developed, and elaborated. Both teacher and students present provocative ideas or experiences, to which others respond. Strategically, the teacher (or discussion leader) questions, prods, challenges, coaxes--or keeps quiet. He or she clarifies and instructs when necessary, but does so efficiently, without wasting time or words.

While the conversation is taking place, the teacher assures that the discussion proceeds at an appropriate pace-- neither too fast to prohibit the development of ideas, nor too slowly to maintain interest and momentum. Further, the teacher knows when to bear down to draw out a student's ideas and when to ease up, allowing thought and reflection to take over while keeping all students engaged in a substantive and extended conversation that extends comprehension of a text (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1992).

Similarly, QtA and IC both require students to think on their feet and think critically about texts. However, the QtA strategy encourages students to ask questions of the author and the text whereas IC focuses on conversation about an ideas or concept that has meaning and relevance for students.

Shared Inquiry (SI)

Similar to IC, in which each participant builds upon one another's ideas, SI (Great Books Foundation, 2014) involves the active engagement of searching for the meaning of a work that everyone in the group has read. With the encouragement of the group, participants articulate and develop their ideas, support their assertions with evidence from the text, and consider different plausible meanings. The discussion leader provides direction and guidance by asking questions about the text and about the comments of the participants; the participants in the group look to the leader for questions, not answers. Based on the conviction that students gain a deeper understanding of a text when they work together and are prompted by a leader's skilled questioning, SI helps students read actively, articulate probing questions and comments about the ideas in a work, and listen and respond effectively to each other.

Collaborative Reasoning (CR)

CR (Anderson et al, 1998) uses discussion to foster students' critical reading and thinking about a text. CR discussions foster conversations among students that draw on personal experiences, background knowledge, and text for interpretive support (Murphy et al, 2009). In the format of CR, the teacher poses a question specifically chosen to ignite varying points of view. Students adopt a position on the issue and generate ideas to support their opinions. With CR, students learn to evaluate reasons and evidence, to consider alternative points of view, and to challenge the argument of others (Murphy et al, 2009).

Unlike the other teacher-facilitated strategies, CR is peer-led with the intent of increasing personal engagement. Students manage their own discussions and have control over what they say within small groups. The purpose of using this model is for students to "cooperatively search for resolutions and develop thoughtful opinions about the topic" (Zhang & Stahl, 2011, p. 257). Then, students are to take a position on the topic, support their opinion with reasons and evidence and challenge each other's arguments.

Book Club (BC)

BC (Raphael & McMahon, 1994) differs from the other approaches including QtA, IC, SI and CR in that it allows for increased flexibility in student choice for discussion and the texts that are being discussed. Based on reader-response theory, (Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978) and comprised of four elements, reading, writing, discussion, and instruction. Students read a text, record their written responses in journals, and then use these responses to engage in small-group discussion, otherwise known as BCs. The instructional element can include mini-lessons for a variety of purposes, such as story elements, reading strategies, and discussion rules. Students also engage in whole-class discussion that allows for students to share information from BC discussions and enhance their awareness of issues relating to the thematic unit (Murphy et al, 2009).

Conclusion

Teachers of classroom conversation share the philosophy that social interaction and cooperation leads to the co-construction of knowledge, and, ultimately, student success (Vygotsky, 1978), which affirms the construct of collaboration and is achieved by teachers and students functioning in "reciprocal, mutually dependent roles" (VanDeWeghe, 2007, p.88). Teachers as "co-investigators" (Freire, 1970, p.81) with students, implies participation in the

process of shared self-reflection, while providing time and opportunity for managed discussions in classrooms. The choices a teacher makes about how to conduct classroom discourse have potential consequences for students' participation and the degree to which they engage in thinking about texts (Nystrand, 1997).

When executed thoughtfully, classroom discourse helps students to engage more fully with texts, develop sound interpretations, improve reading comprehension, strengthen writing, and inspire them to read and write more. However, not all discussion approaches are equally effective. Whether classroom talk emanates from a series of questions posed by the teacher designed to encourage students to think deeply and respond as in AT (Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2006), engage in Socratic Seminar as in SI (Great Books Foundation, 2014), or become engrossed in in-depth conversations about literature as in LGDs (Pittman & Honchell, 2014), the rules of spoken communication are nearly imperceptible in a comparison of one approach to the other, particularly because of the shared goal for everyone to contribute to a lively and academic discourse community.

