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Disrupting the "Norm" with Collaborative Strategic Reading

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Using a case study of a seventh-grade language arts classroom, the authors describe an evidence-based approach to reading comprehension instruction, collaborative strategic reading, which supports all learners by changing the nature of learning and participation.

Diversity is a given. No two flowers are the same, no two snowflakes are the same, and no two students are the same. Differences are valued in nature but are often perceived as problematic in schools, particularly in terms of achievement, ability, and behavior. Ms. Thompson, a seventh-grade language arts teacher in an urban school, chose to reject "difference" as a problem in her classroom. Similar to other teachers we have seen in action, Ms. Thompson used a model of reading comprehension instruction called Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR; Klingner and Vaughn; Klingner, Vaughn, Boardman, and Swanson) to restructure the learning environment in ways that disrupted traditional notions of how students identified with disabilities or as low readers can participate in the learning community. Walking into a CSR classroom, one would not notice "difference" as a way to categorize students, but rather different individuals who are contributing unique ideas, providing each other with feedback, making claims from the text, and asking and answering their own text-dependent questions.

CSR is based on the premise that (1) students can learn to use the reading strategies that more skillful readers use automatically, (2) students can engage in high-quality discussions about text with peers in heterogeneous student-led groups, and (3) structures and supports can act as a vehicle for equitable access. When students engage actively with one another throughout the reading process, teachers can change their position in the classroom and perhaps even their beliefs about what students are capable of. In this article, we provide a snapshot of Ms. Thompson and her students during a CSR lesson.

Disrupting "Norms"

Perceptions of difference come largely from notions of "normal" drawn from the Gaussian, normally distributed bell-shaped curve that has been used historically to characterize achievement and ability (Glass and Smith 15). As a statistical measurement tool, the normal curve is reliable and valid in describing the distribution of random events (e.g., distance to stars, atomic weights of microscopic objects). Yet, human behavior and experiences are not random (Dudley-Marling and Gurn 3), and the normal curve may inadvertently reify commonsense beliefs about the categorization of students: some will excel, most will be average, and some will fail (Fendler and Muzaffar 64). If the purpose of school is for all students to succeed, then notions of "normal" may work against some students, particularly if it is assumed that some will always fall at the lower tail of the bell curve.

Concepts of "normal" create boundaries where some students fit and others are marginalized, most often based on race, language, and perceived ability (Annamma et al. 1278). Ellen A. Brantlinger argued that students who fail to achieve the "norms" are often identified with stigmatizing names (e.g., at-risk, disabled) and sent to separate locations (e.g., special education) to learn (238). And once removed, traditional pull-out special education settings focus heavily on the individual student as the source of the problem, using instructional practices

that are teacher-centered with the teacher transmitting skills to be practiced individually by the student (Ruiz 488; Mehan). Difference, then, becomes problematic, and as a consequence, diversity becomes something to be fixed. Susan Baglieri and Janice H. Knopf remind us that "the question is not whether we perceive differences among people, but, rather, what meaning is brought to bear on those perceived differences" (525).

Students exhibit differences in learning rates, trajectories, and learning styles. We can honor individuality in learning with a reconceptualization of traditional general education classroom settings into places where knowledge and learning is distributed across students and differences are valued in small-group, student-centered instruction. By changing the nature of participation, students identified with a learning disability (LD) can contribute to individual and group expertise and learning (Gutiérrez and Stone 129) and the members of the classroom at large, including educators, can shift perceptions about what is "normal" in the classroom.

Collaborative Strategic Reading Provides Equitable Access

Collaborative Strategic Reading began in a middle school classroom of English learners who were identified with learning disabilities. Janette Klingner adapted reciprocal teaching (see Palinscar and Brown) to include increased supports and elements of cooperative learning (see Johnson and Johnson) that would provide equitable access to the metacognitive strategies and talk moves that were at the heart of this discussion-based approach to improving reading comprehension and content learning (Klingner and Vaughn, "Reading Strategies"). In this study, all students, including those identified as low-comprehenders, made significant gains in reading comprehension. With models such as CSR, students identified with disabilities who might typically be excluded, ignored, or undervalued in general education classrooms are given the tools to engage similarly to their non-identified peers.

