CARREADER

Volume 4
Fall 2007

About the Publication

CAAReader Call for Manuscripts

We invite all those interested in literacy research to submit articles for publication. We request scholarly articles, grounded in theory and research that are of interest to both researchers and teachers. We invite a wide range of submissions focusing on critical issues, current research and/or instructional strategies as they relate to literacy issues on the national level and the state of Connecticut.

- reviews of the literature
- graduate /field studies
- thesis statement
- action research
- position statements

CARReader is a juried publication that is published once a year in the fall. Its content do not necessarily reflect or imply advocacy or endorsement by CARR, its officers, or members. Inquiries and submissions should be directed to the CARReader, Lynda M Valerie, Department of Reading and Language Arts, School of Education and Professional Studies, Central Connecticut State University, 1615 Stanley Street New Britain, CT 06050 or sending an email to Valerie_lym@ccsu.edu

Guidelines for Publication

Publications are limited to 2800 words or less and must include a title, author, statement of purpose, review of the literature, methodology, summary of findings, discussion and/or recommendations, conclusions, and references. Manuscripts should be typed double-spaced with ample margins for reviewer comments. All manuscripts should be formatted using APA 4th edition. The author needs to submit both a hardcopy manuscript and a diskette copy (or e-mail version) compatible with Microsoft Word 2000. To be considered for the Fall 2008 volume, the manuscript must be submitted for review before May 1, 2008.
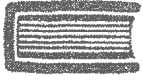
Editors Note

Lynda M. Valerie

This edition features the two scholarship recipients' reports. It is noteworthy that both recipients this year where not individuals. One, written by colleagues investigated the value of professional conversations. The other, written by a study group, investigated the impact of expository text structure on student expository writing.

Each issue also features the review of literature and recent research on a topic of interest for literacy educators. It is our hope that reading summaries of studies and implications for classroom practice will not only stimulate professional conversations about the chosen topic but also encourage readers to create and implement their own classroom research.

The theme the review of literature and research for this publication of the CARReader is critical literacy. Next year's theme will be content literacy. Literacy specialists are continually called upon for assistance form content area teachers who state that they are not reading or writing teachers. What does the research have to offer literacy professionals on the subject of effective literacy strategies in the content areas? We invite all those interested in literacy research to submit abstracts for the next edition of the CARReader to be published next year. We request scholarly studies that are focused on content area literacy, both on the national level and in the state of Connecticut. Submitting a summary or review of literature is another avenue to get acquainted with conducting research and participating in a professional community.

The CARReader shares results of action research reports. This action research compared two comprehension strategies. There is notable action research taking place throughout Connecticut. Share the expertise you have gained through your own action research.

Upcoming Events

March 18, 2008: Dr. Gay Ivey, Professor of Reading at James Madison University, Topic: Adolescent Literacy
location: TBA

Saturday, May 31: Breakfast Meeting, Scholarship winners

CARR Research and Scholarship Grants

CARR encourages research in reading, writing and the language arts through two types of scholarships.
CARR members may apply for a mini-grant of $200 dollars for action research in the classroom

Graduate students in a program leading to a reading/language arts consultant certification or certification as a remedial language arts teacher or a doctorate in curriculum and instruction may apply for the $750 Wirth-Santoro Research Scholarship.

For further particulars on either of these grants contact : Jean Klein at kjean@aol.com

CARR Scholarship Research Report

Professional Conversations to Enhance Reading Research Understandings

Pam Govertsen-Kahn
Middletown Public Schools

Jill Pilon
East Farms School
Farmington, CT

Statement of Purpose

In the Spring of 2004, we took the graduate course, Design, Management and Supervision of Reading Programs at the University of Connecticut. The class was small and discussion was intimate and dynamic. Along with our classmates, we enjoyed the high-level professional conversation so much that we were sad to see the course come to an end. Wishing to continue our dialogue and our shared love of literacy, the idea of continuing to meet as a professional study group was born.

Review of the Literature

How did study groups as a form of professional development emerge? In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education's Report, A Nation at Risk, reported that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people." No Child Left Behind grew out of the many policy legislations since the 1983 report. According to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education's No Child Left Behind: A Desktop Reference, this legislation claims to embody four key principles necessary to address the issues of inequity in public education. The title of the Act comes from President Bush's statement that "too many of our neediest children are being left behind."

One of these principles places an emphasis on improving instruction through the use of teaching methods that have been demonstrated to work. This directive has resulted in the mandate for today's teachers to use scientifically proven, research-based practices, methodologies, and programs. The need for teachers to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to do this has led to reform in professional development practices.

Educators are encouraged to become life-long learners who continually examine their own knowledge and practice in an effort to educate their pupils to meet the demands of an ever more complex world. Wald and Castleberry (2000) wrote:

> We need schools that prepare our learners to lead productive lives in this complex, high-tech, and fast-changing world -- schools that are responsive, fluid, and adaptive to emerging needs and opportunities. The next generation of schools must have the capacity for continuous renewal. We must have an ethos that values lifelong learning for staff and families, as well as students.

Much has been written recently about the relative ineffectiveness of traditional professional development methods, which consisted largely of "one shot workshops or training opportunities without follow-up or immediate relevance to teacher needs" (CLASP Consulting 2002). Teachers would listen to the ideas and return to their classrooms relying only on their own interpretation of the information. "One of the most formidable obstacles a school will face in attempting to function as a professional learning community is the tradition of teacher isolation. . ." (Dufour, 1999). On the other hand, Eastwood and Louis (1992) found that the most important factor in the success of school initiatives is the presence of a collaborative environment, one in which educators become involved in collective inquiry and reflective dialogue. In the last chapter of Living Between the Lines (2001), Lucy Calkins and Shelley Harwayne state, "If we as teachers are going to nurture our souls, we need each other." (Robb, 2000, p. 82)

Lyons and Pinnell (2001) have developed a list of Characteristics of Systems for Extending Learning, a clear intent of NCLB. These include:

- The responsibility for learning is shared.
- There is a commitment to ongoing learning.
- Learning is grounded in the work of students and teachers.
- Learning takes place in an atmosphere of inquiry.
- Learning is accomplished through conversation.
- Data are used for practical purposes.
- Communication takes place within and beyond the community.

One research-based professional development model that meets the requirements of NCLB is the professional study group. This model was one of the "core propositions advanced by the National Board of Teaching Standards" in 1989 (CLASP Consulting, 2002). It is "more likely to lead to sustained change in classrooms than other staff development models" (Allen, 2006-07) and to create a common vision (Sweeney, 2003). According to Garet, Porter et al (2001), the format of a study group meets the criteria of an effective reform-based professional development model. It accomplishes this by its definition — a group that meets over an extended time to enhance the group's understanding of a specific subject or subjects. According to this study:

> . . . our results indicate that sustained and intensive professional development is more likely to have an impact, as reported by teachers, than in shorter professional development. Our results also indicate that professional development that focuses on academic subject matter (content), gives teachers opportunities for "hands-on" work (active learning), and is integrated into the daily life of the school (coherence), is more likely to produce enhanced knowledge and skills.

Further support for the power of cooperative, collegial learning was noted by Garry and Graham (2004, reporting on the work of Porter et al. 2000) with this list of common elements of effective professional development, all of which are characteristics of study groups:

- A focus on higher-order teaching strategies
- Use of a reform type (e.g., teacher study groups or networks) as opposed to isolated workshops
- Inclusion of opportunities for active learning
- Direct connections between teachers' goals and the focus of the professional development
- Grouping of teachers from the same subject area, grade level, or school

Robb (2000, p. 83) has suggested a few additional elements particular to study groups which render them valued tools for improvement in our profession. These include participant control of the curriculum and meeting times, focus on teacher needs (not administrator needs), and inquiry as the force driving the curriculum.

What is the Purpose of a Study Group?

> Why should educators spend professional time together in study groups? There are three major reasons. Study groups help us implement curricular and instructional objectives, collaboratively plan school improvement, and study research on teaching and learning (Fisher using the work of Murphy, 1992).

Study groups typically form when a small group of teachers want to focus on a common issue or concern. Bean (2004) stated "When teachers are involved in an activity that is especially meaningful to them, they become more engaged in the process and are generally more willing to apply what they are learning to their classroom practices. Participation in a study group puts teachers in charge of their own learning. . ." They meet together in order to collaboratively build meaning and problem solve about a common issue. Usually they do so with the goal of improving the quality of instruction in their classrooms through inquiry methods of learning. These groups provide opportunities for teachers to share their expertise, diverse perspectives, and support. Often they turn to sources other than themselves to study collaboratively — the diversity of their perceptions and experiences directly expands the knowledge of their subject for all the study group members, by adding depth and dimensions of understanding that they may not have thought of independently —thus helping to build and expand upon new learning.

