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Building Substantive Engagement through the Use of Connection Prompts

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Abstract

Conversation is a strategy that helps students build reading skills and improve reading comprehension. This study describes the implementation of connection prompts in a 2nd-grade classroom to support students in making predictions, questioning the text, and initiating further conversation. Research suggests that once conversation is initiated, students learn how to carry a conversation and can use it to help build understanding. A qualitative research design was used to identify key themes that emerged from multiple visits to the classroom. There was an increase over time in the frequency of students making connections/predictions, questioning the text, questioning other students, using the connections to think about the text, and working together to build a deeper understanding of the text with the regular use of connection prompts. Further, the connection prompts helped the teacher and students remain focused and on-task. The connection prompts are a simple tool to promote critical thinking through conversation.

Keywords: literacy, book clubs, book circles, book groups, elementary, reading, connection, prompts, comprehension, building knowledge, conversation, dialogue, substantive engagement

1. Introduction

Conversation is a strategy that helps students build reading skills and improve reading comprehension. It is not widely used in the primary grades due to limited time and perceived effort by the teacher. This study describes the implementation of connection prompts with second-grade students in book clubs. These prompts were cues implemented by the teacher that helped students make predictions, question the text, and help initiate conversation. Research suggests that once conversation is initiated, students learn how to engage in conversation as well as initiate conversation. A qualitative research design was used to identify key themes that emerged in field notes from multiple visits to the classroom. The connection prompts resulted in an increase over time in the frequency of students making connections/predictions, questioning the text, questioning other students, using the connections to think about the text, and working together to build a deeper understanding of the text. Further, the connection prompts helped the teacher and students remain focused and on-task. They promoted conversations in the classroom immediately and stimulated deeper conversations in a six-week period. This study suggests that second-grade students are fully capable of conducting conversations with critical thinking about literature and that teachers can scaffold these conversations with a relatively easy-to-use tool.

While conversation as an instructional tool is a well-researched area, it is not used often with regard to reading in early grades (Almasi, O'Flahaven, & Arya, 2001; Berry & Englert, 2005; Christoph & Nystrand, 2001). Teachers regard discussion as a valuable tool, but they admit to not using it. Commeyras and Degruff (1998) reported that only 33% of teachers indicated they frequently use conversation about literature (in the format of book clubs) in their classrooms, while 95% indicated they believe it to be useful. Typically, classroom conversation is dominated by the teacher and teacher-directed activities (Mercer, 1995; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003). In a study of classroom discourse, Nystrand (2003) noted that teacher-directed activities make up about 85% of class time. Student talk makes up about 8% of classroom talk (Baumfield & Mroz, 2002), and teacher questions are primarily closed or procedural (Groenke & Paulus, 2007).

Conversation is a tool teachers use to engage students substantively (Almasi, 1995; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). Teachers are also able to assess student understanding through listening to student talk. Conversations are often initiated and propelled by question answering and question generation. Through conversations, students often

refer back to story structure and summarization strategies to clarify, connect, and expand their knowledge. Further, the National Reading Panel (2000) report cited conversation as having a positive effect on comprehension across grade levels. Conversation can be initiated and facilitated through the use of questioning. When conversation is used instructionally in the classroom, it supports student knowledge and beliefs, and perpetuates further conversation with student participation (McIntyre, Kyle, & Moore, 2006). At its best, it is facilitated by the teacher and structured with the use of specific prompts (Baumfield & Mroz, 2002; Berry & Englert, 2005; Blum, Koskinen, Bhartiya, & Hluboky, 2010; Clark & Graves, 2005; McCarrier, 1995; McIntyre et al., 2006; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Rosenblatt, 1978; Sipe, 2000). Prompts can be used to initiate conversation and promote student questioning, which in turn decreases teacher-led conversations (Wells & Arauz, 2006). The guided instructional conversation, if well supported, develops into conversation.

