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Readers Theatre: Evidence for art
infused Reading Instructional Strategy.

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Readers Theatre: A Viable Reading Instructional Strategy.

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Reader's Theatre is a drama-based reading instruction strategy that usually includes small groups of students reading from a hand-held text with no costumes or staging. The dramatic emphasis is on prosody: rate, tone, emphasis, and phrasing all important aspects of reading fluency (NAEP, 2002). Participants can also add characterization through facial expression and gesturing as they sit on stools or stand facing their audience while performing. Teachers find Readers' Theatre easy to use because it involves little preparation and cost, requires no dramatic expertise, needs no props, and can be done practically anywhere. Readers' Theatre has been recommended (Rasinski, 2003) as a reading fluency strategy. In this paper we offer evidence that Curriculum based Readers' Theatre (CBRT; Flynn, 2004) can facilitate the process of reading comprehension by deliberately engaging the reader in an interpretive act which forces student participants to go beyond mere decoding and towards creating meaning through explication. To examine this hypothesis we will present evidence from a three year study of Readers' Theatre in a Southern California school district.

Past research on the confluence of drama and reading suggests that vocabulary, language facility and reading can be directly impacted by the use of drama in the classroom through the transitional process of reader and text (Podlozny, 2000). More specifically Readers' Theatre has received significant attention in the last decade because of the growing emphasis on increasing oral reading fluency through repeated readings (Ransinski, 2000). Flynn (2004) presented the concept of Curriculum Based Readers' Theatre as:

Curriculum-Based Readers Theatre differs from traditional Readers Theatre in that its script topics come directly from classroom curriculum content, not from published scripts or stories. Curriculum-Based Readers Theatre (CBRT) scripts

are based on curriculum topics and are written to address prescribed standards of learning. They can focus on, but are not limited to, stories and literature.

(p.361)

To understand how pervasive the use of Readers' Theatre has become, despite the lack of clear research supporting this activity, we conducted a Google© search for "Readers' Theatre" yielding thousands of relevant "how-to" websites, scripts, and scholarly discussions. Given the wide use of Readers' Theatre, it is important to provide research supporting the benefits of Readers' Theatre benefits reading instruction and more specifically Curriculum Based Readers' Theatre. We hypothesized that the benefits of using Readers' Theatre in the classroom are rooted in three separate processes: 1) engagement with the text, 2) developing fluency, and 3) motivation. Each of these processes can individually increase reading comprehension. When students engage in Readers' Theatre they have to read and analyze the text in order to plan and produce a performance that will be understood and appreciated by the audience. The social implications of performance provide motivation for the students in a goal-directed activity that has a clear end-product. Oral repeated reading transforms from a mundane and often dreaded task to one of fun and excited anticipation because now it is re-associated with the cachet of being an actor.

Drama and Comprehension

There is accumulated empirical support for the use of drama in the classroom. In her carefully conducted meta-analysis of the use of drama to strengthen verbal skills, Podlozny (2000) found 80 experimental and quasi-experimental studies examining the drama's impact on literacy. Podlozny showed when instruction focused on student enactment of the text there was a moderate effect size on written reading comprehension measures related to the text and a

somewhat lower effect size when the reading comprehension was measured by standardized instruments. While Podlozny provides impressive support for the efficacy for using drama in the classroom only a two of the studies she cites are focused on Readers' Theatre strategies. Since most of the studies in the meta-analysis focus on dramatic instruction that is different from Readers' Theatre, they provide theoretical support for the Readers' Theatre approach, but do not provide direct empirical evidence unequivocally supporting the scaled up use of Readers' Theatre in the schools.

Bakhtin (1986) suggested that meaning is elucidated by word choice, emphasis, and attitude. In Readers' Theatre there is little place for word choice as it often uses the exact original text instead, significance is placed on emphasis and attitude as ways of communicating meaning to others. The student-actor must internalize the text to read the parts in character as well as interpret meaning so that both appropriate facial expressions and physical gesturing can be added to enhance the voice work. The listener-audience garners meaning through this interaction of text and performance.

