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Promoting Literacy Growth through Literature Circles in Second Grade

Divonna M. Stebick, Becki McCullough, and Jenell McKowen

Purposes

In order to demonstrate the value of understanding the social context and taking advantage of opportunities for children to utilize this in their learning and development, the researchers investigated literacy as a social practice. Street and Lefstein (2007) viewed literacy as a social practice, the “general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives” (p. 143). In a school setting literacy practices exist in relations between children, within groups including shared cognitions visible in social identities. Schools are social institutions endorsing such practices, “regardless of children’s culture, ethnicity, gender, language, race, or social class, their learning is profoundly social” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 8). Dynamic teaching is steeped in self-critical inquiry, hence, our research while focusing on classroom teaching and learning, uncovered the interrelationships of second graders’ oral and written language development (Strieb, 1985). The findings contributed both to our growing body of knowledge and aimed to address some of the language of interaction and social processes in second grade classrooms.

Current literacy policies support changes in the instructional context that would significantly alter teaching and learning in primary classrooms (McMahon, Raphael, Goatley, & Pardo, 1997). In the past, analyzed discourse patterns in classrooms showcased that single types of speech genre dominate the discourse in many classrooms (McMahon et al., 1997). When instructional plans are altered and children are given more opportunities to interact and express themselves, they are able to use language while negotiating their perspectives and actively engage in texts to comprehend deeply. Literature discussion circles is one such venue where children can “articulate, clarify, and expand” their ideas (McMahon et al., 1997, p. 19). While much research has been conducted on literature circles in intermediate grades (Bower, 2002; Maloch, 2004), there are few studies that have explored this issue in primary classrooms. The present study analyzed two second-grade classes as they participated in twelve literature discussion circles over a period of three months during the spring of the school year. The paper will discuss the relevance of being reflective practitioners in the field, as well as into the students’ learning and identities. For the purposes of this paper, two related research questions will be explored.

1. Does participation in literature circles lead to increased student engagement in reading as measured by the Elementary Reading Assessment (McKenna & Kear, 1990)?

2. Does participation in literature circles help students increase reading comprehension as captured

through anecdotal records and through the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment (2011)?

Theoretical Framework

Rosenblatt (1978) developed the “reader response” school of literacy. Rosenblatt concluded that text is simply ink on a page until a reader engages with the print to bring the words to life. There is not simply one correct interpretation of literary work, but multiple interpretations, each of them profoundly dependent on the prior experiences brought to the text by each reader (Daniels, 1994). In order for literature discussions to be successful, students need to actively engage with other readers to enhance comprehension (Stebick & Dain, 2007).

Vygotsky (1978) placed social interaction at the heart of a sociocultural examination of literacy. The present study, rooted in the sociocultural context of second-grade classrooms, delved into the phenomenon that language is a living, socially influenced entity. Three aspects of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory directly influenced this research: the idea of internalization, the zone of proximal development, and his notion of child development. These aspects are explained within two other theoretical constructs that influenced the current study, namely Bandura’s (1977) idea of social learning in which Gee’s (2004) notion of identity and role-taking is embedded (internalization), and Rosenblatt’s (1978) transactional theory of reader response (ZPD and child development).

Bandura (1977) emphasized that learning was inherently a social process, stating that “most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action” (p. 22). Bandura identified that a “vast amount of social learning occurs among peers” within groups (1997, p. 9). Second-grade classrooms are filled with such efforts made by students talking, thinking, and role taking in groups.

Bandura’s (1977) theory reflects Vygotsky’s (1978) approach to child development that advocated a child’s cognitive development was structured by the wider social and cultural relationships within which the child is located. Vygotsky discussed “human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (p. 88). A concept Vygotsky used to explain this was that of internalization, that every “function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level: first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological).

Since conversation is essential in literature discussions,

the social structure of such groups assumes a collaborative relationship among its members. In the twelve discussions circles, the task was one of verbal exchange, where at times the group reached some kind of a peripheral consensus and even entertained different viewpoints demonstrating inferential comprehension.