In this study the teacher used an intervention of connection prompts, which are open-ended questions that ask the student to make connections and predictions. Open-ended questions, connections, and predictions are three features of questioning that have been shown to lead to substantive engagement. Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, and Long (2003) suggest the use of prompts (which they refer to as dialogic bids) to initiate and sustain conversation. These prompts are authentic questions, to which there are no prescribed answers. A connection prompt is one that asks the student to associate the text with his or her personal life, general observations, or other texts. When a teacher uses a connection prompt, the students are encouraged to connect the text to their prior knowledge, personal life, or other texts.

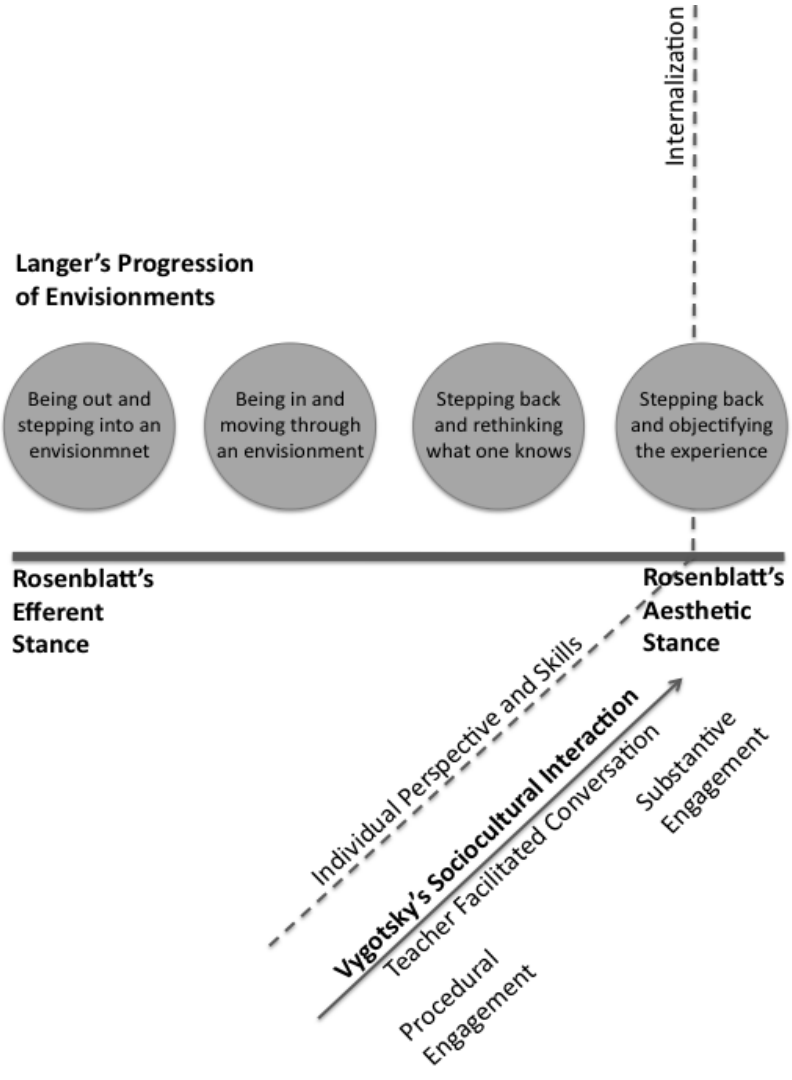

Figure 1. An integrative model of the theoretical framework

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three theories: (a) Rosenblatt's (1978) Transactional Theory of Reading, (b) Langer's (1990) Theory of Envisionments, and (c) Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Learning Theory. The first two theories describe an individual reader's experience with a text, and both theories indicate that a social environment contributes positively toward the experience in that it leads to substantive engagement. Vygotsky stresses the role of social interactions in the development of the individual and the internalization of skills and vocabulary learned in the social context. The students in this study engaged in a social context facilitated by a teacher. An integrative model of the three theories is depicted in Figure 1.