There has been a great deal of research on the components of reading comprehension instruction that are the most supportive for adolescents who are identified with LD including teaching cognitive strategies for identifying and generating main ideas, summarizing, asking questions, and cognitive mapping (Edmonds et al. 293; Gajria et al. 218). Additional recommendations include teaching strategies together; providing explicit instruction in what each strategy is, why it is used, and when; modeling and providing extensive opportunities to practice; and using peer discourse to mediate learning. Further, how much students learn during small-group discussion-based activities depends on the nature and quality of student interactions, and on peers having the tools and shared responsibility for helping one another. CSR includes these best practices, with careful inclusion of supports to facilitate student application and active participation of all learners. While some have argued that classrooms with such specified structures have the potential to constrain learning (McKeown, Beck, and Blake 231–32), students in CSR classrooms are capable of engaging together to tackle demanding text in spaces where all students contribute to and are accepted by the learning community.

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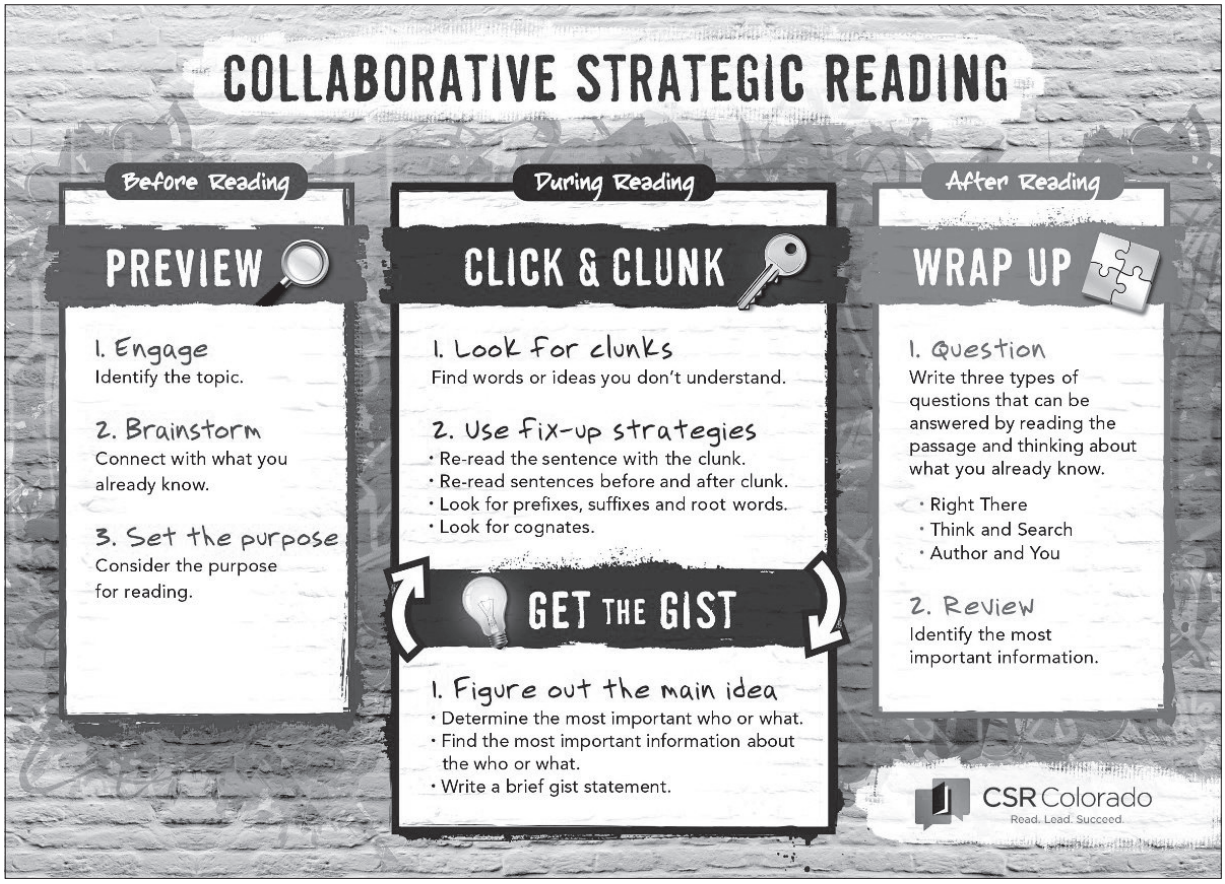
CSR has been studied for more than 15 years, with positive outcomes for students at various achievement levels (Boardman et al. 23; Vaughn et al. 954), including consistently favorable results for students identified as "low readers" or with LD (Klingner et al. 296). In addition to improvements in reading comprehension, students have been observed helping each other and participating in similar ways to their non-identified peers (Klingner and Vaughn, "Real World" 85–86; Moore and Boardman).