The dialogue between and among the second graders as they talked about books in this study reinforced Bandura's (1977) argument for an expanded conception of the social context as defined by a sociocultural, social learning perspective to include the personal experiences of the students. According to Gee (1996), a "big Discourse" is a socially accepted way of "using language," and other "artifacts of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting" that were used to recognize a child as a member of a "socially meaningful group or 'social network,' or to signal a socially meaningful" role (p. 131).

A person's way of talking makes up his/her personal communication. When literature discussion circles are encouraged in classrooms, both formal and informal talk occurs using the speakers' own conversational devices. Delving into young children's language production during these discussions highlights conversations used by the groups and shows that these are context dependent. Whenever communication is shared, an underlying message of rapport emerges while exercising comprehension skills. Further, when children understand each other's ways of understanding, it shows shared background and context. Hence, due to the paradoxical nature of communication, speakers constantly observe the need for involvement and show consideration and understanding. This was evidenced in this study.

Mode of Inquiry

Two second-grade inclusion classrooms with a total of forty-eight students participated in this project. The students' reading abilities on the Fountas and Pinnell scale at the beginning of the study ranged from Level I to Level Q. The two classroom teachers participating in the study determined that all students, regardless of instructional reading level, would participate. A third researcher, a professor of literacy, participated in the project by modeling instruction, co-facilitating literature discussions, and coaching the teachers through reflective practice. Prior to the project, the three action researchers discussed how the project would be structured and executed. The three agreed that the literature circle groups would be held weekly using texts that were leveled between J and M on the Fountas and Pinnell scale. Each group would have no more than seven participants and would last approximately fifteen minutes.

Prior to the start of the study and again at the end of the study, the classroom teachers administered the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System to identify the current reading levels of each second grader (2011). (This assessment is a leveled running record including oral and silent reading.) Since it is a one-on-one assessment, valuable information about each student's reading process, fluency, and comprehension was gathered. In addition, the classroom

teachers administered the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990) to all student participants in order to determine how students felt about recreational reading outside of the school environment and their feelings about academic reading.

Prior to beginning the literature circles, the researchers conducted lessons about questioning before, during, and after reading. The researchers explicitly modeled how asking a good question would look and sound before, during, and after reading. After several lessons, instruction moved to the social portion of literature circles. The researchers modeled how to make eye contact while asking and answering questions. Students paired with partners and took turns asking and answering questions.

After the students demonstrated proficiency generating and answering questions as gathered through systematic anecdotal record keeping, the researchers introduced the literature circle model. The researchers modeled a literature circle while the students observed. The students observed how the literature circle participants looked each other in the eye while asking or answering questions and actively listened to each other. The students also noted the types of questions the researchers asked during the literature discussion.

In the following days, a group of students from a higher ability-reading group demonstrated the literature circles while the other students observed, a "fishbowl" observation strategy. The observing students provided feedback of what they heard and saw to the literature circle participants. Next, all second graders participated in literature circles for twelve discussions. Initially, the researchers organized the literature circles homogeneously by guided reading groups. The groups used texts at their instructional reading level. Students were divided into eight groups, four groups engaged in literature circles and four groups observed the separate circles, using the "fishbowl" observation strategy. In the beginning, an adult facilitated each group. All discussions were videotaped throughout the study. Each discussion ranged in length from eight minutes to twelve minutes in length. After each circle, the group watching the circle shared their cheers and coaching with the group that had been discussing the literature.

In an effort to shift the focus from the social aspects of the literature circles to active engagement in the discussion, the researchers used reflective practice methods to collaboratively plan, execute lessons, examine lessons via video recordings, debrief on student success and instruction to plan subsequent lessons. The researchers continued to refine instructional practices over the next twelve weeks, while the classroom literacy instruction continued to include whole group skill lessons, guided reading instruction, and independent literacy workstations. The students read the books for literature discussions during silent reading time and/or at home.

Data Sources

In action research studies, data collection is a result of the systematic and intentional study of one's own practice

with the goal of improving that practice (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). A related methodological goal of the present inquiry was to base documentation upon evidence taken from the daily life within the second grade classrooms. Different types of data collection techniques were used throughout the course of this study, so that the multiple data sources could be used to validate the findings (Maxwell, 1996). The different methods of data collection identified possible findings to the two research questions discussed in this paper. The instruments included (a) videotaped observations, (b) field notes, (c) interviews, (d) reading motivation surveys, (e) reading assessments, and (f) collection of artifacts in the form of the students' notes.