All three theories recognize the individual reader and her or his learning experience. Rosenblatt (1978) stresses the importance of how the reader approaches a text. She also explains the importance of recognizing that each reading experience is different and builds on the reader's experiential reservoir informing the future reading experiences. Similarly, Langer (1990) recognizes the reader's orientation. She continues to describe the process a reader goes through, and her second, third, and fourth envisionment occur fully with a reading for literary understanding orientation or, as Rosenblatt asserts, aesthetic reading. Vygotsky (1978) is central to the proposed study in that he defines the experience of learning through social interactions. The treatment in this study was administered in a social setting with the intent of teaching through social interaction. It was predicted that this would not only help students make meaning of the text, but help bring the experience with them (as with Rosenthal and Langer's theories) and internalize the skills used to construct meaning. Figure 1 outlines the theoretical framework for this study by incorporating Rosenblatt's continuum, Langer's envisionments, and Vygotsky's theory of social learning. With Rosenblatt's continuum, the horizontal line, goes from efferent (on the left) to aesthetic (on the right). Langer's envisionments (the circles) also progress from an efferent stance to an aesthetic stance with the implementation of a social (teacher-facilitated) environment. The dashed line represents the individual progressing through the envisionments while exposed to the social experience (indicated by the solid line with an arrow). Student discourse develops within the social experience. As the student moves vertically through a social experience, she or he is predicted to encounter Langer's four envisionments. This happens only as she or he also moves horizontally towards what Rosenblatt refers to as an aesthetic reading. The individual internalizes language, ideas, and processes learned in social settings. In this study the prompts help to stimulate the social setting (the conversation). Based on Vygotsky, it is theorized that the reader will internalize the experience of the conversation and the reader will then be able to approach a new text with an enhanced ability to read with a critical perspective and better conversation skills.

3. Research Questions and Methodology

This qualitative study examined the following research questions: a) what is the nature of conversation during book clubs after connection prompts are introduced as measured by student responses (what are the social discourse patterns and what is the content of the discourse)? and, b) what are the experiences of the teacher with regard to the use of connection prompts during book clubs as measured through teacher interviews and observational field notes?

The book clubs were implemented in a classroom with one teacher and 20 second-grade students at a small private school on the West Coast of the United States. The teacher had nine years of teaching experience. She taught at the school for two years and was new to the second-grade classroom. This particular teacher was selected for this study because she had been teaching reading comprehension strategies such as self-generated questions, predictions, and connections to the literature in large-group reading sessions and with partner reading. She also was interested in implementing book clubs in the curriculum and had an interest in learning how to increase conversation around literature. The students were asked to participate because they were working with this particular teacher. There were 12 girls and eight boys. The average age of the students at the beginning of the data collection was seven years, nine months. Ten were white/Caucasian, four were African-American, one was Latino, and five were Asian-American. Thirty-four percent of all students at the school receive financial aid for tuition and more specifically, 30% of the second-grade students at the time of the study received financial aid. All students had parental permission per Institutional Review Board-approved consent forms.