In this era of reform initiatives legislated by policy makers, but not necessarily supported by funding, the study group model may seem particularly appealing to schools as a form of professional development because it is relatively inexpensive. Facilitation depends upon the expertise of staff within the school's culture, thus avoiding the costs of hiring outside consultants. Study groups lend themselves to enduring, well-attended professional development because of the convenience of meeting in the work place. These sessions are easily accessible to the teachers, administrators, parents, and specialists working within the school, affording an avenue of communication among these subgroups. Teachers accumulate knowledge about best practices and integrate them immediately into daily work with children. Magnification of improved student learning is achieved as teachers model and discuss new insight with colleagues and parents. The ongoing inquiry, integration into practice, reflection, and modification

operate in the cyclical manner which results in continuous improvement in schools.

Thus, if study groups are to be valued as a substantial response to the drive for educational enhancement, they need be developed and executed following a somewhat precise, research-based structure that has been proven to be effective.

How Should Study Groups Be Structured?

The structure for study groups referred to in this paper comes from the work of Adam Garry and Parry Graham (2004). Although their work centered on professional development for dissemination of technology best practices, their structural foundations for study groups hold true for the study of any other topic.

Garry and Graham state that for any professional development activity to be effective the activity must center on the study of an area of need directly related to curriculum and student learning. Therefore, the first order of business for a study group is to establish its focus. In fact, a study group usually grows out of a problem that needs to be addressed by a group of people related in some cohesive way (i.e. grade level teachers; classroom teachers, special education providers and reading specialists; or district administrators, principals, and head teachers).

When the participants have agreed to form a group they next need to establish the basic ground rules, which Garry and Graham label, "The Initial Framework for Understanding." This stage is where the group takes care of the group norms. Some conventions to consider might be who will be included in the group (Fountas and Pinnell suggest that groups of 5 to 7 people work best, 2001, p. 174); where and when meetings will take place, and how long they will last; who will facilitate the group; what material/topics will be studied; what the expectations for participation will involve. These expectations should include clear commitment to attend regularly, read chapters, and/or try strategies in the classroom. "As with any group, study groups create their own culture, and when ground rules are established and agreed-on early in the process, it is more likely that the study group will reach its goal." (Vogt and Shearer, 2003).

The person who is selected as facilitator should be someone who is willing to take risks, has experience and expertise in a specific topic, and has the self-discipline to observe and guide participants (Robb,

2000, p. 87). Farr (2004, p. 88) has found that the sharing of power is key to the success of collaborative relationships. A facilitator should view himself as an equal in the learning process, and not as an authority. Further, Farr states that for study groups to maintain continuity, it is essential for a facilitator to provide a skeletal framework for the group, and the group must trust that this role will continue. A facilitator should consider the following suggestions offered by Laura Robb (2000, p. 88):

1. Begin the meeting on time and follow the agenda or plan negotiated with participants at the previous meeting.
2. Read the notes you took from the last meeting to refresh participants' minds.
3. Invite participants to share a minilesson, how a reading or writing strategy worked in their classroom, and so on.
4. Keep the discussion going with these questions: Does anyone have something to add? Does anyone have a different perspective? Can you offer research that supports this idea? Can you show us and interpret students' work? Can you elaborate on that idea? Can you clarify that point with an example from your classroom or from professional reading?
5. Encourage members to link and adapt theory, demonstrations, and discussions to their classrooms.
6. Help resolve heated disagreements by repeating the salient points each side raised and pointing out that diverse ideas can coexist.
7. Negotiate assignments for participants and the agenda for the next study group.
8. Write up the high points after the meeting on notebook paper or on forms your school has developed. Distribute these to appropriate persons.

Jennifer Allen (2006) also suggests that resources should be organized ahead of time and that meetings should be held in a relaxed environment with healthful snacks available.

The next stage "Analysis/Application,"'s also from Garry and Graham (2004), is when "participants are evaluating new resources or ideas with a critical eye and beginning to make connections to their own

classroom objectives and curricula." This phase of the study group process entails positive group discussion that encourages new learning from considered resources, while allowing for group reflection about ways to use this insight as a catalyst to stimulate improved student achievement. It can also include examination of student work, resulting in suggestions for new instruction methodologies to address particular learning needs.

The final phase of a study group's journey has to do with coherence to the entire learning community in the form of Reflection. This may be the most important aspect of the study group because it can have profound impact on the professional culture of a school, according to Garry and Graham (2004).

> Probably the most important aspect of the study group model is its ability to develop and strengthen professional culture, which increases a school's capacity for long-term improvement. At the heart of this process is teacher reflection and collegial feedback.

Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman (1999) view reflective dialogue as a key agent in "melding the private and the public and of autonomy and interdependence" that exist in the professional communities of our schools. Shared understandings bind educators together, reducing some of the isolation in classroom instruction.

Methodology

The Initial Framework for Understanding. We met in the summer of 2004 and had a lively discussion about possible study group topics and potential members. After choosing a date and location for our first meeting, we decided to invite our UCONN classmates and encouraged them to invite two or three colleagues with an interest in literacy research, instruction, and leadership. One aspect of our project that appeared to differ from study groups that had been discussed in the literature was that group members were not all employed by a single school district; rather we represented five districts and a university in the Greater Hartford area (Farmington, Middletown, Waterford, West Hartford, Wethersfield, and University of Connecticut). Core participants included a graduate student, two classroom teachers, one Read- ing Recovery teacher, one teacher/literacy coach, one reading specialist, two reading consultants, one curriculum

specialist for professional learning, two principals, and one university professor. On occasion other professionals joined us when our topic was of personal interest. We were hopeful that this inter-district project could lead to learning that might influence practice beyond the scope of our individual systems.

We prepared a Needs Survey. We included topics and materials that had piqued our own interest during our coursework at UCONN or that we had simply heard about from other language arts professionals. Wanting to serve as effective facilitators who keep a group on task, we also created a simple agenda and a study guide. Full establishment of further ground rules had to wait until the first study group meeting in order to negotiate dates, times, and assignments/readings so that all participants would share ownership of this learning experience.

We met about once per month (seven times) throughout the 2004-2005 school year. All meetings were held at a centrally located Barnes and Noble Book Store from 6:30 until about 8:00 PM. The following chart summarizes each study group meeting, including summary information about the "big ideas" that the group learned as well as examples of how these ideas were applied in the work setting (see tables on pages 8-11).

Analysis/Application

We met about once per month (seven times) throughout the 2004-2005 school year. All meetings were held at a centrally located Barnes and Noble Book Store from 6:30 until about 8:00 PM. The following chart summarizes each study group meeting, including summary information about the "big ideas" that the group learned as well as examples of how these ideas were applied in the work setting:

Reflection

Following each of the first few sessions, we asked group members to complete a formal reflection form. Afterwards we, as facilitators, prepared and distributed minutes by email that summarized our new learning and how these understandings would be implemented in our teaching, coaching, or professional development practices. At the conclusion of each meeting, we saved a few minutes to agree on a focus for the next meeting. As the group became more intimate, structures relaxed as we discovered that outcomes wouldn't always be immediately apparent. Over time our group processes became more fluid, and we found less need for official documentation.

During the 2006-2007 school year, we reconvened and quickly noticed that the interests of our group had taken a new direction. Once again we all completed a needs survey which indicated a desire to concentrate on leadership issues. These texts were springboards for our monthly inquiry/research and reflective discussions:

Literacy Coaching, The Essentials by Katherine Casey
Becoming a Literacy Leader by Jennifer Allen
Sustainable Leadership by Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink
Teaching for Comprehending and Fluency by Irene C. Fountas and
       Gay Su Pinnell
Choice Words by Peter H. Johnston

Highlights from this second year of working together included these deepened understandings:

- Teaching students to label their comprehension strategies is not an important teaching focus. Instead, ability to apply these strategies independently is essential.
- Teachers should understand the power of reciprocal conversation when conferring with students.
- Reading and discussing professional literature together allows learners to make meaningful connections across texts and theories.
- Having commonly understood terminology for literacy ideas helps develop shared conceptualizations.
- Participation in literacy study groups enables administrators

to deepen their knowledge of theory and to identify resources that will help teachers improve the learning of students in their schools.

- Coaching is a collaborative learning model. It is not supervisory. Shared planning and instruction expands everyone's repertoire of instructional approaches and improves student learning. Coaches need to apply the gradual release of responsibility model for learning in their work with other professionals.
- Literacy leaders need to create systems and practice that are sustainable beyond their tenure.
- Commitment as a member of a study group encourages participants to read texts and discuss topics that might not have been explored independently.
- A multidisciplinary study group provides the opportunity to consider ideas from differing points of view and promotes respectful non-judgmental listening.
- Mature study groups are able to encourage professional growth with decreasingly less rigid structures. Groups become less guarded and more willing to take risks in discourse.

Discussion

In our role as facilitators we learned how to gather participants, schedule meetings, develop study guides, manage time, and collect resources. We also learned how important it is to develop strategies for maintaining group processes that focus discussions. Advantages of our partnership included encouragement to keep on track, shared anticipation of issues, constant clarification of thinking, and a renewed professional and personal friendship.

We participated in "Instructional Conversations" (Tompkins, 2003), or conversations for the purpose of enhancing our conceptual knowledge of shared interests, as we read and discussed texts related to literacy and instructional practices.