The CSR process is shown in Figure 1 and includes five before, during, and after reading strategies that students use together in groups of about four students. Teachers assign students to heterogeneous groups and students use expert roles (i.e., leader, clunk expert, gist expert, question expert) to facilitate the process. Students also use resources that distribute learning and increase access such as *role cards* that offer discussion starters and remind students of the process for each strategy; *learning*

FIGURE 1. CSR plan for strategic reading. This figure illustrates the CSR before, during, and after reading strategies. Reprinted with permission from the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk (2009).



logs where students record their ideas individually; and *rubrics* for self-reflection and group reflection. For each strategy, students first think and write on their own, embedding valuable wait time, and then they share and discuss their ideas guided by the role expert. All students participate in each strategy, have an expert role, and are individually and collectively accountable for learning and for helping each other. At the end of a lesson, students take time to reflect on their learning and on the functioning of the group. Throughout, the teacher visits groups to facilitate understanding, promote collaboration, and, as needed, scaffold individual learning.

Case Study: Using CSR to Reposition Students

Meet Ms. Thompson, an experienced language arts teacher who began with high expectations and valuing all students. She appreciated the CSR model because it provided a means to more purposefully promote student-centered work, to give students the right and the space to speak, and to ensure that all knew how to actively listen to each other (Cazden 96). With the support of their teacher and the structures of CSR, these students co-created a social organization of learning that relied on individual voices, questions, and ideas, and in so doing, differences in students were valued while perceptions of ability/disability were minimized.

Ms. Thompson wanted her students to, in her words, "grow as far as they can grow," and she reported that CSR was a vehicle for supporting students' development of important literacy skills. The participation structures and emphasis on text-based discussions that are a part of a CSR lesson were particularly appealing to Ms. Thompson. "I think that oral emphasis," she said, "of them having to sit and discuss . . . has been really, really good." The following excerpts occurred during a unit surrounding Earth Day

and how our choices affect the Earth. The topic of the lesson was climate change in the Arctic, and students were reading a nonfiction article on ice melting near the North Pole. We feature one heterogeneous group of four students and draw our attention to Mateo, a student identified with a learning disability whose assessment data classified him as reading below grade level. Similar to about 50 percent of the students in his grade, he is also an English learner.

In this 50-minute lesson, Ms. Thompson took approximately 90 talk turns. In the focus group of four students, Jennifer and Gabby had a similar number of turns (95 and 93 turns, respectively), while the two other group members, Mateo and Carla, each spoke 53 times. There were differences in the amount of participation across students, yet no one person dominated a conversation, nor was any one student notably silent.

Though the amount of talk provides an initial marker of participation, the content of what was said may be a better indicator of learning. The examples that follow illustrate student interactions during three key points of a CSR lesson: Click and Clunk, Get the Gist, and Questioning. Each example demonstrates how Mateo contributed to the group's expertise. In none of the excerpts does Ms. Thompson or Jennifer, Carla or Gabby (Mateo's group) single out Mateo as a weaker, less capable reader. Instead, *each* student's ideas, competencies, and questions are brought to the forefront of a collective and individual reading of a text.