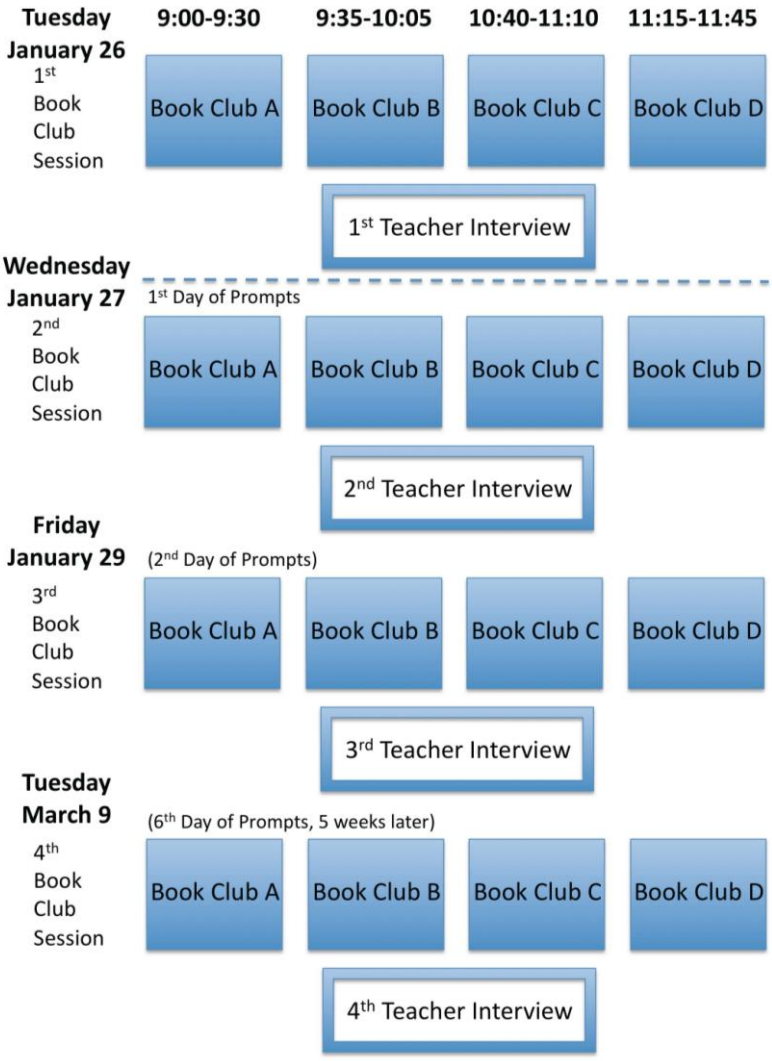

Figure 2. Chronological progression of book clubs and interviews

Students were separated into four book clubs assigned randomly by, and led by the teacher (referred to as Book Club A, Book Club B, Book Club C, and Book Club D), with five students per book club. The researcher observed each of the four book clubs five times (for a total of 20 book club meetings, each approximately 20 minutes long) and conducted four teacher interviews (one after each book club) (see Figure 2). The first book club did not include connection prompts. A set of one meeting for each of the four book clubs is referred to as a book club session.

The book used for the three initial days was Marshall's (1983) *Fox at School*. In each session the students read a chapter. The book was recommended by the teacher because it is a grade-level book, and it is an ideal book to use when introducing connections because the main character, Fox, encounters situations familiar to the subjects (i.e., being on stage in a school play and fire drills). For the final book club session (and the book club in between during which there was an informal observation) the students read Cameron's (1981) *The Stories Julian Tells*. This book was also selected by the teacher and is at grade level, but more challenging than *Fox at School*. It has more complex vocabulary and is written in the first person. The teacher felt the students would be able to relate to the main character well.

As the story was read aloud, the teacher stopped for any pressing questions and comments and the three discrete prompts (during the second, third, and fourth book club sessions). The teacher modeled responses to the prompts in the first book club session in which prompts were used. The first connection prompt was used during the story

(the teacher paused in the middle of the story to pose it), **"If you were writing this, what would happen next?"** The prompt allows students to take on the role of the author and to voice their opinion on what would logically happen if they were writing. Prediction is a commonly used strategy for reading comprehension. The second and third connection prompts in this study were used after the reading. The second connection prompt, **"Does the book make you wonder about anything?"**asks the students to be creative and question the text. The questions can be in any form, from plot-related to author's purpose. Research indicates the use of student-generated questioning is a useful reading strategy (Baumfield and Mroz, 2002). The final connection prompt in this study, **"Does this book remind you of anything?"** asks students to directly connect to the text in any way they feel comfortable (for example, prior knowledge, prior experience, or other texts). The researcher recorded all book clubs and teacher interviews digitally and was not an active participant in the instruction or student conversation.

There were teacher interviews after the second, third, and fourth book club sessions. This time the interview was used to gauge teacher perceptions of the conversation that followed the treatment. The second, third, and fourth interviews were also open-ended, but focused on the use of the prompts (teacher comfort level using the prompts and student use of the prompts). The questions for the second, third, and fourth interviews were: (a) "How do you think the book club went?" (b) "Do you feel the connection prompts encouraged the amount of conversation?" (c) "Do you feel the quality of conversation was different with the use of connection prompts?" (d) "Do you feel student understanding was different after using the connection prompts?" (e) "Do you think the connection prompts helped the students make connections to the text?" and (f) "Are there any changes you would make?"