1. These discussions provided multiple encounters with the vocabulary of our craft, embedding the language into our thinking. This has led to an improved ability to conceptualize the knowledge of our profession as we teach and communicate with other education professionals.

1. These conversations also helped to expand our own understanding of topics, while considering various interpretations by colleagues with varying perspectives. Personal connections, experiences, and questions were frequent cause for shifts in thinking. Such sharing of insight deepened the comprehension of each of the study group members in ways that an individual reading of the same text would not have accomplished.

2. Multiple encounters with ideas based on readings in a relaxed social setting helped conceptualizations become more memorable. The supportive tone of the group encouraged experimentation and application in classrooms.

Our study group was highly successful as a shared learning opportunity. Each of Farr's (2004, p. 73-98) descriptors of the collaborative process was apparent in our action research. We all placed high value on our meetings and created time in busy schedules to meet. Our learning was focused, but willingness to change direction to address unexpected questions kept us flexible. Because participants genuinely trusted and cared for each other while respecting individual competency, dialogue was open and non-judgmental. Power was shared equally as decisions were made and while conversing. With members representing a variety of literacy perspectives and several school districts, we constantly discussed issues that would impact learning beyond our individual schools, sharing ideas that could improve instruction in our region or state. Perhaps most important – we laughed often together and regarded our study group as an enjoyable method of renewing professional energy.

It is difficult for study group members to maintain commitment when topics are not of personal interest. Perhaps a group of five to seven members as suggested by Fountas and Pinnell would have helped with consistent attendance. It wasn't possible for us to please all of the original members with chosen topics because of differing priorities for professional growth. A core group who attended the meetings regularly expressed that the experience was better than anticipated, and that it served as an inspiration to keep current with literacy issues.

It was often hard to read an entire text for each meeting. Flexibility to allow continued conversation at a subsequent session proved to be helpful. Rather than planning to read entire books, focusing on only a chapter or two made the task feasible for busy professionals. A jigsaw or similar strategy could also have been used to share the reading preparation ahead of time or at the actual meeting.

The inter-district study group structure created a learning ripple effect. Not only did members learn content, but they also became familiar with this professional development model. They recreated this experience in their local districts, schools, and classrooms – sharing and continuing their own learning while growing the learning of others in their community.

Through our work as an inter-district group, a discourse began about the widely varying resources, curriculum, support programs, staff roles, and student performance among a small urban and several suburban districts.

Recommendations

- There is ethical potential for the strong collegial bonds that are developed in this inter-district collaborative professional development model to influence improved education at a larger scale. In such a setting, professionals from both high and low performing districts may be able to work together to find ways of equalizing student performance among all districts in an entire region.

- It might useful to explore ways to use technology to enable study group members from varying districts to converse and enhance understandings of text between scheduled meetings.

- Extensions of shared study group learning might include focused observations and walk-throughs, peer coaching, and joint lesson study.

- Continued research about study groups with interdisciplinary membership (professors, administrators, literacy specialists,
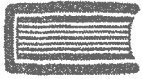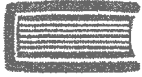
teachers, graduate students, etc.) is needed to determine their value in the development of collaborative learning communities in educational settings.
- Further studies that measure the relationship between study groups and improved student performance would be helpful to quantify the utility of this professional development model.

Date	Topic	Learning That Took Place	Ideas Incorporated into Teaching as a Result of Discussion/Readings
9-27-04	Introduction, Needs Survey, Ground Rules, Book Discussion of *Still Learning to Read* by Franki Sibberstein and Karen Szymusiak	• There are 6 cueing systems • Teachers need to model their own reading behaviors and share their own reading lives • Teachers must know who their readers are to help establish goals • Teachers need to have basic knowledge of the reading process before they can transform their instruction • Professional collaboration is a powerful way to improve literacy instruction	• Readjust use of Reader's Notebook • Improve Reader's Workshop by incorporating mini-lessons, structured independent reading, guided groups, and debriefing at the end • Organize the classroom library to answer the task and purpose of young readers • Build more knowledge of the literacy process with colleagues • Encourage and participate in collaborative conversation among grade level teammates • Use *Still Learning to Read* with upper elementary grade teachers in a study group
10-25-04	Book Discussion *Still Learning to Read*	• We need to make reading "real" for all readers • Management issues are vital as teachers try new practices • Elements of reader's workshop can be	• Asking students to use response notebooks to write about read aloud • Plan for focused study of author's craft during read aloud • Include shared reading as part of the

		built upon at every level, not just primary - Centers can be used as flexible choices for students during independent reading - We need to model "teacher as reader" to help students think about their own processing strategies - We need to teach students how to read at a "just right" speed - Reading response journals can be used to write about the read aloud or guided reading text as well as personal selections - Fix-it strategies need to be taught explicitly	daily reader's workshop - Helping colleagues understand the 3 types of mini-lessons – management, literary, and strategy - Teaching fix-up strategies explicitly - Choosing "touchstone" texts and organizing them for specific strategy lessons – many were taken from *Still Learning to Read* - Documenting the flow of topics within a discussion
12-13-04	Book Discussion *Teaching Vocabulary in All Classrooms* by Camille Blachowicz and Peter J. Fisher	- Discussion is a powerful tool to expand and make ideas memorable - We need to hold children accountable for vocabulary growth by having them use new words in responses and conversation - Vocabulary is integral to literacy development - Vocabulary is difficult to assess - Purposeful instruction of vocabulary is necessary. Don't use recipes. Instead analyze what good readers do to learn vocabulary, then teach these strategies - Consider choice, control, collaboration, connections, challenge when deciding what to teach - Motivation is important factor in vocabulary growth – this happens when we are eager to understand hard text	- Have a "word of the day" - Thoughtfully anticipate and incorporate vocabulary in planning of book introductions and lessons - Have more discussions that include purposeful use of vocabulary - Teach word study/analysis explicitly - Create a "word rich" school – hallways, etc. - Continue to incorporate discussion ideas into teacher preparation courses - Have students keep record of interesting words that arise in text that they are reading. Choice of words is up to students - Reading more about vocabulary research - Reading with greater awareness of strategies we use to understand words
2-9-05	Book Discussion *Writing Essentials* by Regie Routman. Discussion topic: "What is Essential in the Teaching of Writing?"	- Writer's Workshop approach as advocated by Teacher's College can be an effective teaching model - Mini-lessons are powerful for teaching writer's craft if they are brief (10 minutes or less) and allow for active student engagement - Teachers need to model their own writing. They need to consider themselves to be writers and make their work public. They should keep their own writer's notebook. - Teachers could gain confidence in their own writing if they have opportunities to write with their colleagues - Kids need to feel passion about writing - Public conferences are a technique that can be used to teach a skill that is useful for the whole class - Students need to understand and develop their own voice as writers - Content should be the focus in writer's	- Including a daily mini-lesson during writing instruction - Including a "public conference" often by showcasing a student's work that shows evidence of application of taught strategies *or* by helping a student who is having difficulty applying a strategy - Writing in front of the class using the overhead to model and think aloud about the struggle of the writing process - Providing more opportunities for students to "write short" pieces to practice new strategies - Including opportunity to story tell prior to writing - Using rubrics to make convention expectations clear - Having brief writing workshop "interruptions" to remind students to spend a few minutes editing their work

		workshop • Kids need lots of opportunities to "write short" • Conversation is an important pre-writing strategy • Teachers need to require students to use conventions correctly as they write • Topics that we ask students to write about should be authentic and personally significant • Students need to learn strategies for finding a topic • Connections between reading and writing strategies should be made evident	before proceeding • Providing direct instruction about how to find topics • Using Read Aloud from Reader's Workshop to highlight author's craft that class has been learning in writing workshop
3-30-05	Book Discussion *What Works in Schools* by Robert Marzano	• Schools have a significant effect on student achievement • An effective teacher is the most important factor in student achievement • Professional development is critical if we want to have highly qualified and informed teachers • Professional development comes in many shapes and forms -- study groups such as ours is one form	• Study groups have been established in our schools to discuss this book as well as *Still Learning to Read*
4-7-05	"Field Trip" to hear Robert Marzano speak about his book, *What Works in Schools*, University of Hartford, CREC Teaching and Learning Book Club	• Schools account for 20% of the difference in achievement, other 80% is a result of home, background, motivation, etc. • School factors that influence achievement include (in rank order) a guaranteed and viable curriculum, challenging goals and effective curriculum, parent communication and involvement, safe and orderly environment, collegial and professional staff • Teacher factors (in no specific order) include instructional strategies, classroom management, classroom curriculum design • It is impossible to implement all of the mandated curriculum in the amount of time we have • Reading comprehension is the *only* essential curriculum item • Curriculum should be *lean and mean* • Never use a single test to make high stakes decisions • Students and teachers need feedback every 9 weeks • Expecting "excellence" is not fair, expecting "competence" is fair • Students find satisfaction in being engaged in something that is complex and dynamic, that allows for	• Rethinking "excellence" and "competence" when evaluating children's performance • Considering more effective ways to provide frequent feedback • Planning and including a clear statement of the anticipated learning goal at the beginning of lessons • Being more vigilant about planning effective and appropriate reading comprehension instruction, and making it clear to students that this is the most important thing that they can learn in school

		relationships with other people, and provides for some autonomy in learning • It is important to choose teaching/learning strategies that work for your individual school • Students should be aware of the learning goal of every lesson – "As a result of today's lesson, you will understand. . ."	
5-11-05	Discussion about Marzano's 4-7-05 presentation and Book Discussion *Classroom Instruction that Works* by Robert Marzano	• It is important to know which instruction strategies have the greatest impact on student learning – don't waste time • Summarizing is one of the most important skills that students need to learn • Explicitly engaging students in the creation of non-linguistic representations leads to improved learning because they stimulate increased activity in the brain. Examples include graphic organizers, physical models, creating mental pictures, drawing pictures, kinesthetic activities	• Preparing a jigsaw reading activity to help staff efficiently read several chapters and to discuss this book