Drama and Fluency

Simply put, fluency is the ability to read with automaticity (rate) and online comprehension (prosody) exerting little effort. Fluency frees processing capacity that can be used for deep comprehension processes (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). There is strong evidence linking reading fluency and comprehension (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001). Studies of fluency usually focus on the easily quantifiable measures of accuracy, rate or a combination of the two. While these are important components, we suggest that prosody is an important component that separates "word callers" from self-monitoring expressive oral readers. Prosody is often the observable evidence of online comprehension.

The main finding of recent studies (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003) on the contribution of fluency instruction in the classroom is that various modes of repeated oral readings were important contributors to growth in fluency. Current emphasis on fluency all points to common roots, particularly the work of Samuels (1979), McCormick and Samuels (1979) and Dahl (1974) on the effects of repeated readings on struggling readers. Rasinski (1994; 2003) placed high value on repeated readings and their impact on oral fluency rates and presented a compelling rationale and a method to expand fluency as part of the regular reading instruction.

The research on fluency indicates three possible benefits as part of Readers' Theatre fluency instruction. The first is motivational, i.e. texts are engaging and support independent student-group repeated practice (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1999). The repeated practice is interactive in nature and engaging to all participants. A second aspect is the creation of meaningful context for re-readings, thus a rote activity becomes purposeful and even fun (Rasinski, 2003). Beyond the motivational aspects Readers' Theatre provides an emphasis on the oft neglected prosody aspect of oral reading (Schreiber, 1991). The interactive contextualized text provides ample opportunity to highlight intonation, phrasing, and attention to punctuation as the text comes to life. Peer and teacher feedback on the prosodic aspects become acceptable pointers to successful performance for both the group and the individual. And finally, working on group performance fosters engagement with the text that enhances comprehension of the specific text through familiarity and discussion.

Drama and Motivation

Expectancy theory provides the foundation for a coherent argument that explains how drama in the classroom impacts student motivation. We claim that the motivational aspect of drama is more than the perceived "play-acting is fun" attribute. The framework of achievement

motivation provides a clearer explanation for increased student persistence, quantity of effort and cognitive engagement leading to improved achievement. Reading behavior according to the Eccles and Wigfield (2002) *expectancy value model of motivation* focuses on two motivational beliefs that impact achievement behavior: 1) goals that lead students to value the task and 2) task-specific-self-concept that leads to expectancy of success. In drama, the goals are very well defined. When students know that the goal of the activity culminates in a performance in front of a live audience, they become highly motivated to achieve at the best of their ability. One of the most important aspects of using Readers' Theatre in the elementary classroom is that the time between goal setting and achievement is very short. It can be easily argued that task value increases significantly when Readers' Theatre is used in the classroom. The second motivational belief is expectancy for success: repeated practice embedded in the procedures of Readers' Theatre increases students' expectancy of a successful performance.

Readers Theatre in Practice

Readers' Theatre has three phases that combine to build reading fluency, motivation, and comprehension: interpretation, practice, performance and listening. *Interpretation*, in terms of Readers' Theatre, involves not only vocabulary and text comprehension, but also the translation of the text into vocal and kinesthetic actions. During this phase, children actively engage with the text and build their comprehension. For example, the student when reading the lines of a sly fox, first must develop an understanding of slyness in the context of the story and then consider how to convey this slyness using tone and phrasing coupled with facial expressions.

In the *practice* phase, students repeatedly read the script to hone their performance all the while receiving feedback from their teacher and peers. This repeated reading enhances their oral reading rate and prosody. The subsequent *performance and listening phase* is often conducted

within a classroom. The *performance* portion of this phase is an extremely important part of the Readers' Theatre process as it provides meaningful goals, a social environment, and a strong sense of audience, which help motivate even the most reluctant reader (Tyler & Chard, 2000). The *listening* portion of this phase occurs naturally since Readers' Theatre is done in small groups. Most of the participants are listeners who provide feedback at the conclusion of the performance, which encourages the listeners to think about the manner in which the oral reading conveyed both text through the spoken word and subtext through the acting.

The advantage of this particular scripting method is that it does not disturb the author's word. It virtually leaves it intact. This allows the reader to be exposed to the intent and flow of the original piece, creating a stronger analysis and comprehension tool to use while moving through more complex and difficult literature.