4. Data Analysis

After the book clubs met, the book club conversations were transcribed and read for preliminary expected categories: (a) connections, (b) predictions, (c) questions, and (d) uptake. Using these categories the data were categorized through multiple reads of the data, and there was 91% agreement with a research assistant. The patterns in the data supported the four initial categories, but there were unexpected patterns that yielded four new categories: (e) inference, (f) constructing meaning, (g) enthusiasm, and (h) off-task comments. The initial four categories were processing categories. There was a new processing category, which, that expanded on connecting, predicting, and questioning. Further, a product category emerged, constructing meaning. The final two categories that emerged, enthusiasm and off-task comments, were affect categories.

5. Results

Table 1. Total Occurrences by Category and Book Club Session

Category		Session			
		1	2	3	4
Original Categories	Connections	36	57	33	76
	Predictions	5	27	45	32
	Questions	2	14	22	25
	Uptake	17	76	72	79
New Categories	Inference	2	25	25	14
	Constructing Meaning	29	49	58	88
	Enthusiasm	4	15	18	17
	Off-Task	13	3	2	2

The book club sessions were coded by category and the number of utterances in each category was tallied. Table 1 reports the total occurrences of each category across four book club sessions. Each category increased from the first book club to the fourth, except for off-task comments, which decreased.

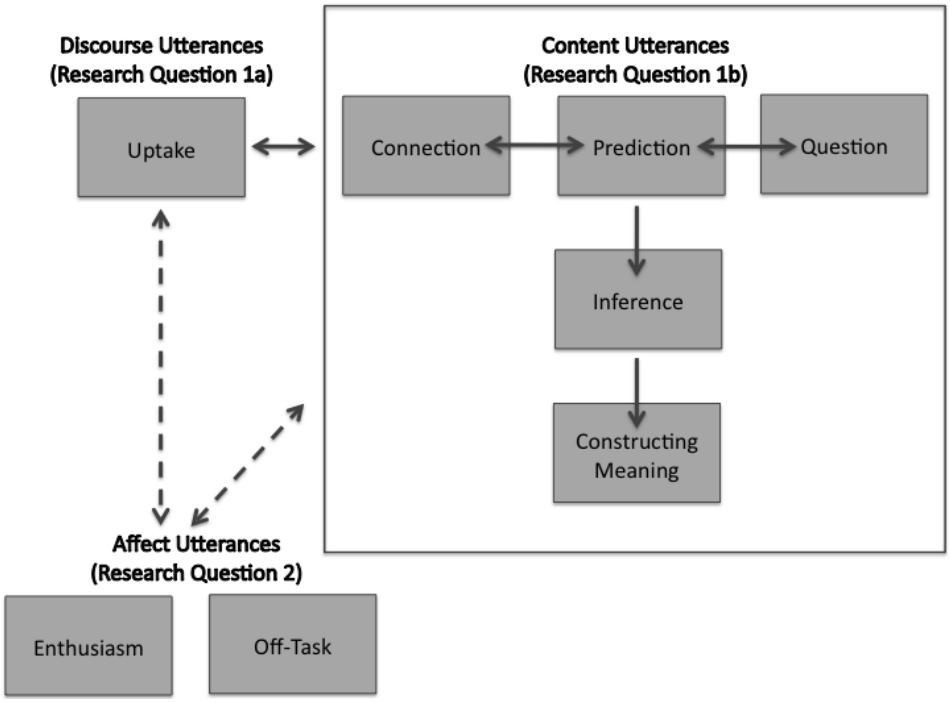

Figure 3. Interconnectedness of categories

Figure 3 illustrates the connections between the categories of talk. The category that best describes the discourse is uptake. It increased dramatically as the book clubs progressed. There are five categories that make up the content utterances: (a) connection, (b) prediction, (c) question, (d) inference, and (e) constructing meaning. Uptake influences further connections, predictions, and questions, as indicated on the model by the double-sided arrows. Uptake increases with the increase in connections, predictions, and questions. The content of the discourse can be described by the connections, predictions, and questions. These lead to inferences and ultimately to constructing meaning (through the use of uptake), as indicated by the flow of arrows within the content utterances. Enthusiasm and off-task are affect categories. They do not directly indicate discourse or content, but they certainly affect it, as illustrated by the dashed arrows. Descriptions of the categories are provided in order of complexity of content.

