

**What are the effects on students' reading comprehension when they participate in book talks?**

*Mathew Effect: The Poor Get Poorer and the Rich Get Richer*  
*The Reading Version : Poor Readers become poorer readers and good readers become even better readers.*

**Purpose and Rational**

The purpose of this action research was to study the relationship between classroom discussions and the reading comprehension development of children. The research examined the implementation of Book Talks (BTs) with particular attention to Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive objectives and the assumption that talking about texts would enable students to acquire the ability to make new insights , correct misrepresentations and misconceptions and discover new ways to relate to each other. The study was based on the following inquiry questions: a) what are the effects of BTs on students' reading comprehension? b) how can a teacher avoid poor readers from becoming poorer readers and support good readers to become even better readers? c) what is the influence of teaching Metacognitive strategies on deepening students understanding?

*Theoretical and Research Framework*

This action research is informed by sociocultural theory and the transactional theory of reading response (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978,1986, Rosenblatt,1978) which presupposes that talking about texts increases the reader's abilities to think, reason, and understand. Metacognitive Theory also influences this research with particular focus on teaching students self-regulating and monitoring reading strategies. A number of studies support the significance

of metacognition in cognitive development and academic learning (e.g., Myers & Paris, 1978; Paris & Myers, 1981, Paris & Jacobs, 1984, Duffy, 1993).

Research on language, literature and thinking (Bakhtin, 1981, Vygotsky, Freire) suggests that talking about literature can transform learning experiences such as reading into cognitive structures. Talking is a particularly good way to develop and extend students' deep understanding of what they have read in all content areas especially to enhance their own personal lives.

The overwhelming amount of students in my class scored Below Basic (BB) or Far below Basic (FBB) on the CST. This may suggest that students utilized lower level thinking skills, such as drawing out factual answers from text, recalling facts, and recognizing terms about a concept, rather than utilizing higher level thinking skills that would allow them to transfer and apply concepts to another context.

The BTs offered an opportunity for me to engage students in what Vygotsky called "zone of proximal development" to find out where they are, what they think and to go beyond the information given. The dynamic discussions in the latter part of the year clearly supported the transactional principles of "mediating intellectual activity"

### *Interests Motivating This Research*

It is widely acknowledged in literature that there are many variables that affect students' reading comprehension development such as teacher quality and behavior, the reader's Metacognitive knowledge, students background knowledge, motivation & perception as a reader, variability in texts are just a few

of many identified by reading researchers. In order to be effective, I designed my reading instructions with most of these variables in mind. I felt that my practice was pretty sound with regard to teaching reading and the formative assessments supported my assumptions but the perplexing difference in ELA scores demonstrated that there was still a gap in my instruction.

*Assessment Scores*

A fall 2005 teacher report produced by the San Francisco Unified School District(SFUSD) Achievement Assessments Office which provided score information for the 2005 California Standards Tests(CST) in English Language Arts (ELA) showed data that compares District students, school students and my fourth grade students to the proficient range of students throughout California.

Figure 1

Average Percent Correct

Reporting Strand/Cluster	District Students	School Students	My students	Proficient Range
Reading Comprehension	56%	45%	42%	67-84%
Literary Response& Analysis	61%	51%	48%	73-87%

The ELA scores was just one evaluation tool among a variety of assessments which fall under three categories: entry level, formative and summative tests. Entry level tests at the beginning of the school year assess the student's current knowledge of any particular topic, formative assessments measures students understanding and learning of the current topic and allows

the teacher to ret each the information. Usually these forms of assessments are in the context of the study while the class is still learning that particular topic. Lastly the summative assessments which are generally in the form of a) end of the unit test and /or b)state wide standardized tests evaluates the students understanding and ability to transfer information in another context.

## **Methodology**

### *Book Talk Model*

Each week at the start of school year, students read an assigned text from the Houghton Mifflin Student Anthology which was the SFUSD adopted English Language Arts curriculum. The students answered reading comprehension questions and wrote summaries. I provided direct explicit instructions on reading strategies such as questioning aloud as I read. Students received direct instructions on self correcting strategies such as context clues whenever they found they did not understand the text. I facilitated the BTs and prepared discussion questions twice a week. Most of the discussions were characterized by: a) mostly teacher talk and short answer phrases from students b) lower level questioning that assessed students' abilities to draw out factual answers, recall facts & recognize terms from the text.

In contrast to this, during the Spring 2006 semester, students were facilitating the BTs and I had removed myself as facilitator. Moreover the students prepared their own discussion questions.

*Setting*

The student participants are from an inner city school, Dr. George Washington Carver Elementary School, which is located in the Bayview Hunters Point (BHP). According to the 2000 US Census, 48% of the residents are African American, 1.3% American Indian, 23 %Asian & Pacific Islanders, 17 % Hispanic and 10% White. The unemployment rate is 13% in BHP which is twice the rate for the city as a whole. The students are from my own classroom with twenty students composed of twelve fourth graders and eight third graders. Eight students are African American, seven Samoan, one Cambodian, three Samoan, and one Tongan.

*Data Collection Procedure*

This qualitative study used two tools for collecting data. Students were videotaped three times, once in the Fall and twice during the Spring semesters. The book talks were transcribed and coded. In this procedure the students' questions and statements were examined based on Blooms(1956) & Anderson & Krathwohl(2001) taxonomy. The other source of data was the student's individual CST(2004-05) Reading Comprehension scores.

The teacher /researcher conducted guided discussions twice a week in the Fall. In the guided discussions I focused the BTs questions related to knowledge and comprehension questions (i.e. What is your favorite part ? Who are the main characters ? What is the setting, problem and solution?)

