

ENCOURAGING REFLECTIVE AND CRITICAL THINKING DURING SILENT READING: AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IN A GRADE 2/3 CLASSROOM

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Abstract

In this action research project, undertaken in a Grade 2/3 classroom, I posed the question: How can I encourage the readers in my class to become reflective and critical thinkers as they read? My aim was to support students in becoming reflective about what they read as well as about the strategies they used while reading, and to support the students in becoming critical thinkers about how they could improve their current reading strategies and understanding of the text. A particular activity upon which I focused was silent reading time. As I modelled strategies, discussed with individual students their skills and how they could improve, directed their thinking with questions, and provided support (such as scribing for struggling writers), I found that the students became much more engaged in their reading and provided thoughtful written and/or oral answers and comments after reading. The students also performed well on the provincial Grade 3 test during which they read and reread the text carefully and provided detailed answers.

Introduction

The art of teaching and the act of learning are intertwined. As the teacher creates learning opportunities for the students, s/he then reflects upon and critically analyses these opportunities in terms of their outcome, both intended and realised. The teacher, in turn, can then learn how to be a more effective teacher in the face of the individuality and complexity of the learners in the classroom. Viewing teaching and learning as two activities that go hand in hand in a kind of symbiotic relationship allows me to imagine things differently. It is not necessary for me to rely solely on external guidance or to feel trapped in a particular method or tradition. My own experiences (both inside and outside the classroom), combined with creative and critical thinking, brings my teaching to the level of an art - I imagine possibilities, search for deeper understanding, build knowledge, and then create varied and respectful learning environments in which each individual feels valued and cared for as they learn.

The journey from words on a page, whether in curriculum documents or the above philosophical understanding, to action in a classroom takes many twists and turns. Action research is one means of professional development that makes the journey one of discovery and excitement. There is no doubt that teaching within the educational system as it is today and has been for many decades is a great challenge, full of obstacles and unrealistic expectations. How can we possibly meet the individual needs of students, scaffolding instruction in order to carry them effortlessly from one level of understanding or skill to the next, when we have such a range of skills and abilities within one classroom? It is an impossible task, but we forge ahead in any case, doing the best we can. And my salvation in terms of professional development has been action research.

The particular action research project I would like to share with you was conducted during a year of teaching a Grade 2/3 class. Over the previous few years, the literacy levels of students in Ontario had become a focus of the provincial government, Boards of Education and individual schools. At my particular school, the primary team had already begun to examine their literacy practices and were well on their way to embracing a 'balanced literacy' approach from Kindergarten through to Grade 3. We had levelled many of the books in our classrooms according to Fountas and Pinnell (1999), purchased new resources that were levelled by the publishers, and read professional literature and attended workshops that suggested ways of implementing a block of time devoted to literacy. As I began to learn much more about the development of reading and writing skills through professional reading and my experiences with students, I became very aware of the difference between being able to read words on a page and being able to truly comprehend and construct meaning from the text.

For my action research project, I chose to explore ways of encouraging my Grade 2/3 students to think about their thinking, their reading strategies, and their comprehension of the text while reading. Since my own learning as a teacher is based to a large extent upon critical reflection of my practice, I wanted to encourage my students to become reflective and critical about their own skills and abilities as readers, and thus become better learners at the same time. My primary focus as a teacher is not improving scores on the provincial Grade 3 test. However, I felt that if the students in my care were to become reflective thinkers, both about themselves as learners and about their comprehension of text, then they should, as a result, be able to provide appropriate responses to the questions on the reading portion of the provincial test (given that their decoding skills were at grade level).

In order for you to enter into my world and understand my actions and thinking, I begin by describing the setting, some of the ideas that influenced me, and current practices within my school. I then focus on one aspect of my research and describe in detail the actions and revisions I took as I assessed the effectiveness of these actions in terms of the thinking skills of my students. The results of my research are embedded in the story as part of the cycle of action research and discussed afterwards as I consider feedback from students and parents that I obtained through interviews and questionnaires at the end of the year. Finally, I conclude with a statement about the value of the research.