5.1 Off-Task

Off-task comments decreased from the first book club session (13 utterances) to the second (three utterances) and remained low (two utterances) for the final two book club sessions. The nature of the off-task comments remained similar throughout the book club sessions. During the first day of book clubs the comments ranged from, "I just have to say Mercy Watson!" to "I love your [the teacher's] earrings." In the final book club session an off-task comment was, "I'm so tired." The decrease of off-task comments suggests that the book club environment developed into a classroom environment with more focused attention. This is supported by the teacher interviews and field notes, which suggest that students remained on-task more when guided by an activity and/or teacher.

5.2 Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm went from four in the first book club session, to 15 in the second, then 18, and a final 17. The data suggest that with the introduction of the connection prompts students were more engaged readers as enthusiastic comments rose dramatically from the first book club to the second and remained high throughout the fourth. Enthusiasm was a simple, "Can I go first?" (Book Club A, 1-26-10) in the beginning. In a later instance students began chanting, "Book club rocks! Book club rocks..." In the final book club session the enthusiastic remarks showed a true engagement as the students were responding to the text with, "Ew, Oh God!"

5.3 Connections

Connections increased from 36 in the first book club session to 57 in the second, dropped to 33 in the third, and

then increased to 76 in the fourth. It is not surprising that they increased as the intervention had the teacher prompting the students to make connections. There was a significant drop in connections for the third day as only one connection was made during Book Club C that day. A close examination of the data reveals that the teacher neglected to use the prompt, "Does this book remind you of anything?" which asks students to make connections.

The connections made in the first book club were simplistic statements for the most part. In the first book club they read a book in which the main character is nervous and has trouble sleeping. One of the students remarked, "I couldn't sleep on Christmas Eve." The connections made in the later book clubs were more complex. On the second day of book clubs, when the story was about fire drills, one of the students said, in response to the character being nervous to go down a fire-escape slide, "I'm a little scared because sometimes I think actually it might be real…. I'm scared…" In another book club that same day another student connected to the scared feeling, "Do you know what [Teacher]? I used to be really scared in, of fire drills. The alarm made me scared…When I was in preschool the alarm of the fire drill made me scared… It was so loud, like the first time I heard it I was like, I had no idea what it was." An example from the last day of book club is a connection to the fig tree in the story. The boy in the story is waiting and watching for his fig tree to grow. The student related, "There was this tree, and I always thought it was gonna be growing, but I never knew that it stopped growing already, and so I always thought, 'Oh, well if it's gonna grow I should stay out here.' And I always wanted to camp out in my backyard."

5.4 Predictions

Predictions went from five in the first book club session, to 27 in the second, 45 in the third, and 32 in the fourth. As with connections, the teacher was prompting predictions, so the increase was anticipated. What was unexpected was the drop in number of predictions during the fourth book club session. However, when looking at the increases of utterances in other categories, it makes sense that given the same general amount of time, the amount of talk would remain the same, and the difference would be in the type of talk. In the first book club session the students were able to make predictions and the predictions were simple and based for the most part on predictions about actions (what might happen). One of the students in the first book club session spontaneously guessed, "I bet she messes up." The guess is likely based on the fact that the character, Fox, tends to make mistakes. The student offered no specific details about the prediction. In the later book club sessions some of the predictions take into account more information. For example, on the third day of book club, during a reading of *Fox in Charge*, one student stopped and said, "…from the title, it seems like if Miss Moon was out he would be substitute and then he had to teach a class…" The student processed the story and made a guess using information from the text and referring back to the title of the chapter.