### *Data Analysis*

Three instructional conversations were chosen for analysis based on a combination of Bloom's(1956) original Taxonomy of cognitive objectives and Anderson and Krathwohl's(2001) modification of these categories. The researchers who studied under Bloom revised the categories by changing the nouns to verbs. These classifications were used to determine the levels of questioning during the BTs. The following table shows the taxonomies starting from the lowest level of cognitive thinking, Remembering (*Knowledge*) and Understanding (*Comprehension*) to the more advance categories: Analyzing, Evaluating, and Creating.

Table 1: Bloom, Anderson & Krathwohl Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives

<i>Bloom</i>	Anderson and Krathwol
<i>Knowledge</i>	Remembering
<i>Comprehension</i>	Understanding
<i>Application</i>	Applying
<i>Analysis</i>	Analyzing
<i>Synthesis</i>	Evaluating
<i>Evaluation</i>	Creating

### *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*

Here is an excerpt from the first videotaped session after the group read Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters. The questions fall mostly in the first two

categories : Remembering and Understanding. The answers consisted mostly of short phrases and students did not elaborate or give reasons for their answers hence there was not a smooth flow to the discussions. Below is an example of the types of questions students and the teacher/researcher asked.

- **Teacher:** *Who are the main characters and what is the setting?*
- **Teacher:** *What is the problem and the solution?*
- **Student One:** *Can someone summarize Mufaro's Daughters?*
- **Student Two:** *If Manyara was queen would Nysasha be servant?*
- **Student Three:** *Why does it have the title it does?*
- **Student Four:** *Would you want to be a magician?*
- **Student Five:** *At the end ...how did the garter snake change shape?*
- **Student Six:** *Why does Manyara want to be queen?*
- **Student Seven:** *Did you like this book?*
- **Student Eight:** *What's your favorite part?*

#### *Who Stole the Wizard of Oz?*

The following is an example of the second videotaped session in January 2006. The questions can still be categorized in the Remembering and Understanding categories, however there is a notable improvement in the level of the discussions (i.e. longer and included elaboration ) and the questions include: a) applying b) analyzing and c) evaluating categories.

- **Student One:** Do you think Mrs. Chesterton should have stolen the books?
- **Student Two:** Who do you think is the real thief?
- **Student Three:** If Becky and Toby stole the book ,how would you feel?

- **Student Four:** Does the story teach you a lesson?
- **Student Five:** Which character would you like to spend a day with and why?
- **Student Six:** How would you feel if you were accused of something you did not do?

*Island of the Blue Dolphin*

Here are two examples of the last videotaped session at the end of the school year in June 2006.

Example A:

Student One : Do you think Karana could be chief of the island?

Student Two: I don't think she can be chief because she's a girl and she burnt down the village

Student Three (interrupts): yeah but didn't you do the reading homework yesterday she made a new house

Student Two: yeah but I still don't think she can be chief—she's by herself

Student Four: I agree because even though Chief Kimki is gone he's still chief of Ghalas-at if they come back Karana can't be the chief.

Student Five: I disagree with you –they won't come back because they know the Aleuts might come back to the island.

Student Six: yeah but isn't the village laws ..is that the law for women that They can't make weapons- if she can't make weapons and they have a war with somebody else how can she be chief?

Example B:

Student One: if you were in the story would you change the way it is or would you like be a different character?

Student Two: I didn't get your question.

Student One: If you're in the story, the author put you in the story and just

pretend its you in real life would you change it? You're in the story and you're in the story?

Student Three: (others chime in) oh yeah ok like we are another character In the story. oh I yeah yeah I get it..

Student Three: I wouldn't change the story if I was an extra character because I would jump off the ship if my brother jumped off to go to the island to get his spear.

### *Results and Discussion*

A few significant findings emerged from the data analysis of the BT: a) students were more likely to ask higher cognitive level questions when they were told there would be a book talk following the reading of the text, b) answers included more elaboration using phrases, details and ideas from the text, c) students perceived many benefits from the BTs, d) more students were motivated to completed reading tasks prior to BTs, e) teacher and students were able to identify and correct any misinterpretation of information f) understanding of texts more likely constructed by the students rather than the teacher, g) standardized formative assessment showed a significant improvement for most of the students.

The results of this research raises some important questions. First, what other variables could have positively affected the questioning students . For example, Did the parents help them with the questions? Did knowing the camera was videotaping them influence the questions? Another question that has emerged is with regard to measuring the level of questions. Regardless, the

findings suggests that participating in book talks had a positive influence on students reading comprehension.

### **Educational Implication**

Obviously one action research about students participating in book talks can generate limited knowledge about the effectiveness of one pedagogy. However, coupled with research on sociocultural theory (Rogoff, Vygotsky), important research on reading performance and instruction of dialect speakers (Burke, Pflaum, Knafle, 1982; Labov, 1982) and results of Metacognition on student achievement (., Myers & Paris, 1978; Paris & Myers, 1981, Paris & Jacobs, 1984, Duffy, 1993) this study has important implications for classrooms and the use of discussions after reading texts. This study supports the use of talk as an instructional strategy to further enhance student's abilities to construct their own knowledge and meaning from texts as well as assist teachers to evaluate students understanding and reasoning.

Administrators can add Book Talks as an alternative to Sustained Silent Reading in their daily schedules. Book talks can help solve the problems teachers face with not having enough time to teach reading. Teachers can easily implement this instructional strategy in their classrooms with minimal professional development.

### Citations

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