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The Impact of Expository Text Structure Knowledge on Fifth and Eigth Grade Students' Expository Writing

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Introduction

"The face of content area literacy instruction is changing. Once associated exclusively with middle and high school instruction, today, as never before, educators are directing their attention to the importance of encouraging content area literacy instruction at even the earliest levels" (Moss, 2005, p. 46). In the article, "Searching Informational Texts: Text and Task Characteristics That Affect Performance" the author states, "Informational texts deal with relatively less familiar content and use text organizational patterns (e.g., compare and contrast, cause/effect) different from the traditional narrative structure."(Brown, 2003, p.1). With the current academic focus on reading instruction across the curriculum we were interested to see if expository text structure knowledge would affect students' expository writing.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of our research, The Impact of Expository Text Structure Knowledge on Fifth and Eight Grade Student's Expository Writing focuses on the relationship between student knowledge of expository text structures and the transfer of that knowledge to the students' expository writing.

Review of Literature

Currently an "ever-deepening crisis in adolescent literacy" exists according to a position statement for the Commission on Adolescent Literacy of the International Reading Association (1999). The expectations of adolescent students to comprehend complex content are unlike any expectations set for previous generations of students, due in part to the complex technological demands of today's workplace.

Alarming statistics from the 1998 Reading Report Card by National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that approximately only sixty percent of U.S. adolescents could understand factual statements and less than five percent could elaborate on the meaning of the material read (Meltzer, 2001). NAEP writing assessments also showed that few adolescents could write material with the amount of detail needed to support their main points. If students can't understand the science they are reading, how can they be expected to draw a correlation for an experiment, understand a scientific argument or write about cause/effect? These same questions can be asked with different disciplines such as history or mathematics. Students must learn how to distinguish, identify and interpret the most important expository content and succeed in transferring this information into their expository writing. As students are being pushed to read and understand more content, many students struggle with not only what the text is about but also how to read it. Students who are unfamiliar with expository reading have difficulty understanding how to negotiate these texts because they lack schema for such genre and topics (Villano, 2005).

Today's adolescents in the 21st century working world will read and write more than at any time in human history (Vacca, 2002). They will need advanced literacy levels to succeed in managing the vast quantities of information they will be confronted with in their professional and personal lives. Compounding the problem is students entering middle and high school receive little or no instruction in using reading and writing strategies to learn with texts (Vacca, 2002).

As reported by Vacca, a recent report by the Carnegie Corporation of New York finds that more than 50% of students entering high school in the 35 largest cities in the United States read at or below the sixth grade level. While appearing skillful at reading, some students are only going through the rote process of reading and writing while they are unable to interpret the meaning of content area subject matter. Although students receive instruction in rhetorical writing, they rarely associate writing with learning "by using writing to explore and and interpret
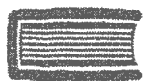
meaning that they encounter in texts and class discussions," (Vacca, 2002, p. 3).

Because of the importance of text structure in comprehension and writing, the issue is not whether text structure instruction is effective but what type of instruction is most effective (as cited in Englert & Hiebert, 1984; Horowitz, 1985; McGee, 1982). Students that were aware of text structure while reading produced better structure in their writing and were better comprehenders (as cited in McGee, 1982). Research findings suggest the importance of leveraging reading and writing relationships when creating text structure interventions or lesson plans. In their analysis of textbooks Kragler (2005) noted, that the social studies and science texts primarily focused on assessing student understanding rather than a focus on comprehension instruction. Comprehension instruction that was offered was inadequate.

In "Integrating Reading and Writing to Teach Compare-Contrast Text Structure: A Research-Based Methodology", Shirley Dickson (1999) states that "Research in text structure, writing process, and integrated reading and writing provides evidence that these instructional components mutually support each other" (p.1). Dickson's statement is an affirmation of our research of the relationship between student knowledge of expository text structures and the transfer of that knowledge to the students' expository writing.

A study conducted by Williams, Hall and Lauer (2004) on the benefits of teaching expository text structure to young at-risk learners demonstrated that even second grade students benefited from specific instruction in expository text structure. Some of the conclusions drawn from the study were that knowledge of text structure organization improves comprehension and positively affects the ability to transfer this knowledge both orally and in written summaries. This instruction, especially if it is geared toward a single text structure such as cause and effect that was used in the study, is effective in improving students' comprehension of expository text.

Some of the lessons taught in the Williams, Hall and Lauer study (2004) are similar to lessons used in our research. These include the use of graphic organizers, teaching compare and contrast strategy questions, summarization, and instruction in "clue" words used in the cause/effect text structure.

Solutions to Address the Problem

Vacca (2002) points out that while content literacy programs are emerging in middle and high schools he believes it is important that all subject teachers share the responsibility in literacy development. More teachers, he writes, are aware of the needs of their adolescent students, and are finally beginning to use instructional strategies that incorporate content literacy.

Sinatra (2000) points out that, in order to effect change, teachers need to model the use of concept maps; providing guided practice in concept mapping, and encouraging progression toward using concept mapping independently. This should be done as part of teaching expository text structure and allowing for more student led discussion.

Jacobs (2002) states that teachers need to activate and organize students background knowledge and that they must effectively use strategies that bridge known to new knowledge, such as brainstorming, using graphic organizers, cloze passages and encourage the development of students' own questions through writing or interactive writing. Along with Vacca, Jacobs too talks of staff development, where content area teachers must examine their instructional goals to see how reading and writing to learn in the content areas can lead to a stronger development and a clearer understanding for students.

Limitations in Existing Research

After an extensive search, few studies were found that paralleled our research, The Impact of Expository Text Structure Knowledge on Fifth and Eighth Grade Student's Expository Writing. The majority of the studies focused on the need for expository text structure knowledge and its relationship to reading comprehension. Few studies were found with supporting material for the transfer of text structure knowledge from reading to the expository writing process.

Numerous studies approached the topic of teaching reading strategies in the content areas and went on to propose that reading instruction is the responsibility of all teachers, including content area teachers, due to the fact that, unfamiliarity with expository text structure interferes with student's ability to understand the "to-be-learned" material (Bakken & Wheldon, 2002). Students need direct instruction in expository text structure; and that concept mapping aids in the writing process Sinatra (2000). The article does not claim direct instruction

in expository text structure improved students' expository writing with a transfer of strategies from the reading process to the writing process. We attempted to answer two questions during our research:

1. Do students possess background knowledge of text structure from their reading?
2. With direct instruction of the cause/effect expository text structure will we see a transfer of knowledge to the students' expository writing?

Method

Participants:

This qualitative study involved two classes, one fifth grade, and one eighth grade located in the same urban district. The participants consisted of 9 elementary and 7 middle school students. All participants were from inclusion classrooms and no distinctions were made between special education students and regular education students during the study. Students were chosen through convenience sampling. Our study was designed to measure the students' expository text structure knowledge on their expository writing using cause/effect genre.

Instrumentation:

Baseline data was collected through the triangulation of two types of instruments. The first instrument was (a) modified Cloze of an expository cause/effect passage. This modified Cloze consisted of 200-250 words. The second instrument (b) an open ended visual cue provided the participants with two pictorial representations of a cause/effect relationship. These visuals were used to elicit an open ended written response which provided evidence of the students' expository writing knowledge using the cause/effect structure. Visuals provided a modification for inclusion students to respond with their peers. Participant responses to visuals were critically viewed through the use of a rubric. This rubric measured participants' understanding and application of necessary key elements of cause/effect writing.

To allow for consistency in the scoring of student work, each researcher participated in the development of the parameters used in the rubric. Scoring was based on the format used on the Connecticut Mastery Test-Third Generation. Each student's writing score was based on two separate readings each producing a score between 0 and 4. A third scorer was used when there was a discrepancy of more than one point between the judgments of the first two scorers. The two scores for each essay were added to produce the final score for each student with a maximum score of 8. In order to control bias due to student familiarity, the classroom teacher, as well as an objective scorer/ researcher assessed the data.