The Context

Imagine a classroom in a typical school built in the 1960's. A wall of windows looks out onto a large yard; two other walls are filled with chalkboards and bulletin boards; the remaining wall contains cupboards with hooks for coats, a sink area and storage cupboards. Desks are arranged in groups of four and 24 students fill the chairs. These students bring a wide range of interests, personalities, and skills and abilities with them. A curriculum has been created for these students telling the teacher and parents what these children are expected to know and do by the end of the year. To add to the mix is a teacher who brings with him or her a way of thinking that will greatly influence the structure, ambiance and tension of the learning environment. I am that teacher so it is important that both you and I understand my perspective on teaching and learning in order to understand the reasons for my actions and the expectations I have of my students.

My practice has been greatly influenced by the work of Vygotsky who is widely referred to in current literature on teaching and learning (for example Kohn, 1999; Bruner, 1996; Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000). The idea of knowledgeably assessing the students' understanding and skill and then scaffolding instruction in such a way to guide the students to a deeper or broader level of knowledge makes sense to me. Start where the students are, not where the curriculum assumes they are, and work within their zone of proximal development. I also have read with great interest Wiggins and McTighe's (1998, p.10) book *Understanding by Design*. What "enduring understandings" do I want my students to gain from the experiences I offer to them? When they have moved on, how will they have changed as learners? *Managing the Literacy Curriculum* (Webster, Beveridge & Reed, 1996) was another resource that influenced my thinking about communities of learners and the culture of classrooms. What kind of interactions do I have with my peers and with my students? Do these interactions challenge existing understandings and help each individual "to move forward, to reach new concepts and competencies" (Webster, Beveridge & Reed, 1996, p. 144)?

As I reflected on the challenges and opportunities I offered to my students in the area of reading, I came to the conclusion that it would benefit the students in my class if they were to develop a reflective and critical stance towards their reading abilities, which includes their ability to decode words and their ability to construct meaning from the text. In Kindergarten and Grade 1, the focus is learning to read. The text is supported well by pictures that help with the decoding of words and the meaning of the text. As the length of the text increases and the number of pictures decreases, it becomes increasingly important that the reader use a wide variety of strategies for both decoding and comprehending text. In Grade 3, students who can read grade level text independently need to be focusing on reading to learn. They need to be constructing meaning by using such strategies as predicting, making connections, inferring, summarising, synthesising, analysing, and critiquing (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

In the last few years, there has been a tremendous emphasis on using levelled books in the primary division. Publishers of professional resources and student books jumped on the band wagon and began producing texts for the classroom that were levelled according to a prescribed standard. Because the

Board of Education for which I work has supported Reading Recovery for a number of years and a Reading Recovery teacher worked at my school, we had been exposed to the idea of levelled books already.

Reading Recovery is a program that was originally developed in Australia by Marie Clay (1991). The idea behind the program is to catch students in Grade one who are struggling with reading and give them intensive one-on-one teaching of reading strategies for a half hour a day with a trained Reading Recovery teacher. The students move up through levels of books as they demonstrate their competence at each level. Their competence is determined through the use of running records. A running record is taken as the child reads and is a record of all his or her errors and self-corrections. By dividing the number of words read by the number of errors, the teacher determines if the book is at an easy, instructional or hard level for the child. When a student can read a book with at least 95% accuracy, then he or she is moved up to the next level for instruction.

The advantage to having a Reading Recovery teacher at our school with this amount of expertise in teaching reading was that the primary teachers learned not only about effective reading strategies but also about the differences between the levels of books used in the Reading Recovery program. Using this knowledge and samples of professionally levelled books, we assigned levels to many of the books in our classrooms and began assessing our own students using running records. The students were then told from which bins they could take books for independent reading time. As time went on we became much more knowledgeable about our students skills and abilities in reading.

The Problem

During this time of using levelled books in my classroom, I began to differentiate between the ability to decode words and read fluently and the ability to construct meaning from the text. It became apparent that many of my students who were fluent readers needed instruction in order to be able to grasp higher level skills and concepts. For example, they should be able to appreciate and comprehend the complexities of the text and provide detailed written answers to questions related to the text. The results of the provincial Grade 3 testing indicated that only about half the students were responding with level 3 or 4 answers on the test. Although the test is only a snapshot of a student's skills, it does give a good indication of what the child is independently capable of in the area of written responses.