Click and Clunk: Distributing the Learning

In a CSR lesson, students are taught to monitor their understanding while they are reading, identifying words or ideas they do not understand, and then to work together to figure out the meaning of the unknown words. The nature of this step calls for students to recognize that all readers may have breakdowns in understanding, and that not knowing the meaning of every word in a complex text is OK. In the following example, Jennifer, a student who the school had identified as a "high achiever," tells the group that she is unsure of the word *perennial*. The word is a clunk for her. Gabby thinks she knows the meaning of the word, and Ms. Thompson pushes the students to be more explicit with language and to use the text for clues. In this exchange, Mateo shares his knowledge of a key word in the text, which subsequently helps the group come to a clearer understanding of the clunk.

Teacher: So what other clunks do you have?

Jennifer: Hmmm . . . perennial.

Gabby: Perennial? Perennial is like ice that's frozen all the time.

Teacher: So that's perennial *ice*, but the word perennial is what you're trying to figure out. . . . When you think about perennial ice and annual ice . . . something that's perennial . . .

Mateo: Something that's multi-year. Goes on for like a long time.

Teacher: How do you know that?

Mateo: 'Cause after perennial it says multi-year, is like a process that goes on for a long time.

Mateo is comfortable speaking up and using a strategy he had learned (CSR fix-up strategy: reread the sentence with the clunk and look for clues). In this excerpt, the "high achiever" is able to ask for help while Mateo, a student identified with LD, provides a key link to the solution. Both problem solving and learning are distributed across group members fluidly without regard to anyone knowing more or less than anyone else. The social organization of learning *has* indeed minimized differences and all group members have become "potential resources" (Gutiérrez and Stone 129) for their peers.

Gist: Sharing Responsibility for Learning

Students using CSR also stop during reading to discuss key information and formulate gist (main idea) statements. The following example shows all students sharing ideas about what is most important in the text and highlights Mateo's role as the Gist Expert, supporting his peers in thinking first about what is most important from the section. He also contributes key ideas that are integrated into students' written gist statements.

Mateo: OK so, let's go to the gist. Does anybody have any important ideas about this section?

Gabby: Well this is actually talking more about the North Pole, although it mentioned

South Pole although it was supposedly talking about the North and it was telling about the effects that it did.

Mateo: Yeah and 65 percent loss of the ice and two different ice types—it was talking about it too.

Jennifer: Where's that?

Mateo: Sea, sea ice [points to section in text].

Carla: It was talking about how it shattered, it shattered all previous records of this significant arctic ice—

Jennifer: 'cause it—

Gabby: Caused the loss of 65 percent of the ice that's like really important and especially if it happened just that one year.

Jennifer: That's more than half!

Next, Mateo offers an idea to Jennifer about how to make her gist statement clearer. "So, where it says high," he says, "you could also put increased, increased temperatures." Jennifer revises her gist, and the teacher later acknowledges this contribution. "Mateo, I really liked your idea of using 'increasing temperatures' instead of 'bringing high' temperatures." Ms. Thompson continues to highlight how Mateo helped his group pull key ideas from the entire section together. The responsibility for learning belongs to the students and is reinforced by the teacher with feedback. For students with learning disabilities, interactive dialogue with peers that is supported by explicit feedback from the teacher promotes students' reading comprehension. There is no need here for students *labeled* as less able learners to do their "learning" somewhere else, to be singled out as different, or to participate any less than other students. In this context, Mateo receives what he needs to learn and contributes meaningfully to the learning of others. Fitting students into a set of expected normalized outcomes is uncommon in a CSR classroom.