Further, the research on classroom discourse supports the belief that discussion does, in fact, have a positive effect on reading comprehension and student learning. With the implementation of BCs (Raphael & McMahon, 1994) and CR (Anderson et al, 1998) in the classroom, the sharing of text-supported student opinions and ideas encourage the use of evidence to support student thinking. With the implementation of the CCSS Speaking and Listening Standards in 2010 (NGA & CCSSO, 2010) classroom instruction in the facilitation of student discourse has not only become beneficial but required in order to ensure students are college and career ready.

The Common Core State Standards specifically states, "To be ready for college, workforce training, and life in a technological society, students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas" (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 4), and "…participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively" (NGA& CCSSO, 2010, p. 22). Being able to communicate effectively, with purpose, clarity, respect, and evidence are skills that are imperative to success not only in the classroom, but within the world at large. Therefore, fostering high quality student discussion facilitated by a trained teacher are the first steps to ensure that students are prepared for a rapidly changing, technologically advanced world where human interaction and communication are still the foundation for success.

Methodology

The importance of discussion has been emphasized in a number of studies which demonstrate that students reach higher levels of thinking and comprehension through thoughtful elaboration and co-construction of meaning about and around a text (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Beck et al., 1997; Brown et al., 1993; Goldenberg, 1992; Hiebert & Wearne, 1993; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994; Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2006).The studies also stressed the importance of teacher facilitation during discussion and the overall goal of student ownership over the discussions they are having in the classroom. Students' learning is enhanced when they have many opportunities to elaborate on their ideas through talk. Scaffolded classroom talk assists students to deepen their understanding of texts (Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2004).

Teachers must explicitly teach students, through the gradual release model, to be fully responsible for the discussion taking place. But, this often requires practice and teacher guidance.

The ultimate goal is that students assume considerable responsibility for the success of the discussion, initiate topics, and make unsolicited contributions (Danielson, 2007).Additionally, when teachers lead learners in discussions of texts, they are also, whether their students realize it or not, teaching fundamental reading skills (VanDeWeghe, 2007). Conversations in the classroom help students make sense of texts and topics and encourage students to deepen their understanding of what is being studied. AT (Michaels, et al., 2010) is one way students can achieve this by thinking and reasoning together, building on one another's ideas, and holding one another accountable for the comments being made in a discussion. This study explored providing students with a collection of sentence stems and the impact they had over student ownership and the efficacy of the discussion around literature using the principles of AT.

Participants

The participants of this research resided in a small, suburban New England town. The public school district consisted of seven schools with a total population of approximately 3,285 students, which included approximately 825 middle school students. The population of students was 86.3% White, 7.5% Hispanic, 4.3% Asian, 1.6% Black, and .3% Native Indian. Eight percent of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The district performance index in English Language Arts was 79.1, ranking above the Connecticut state target of 75. The high performance of students within the district has led 89.4% of students to enter into college after completion of high school (CSDE District Profile, 2015-2016).

As the facilitator of this study, I am a certified female teacher with 15 years of secondary English teaching experience, four months of experience as a Reading Specialist, and a masters degree. The study included 18 eighth grade students, consisting of 8 female and 10 male students, ranging in ages from 13-14, in which there was one student with an IEP and three

students with a 504. The selection of students was through the method of convenience sampling within a classroom that I provide support to on a daily basis.

The duration of this study was over a six-week period. Although the sample size was small and results cannot by generalized, the goal of this research was to increase my own knowledge in the pedagogy of student discourse. If successful, I would bring my new insight to professional development workshops within my school and share the effectiveness of classroom discussion on reading comprehension.

Materials

A selection of statement stems, grounded in cognitive and social development theory for the purpose of eliciting student interactions, were posted on the walls of the classroom on anchor charts and given to students as bookmarks (Appendix 1). In this way teachers could easily facilitate and prompt conversation, while students had immediate access to conversation starters. Sample stems included:

1. Can anyone add on to what _____ said?

2. What did you mean by _____?

3. So what you are saying is that _____?

4. Do you agree with _____?

5. Can you tell me more?

Similarly, student discussion stems included language for students to respectfully state opinions, expand upon, or clarify information.

1. I think/believe that _____.

2. I agree with _____ because_____.

3. I have a different point of view; I think _____.

4. I don't quite understand _____.

5. Can you give me an example of that?

      Additional materials included an iPad for the recording of discussions, data collection sheet (Appendix 2), and high quality texts that were accessible to all students.