5.5 Uptake

Uptake increased from 17 student uptake responses in the first book club session, to 76 in the second, 72 in the third, and 79 in the fourth. Student uptake showed a dramatic increase, with a small dip in the third book club session. The 17 student uptake responses in the first book club session suggest that students were able to respond to one another. The increase in uptake that followed suggests that they interacted even more when the prompts were used. As the students were exposed to more book clubs, students returned to previous student utterances throughout a book club conversation which suggests that they were listening attentively and were able to connect the conversation back to earlier ideas. Further, they connected back to earlier book club sessions, which suggests a change in the nature of the category from simple responses to critical thinking responses. In addition to general uptake, when a student refers back to earlier comments, another text, or prior conversations, the student is demonstrating a connection to the literature beyond a surface-level understanding and building on prior knowledge. In an example of uptake that refers back to an earlier part of a book club, one student said, "I think the fig tree's not gonna grow and Huey, and Julian's gonna be growing and his dad's gonna be like, 'Do you know what's going wrong with this fig tree? It hasn't been growing.'" The conversation continued from there. Fifteen turns later, a second student said, "… If the dad says that, what [the first student] said… I think he will, maybe Julian will be like, 'Uh, uh.'" In this example, the student returned to an utterance of another student.

5.6 Questions

Questions increased from two student questions in the first book club session, to 14 in the second book club session, 22 in the third, and 25 in the final. The questions in the first book club session demonstrated general curiosity, "I wonder what's gonna happen?" but appeared to demonstrate deeper thought as the book clubs progressed. A question taken from the third book club session, "I wonder why the class lied to Miss Moon?" illustrates a student's confusion over a character's motive.

5.7 Inference

Inference increased from two responses in the first book club session to 25 in the next two book club sessions and to 14 in the final book club session. The two inference responses in the first book club session suggest the students were not expressing independent thoughts about the reading much in the first book club. They were responsive, but not illustrating an ability to think critically about the text. The increase to 25 in the following two book sessions suggests the students were able to expand their thinking about the text and to think independently about it. The increase in constructing meaning could be one of the reasons the inference decreased in the final book club session. As students began to construct meaning, they used their inferences to build meaning together, thereby decreasing the number of simple inferences.

5.8 Constructing Meaning

Constructing meaning went from 29 utterances to 49, to 58, to a final 88. The increase in constructing meaning responses suggests that the students were better able or more comfortable constructing meaning together when using the prompts and exposed to the book club settings regularly over a period of time. During the third day of book club, in a reading of the chapter *Fox in Charge*, Fox is left in charge of the students in his class when his teacher leaves the room. The other students misbehave, and the reader is led to believe for a moment that the principal will punish Fox, not the students who were causing the trouble. Mid-reading, a student made an inference, "Wait, but it's not Fox's fault." Another student constructed meaning, "Yeah, because Miss Moon left the room with him all alone in there." The conversation continued and a third student constructed more meaning, "…It was the class's fault; they wanted to have some, some fun. But, Fox said, 'Open your readers.'" The student who started the conversation with the original inference added, "So it was Fox who was good, and the kids who were bad." The conversation developed as the students constructed meaning with each other.

5.9 Pedagogical Reflections

The teacher noticed after the first book club that the students were not able to articulate reading comprehension strategies. When she asked them to review strategies, they spoke entirely about decoding strategies. Reflecting on this, the teacher realized she had posted decoding strategies on the wall, and she decided to post comprehension strategies as well. The teacher felt a strong need to "push for those questions and those strategies to… get at the deeper meaning." The teacher found the prompts helped her structure conversations, keep students on task, help them think more critically about the literature, and learn to listen, process, and respond to student thoughts. The teacher was comfortable with the prompts because they expanded on reading strategies she was already implementing in the classroom.

5. Discussion

The use of connection prompts during book clubs resulted in an increase over time in students demonstrating the ability to construct meaning. The meaning construction was a combination of students making connections and predictions, questioning the text and other students, using the connections to think about the text, and working together to build a deeper understanding of the text. Further, the connection prompts helped the teacher and students structure the conversation, keeping student focus on-task.