With my growing understanding of teaching reading through the modeling and practicing of strategies, and my experience teaching students with a wide range of abilities and backgrounds, I began to consider ways to encourage my students to become better learners by reflecting on their skills and abilities and developing a greater understanding of the reading process. As a result of this thinking I posed the following question: How can I encourage reflective and critical thinking in my students as they develop as readers in the primary grades?

The Action

Collecting Data

Before describing my research, I will explain who was involved and how I recorded my experiences and thoughts. To begin with, I invited the following colleagues at my school to be my team of critical friends: the kindergarten teacher, the Grade 1 teacher, the Grade 2 teacher, the resource teacher, the Reading Recovery teacher, a Grade 8 teacher and the principal. Through formal meetings, informal conversations, and e-mail messages, we discussed my actions, concerns, student responses, and revisions to my actions. My data collection included: written messages between my critical friends and myself; a journal in which I chronicled my actions, resources and student responses as well as my own thoughts about those matters; another journal in which I commented in a more general way on my professional development and thinking processes; samples of students' written work; and my observations of students throughout the day. Samples of communication between my colleagues and myself, and samples of my journals can be found at *[website removed]* under M.Ed. Reports.

A concern

Silent reading has always been a nebulous time for me. When I began teaching ten years ago, it was expected that all students would be given time to read anything of their choosing for a period of time every day, during which the teacher would also read silently. The thinking was that the more one reads, the better one gets at reading; logging reading time was important. It was certainly an easy block of

time to fit into the day. I usually had it scheduled right after recess so that the students knew what they had to do and could settle right down and become absorbed in their books. However, being the kind of person who values learning time, I was concerned about the effectiveness of silent reading time both for myself and for students who struggled with reading. I find that readers who struggle with decoding text and readers who think decoding text is the main point of reading do not benefit much from silent reading. They tend to be only looking at the pictures, or reading words but not getting the message, or fiddling with things in their desks, or pretending to read grade level books in order to appear like everyone else. And it also seems to me that silent reading time is a perfect opportunity for the teacher to spend time individually with students in need of extra instructional time instead of reading silently as well.

First action

With this in mind, I borrowed an idea from *Teaching Children to Read and Write* (Toronto District School Board, 2000). At the beginning of the year, I gave each student a small notebook in which to write me a letter about the book they were reading. I modelled this activity by writing a letter to them on chart paper about the book I was reading. Each day I jotted down a couple of sentences about my feelings or thoughts or connections to the text. Sometimes I would comment on a character, or describe the setting, or tell what happened, or maybe make a prediction. This went on for several days. Then I divided the class into four groups and they were assigned a certain day of the week to hand in their notebooks. I wrote a letter back to each student with the hope of extending their thinking by asking questions and providing a model of good writing.

Some students wrote lengthy letters and others could barely get the date on their page in the ten minute response time I allowed. All students were interested in reading my letter to them, but after about four weeks the novelty wore off and I was not seeing any change in the quality of the students' responses. I did not feel the time was well spent.

There are two things I should mention here to provide a more complete picture. First, the students had to be reading a book that was at their reading level as determined by running records and comprehension questions. On an individual basis, I listened to students read levelled books in order to determine the highest level they could read with an accuracy of greater than about 94%. I also asked questions about the text and the connections they made to it. At the time of listening to the students, I engaged them in conversation about their reading strategies and what they could do to improve their skill. We discussed why a text was difficult to read and how to choose books that would not be too difficult to read and understand. These conversations also took place with the whole class during library time when the students were expected to choose at least one book that they could read independently. The levelled book bins in the classroom contained a variety of fiction and non-fiction books, so the students were often exposed to books they might not otherwise choose for themselves.

Second, to support students with their independent reading, I modelled decoding strategies during group lessons. For example, I did a cloze activity where I wrote a paragraph on chart paper and covered up words that I thought might be unfamiliar to the students. By using context, the students predicted what the word might be. I then uncovered the first letter and asked the students to refine their predictions based on that first letter. Then, I uncovered the rest of the word and asked the students to compare their predictions with the actual word. This process was one way of many of demonstrating for the students the various ways of solving unknown words in the text.