Design

      The Accountable Talk Sourcebook (Michaels, O'Connor, Hall, & Resnick, 2010) was the curricular methodology used in this action research project. The sourcebook is a free resource from the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. It provides tools, strategies, norms, and research to support educators looking to increase the level of productive discourse in any content area. The format used was the Fishbowl (Michaels, et al., 2010, p. 25), in which a small number of students were positioned in the center of the group and were asked to engage in some form of valued talk while the rest of the students watched the interaction. At different points, the focal students (the "fish") were interrupted and the observers discussed what they noticed about the focal students' talk, process, or reasoning. Students took turns in these roles, so that they practiced being both contributors and listeners within the group discussion.

      The process of AT required me to guide and scaffold student participation by first modeling appropriate forms of discussion by questioning, probing, asking for clarification, requiring justifications of opinions and evidence for claims, and revoicing student statements. In this format, the students contributed their own ideas and knowledge, and engaged with others' ideas and suggestions (Michaels, et al., 2010). A non-judgmental setting encouraged students to share their thoughts and opinions.

Procedure

I provided support in an eighth grade classroom everyday for 6 weeks in which I used AT strategies to teach students to engage in meaningful and purposeful discussions about texts. Data was collected in two ways: the classroom teacher videotaped the lessons so that students' oral responses could be analyzed and a tally sheet was used that indicated the extent to which each student used the discussion stems and the nature of their responses (see Appendix B).

Prior to the first Fishbowl discussion, the students were responsible for reading a section of the text individually. The teacher gave a formative assessment in the form of an entrance slip asking literal comprehension questions to make sure students had a basic understanding of the text they read. The teacher administered a baseline assessment at the start of the six week period which required a group of five students to sit in a circle in the middle of the class and discuss what they read. The rest of the class observed the groups interaction. The teacher began the discussion by posing a previously planned, text-based question to launch the discussion. Then, the teacher posed another question for a new group of students until each student in the class was part of a fishbowl discussion. Prior to the baseline, students received no formal coaching. Data collection included tallied responses based on several criteria:

1. Did the student share his/her opinion about the question or text?
2. Did the student use text evidence to support their response?
3. Did the student elaborate upon another student's response?
4. Length of student response.
5. Total number of student responses.

Following the baseline, explicit instruction around the topic of student discourse took place two times per week for a total of six weeks. The Fishbowl strategy was explained as was the AT model by establishing three main aspects of the AT classroom: introducing talk formats,

teacher moves, and norms for equitable and respectful participation (Michaels et al., 2010). The following provided a foundation for teachers to use: re-voicing, restating, reasoning, adding on, and wait time (Chapin, O'Connor, & Anderson, 2009). During explicit instruction, the teacher modeled optimum responses, provided feedback based on student responses, and students practiced and expanded upon sentence stems. The teacher expected and stressed student participation throughout the process.

Fishbowl discussions took place one time per week for a total of six weeks. One group of six students was the "fish" while the rest of the class observed the group's behavior and discussion techniques. After the discussion took place, students received specific feedback regarding the caliber of discussion, including areas for improvement by both the other students and the teacher. After three weeks, additional data collection occurred in the same fashion as the baseline. The final data collection occurred at the end of the six week period.

Data Collection & Data Analysis

Data Collection

In order to determine the extent to which discussion is utilized in the classroom and to determine if this was an area of interest for professional development, I distributed an online survey (Appendix A) to 15 certified middle school teachers, including ten Language Arts teachers and five Special Education teachers. Ninety–two percent of the respondents have been teaching for ten years or more. The purpose of the survey was to gain an understanding of the frequency of teacher and student-led discussions happening within classrooms. Further, the survey gave valuable information on the level of comfort teachers felt instructing students in discourse strategies.

Sixty percent of the respondents indicated that they engage in teacher-led discussions daily and 26% engaged in student-led discussions only occasionally, with an additional 26% responding that they would like to include student-led discussions in their lessons more often. A total of 60% of the respondents indicated they were either uncomfortable or only somewhat comfortable with implementing student-led discussions, and 67% were either uncomfortable or only somewhat comfortable teaching students different discourse strategies. Despite its potential as a powerful strategy for increasing comprehension, only 27% of the teachers surveyed felt mostly comfortable implementing student led discussions about a text, while only 20% felt mostly comfortable teaching students different discourse strategies in their classrooms. Approximately 54% of respondents indicated that the topic of Student Discourse is one in which they would be interested in attending during professional development.