Adams (2003), Founder of The Readers Theatre Institute, insists that anything can be scripted. However, novice scriptmaking should begin with literature that has direct dialogue and uses a third person voice. This is because it is much easier to determine how to balance a script so that the narrators and the characters carry close to equal responsibility to the piece.

Step 1: Orally read through the selection with each person in the group reading a sentence. This brings each member their first exposure to the literature piece simultaneously.

Step 2: Identify the main characters, or those that have direct dialogue. "Earthquake Terror", a story by Peg Kehret, found in the fifth grade Houghton-Mifflin anthology (2003) lends itself to this kind of scripting.

"Mommy!" Abby's shrill cry rose above the thundering noise.

Jonathan struggled toward her again, his heart racing. When he finally reached her, he lay beside her and wrapped his arms around her. She clung to him sobbing.

"We'll be okay," he said. "It's only an earthquake."

Only an earthquake. He remembered magazine pictures of terrible devastation from earthquakes: Homes toppled, highways buckled, cars tossed upside down, and people crushed in debris. Only an earthquake.

"We have to get under shelter," he said. "Try to crawl with me." Keeping one arm around Abby's waist, he got to his hands and knees and began crawling forward on the undulating ground.

"I can't!" Abby cried. "I'm scared, the ground is moving."

Jonathan tightened his grip, dragging her across the ground. A small tree crashed beside them. Dust rose, filling their noses.

"I want Mommy!" Abby shrieked.

The example above illustrates how to identify the direct dialogue (underlined) spoken by the two characters, Abby and Jonathan. By highlighting the quotations only, it becomes evident that the characters do not have a balanced amount of the story to carry. The beauty of literature is that the author allows the reader to not only hear what the characters have to say but allows the reader to make the imagery in his own mind through descriptive writing. This writing includes the characters thoughts and actions as well as vivid images of the time and setting. Once the characters have been identified, it becomes a simple task to determine the narrators. If the author has given life to characters he has also given life to each character's inner thoughts, feelings, and actions. Therefore each character can have his/her own narrator. In this story we can divide the narration into two narrators; one for Jonathan (light grey) and one for Abby (dark grey).

Step 3: Divide the narration by assigning each character a narrator to play their alter ego. This process is called Divided Narration.

"Mommy!" Abby's shrill cry rose above the thundering noise.

Jonathan struggled toward her again, his heart racing. When he finally reached her, he lay beside her and wrapped his arms around her. She clung to him sobbing.

"We'll be okay," he said. It's only an earthquake."

Only an earthquake. He remembered magazine pictures of terrible devastation from earthquakes: Homes toppled, highways buckled, cars tossed upside down, and people crushed in debris. Only an earthquake.

"We have to get under shelter," he said. "Try to crawl with me." Keeping one arm around Abby's waist, he got to his hands and knees and began crawling forward on the undulating ground.

"I can't!" Abby cried. "I'm scared. The ground is moving."

Jonathan tightened his grip, dragging her across the ground. A small tree crashed beside them. Dust rose, filling their noses.

"I want Mommy!" Abby shrieked.

Although this step has separated the narration and has allowed for more logical participation, it still does not lend itself to an optimum balanced script. It becomes evident that the characters do not share equity with the narrators.

In a piece of literature the author has invited us into the world of the characters. We not only know what they are saying but we also know what they are thinking and doing. It becomes a task of analysis to legitimately assign more of this to the actual character. This is accomplished through demonstrating movement through gestures and mime and by moving some of the narration to the character.

Step 4: Analyze the narrations and search for the words that the characters can demonstrate or speak. Assigning narration to the character requires the sentences to be divided past the pronoun. A character cannot use the pronouns that refer to him but can possibly state what he is doing.

“Mommy!” Abby’s shrill cry rose above the thundering noise.

Jonathan struggled toward her again, his heart racing. When he finally reached her, he lay beside her and wrapped his arms around her. She clung to him sobbing.

“We’ll be okay,” he said. It’s only an earthquake.”