Prior to instruction both instruments were administered in order to establish a baseline of the participants' knowledge of expository text structure and its impact on their expository writing. In order to establish fair baseline data all participants involved were assigned a number. Every third number was then selected from this list, thus allowing for a fair distribution of participants from the high, middle, and low ranges. This process also allowed for the inclusion of special education students from both classrooms.

At midpoint of the study, the students' knowledge of cause/effect text structure and its effect on their writing was re-evaluated using different versions of each instrument. These instruments were administered only after the students had been exposed to the cause/ effect text framework along with sufficient modeling, guided practice and independent application of the cause/effect writing framework.

For the final assessment a change was made to the visual cue instrument. Instead of providing the participants with two pictorial representations of a cause/effect relationship, only one was provided. This was done in order to ascertain whether or not participants had internalized the instruction of cause/effect genre. In regard to the Cloze passages all three fifth grade passages had a number of cause/ effect signal words eliminated from the text. However, for grade eight the third Cloze passage had an elimination of phrases indicating cause/ effect relationships.

Results

In exploration of our research topic, The Impact of Expository Text Structure Knowledge on Fifth and Eighth Grade Students' Expository Writing our random sample group of participants consisted of 9 fifth grade students and 7 eighth grade students selected from a pool of 50 students that participated in our study (see table on page 17).

Discussion

Consistent with the findings of several other researchers; Moore (1996), Jacobs (2002), Sinatra (2000), Dixon (1999), Williams, Hall and Lauer (2004), our research findings strongly suggest that specific instruction in expository text structure positively affects students' comprehension of material read with a transfer of text structure skills to the students' writing.

Data analysis of results from both the visual prompt as well as the Cloze passage demonstrate an increase in student scores for both fifth and eighth graders. When comparing baseline to final scores for the visual prompt assessment, there was an increase of 62% in correct student responses. Cloze passage assessment also showed a significant increase of 75% from the baseline to the final assessment.

Interestingly, when viewing the results of the fifth and eighth grades separately, 67% of the fifth graders and 29% of the eighth graders showed a significant drop in their visual prompt responses when comparing from baseline to mid-point. A factor that may have contributed to this decline in scores was that CMT testing occurred during this time period which adversely affected pacing of instruction and delivery of assessments.

Limitations

The primary limitations of the study were the limited amount of time allocated in conducting the research and lesson design. Also, the research was conducted during the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) and was administered around the CMT test schedule.

Initially, lesson design for both 5th and 8th grade was identical but was modified to meet the individual needs of each class. "Modifications made must be based on sound knowledge of the learner: what he

or she knows and can do, as well as his or her learning style" (as cited in McMackin & Witherell, 2005, p. 249). The fifth grade students required more practice in cause/effect because of their limited exposure to the structure. The eighth grade students had previous experience using cause/effect and thus became bored with the amount of lessons administered. The lesson design and the number of lessons had to be modified. Also, the fifth grade needed more explicit instruction in application and use of a rubric, whereas the eighth grade did not.

Strengths

The primary strengths of the research include the sample size, use of students in the same urban school district, use of visual prompts and continuous weekly meeting of the researchers.

The sample size of fifty participants from which our random group of sixteen was selected was manageable and allowed the researchers to conduct an in-depth analysis of each participant's work. Using students from the same urban school district allowed for a fair comparison of students from the same socio-economic background.

The use of visual prompts allowed ESL, struggling readers and special education students to complete the assignment of writing an expository passage using cause/effect that was not dependent on their reading ability. As a result of the cause/effect lessons included in the research study all participants were exposed to the cause/effect structure and had additional practice in using cause/effect. This enabled them to have prior knowledge that may have aided them in the Cloze portion of the CMT.

Implications

Our results strongly suggest that instruction in cause/effect text structure positively affected the students' expository writing with a transfer of knowledge from reading to writing. Resulting from an in-depth analysis of participants' work, we identified significant improvement over time in students' baseline to final assessment scores for the random sample of students selected.

With our findings in mind we agree with Sinatra (2000) that a shift in teaching style is needed in order to address content area reading instruction. "Teachers need to move from the 'broad brush' approach

of covering content to focusing on selected topics in depth."
According to Moss (2005) students receive limited exposure to exposition and get little instruction in how to comprehend information text.
We assume students can transfer their ability to read narrative into
competent reading of non-narrative, upon which much of their further
education and capacity to deal with adult life will depend.

Suggestions for Future Research

Suggestions for future research would include the replication of this
cause/effect text structure study in other urban districts within Connecticut to establish validity for this research project. Another area
of productive research might be the study of other expository text
structures such as: compare/contrast, sequence, and description to
see if knowledge of these structures is transferred to academic areas
other than in which they were learned.

Visual Prompt and Cloze Passage scores from 5th and 8th grade random sample

Baseline to Mid-point Scores		
	Visual Prompt	CLOZE Passage
Score Went Down	8	2
Score Stayed The Same	5	4
Score Improved	3	10
% Showing Improvement	19%	63%
Total Random Sample	16	16

Mid-point to Final Scores		
	Visual Prompt	CLOZE Passage
Score Went Down	1	5
Score Stayed The Same	3	7
Score Improved	12	4
% Showing Improvement	75%	25%
Total Random Sample	16	16

Baseline to Final Scores		
	Visual Prompt	CLOZE Passage
Score Went Down	2	3
Score Stayed The Same	4	1
Score Improved	10	12
% Showing Improvement	63%	75%
Total Random Sample	16	16
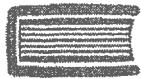
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Critical literacy is a mindset; a way of viewing and interacting with the world. It is not merely a method or an approach to the teaching of literacy or the language arts. Much has been written on the topic of critical literacy of late and as is evident from many of these writings, it is important that we establish the understanding that critical literacy is a philosophy rather than "a set of methods or techniques" (McDaniels, 2004, p. 272). Critical literacy theories as set forth by Freire "advocate for a sweeping transformation in ways of thinking rather than specific teaching strategies or techniques" (McDaniels, 2004, pp. 473-474). As such, critical literacy examines texts in order to identify and challenge social constructs, ideologies, underlying assumptions, and the power structures which intentionally and unintentionally perpetuate social inequalities and injustices. Critical literacy aims to delve deeply into sociopolitical and sociocultural issues embedded in texts in order to identify the root causes of social inequalities and injustices.

Critical literacy, the philosophy

When discussing critical literacy one has to first consider its philosophical underpinnings. Without doubt, one of the most significant and influential books in the field of critical literacy is Freire's <u>Pedagogy of the Oppressed</u>. Freire, in this book, sets forth his understanding of power relations within society and the ways in which they manifest themselves in the classroom. Freire draws attention to the power differential in the classroom between the teacher and the student which leads to the banking method of education. The banking method of education is an education whereby students are fed information by a teacher who is viewed as an expert and a dispenser of knowledge. Therefore, a child's own life experience goes unacknowledged. As a result, in the banking method it is the teacher who holds all the power. There is no power sharing between students and teacher. The banking method can, in turn, lead to resistance on the part of the students. Because the students may feel as though another person's belief system or culture is being imposed on them they resist what the educator has to offer.

Critical literacy, on the other hand, acknowledges the student's life experiences and includes it in the curriculum. When implementing critical literacy, one can not follow a predetermined curriculum as it is the students' interests, motivations, and life experiences that create

and drive the curriculum. Power is shared between students and teachers. This is what Irwin (1996) refers to as a "power-to/power-with" relationship and what Shor (1992) refers to as the third idiom: a place where the teacher's academic culture and the students' everyday cultures meet to create a new culture specific to their classroom. Understanding Freire's contribution to critical literacy is important because through his work we come to understand that critical literacy is not simply a method of teaching. It is a philosophy, a way of viewing and interacting with the world.

In the article, "Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices", Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) expand upon this understanding of critical literacy. Based on an extensive review of literature, the authors identify four dimensions of critical literacy: (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice.

In disrupting the commonplace, critical literacy provides ways to challenge common assumptions: those aspects of our everyday lives that we traditionally accept without question. Disrupting the common place encourages us to "use language and other sign systems to recognize implicit modes of perception and to consider new frames from which to understand experiences" (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 383). In so doing we problematize all subjects of study and understand existing knowledge as a historical product, we interrogate texts by identifying how we are being positioned by the text, we include "popular culture and media as a regular part of the curriculum for purposes of pleasure and for analyzing how people are positioned and constructed by television, video games, comics, toys, etc," (p. 383) we develop a language of critique, and we study language to "analyze how it shapes identity, constructs cultural discourses and supports or disrupts the status quo" (Lewison, et al., 2002, p.383).