Data collection of the fishbowl discussions took place over the course of six weeks. Sources included videotapes of classroom discussions scored using a tally rubric, classroom observations, and a student survey. Data collection occurred at the beginning of the research period, after three weeks, and at the end of six weeks, with the exception of the survey which was administered at post testing only.

Over the course of the study, three discussions were formally recorded using a video camera. A tally sheet guided the coding of videotapes taken during the study (Appendix B). Students were assessed at the beginning of the research project in a fishbowl discussion prior to any instruction. Videotapes of discussions enabled me to listen to classroom discourse beyond the classroom conversation so that I could accurately record students' use and number of sentence stems.

I tallied students' responses using three criteria: shared opinion, provided text evidence, and use of sentence stems. Following each recorded discussion, I tallied and totaled each category. Then, I compared totals and analyzed growth patterns at the end of the study. In order to hold students accountable, I graded students in the final fishbowl discussion using a rubric measuring the quality of comments, use of textual evidence, proof of active listening, and use of sentence stems (Appendix C). Each group included six students and they were given eight minutes to engage in discussion.

Finally, at the end of the six week period and after the last fishbowl discussion, students received a survey (Appendix D). The purpose of the survey was to gain an understanding of student engagement and enjoyment of the fishbowl activity as well as new insight and increased understanding of the text.

Data Analysis

Using the recorded videos after pre and post-testing, I analyzed and calculated the mean for each recorded discussion in each category of student discourse. Table 1 shows the number of student comments, number of specific textual examples, and the number of times sentence stems were used to make those comments in all three fishbowl discussion groups. I then calculated the mean for each category resulting in the number of comments made at 29.6, the use of specific textual evidence at 11.3, and the number of sentence stems used at 6.3.

Then, I instructed the students in the use of Accountable Talk sentence stems, gave them a laminated bookmark listing sentence stems to use in discussions, showed them the grading rubric, and gave them the text-based questions they would answer to prepare for the discussion. Students continued to practice using the sentence stems in both fishbowl discussions as well as in

Turn and Talk conversations. After six weeks, the final videotaped session took place. The results are presented in Table 2 and discussed.

Again, I calculated the mean for each category with the number of comments made by the students increasing to 41.6, the use of specific textual evidence increasing to 22.3, and the number of sentence stems used increasing to17.3. From pre to post-testing, Table 2 indicates that there was an increase in sharing of opinion, providing sufficient evidence, elaboration upon other's response, and use of sentence stems. Table 3 compares the means in all three categories.

From pre to post testing, the number of comments made by students (n=18) increased by 16.8%, the number of specific textual examples used increased by 32.7%, and the use of sentence stems increased by 46.6%. Overall, from pre to post testing, findings indicate that students (n=18) became more skilled supporting their comments with textual evidence and at using the Accountable Talk sentence stems during class discussions to build on each other's ideas and enhance classroom discussion.

Additionally, at the conclusion of the six weeks, the student survey indicated an overall enjoyment of engaging in fishbowl discussions with 67% of students strongly agreeing or agreeing that they enjoyed engaging in fishbowl discussions. Although 56% of students indicated that they did not like using sentence stems to respond to their classmates, 67% of students stating that the sentence stems did, in fact, help them build on their classmates' ideas.

To answer research question one, "how does classroom discourse affect overall literacy achievement," it is important to consider that classroom discourse helps students make sense of fiction and nonfiction texts while encouraging them to deepen their understanding (VanDeWeghe, 2007). According to the student survey 78% of students indicated that the

fishbowl discussions increased their understanding of the text. Additionally, 78% indicated that they gained new insight into the text based on their discussions with their classmates

Further, the tally of student comments from the first fishbowl discussion to the last discussion indicated an increase of students participating in the discussion and using more textual evidence to support those comments. This use of collaborative dialogue during lessons was positively associated with students' gains in building knowledge and comprehension (Brown et al., as cited in Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2006).

To answer research question two, "how does discourse connect to student engagement and motivation," a learning environment was created that maximized the learner's ability to interact with each other through discussion which led to purposeful discussions, meaningful exchanges between students, and discourse wherein each student felt like their contributions were valued. This resulted in increased student motivation and understanding of the text. Since the ultimate goal of student discourse is for students to assume considerable responsibility for the success of the discussion, initiate topics, and make unsolicited contributions (Danielson, 2007), then this strategy proved effective in engaging students. The teacher observed that students were excited to get to class and eager to participate on fishbowl discussion days.