Only an earthquake. He remembered magazine pictures of terrible devastation from earthquakes: Homes toppled, highways buckled, cars tossed upside down, and people crushed in debris. Only an earthquake.

“We have to get under shelter,” he said. “Try to crawl with me.” Keeping one arm around Abby’s waist, he got to his hands and knees and began crawling forward on the undulating ground.

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Jonathan tightened his grip, dragging her across the ground. a small tree crashed beside them. Dust rose, filling their noses.

“I want Mommy!” Abby shrieked.

At this point the script can become usable to the students. By assigning the highlighted parts, the student can read from the text. Additional analysis can include interpolations (sound effects), miming, gestures, and actions that are performed from music stands for the narrators, and stools for the characters. This is *Staged Readers Theatre*. It is a practical way to bring

performance to the classroom without elaborate blocking, costuming or time-consuming rehearsals.

Step 5: (optional) Retype the highlighted story into script format. Assign the staging so that the narrators are in close proximity to their character. This can be seen in the Appendix.

Research Support

In a series of designed experiments described below analyzed the impact of Readers' Theatre as an instructional strategy to improve comprehension through oral reading fluency, motivation, and engagement with the text. Study research designs progressed from a pull-out intervention with a single expert delivering instruction to a small student-group to a scaled-up model in which multiple teachers provided instruction in Readers' Theatre for a variety grade levels. The objectives of the studies were: (1) to examine the efficacy of Readers' Theatre as an instructional component in the elementary classroom and (2) to analyze the challenges of scaling-up intervention research. The scaling-up process not only investigated the efficacy of the approach, but also began to come to grips with the ever-increasing issues of professional development and implementation fidelity: we believe that these issues of scalability are essential for the translation of research into practice.

Study 1

The first study was conducted to determine the efficacy of Readers' Theatre as an instructional strategy. In order to avoid variations in implementation, an arts specialist delivered instruction for all experimental students. Special care was taken to ensure that all students received equal instructional time. The curriculum used in the study included excerpts of narrative text and poetry from the district basal. The research question was, "How much does Readers'

Theatre increase students' reading achievement?" The study examined whether Readers' Theatre was as effective as other drama strategies examined in Podlozny's (2000) meta-analysis.

Discussion

The conclusion was that a highly controlled application of Readers' Theatre for a limited time produced moderate effects in reading recognition and comprehension. The effects were larger for curriculum-based assessment (unit test) and smaller for standardized assessments. The study showed a clear advantage for the use of Readers' Theatre over standard reading instruction.

Study 2

In this study, the arts specialist trained the teachers in Reader Theatre techniques. The training involved two days of training focused on Readers' Theatre concepts and delivery. The study teachers then attended a specialized professional development session on the study procedures. Participating teachers chose the two focus basal narrative texts, Reading –California Grade 4, Boston: Houghton Mifflin (2001). They learned the scripting techniques developed by Adams (2003), which allows the teacher (or students) to adapt the basal text into a Readers' Theatre script without modifying a single word in the original text. These fourth grade teachers then provided the classroom instruction in this scripting technique to the students. The teachers were randomly assigned to an experimental block in an alternate block design.

In highly controlled applications of Readers' Theatre the curriculum-based results were highly significant. The large effect size in the first block is a result of a ceiling effect in the outcome measure, i.e. many students in the experimental group scored 100% correct on the test. The relatively moderate effect size in the second block is more in line with results of the first study, but also may reflect carryover effects from the first block. Analysis of the oral fluency

results showed gains for all students for the two blocks with benefits for all ethnic and language groups.

This study showed that teachers could effectively use Readers' Theatre components as part of their regular reading class instruction. These results further strengthen the conclusion that this approach helps all students not just struggling readers. It is important to note that, as in Study 1, the benefits are not limited to reading fluency but extend to comprehension and vocabulary.

Study 3

In the final Study, the experimental volunteer teachers attended a two-day Readers' Theatre training session and one day pre-experiment orientation session. The experiment group also attended an additional day of training during the middle of the study to review early results and to focus implementation.

The experimental teachers were asked to provide 1 hour a week of Readers' Theatre activities for the study period. They were encouraged to script stories as well as to engage in choral reading and prepared script performance. They were asked to keep a monthly time log and were observed in the classroom infrequently. Both experimental and control groups were to use the district mandated reading program by Houghton Mifflin (2001).