When interrogating multiple viewpoints we reflect on how the story might be different if told from somebody else's perspective. In so doing we become aware of whose voice is being included in the text and whose voice is being omitted from the text. We begin to understand that there may be conflicting opinions and points of views surrounding any one issue which is one of the reasons why dialogue is important to critical literacy. Without speaking and dialoguing with one another, we disallow ourselves the opportunity to hear and possibly understand the multiple viewpoints that surround any one topic.
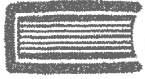
Focusing on sociopolitical issues means acknowledging that education is political as are curricula and textbooks. Teaching, therefore, is not a neutral act "yet often it takes place with no attention given to how sociopolitical systems, power relationships, and language are intertwined and inseparable from our teaching" (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 383). Critical literacy draws attention to the power relationships in society and in education. Critical literacy moves beyond the personal to understand "the sociopolitical systems to which we belong," (p. 383) it challenges the "unquestioned legitimacy of unequal power relationships by studying the relationship between language and power," (p. 383) it uses literacy to engage in the politics of daily life, and it redefines literacy as a "form of cultural citizenship and politics that increases opportunities for subordinate groups to participate in society and as an ongoing act of consciousness and resistance" (Lewison et al, 2002, p. 383).

The fourth dimension, taking action and promoting social justice, means engaging in reflection and action to empower oneself and others to become agents of change. As with the other dimensions identified by Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, using and analyzing language as a part of our everyday lives is important. One needs to be able to use language so as to "exercise power to enhance everyday life and to question practices of privilege and injustice" (p. 384). It also means analyzing language to be able to identify how it is used to maintain domination and legitimize knowledge, power, and culture (Lewison, et al, 2002, p. 384).

In Critical literacy: A way of thinking, a way of life, McDaniel (2006), introduces pre-service teachers to critical literacy. McDaniel's book is important to the literature on critical literacy because in it she identifies a need for teaching critical literacy at the university level. According to her study, many teacher-education students identify the purpose of education as that of preparing students for "getting along in the world" (p. 147). McDaniel notes, "[f]or the most part, the participants thought education was about functioning or surviving in the world, with a focus on individual development. School should be 'fun,' but the focus is on 'getting along in the world' and all that term implies —conformity, compliance, and fitting in" (p. 138). Critical literacy challenges the idea that the purpose of education is for "getting along in the world." Critical literacy teaches for transformation and liberation by encouraging students to question and challenge social constructions, ideologies and "the systems within which we live

everyday" (Foss, 2002, p. 394). Although uncomfortable at times, "the road towards equality is neither certain nor easy, but as teachers we must continue to travel it" (Christensen, 2000, p. 98).

Another important aspect of McDaniel's book is that it demonstrates how literature, without critical examination, can perpetuate the status quo, the dominant culture and legitimize certain ideologies, traditions, assumptions, and power relations. McDaniel argues that there is not a "good or bad" time to introduce children to critical literacy. When people raise concerns about the age appropriateness of controversial topics, McDaniel responds, "ideas that adults deem disturbing or forbidden are often avoided, despite children's possible desire to learn more about them. Ironically, such taboo topics pervade mainstream media. Rather than examining underlying ideologies and social structures from which these messages arise, we frequently strive to maintain children's 'innocence' by filtering out what we consider to be overly realistic or disturbing texts" (McDaniel, 2006, p. 50).

Implementation of critical literacy

When examining literature focusing on the implementation of critical literacy, certain commonalities emerge: (1) in all cases the lessons build on the students' lives and relate the learning to the students' lives, (2) the lessons incorporate some or all of the four dimensions of critical literacy as identified by Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys, (3) the lessons introduce students to a variety of texts ranging from picture books to cartoons and from novels to websites, and (4) as students and teachers became more familiar with critical literacy the questions raised and the discussions that follow become more in-depth underscoring the fact that critical literacy is a process that needs time to develop.

Building from the students lives:

Because students ought to be personally invested in their learning, it is crucial that the curriculum not be predetermined (Christensen, 2000; Chafel, Flint, Hammel & Pommeral et al. 2007; Shor, 1992; Vasquez, 2004). When teaching for critical literacy, teachers and students come together to create the curriculum. A critical literacy curriculum "is one that cannot be prepackaged or preplanned. It is the kind of curriculum that deliberately 'makes significant' diverse children's cultural and

social questions about everyday life. It arises as teacher and children tune in to issues of social justice and equity that unfold through classroom discussion and begin to pose critical questions" (Vasquez, 2004, p. xv). This allows for students to become more invested in their learning and for a more equal sharing of power between students and teacher. In order to do this and still meet the demands of mandated curricula and standardized tests, Vasquez suggests becoming very familiar with what is required and then "negotiate spaces to engage in critical literacy practices" (p. 31).

In <u>Young children, social issues, and critical literacy: Stories of teachers and researchers</u>, Chafel, Flint, Hammel, and Pomeroy (2007) provide examples of how they successfully negotiate their curricula to focus on the theme of poverty. The theme of poverty became a focus because many conversations, initiated by students, dealt with issues of poverty and because "one in five children in the United States under the age of six lives in Poverty" (p. 73). Activities such as writing thank-you notes to a local bakery for donating food to their shelter, creating short films to convey information about advertising strategies, and growing a class vegetable garden to contribute food to a local "community kitchen" emerged from students' interests and lives. Read alouds of <u>Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen, Sister Annes' Hands and Tomás and the Library Lady</u> were also incorporated into lessons to enrich and extend class discussions relating to the theme of poverty.

Similarly in <u>Teaching for critical literacy: An ongoing necessity to look deeper and beyond</u>, Michael Michell (2006), developed the unit "Alternative press and need for alternatives" (p. 43) following a series of conversations with faculty and students which, "revealed how hungry students were for something other than the readily available sources, predominantly Fox, CNN International, BBC International, and a variety of Brazilian television news programs". It is important to note that negotiating the curriculum with our students and creating spaces to integrate critical literacy into our lessons "does not mean giving up teaching the core ideals and skills of the class; it means using the energy of their connection to drive us through the content" (Christensen, 2000, p. 5). When negotiating the curriculum, "the point is not to teach a certain novel or a set of facts about literature, but to engage students in a dialogue, to teach them to find connections between their lives, literature, and society" (Christensen, 1999, p. 182).

Four dimensions of critical literacy:

As previously discussed, Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002) have identified four dimensions important to critical literacy: (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice. In the literature on the implementation of critical literacy several, or all, of the dimensions are evident in the lessons. For example, in the book <u>Critical literacy: Enhancing students' comprehension of text</u> by McLaughlin and Devoogd (2004) the teaching of critical literacy is organized around these four dimensions. The authors provide numerous examples of how texts can be introduced to elementary and middle school students in a way that engages the reader in problem posing, challenging social constructs, examining alternative perspectives, and looking for the bias in the texts. The four dimensions of critical literacy are also clearly evident throughout Linda Christensen's book <u>Reading, writing and rising up</u>, and in the edited book <u>Education is politics: Critical teaching across differences, K-12.</u>

In her article, "Peeling the onion: Teaching critical literacy with students of privilege," Foss (2002) engages the students in problematizing systems, challenging commonplace, realizing multiple viewpoints and raising awareness of privilege. To do this Foss organized the teaching of <u>To kill a mockingbird</u> by Harper Lee around the following:

- examination of the institution of school and how it functions in our lives;
- identification of individuals' multiple subject positions and development of an understanding that experiences, such as reading, are socially constructed;
- recognition and problematization of the privilege that permeates our lives. (p. 395)

By engaging students in a privilege walk and an intersection of identity activity and by reading and responding to a series of texts, Foss's students were "identifying and problematizing the systems within which we live everyday" (Foss, 2002, p. 394). Michell in his article also allows students to problematize the systems in which they operate explaining, "[t]eaching for critical
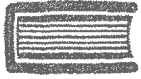
literacy must be an ongoing and proactive project, one that cultivates a global citizenry that reads the world, problematizes it, and takes action to make it a better place for the 'decent survival of all'" (Michell, 2006, p. 42). He and his students do this by engaging in a unit that examines the need for alternative press, and by grappling with questions such as, "Does war challenge us to be fully human?" (p. 43).

A variety of texts

Because critical literacy is concerned with the analysis of all kinds of texts, a variety of materials and resources can be used when teaching for critical literacy. Text is not limited to a traditional understanding of reading, but instead includes all things that can be read. McDaniel (2004) explains,

> Critical literacy transcends conventional notions of reading and writing to incorporate critical thinking, questioning, and transformation of self or one's world. Additionally, definitions of critical literacy usually consider "text" to be anything that can be "read" which leads to infinite possibilities. Some would argue that a T-shirt, graffiti, a cereal box, or a rock all can be "read" as texts. Essentially, a person can "read," interpret, question, and "rewrite" almost any aspect of his or her world. (p. 474)

Lessons discussed in this review of the literature use picture books, novels, plays, videos, cartoons, and the internet when teaching for critical literacy. Harste, 2003, uses a UNICEF poster to convey the way in which critical literacy can be used to read a text. If we are to read the world as well as the word, then we need to include all sorts of texts in our classroom instruction. Christensen points out, "[w]e must teach students how to 'read' not only novels and science texts, but cartoons, politicians, schools, workplaces, welfare offices, and Jenny Craig ads. We need to get students to 'read' where and how public money is spent. We need to get students to 'read' the inequitable distribution of funds for schools" (Christensen, 2000, p. vii).