Research question three, "what are effective discussion strategies to encourage student discourse in the classroom," takes into consideration that no one intervention strategy can be attributed to general advances in student reading performance (Fisher, 2001). Yet, students have to develop the skills and strategies that will lead to deeper and more productive discussions (Mills, 2009). The introduction of Accountable Talk sentence stems that were then used in a fishbowl discussion proved to be an effective strategy as evidenced by the data and student survey. These stems were modeled, practiced, and applied to classroom discussion as a means of

inviting more active interaction between classmates and deeper understanding of important concepts in the text (Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2006).

Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The implementation of the Common Core Speaking and Listening Standards in 2010 has demanded that teachers make discourse in the classroom a priority. The standards require students to "participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 22). While not only addressing the standards, it is also evident that discourse in the classroom increases student comprehension and deepens their understanding of texts.

Recommendations

This study revealed that when students utilized Accountable Talk sentence stems in classroom fishbowl discussions, their understanding of the text, as well as their motivation, increased. Therefore, ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers to learn specific strategies to teach and nurture this skill in students should be provided. Moreover, teachers need to allow opportunities for students to engage in managed discussions about their learning. Discussion that has a purpose, with substantive comments that build off each other, with a meaningful exchange between students will result in discourse that promotes deeper understanding. Discussion-based classrooms using dialogue where the instructor manages the discourse can lead each student to feel like their contributions are valued resulting in increased student motivation.

Friere (1970) and Vygotsky (1978) believed social interaction is integral to students' knowledge construction. Vygotsky argued, "Language is the main tool that promotes thinking, develops reasoning, and supports cultural activities like reading and writing" (Vygotsky 1978).

The results of this research support these claims that classroom discussion and social cooperation are beneficial for generating new knowledge and integrating multiple interpretations of texts.

Practical Application of the Findings

Since this study included only one eighth grade class, future research should investigate the most effective strategies across all middle school grade levels. The investigation of other discourse strategies that will increase comprehension should also be examined.

Finally, I will share these results at the 6th Annual Sacred Heart Literacy Conference in April, 2018, as well as with ELA teachers at her school in order to encourage other teachers to utilize discussion based strategies in their own classrooms.

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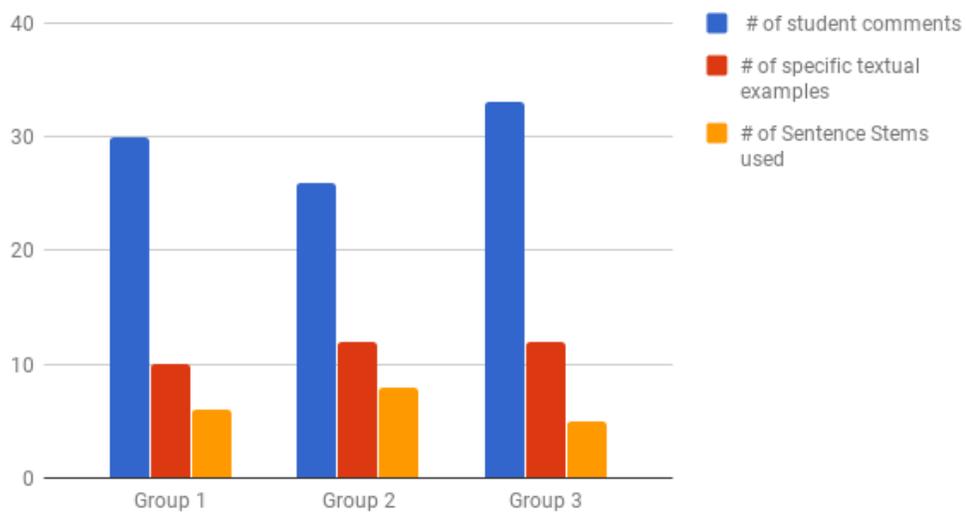
Table 1