Scaling-up decreased the impact of the Readers' Theatre in the classroom despite the increased amount of time that teachers were able to use the Readers' Theatre strategy. While there appeared to potentially more time, the looser controls allowed a diluted implementation. We found that the instruction tended to be sporadic, instead of the sustained regular implementation of Readers' Theatre in the first two studies. The small effect size reflects diminished implementation and the reduced novelty effect.

Conclusion

While Readers' Theatre has often been cited as a repeated reading strategy (Rasinski, 2000) few studies have shown its actual contribution to students reading performance. The series of studies presented here show that a carefully conducted Readers' Theatre component can increase student performance in both fluency and comprehension. The evidence from the three studies shows not only that Readers' Theatre is an effective strategy when used by experts but that it can be implemented successfully in the classroom.

One caveat must be highlighted here: the Readers' Theatre component used in our studies was NOT based on ready made scripts written by others, but rather on classroom curriculum. This feature cannot be underestimated as it connects content and domain knowledge with fluency practice. The use of scripting techniques by teachers and students led to longer reading periods and immersion with the texts increasing both fluency and comprehension.

The series of studies presented the dilemma of scaling up of validated instructional components. It is not simple or straight-forward transferring practice from carefully controlled experiments to wide scale application. The main dangers are demands on teacher and classroom time, teacher fidelity to the core ideas of the instructional component, and long-term commitment. The result of these challenges was smaller but still significant effects in large-scale implementation.

In considering future scaled-up experiments, professional development and teacher support must allow for incremental increases in teacher self-efficacy and classroom practice. The scripting technique with its time demands often resulted in time management dilemmas for the classroom teacher and researcher alike. Based on discussions with participating teachers pre-scripted basal stories should be the first step. Teachers would build their own implementation

skills while seeing more immediate student results with less initial effort and instructional time. Increased self-efficacy should result in stronger fidelity to the implementation during the latter part of the experiment. This process of professional support has wide application in a variety of implementation studies.

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Appendix

CAST

Reader1: Jonathan

Reader 2: Narrator 1 for Jonathan

Reader 3: Abby

Reader 4: Narrator 2 for Abby

STAGING

_____ 0 0 _____

N1 JON ABBY N2

ABBY: "Mommy!"

N2: Abby's shrill cry rose above the thundering noise.

R2: Jonathan struggled toward her again, his heart racing. When he finally reached her, he

JON: lay beside her:

N1: and wrapped his arms around her. She clung to him sobbing.

JON: "We'll be okay,"

R2: he said.

JON: It's only an earthquake."

N1: Only an earthquake. He remembered magazine pictures of terrible devastation from earthquakes:

JON: Homes toppled, highways buckled, cars tossed upside down, and people crushed in debris.

N1: Only an earthquake.

JON: "We have to get under shelter,"

N1: he said.

JON: "Try to crawl with me."

N1: Keeping one arm around Abby's waist, he got to his hands and knees and

JON: began crawling forward on the undulating ground.

ABBY: "I can't!"

N2: Abby cried.

ABBY: "I'm scared. The ground is moving."

N1: Jonathan tightened his grip, dragging her across the ground. a small tree crashed beside them. Dust rose, filling their noses.

ABBY: "I want Mommy!"

N2: Abby shrieked.

N1: He pulled her to the trunk of the huge redwood tree that had uprooted.

JON: "Get under the tree,"

N1: he said, as he

JON: pushed her into the angle of space that was created

N1: because the center of the redwood's trunk rested on the other tree.

N2: When Abby was completely under the tree,

N1: Jonathan lay on his stomach and his left arm thrown across Abby.

He pulled himself in as close as he could so that both he and Abby were wedged in the space under the big tree.

ABBY: "What's happening?"

N2: Abby sobbed. Her fingernails

ABBY: dug into Jonathan's bare arm.

"It's an earthquake."

"I want to go home."

N2: Abby tried to push Jonathan away.

JON: "Lie still,

N1: Jonathan said.

JON: "The tree will protect us."