Second Action

Getting back to silent reading time, I decided to hold the students accountable for their reading in ways other than writing me a letter. Again, borrowing an idea from a workshop I attended (Lindquist, 2000), I decided to direct their responses by asking specific questions. The following is a sample of the kinds of questions I would put on the board at the beginning of the silent reading period so the students would know what they were expected to think about. In some instances, I put up two questions, one pertaining to fiction and the other to non-fiction text. The students had previous experience with the questions since I used guided and shared reading time to discuss similar questions and possible answers.

- What are the personality traits of the main character? What actions show this trait?
- If your text does not contain characters, describe an object and explain its importance.
- Would you choose one of the characters as a friend? Why or why not?
- If there are no characters, would you like to find out more about the topic? Why or why not?
- What were you reminded of as you read today? Give lots of detail.

- Describe the setting of your book.
- Retell in about thirty words what you read today.
- Pretend you are one of the characters or objects. Tell what you think you might do after school today.
- Rate this book on a scale of one to ten and tell why you chose that number.

In order to encourage a detailed answer, I gave a minimum number of words I expected the students to write depending on their grade.

Accountability: I continued to read their responses but would often only put a check mark to indicate I had read them due to time constraints like writing report cards, marking other work, and preparation time. I felt that this was not very encouraging for them as I saw them open their books upon receiving them back and look for a comment, so I made another change. At the end of the response time, I randomly chose five names out of my bucket of names (a cookie tin containing a clothespin for each student with his or her name on it). Those students were asked to read their response and add anything important they may not have had time to write down. This action provided a degree of accountability since the students did not want to be caught with nothing written down, and it provided an audience for their writing. Most students were anxious to share their responses, and often groaned when their name was not chosen. It also gave me an opportunity to ask them a question that would further their thinking, and it gave the class a glimpse of the book.

Third Action

There were still a few students about whom I was concerned. These were the students who, for various reasons, seemed to really struggle to get much written. I decided, after discussions with my colleagues, to have them join me during silent reading time in groups of three. They gathered on the carpet with their book bags and response journals and began to read. I called them one at a time over to a table, had them read out loud to me, and then I scribed their response to the question on the board. These three students varied depending on whom I thought could use that kind of support. This gave me the opportunity to monitor their reading and ask questions that helped them with their response if they were stuck. This scaffolding seemed to really boost their self-esteem. When it came time to read responses to the class, they were most anxious to be chosen because now they were confident in what they had to read. Previously, they were not comfortable with the random choosing of names and would be busy trying to make something up on the spot if they were chosen. I had considered having other students in the class take turns being scribes for these students but after discussing it with my critical friends, I rejected that idea because I felt the support I provided would be more beneficial than a peer's.

Fourth Action

Since I was using silent reading time to listen to individuals read and scribe their responses, I was not available to respond to inquiries from the rest of the class. As a result, I suggested to the students that they use post-it notes to mark words or parts of the text they didn't understand and then ask questions at the end of the period (Toronto Board of Education, 2000). This action emphasised in another way the importance of recognising when they didn't understand, encouraging once again a reflective stance. There were always several students with their hands up when I became available to answer them.

Fifth Action

As the students became more competent readers and could explain to me why a text was a good choice for their abilities, I gave them the freedom to choose any book to read. I did spot checks where I asked students to read a short section of the book they had chosen and ask them to tell me a little of what they had already read. I found that students were making good choices and were quite capable of justifying their choice. For example, they said that they knew most of the words, had read similar books with no difficulty, knew something about the topic already, or explained what they did when they couldn't understand a word or passage.

The Results

The first thing I noticed as I revised my actions was a class that became more and more absorbed in their reading. To begin with, the students I chose to sit near me knew that I would be discussing their reading with them, and so they actually read. And when I scribed for them, they suddenly were able to share many more connections and thoughts, revealing much deeper thinking than they could as struggling writers. To me, this valuable time stretched their reflective and critical thinking skills much more than if

they had been left alone during silent reading. The rest of the class also became more engaged for two reasons. One, they were not distracted by struggling readers who were looking for anything to do but read, and second, they were being held accountable for what they read through the questions they had to answer.