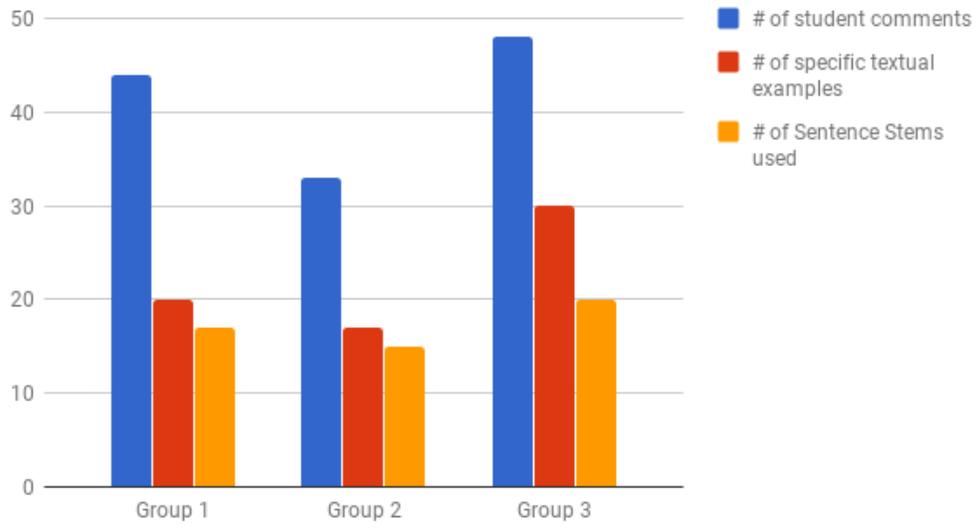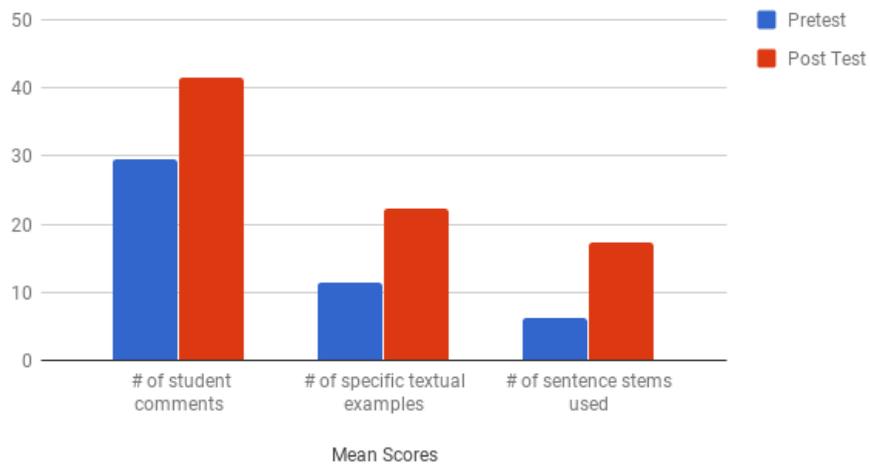Table 1: Before Instruction

Table 2

Table 2: After Instruction

Table 3

Table 3: Mean Scores of Pre and Post Tests

Teacher Survey

Dear Fellow Teachers:

I am in the process of working on my 6th Year Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS) in literacy, and I need to survey my colleagues as part of a project. Would you mind taking a moment to fill out this survey? It will help me discover how to best support teachers in our building in order to provide our students with the best literacy instruction possible. I appreciate your support. Thanks!

Laurie Coville

* Required

What grade level do you teach? *

Grade 6
Grade 7
Grade 8
Other
Other:

What subject do you teach? *

Social Studies
Language Arts
Math
Other
Special Education

How long have you been teaching? *

0-2 Years
3-5 Years
6-10 Years
More than 10 years

Please check all topics in which you would be interested in attending Professional Learning. *

Guided Reading
Interactive Read Aloud
Shared Reading
Before/During/After Reading Strategies
Class Book Discussions
Book Group/Literature Circles
Student Discourse
Reading Conferences
Formative Assessment
Summative Assessment

In which 3 areas of reading do you feel most confident? *

Fluency
Vocabulary
Guided Reading
Phonics/Decoding
Running Records
Reading Comprehension
Inferencing
Main Ideas
Summarizing
Assessment Analysis

In which 3 areas of reading do you feel least confident? *

Fluency
Vocabulary
Guided Reading
Phonics/Decoding
Running Records
Reading Comprehension
Inferencing
Main Ideas
Summarizing
Assessment Analysis

How often do the following aspects of reading happen in your classroom? *

Daily
Frequently (2-3 times per week)
Occasionally (2-4 times per month)
Rarely or Never
I'd like to include this more often