Critical Literacy as a process

As is evident in the article by Chafel, Flint, Hammel and Pomeroy (2007) the more we engage in the teaching of critical literacy the more comfortable we become with it. While observing Jane Hammel's classroom, Amy Flint noticed a significant change in Jane's teaching between the spring of 2000 and the fall of 2003. Following a reading of Tomás and the library lady, the conversation in the fall of 2003 was more dynamic and enriching than the conversation that followed a reading of the same text in the spring of 2000. Flint explains, "Jane was more cognizant of bringing the children's lives and experiences into the discussion." Furthermore, Jane "did not steer away from the more difficult issues related to migrant farming and poverty. In so doing, the children's talk became more complex and substantive" (Chafel et al. 2007, p. 78). Flint also noticed that the discussions surrounding the book were broader and moved beyond the text.

This account suggests that the comfort level one has with the teaching of critical literacy evolves over time. As with many educational philosophies, theories, and strategies they need time to develop. When asked by others how to teach for critical literacy, Michell (2007) advises "begin with one unit a semester, or even a year and over time their teaching and curriculum would transform and maintain a constant state of renewal" (p. 45). Coming to understand critical literacy is a process and the teaching of critical literacy consists of "fluid ideas that require continual reflection so that they might become more meaningful for learners" (Foss, 2002, p. 401).

Who benefits from critical literacy ?

Everyone benefits from critical literacy and critical literacy is appropriate for students of all ages. By opening up the curriculum to address social issues students in elementary school "can grapple with new understanding of the world and their place in it" (Chafel, Flint, Hammel & Pomeroy, 2007, p. 73). Students in middle and secondary school benefit from critical literacy as they are experiencing a transformation that 'unleashes kids' inner strengths as they struggle to identify the unique gifts they bring to the world" (Foss, 2002, p. 394). Similarly, undergraduate students and graduate students in teacher education programs need to be exposed to critical literacy (McDaniel, 2006).

Critical literacy not only benefits students in inner city schools, it benefits all students regardless of location. Students from all socioeconomic groups, races, ethnicities and religions need critical literacy. To teach critical literacy to only a select group of students does a disservice to everyone as it denies students a complete education and it leaves students "miseducated to the extent that they receive only a partial and biased education" (Nieto, 1996, p. 312). Therefore it is important that, "[e]very teacher in every classroom of every child of every age everywhere in the world should ask what he or she can do to cultivate students who will make the world a more positive place for all its inhabitants" (Michell, 2006, p. 45).

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Action Research

Effective Comprehension Strategies for Fifth Grade: A Research Proposal

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There are numerous definitions of comprehension available from a multitude of resources. In terms of our research study, the members found the terminology "text comprehension" to be the most applicable. Text comprehension is defined as "the ability to understand or get meaning from text (any type of written material)" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001, p. 471). Understanding what is being read is the reason for reading and therefore is a critical component of all learning. Therefore, providing students with comprehension strategies can help them determine the meaning of what they are reading. When teachers teach comprehension as a strategic process, it enables the readers to make connections with what they are reading and move beyond literal recall of the texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

The members of our research team collectively decided that it would be advantageous to go further and explore various strategies to help students learn and apply comprehension strategies more effectively and productively with nonfiction texts. Expository text plays a key role in reading from the fourth grade on because students begin reading less narrative texts and therefore read more expository texts. Kendra M. Hall, Brenda L. Sabey, and Michelle McClellan from Brigham Young University, conducted a study on expository text comprehension. According to their study titled, Expository Text Comprehension: Helping Primary-Grade Teachers Use Expository Texts To Full Advantage, "Expository, or 'informational' texts convey and communicate factual information. These texts contain more unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts, fewer ideas related to the here-and-now,

and less information directly related to personal experience" (2005, p. 212). As a result, students need to be explicitly taught how to use expository text effectively. With that being said, there have been several instructional programs that have been created in order to help increase comprehension of expository text. These programs focus on vocabulary, text structure, or text signals. "Text structure awareness has been shown to be an important foundation for facilitating text comprehension and recall (Dickson et al., 1998)" (Hall et al., 2005, p. 215).

In addition, it has been found that students who are taught expository text comprehension strategies, are better able to compare and contrast and write better summaries than students who did not receive explicit instruction in comprehension strategies. Overall, these strategies are necessary to organize and make sense of expository text (Hall et al., 2005). When students have comprehension strategies that they can use in order to read nonfiction texts, they can make meaning in a more thorough way.

Jennifer Conner's (2006) article, "Instructional Reading Strategy: QAR (Question-Answer- Relationship"), discussed a strategy that assists students in the monitoring of their comprehension of the text. The article described QAR as a "reading strategy in which students categorize comprehension questions according to where they got the information they needed to answer each question" (Conner, 2006, Description of QAR section, 1). Conner (2006) wrote that this comprehension strategy is successful with fiction texts and nonfiction texts. By writing questions based on the text, teachers are giving students the opportunity to learn how expository text works and how to navigate through it. This type of strategy connects to Hall, Sabey, and McClellan's research (2005) that suggested explicit instruction in comprehension strategies is beneficial for students to learn and more importantly learn how to use them effectively.

F.P. Robinson (2001), author of Effective Study, highlighted another comprehension strategy. The SQ3R method has five steps: survey, questions, read, recall, and review (Robinson, 2001). This strategy allows students to have a plan as they read nonfiction texts. Students write down their findings from skimming the text, write down questions about the text, and try to answer the questions while reading. Students also check their comprehension by recalling what the text is about, and finally reviewing all their information in order to see the whole text (Robinson, 2001).

Participants

Participants are from two different school districts in Connecticut. The population consisted of forty-two fifth grade students from two different communities. A convenience sampling was utilized with one hundred percent participation expected. The participants were from a lower middle class town and a higher middle class town. One of the fifth grade classrooms is located in a suburban area and consists of twenty students. Out of the twenty students, eighteen are Caucasian, one is African American, and one is Biracial. In addition, four of the twenty students receive special education services. There are eleven boys and nine girls in this classroom. The other fifth grade classroom is located in a rural area and consists of twenty-two students. All of the twenty-two students are Caucasian and of those students, two of them receive special education services. There are nine boys and thirteen girls in this classroom. Overall, all of the students are in an inclusive instructional environment, but are at varying ability levels.

Methodology

Instrumentation

Over the course of the research study, assessments were conducted to measure the effectiveness of the two comprehension strategies utilized by the participants. Before beginning the study with the participants, a member of the research team implemented a teacher created pre-assessment and post-assessment to a small sampling of fifth grade students from her school. Furthermore, the rubric used to score the two assessments in the field test was the same one used for the actual research study.

After the initial pre-assessment, the two participating teachers modeled and implemented the QAR strategy and the SQ3R strategy in their classrooms. Each teacher used one of the above-mentioned strategies in daily instruction. At the end of each modeling lesson, the students independently completed a related comprehension activity pertaining to the nonfiction text passages about various explorers. The format of the comprehension questions was open ended and required written responses. In addition, the questions were connected to the comprehension strategy being modeled each day. The two members of the research team who are not implementing the instruction scored the

students' responses and shared their results. Discussions regarding the scores and any inconsistencies noticed were addressed by all members.

The daily comprehension activities were conducted with the intent to measure the effectiveness of the two chosen strategies to improve the student's comprehension with nonfiction texts. At the conclusion of the study, the students were given a post-assessment, similar to the pre-assessment, in order to identify which strategy showed an increase in the student's comprehension. Participants also completed a survey about the specific comprehension strategy that was used in their classroom and its effectiveness when reading and answering questions about nonfiction texts.

Procedures

The participants of the research study were members of two different fifth grade classes that are located in two different elementary schools in Connecticut. In both of the classrooms, the daily allotted time for instruction for this research was approximately forty-five minutes. Prior to beginning the lessons with the participants, the members of the research team organized the necessary materials including selecting appropriate nonfiction texts, creating open ended comprehension questions, and generating lesson plans that were replicated in each classroom. In classroom one, the teacher utilized the QAR (Question-Answer-Relationship) strategy with her students. In classroom two, the teacher utilized the SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) strategy. After the conclusion of the daily, week and a half implementation of the two strategies, the participants were given a post-assessment, created by the research members. The researchers who did not implement the study analyzed the data to prevent bias when interpreting the results from the open ended responses.

After the pre-assessment was given, the two classroom teachers began the model lessons and related written responses. The two teachers followed the same 'mini-lesson' format based on Columbia's Reading Workshop including the materials and how the model lessons will be presented such as with think-alouds, etc. This ensured credibility and dependability in the data we are collecting from the participants. Below is the planned schedule of the implementation of our research study:

- Pre-assessment: Read <u>Marco Polo</u>, by Struan Read (2001) from the Groundbreakers Series and the students will answer comprehension questions related to the specific passages.

- Lessons 1-6: Teachers will model one of the two chosen strategies using pre-selected articles from Time for Kids. Then the students will read passages from six different explorer books from the Groundbreakers Series and answer various questions using the comprehension strategy being focused on in each classroom.