Questioning: Accessing One Another's Knowledge

The CSR lesson wraps up with students generating and asking each other questions about important content from the reading and then discussing answers. In the following excerpt, Mateo asks his question to the group. During discussions, we noticed that Mateo is often the third or fourth group member to share. He seems to benefit from hearing other students first and often uses the extra time to continue formulating his ideas. Here, he is invited to share by the question expert.

Gabby: OK, go Mateo.

Mateo: I put, "How can climatologists find how the climate changes?"

Carla: By the sun and satellites—

Gabby: The warm air, the satellites.

Carla: And like last summer how it looked and before last summer how it looked.

Jennifer: And models . . . it says like models and then it says satellite pictures.

Mateo: Uhm I just, like for my answer I put, "They have different tools that they can use."

Multiple: Yeah, good, yeah.

Using the CSR process, the group discussed the answer to Mateo's question and he also had an opportunity to share his answer, which prompted consensus and praise from his peers. His answer was not as detailed as the others, yet it captured the overall idea, which is also important as it serves as a helpful synthesis for his group. Mateo's contribution was supported as equitable; all ideas were welcomed and considered. For Ms. Thompson's class, CSR changed common patterns of participation with wait time, discussion structures, and the repositioning of learner status so that everyone's ideas were accessible to all members, and learning was distributed.

Conclusion

The pattern of classroom participation observed during CSR revealed that Ms. Thompson did not ascribe to normal distribution, bell-curve thinking, and she did not assume that some students would excel and others would fail, as Lynn Fendler and Irfan Muzaffar described. She used CSR to purposefully design a learning space that supported heterogeneous, student-centered, distributed learning and

noted growth in students who might not typically participate actively. The outcome was a classroom where diverse ways of learning and participation were welcomed, and where all students' ideas contributed to the collective learning of others. Just as in nature where every flower is different, beautiful, and valued, by changing the pattern of participation, every student can be, too.

Giving more students the chance to talk helps them actively struggle through new ideas and elaborate on their cognition. Students develop metacognitive awareness of misunderstandings in the text and work alongside their group members to repair them. Mateo and his peers developed their expertise about the loss of perennial ice in the Arctic, linked to the bigger idea the students were studying on the impact of our choices on the environment. Our observations of Ms. Thompson and her students supported the notion first purported by Kris D. Gutiérrez and Linda D. Stone that

> Expertise is not simply the sum of the individual's knowledge and is not located in one individual. When children have access to one another's reasoning, and thus, procedural, conceptual and strategic knowledge, then individual students' knowledge and group expertise overlap in ways that enhance literacy development. (126)

Restructuring participation and valuing all students as members of the community is indeed important, but many students also need tools to succeed. With CSR, students receive explicit instruction in reading strategies, are provided with resources (both material and human), and are taught how and when to use these strategies and resources. We believe that CSR as a classroom instructional approach successfully changes access to learning in ways that promote equitable contributions of all students and minimizes the typically negative impact of difference. We challenge educators to discard notions that students have skills that are distributed like a bell curve. Approaching a class with the assumption that some percent of the students will fail makes it difficult to engage all students and to maximize individuals' potential to learn. *How* we teach can redefine *who* can learn and models like CSR leverage instruction to reorganize the classroom into a place of community and knowledge building for all students.

Note

The authors would like to dedicate this piece to Janette Klingner, who put her heart and wisdom into creating spaces that empower both teachers and students to realize their potential as learners and knowledge creators. She dedicated her career to resolving inequities in schools and school systems by addressing the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education, by creating culturally responsive Response to Intervention models and through her work with CSR. Janette passed away in March 2014.

For more information about CSR, go to http://Toolkit.csrcolorado.org.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION — **Lisa Storm Fink, RWT**

In "Scaffolding Comprehension Strategies Using Graphic Organizers" from ReadWriteThink.org, collaborative strategic reading (CSR) is initially presented to students through modeling and whole-class instruction. To facilitate comprehension during and after reading, students apply four reading strategies: preview, click and clunk, get the gist, and wrap-up. Graphic organizers are used for scaffolding of these strategies while students work together in cooperative groups. http://bit.ly/1D2isOW

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