Results

Based on an initial analysis of our findings, we found that the literature circles developed into a more natural conversation, students generated higher-level questions to engage more participants within their discussion circle (see Table 1.), and students' reading attitude increased slightly over the three-month period (see Table 3.).

Table 1. Evolution of Questioning Skills Over the Course of Twelve Literature Discussions

Samantha (reading below grade level)	Why did Frederick say to close his eyes? (from Frederick)	Do they like the gift that connects them to the world? (from The Magic Box)
Timmy (reading on grade level)	How did the rock slide begin? (from The Magic Box)	How does an earthworm survive downpours through the night?(from Earthworms)
Ryan (reading above grade level)	When Miss Rumphius went to the island, did she go to visit someone? (from Miss Rumphius)	Why would Mario keep the cricket? (from Cricket in Times Square)

After reviewing the taped discussions, we found that students relied less on prompting, engaged in a conversation about the book read, and demonstrated various types of comprehension strategies throughout the conversations. The conversations not only included higher-level questions but also connections and inferences about the text. This increase means that students actively engaged in comprehension strategies while reading and discussing the text (see Table 2.).

Table 2. Evolution of Thinking Skills Over the Course of Twelve Literature Discussions

Samantha (reading below grade level)	I think Frederick is cute ? (from Frederick)	I think it would be weird to live without a T.V. I can't imagine not having a magic box. (from The Magic Box)
Timmy (reading on grade level)	I think the family is poor. (from The Magic Box)	I wonder how many times you tear an earthworm. If you could tear it many times and it would still grow back, you could grow your own fish bait. (from Earthworms)
Ryan (reading above grade level)	Miss Rumphius dresses funny. ? (from Miss Rumphius)	I am not sure it is very smart for Mario to be friends with a Cricket who is friends with a mouse. Mario needs to find real friends so he can play real games. (from Cricket in Times Square)

Table 3. Elementary Reading Attitude Survey Results

February	38.11	44.8	40.26
May	39.63	46.63	41.61

A more significant result included a transfer of the discussion behaviors to other areas of the school day. One example included a reading intervention group of students who began to engage in discussions about their thoughts and opinions without the teacher's facilitation. Normally, these five boys do not contribute to a conversation unless asked directly. One of the boys asked a question, "What would happen if they didn't change the color of the ball?" The boys began an impromptu literature discussion. They piggybacked, questioned, concurred, disagreed, justified answers by quoting the book, without planning, and without adult participation for a full twelve minutes. The teacher actively listened, observed, and waited. Finally when the discussion stopped, another boy commented, "We just did some piggybacking like lit discussions!" The attitudes and comments of the others reflected his realization;

"That was awesome."

"He showed where it was in the book."

These responses are atypical for this intervention group.

Scholarly Significance

The findings of this research support the theoretical rationale presented earlier in this paper. All the suggested implications for teaching, while being grounded in the sociocultural framework, drew from the theorists that influenced the current study. The present study highlights the complexity of classroom interactions that are social by nature. Each year, every teacher inherits a group of children with very different and numerous social experiences that influence how they understand literacy. It is thus important for educators to provide venues that would allow our children to interact with one another and test out their knowledge and experiences. As teachers it is our professional commitment to work toward creating such experiences for our students.

Although educational institutions and teachers "talk about and teach separate interpretive activities," reading, viewing, listening and so on, children "actually live in whole cultures and bring insights from one medium into their approach to another" (Mackey, 2002, p. 50). Children, "today actually read within the framework of a sophisticated context that includes numerous forms of media, multimedia, and cross-media engagement" (p. 51). Against such a backdrop, this study generated six implications for teaching that will be of relevance to future research: (a) use of think strips prior to discussions, (b) teaching social skills prior to launching discussions, (c) bringing out-of-school interests to discussions, (d) student selection of books, (e) transferring discussion skills to other contexts, and (f) orally sharing thinking prior to writing responses to reading.

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