- Post-assessment: Read <u>Henry Hudson</u>, by Ruth Manning (2001) from the Groundbreakers Series and the students will answer comprehension questions related to the specific passages.

Analysis and Results

After the completion of the week and a half implementation stage of the action research study, the level of effectiveness of the two chosen comprehension strategies was measured. First, the two group members who were not involved in implementing the two comprehension strategies scored the students' responses based on the pre-determined rubric. Then the group members compiled the results of the eight days of lessons onto tables for each class for further analysis by each type of question-explicit, implicit, and script-implicit. Next the scores from the pre-assessment, the six mini-lessons, and the post-assessment were averaged into percentages and were then compiled in a table for each school. Finally, the group members compiled the results of the pre-assessment and post-assessment for each class onto a bar graph.

Next, the group members analyzed the scores from School Two to look for growth, if any, from mini-lesson one to mini-lesson six. School Two's students' scores showed that 12 out of 22 students received higher scores on mini-lesson one than on the pre-assessment. One out of the 22 students increased his/her score from mini-lesson one to mini-lesson two. Fourteen out of the 22 students received higher scores on mini-lesson three than on mini-lesson two. From mini-lesson three to mini-lesson four, 20 out of the 22 students' scores increased. Two out of the 22 students' scores increased from mini-lesson four to mini-lesson five. Ten out of the 22 students received higher scores from mini-lesson five to mini-lesson six. Finally, 6 out of the 22

students' scores increased from mini-lesson six to the post-assessment
.

After looking at the data tables of the two schools' six mini-lessons, the group members decided to look more in-depth at the pre-assessment and the post-assessment. In terms of School One, there were substantial changes seen from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment. Out of the 20 students in the classroom, 19 of them went up, which equates to a 95% increase from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment. The remaining student whose score decreased from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment went down by six points, which equates to a 5% decrease. When looking at the data further, it was noticed that this particular student is a special education student. Interestingly, the other three special education students demonstrated an increase in their scores from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment. To illustrate, student number five went from 53% in the pre-assessment to 63% in the post-assessment, which is a ten-point increase. Student number seven went from 50% in the pre-assessment to 72% in the post-assessment, which is a twenty-two-point increase. Student number thirteen went from 63% in the pre-assessment to 75% in the post-assessment, which is a twelve-point increase.

In terms of School Two, there were varying degrees of change seen from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment, some positive and some negative. Out of the 22 students in the classroom, 10 of them went up, which equates to a 45% increase from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment. On the other hand, 7 out of the 22 students went down, which equates to a 32% decrease from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment. The remaining 5 students out of the 22 students stayed at the same percentage from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment, which equates to 32%. In terms of individual student progress, it is worth noting the results of the two special education students in School Two. One of these students demonstrated an increase from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment, while the second student experienced a decrease. Student number one went up from 37% in the pre-assessment to 41% in the post-assessment, which is a four-point increase. On the other hand, student number thirteen went from 69% in the pre-assessment to 44% in the post-assessment, which is a twenty-five-point decrease. Students in School Two differed in their answers to the survey statements. Twenty out of the 22 students thought they would have

been more successful on the pre-assessment if they had been taught the SQ3R strategy before they answered the questions about Marco Polo. Eleven out of the 22 students thought that the SQ3R strategy was helpful when taking the post-assessment. Eighteen out of the 22 students answered that they would use the SQ3R strategy when reading on their own. Seventeen out of the 22 students felt positive about reading nonfiction texts now that they have learned the SQ3R comprehension strategy. Overall, when comparing the survey results between the two schools, it was evident that the students in School One responded more positively about the QAR strategy than the students in School Two did about the SQ3R strategy.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this action research study was to identify effective strategies to build comprehension in fifth grade students using nonfiction texts. The study consisted of implementing two different comprehension strategies in two different fifth grade classrooms, in order to determine whether or not they were effective comprehension strategies. Students in School One were exposed to the QAR strategy and students in School Two were exposed to the SQ3R strategy. Each strategy was taught daily for a week and a half and included a pre-assessment, explorer comprehension questions, a post-assessment, and a survey. The two comprehension strategies were then measured using a rubric to score each of the students' written responses. These instruments were initially field-tested by a group member for creditibility and dependability. Furthermore, the effectiveness of each strategy was determined by the group members at the conclusion of the study based on the pre-assessment data, the results from the six mini-lessons, the post-assessment data, and through the participants' responses to the survey.

Based on the results of the survey responses, the majority of the students in School One were interested in using the QAR strategy. On the other hand, School Two students found the SQ3R strategy to be lengthy and cumbersome. Furthermore, the informal observations made by the two classroom teachers throughout the study reflected the importance of self-efficacy. Overall, the teacher in School One felt that her students were motivated and consistently tried their best when completing the written responses, for the most part. Towards the end

of the study though, the teacher in School One felt that her students did show a slight drop in motivation due to the constant written responses being done, rather than the actual application of the QAR strategy. Overall, students in School One had to make a decision as to which question-answer-relationship to use out of the four total aspects and then only use one part of the strategy to answer each question. On the other hand, the teacher in School Two felt her students were not very motivated and lost complete interest by the fourth mini-lesson. The teacher observed that her students were complaining and less determined to complete the comprehension questions as the study went on. It was concluded by the group members based on the data scores and teacher observations that the students in School Two also lacked motivation due to the fact they needed to go through five steps for each nonfiction text being read during the mini-lessons.

Furthermore, the students in School One appeared to be more successful when applying the QAR strategy to the comprehension questions they were asked to respond to throughout the study. Based on the overall results of the students in School One, as well as their responses to the survey statements, the group members felt our research correlated with much of the research that has been conducted regarding the QAR strategy. The teacher in School One also commented that implementing the QAR strategy was helpful for her students to use when responding to the comprehension questions and will be a strategy she plans on utilizing in future instruction.

The teacher in School Two also commented that implementing the SQ3R strategy was overwhelming and time consuming, considering she had never applied it before in her instruction. Due to the format involved for successfully utilizing the SQ3R strategy, the group members felt that it was too time consuming and not necessarily a student-friendly strategy to utilize, especially for students who may be experiencing difficulty with their comprehension.

In terms of our research question, which strategy, the QAR and/or the SQ3R will increase reading comprehension of nonfiction text, the group members concluded that the QAR strategy was more successful in improving the overall comprehension of the fifth grade students when reading nonfiction texts. The group members found the QAR strategy to be more user-friendly and less overwhelming than the SQ3R strategy. Furthermore, the data we collected also empirically supported our research findings. However, the group members felt that

further research studies pertaining to the QAR strategy and the SQ3R strategy are necessary, in order to help validate our findings.

There were a number of limitations easily recognized by the group members before, during, and after our action research study. One was that the convenience sampling being used to conduct the study was not representative of all students in fifth grade because of their school's locations, socio-economic status, and ethnicity, which was predominately Caucasian. Furthermore, our participants were only fifth graders, so the conclusions made at the end of the research study may not be applicable to other groups of students and grade levels.

A second limitation that became evident was the gap between the two schools being used for the study, according to the State Department of Education's website pertaining to the school districts' ERG rankings. School One was classified in ERG A and School Two was classified in ERG E. These rankings are four levels apart and are dependent on many factors, including education, occupation, poverty, family structure, home language, and district enrollment. The group members considered that these differences could have affected the results of our study, to an extent. To illustrate, School One is at the top of the ERG classification and based on the results of our action research study, the students in this school overall made more growth than the students in School Two. As researchers though, the group members had no way of knowing whether or not School Two would be less successful when responding to the open-ended comprehension questions due to their lower classification on the ERG ranking. Even though there was a gap, the group members needed to use these two schools, in order to conduct the study, because of availability and convenience. Before beginning the study, the group members were aware that the two schools were different in some respects, but we were not aware of the extent of the gap, which can be seen as a significant limitation in our study.

Despite these limitations, beneficial information was obtained about the importance of explicitly teaching specific comprehension strategies to students, in order to help them effectively understand what they are reading. In terms of our action research study, both comprehension strategies proved to have some impact on the students' comprehension within the limits of the study. The QAR strategy appeared to be more effective than the SQ3R strategy in terms of the students' written responses and reactions to reading nonfiction texts. Overall, the group

members determined that explicitly teaching specific comprehension strategies are beneficial for teachers to teach and implement in their classrooms, in order to help increase the comprehension for all students.

To conclude, as stated previously in the introduction, comprehension strategies need to be explicitly taught, modeled, and practiced in a meaningful way, in order for the students to improve in their understanding of what they are reading. The implication of our action research was to determine whether or not one, both, or neither of the two strategies being used should be implemented by classroom teachers when teaching their students how to comprehend nonfiction texts. Based on the results we obtained throughout the study, the group members concluded that the QAR strategy appeared to be the more effective strategy to utilize compared to the SQ3R strategy, especially when reading nonfiction explorer texts. However, further research using both the QAR strategy and the SQ3R strategy would be advantageous, in order to come to a more conclusive decision regarding the effectiveness of these two comprehension strategies for students at different grade levels and in different school districts.

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