Teacher led discussion
Student led discussion
Book groups/literature circles
Interactive read aloud
Shared reading
Explicit teaching of comprehension strategies
Teacher led discussion
Student led discussion
Book groups/literature circles
Interactive read aloud
Shared reading
Explicit teaching of comprehension strategies

Please rate the following: *

Uncomfortable
Somewhat comfortable
Mostly comfortable
I could teach someone else how to do this

Leading a book discussion in a whole group setting
Asking open ended questions about a text
Prompting students to add more to their response
Implementing completely student led discussion about a text
Monitoring comprehension through oral responses
Teaching students different discourse strategies
Leading a book discussion in a whole group setting
Asking open ended questions about a text
Prompting students to add more to their response
Implementing completely student led discussion about a text
Monitoring comprehension through oral responses
Teaching students different discourse strategies

Appendix B

Discussion Tally Sheet

Student Name	Shared Opinion (tally)	Provided Text Evidence (tally)	Use of Sentence Stems (tally)
TOTALS:			

Appendix C

<u>Class Discussion Rubric</u>

|	**5**	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**
Quality of Comments	Timely and appropriate comments, thoughtful and reflective, responds respectfully to other student's remarks, provokes questions and comments from the group	Volunteers comments, most are appropriate and reflect some thoughtfulness, leads to other questions or remarks from student and/or others	Volunteers comments but lacks depth, may or may not lead to other questions from students	Struggles but participates, occasionally offers a comment when directly questioned, may simply restate questions or points previously raised, may add nothing new to the discussion or provoke no responses or question	Does not participate and/or only makes negative or disruptive remarks, comments are inappropriate or off topic
Resource/ Document Reference	Clear reference to text being discussed and connects to it to other text or reference points from previous readings and discussions	Has done the reading with some thoroughness, may lack some detail or critical insight	Has done the reading; lacks thoroughness of understanding or insight	Has not read the entire text and cannot sustain any reference to it in the course of discussion	Unable to refer to text for evidence or support of remarks
Active Listening	Posture, demeanor and behavior clearly demonstrate respect and attentiveness to others	Listens to others most of the time, does not stay focused on other's comments (too busy formulating own) or loses continuity of discussion. Shows consistency in responding to the comments of others	Listens to others some of the time, does not stay focused on other's comments (too busy formulating own) or loses continuity of discussion. Shows some consistency in responding to the comments of others	Drifts in and out of discussion, listening to some remarks while clearly missing or ignoring others	Disrespectful of others when they are speaking; behavior indicates total non-involvement with group or discussion

Appendix D

Student Survey

Please complete the survey to help in my collection of data for my grad school. Thanks!

Your email address (**laurie.coville@monroeps.net**) will be recorded when you submit this form. Not you? <u>Switch account</u>

* Required
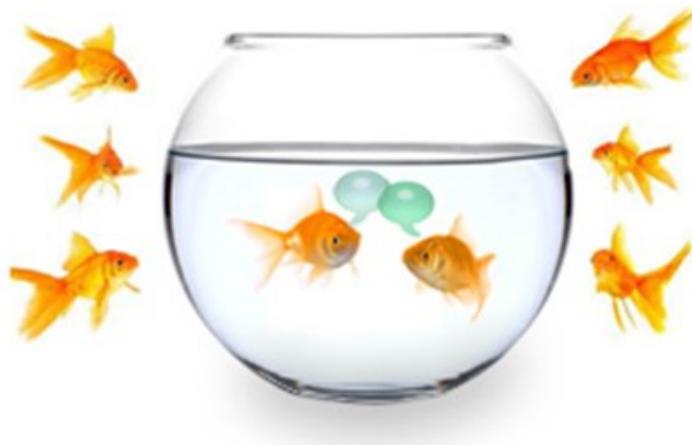
I enjoyed engaging in fishbowl discussions. *

Strongly Agree

1
2
3
4
5

Strongly Disagree

I liked using sentence stems to respond to my classmates' comments. *

Strongly Agree

1
2
3
4
5

Strongly Disagree

The use of sentence stems helped me build upon my classmates' responses. *

Strongly Agree

1
2
3
4
5

Strongly Disagree

The fishbowl discussions helped me understand the text better. *

Strongly Agree

1
2
3
4
5

Strongly Disagree

The fishbowl discussions gave me new insight into the text. *

Strongly Agree

1
2
3
4
5

Strongly Disagree

In your opinion, what should be done differently the next time we do a fishbowl discussion?
Your answer