As the number of predictions and inferences decreased, the number of constructing meaning responses increased. One reason could be that the type of response students used progressed from what might have been a simple prediction or inference to a true conversational thought that expanded the idea of another student, constructing meaning. It follows from the interviews with the teacher that the students were better able to keep their comments focused on the text and conversation when she used the connection prompts to help structure the conversation.

With regard to questioning, the teacher noted that it is hard for students to generate questions, specifically with fiction. While the number of questions increased from one book club session to the next, there were certainly fewer instances of questions than connections, predictions, and constructing meaning (for all the book club sessions). This finding suggests that while the connection prompts might have helped the students form questions, it was still more likely for students to utter other types of responses than questions.

The combination of the increased enthusiasm and the reduction in off-task comments suggests that the book clubs provided enough structure to engage students and to keep them on task. This is also supported by the teacher's belief that the prompts helped to structure the conversation and keep student comments related to the text and conversation.

Student discourse was limited in general and also focused on fluency of reading and literal understanding of the text in the first book club. As the teacher continued to use book clubs and implemented the connection prompts,

students began to expand on their own ideas and each other's ideas.

The teacher interviews highlighted two needs for classroom instruction and the benefits and challenges of the prompts. The two needs were to post comprehension strategies on the wall (in addition to the already posted decoding strategies) and to help students learn to form questions. The teacher found the prompts helped her structure conversations, keep students on task, help them think more deeply about the literature, and learn to listen, process, and respond to student thoughts. In the final teacher interview the teacher indicated interest and determination to continue to use the prompts to introduce new literature, but at the same time she noted that she felt the students were implementing some of the prompts automatically. She said, "… the prompts are embedded in their way of being in the books. So if I forgot to do a prompt, let me tell you, there'd be five children reminding me." The implication is that the students internalized the prompts and were automatically using them.

6. Limitations

The study was limited by the fact that all data were collected in one setting and there were 20 subjects. Therefore, the conclusions may not be generalizable. In addition to the sample being small, the subjects were all students in a private school and thus might come from families that value education more than the general public. Methodologically speaking, the researcher did not have more than two days access to the classroom prior to the intervention. The degree to which change was manifested due to the prompts alone is limited. Finally, the researcher had a role in conceptualizing the study and implementing the intervention (present in the classroom during all data collection). Despite the limitations, this study has much to offer in that there is a need for examples of how to generate conversation in the classroom, especially in the primary grades.

7. Conclusion

The connection prompts are a simple tool that lead to conversations in the classroom within a day and deeper conversations within six weeks. After the connection prompts were introduced, the talk between the teacher and students evolved into a conversation in its truer definition, including more instances of uptake. Students not only made more connections with the continued use of connection prompts, predictions, and questions, but they also responded to each other's comments more frequently than previously. The prompts are a tool teachers can use to increase the amount of student talk, which will contribute to reducing the ratio of teacher-to-student talk. In addition to the instruction taking on a more conversational format and the students increasing their participation, the content of the discourse evolved. Student predictions, connections, and questions led to more meaningful thought construction about the text.

Through the use of connections, predictions, questions, and uptake, the students in this study were engaged substantively as demonstrated by their use of inferences and ability to construct meaning together. In the first book club, there were only two student inferences. As the teacher implemented the prompts, inferences increased to 25. Inferences stayed at 25 for the third book club session and decreased to 14 in the fourth. As the number of inferences decreased, the number of responses constructing meaning increased by more than 50%. The decrease of inferences makes sense because constructing meaning involves the use of inferences and expanding on those ideas through uptake. The nature of the talk during book clubs moved from a conventional classroom conversation of teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation to true conversation as the teacher implemented the prompts. The data suggest that the students were better able to respond to one another and expand ideas together.

The connection prompts stimulated and supported instructional conversations in a relatively quick and efficient manner. It took very little time on the teacher's part to incorporate them into her instruction. This is an important finding in that teachers may choose easier methods even if they know another method might be better academically (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 1993; Commeyras, 2007). The connection prompts offer teachers a relatively convenient method that will lead to meaningful reading.

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