The reading responses became much more detailed and varied as well. With questions to guide them and other students modelling their answers by reading them out loud, the length and quality of the answers increased. As well, I was able to ask clarifying questions that extended thinking and involved the rest of the class since they also had comments to make. The immediate oral feedback I felt was much better than a written response that they could choose to ignore at a later date. It also kept me more in touch with students who needed that little extra attention from me.

In May of that year, I felt my actions were affirmed as well when I saw my students writing the Grade 3 test. I saw them rereading, stopping to think, and providing detailed answers. As I considered the skills of my students at the beginning of the year, and the various abilities of individuals, I was pleased and proud of their efforts, regardless of the marks they were to get. As it turned out, as a group they did well. Not including the 2 students that were exempted from the reading portion of the test, 83% of the remaining 18 grade 3 students received at least a level 3. These results were significantly higher than in previous years.

At the end of the year, I assessed every student's reading level and asked them about their thoughts concerning some of the tasks I had them do throughout the year. One question I asked in particular was: Did the reading response journal make you think more about what you read? Following are their responses to that question.

- If I just started the book it helped me think more.
- Sort of. You really thought about the question and tried to get ideas about the story.
- A little. Not that much. I already stop and think a lot. I make pictures in my head. I stop and stare then reread.
- Yes – we would read the story and try to think of the answer. It made us think more about the story.
- Yes – I got to write a lot. Sometimes I read what you wrote back.
- Yes – on the weekend I would read the journal to help me remember what I had read.
- Yes – you think more about the things you read because you had to write it down. If someone just asks you, you might say 'I don't know'.
- Yes – it helped me by making me concentrate on stuff.
- Sort of – not really – it just asked questions.
- Yes – when you asked a question, I figured out what the question meant and then I would read it again so I wouldn't miss a part.
- It helped sometimes because it was asking questions I had to answer. Brandon (a volunteer) wrote down the answer after we talked about it.
- Yes – I got to write things down and explain to other people what I read.
- Kind of – it made me discouraged because I didn't know how to answer all the questions.
- When you asked a question, I could just answer it. I didn't have to think of my own response.
- It was helpful. I would look back in the book to answer the question and would remember more.
- It didn't really help.
- Yes – it made you think back and try to remember what you read. It made you pay more attention to the book.
- Yes – it helped me learn more because it juices my brain up.

Although there were a few negative thoughts, most students felt that the final version of my actions, posing a question, helped them focus on their reading and think more.

Parents also gave me interesting feedback. I asked the following question on a survey I sent home on the second to last day of school. What strategies have you observed your child using that have helped him or her become a better reader? I am particularly interested in knowing about your child's desire to understand the text, perhaps by asking questions about difficult words or ideas, retelling or explaining or discussing what he has read, reading other books about the same topic, rereading the text when it didn't make sense, and other strategies you observed him or her using while reading. These were the

responses to the question: "What strategies have you observed your child using that have helped him or her become a better reader?"

- Rereading
- Asking for help
- Looking for the little word in the big word
- Rereading the same story several times to become comfortable with it
- Retelling
- Asking a lot of questions about what was read
- Discussing story
- Sounding out words
- A desire to understand the story and its main points
- Slowing down and trying to understand the text
- Reading ahead and if that doesn't help, ask for clarification
- Puzzles out difficult words using root words.

Conclusion

Action research is a qualitative study that has as its goal the improvement of practice. This study served its purpose in that the process helped me clarify my own thinking about teaching reading and what I really wanted to see my students doing, that is, thinking reflectively and critically. I made changes to my practice, considered feedback from my colleagues, searched out current best practices to help me revise my actions, and kept written records which helped me clarify my thinking and imagine new possibilities.

Because this research is qualitative, I cannot claim that my actions caused my students to be better learners or better readers, and I cannot prove that my students became reflective and critical thinkers as a direct result of my actions. There were many more influences on the students than just the actions I took during silent reading time. If someone is looking for solid proof or cause and effect relationships, I cannot provide that. But in telling my story, readers can decide for themselves if my actions made sense and use my ideas as they see fit in their own classrooms.

In my current role as a Reading Recovery teacher and a special education resource teacher in a primary division, I am involved with inquiring communities of teachers at two different schools. These teachers are grappling with the same concerns I had about reading comprehension and are searching for ways to help their students become better readers. As we reflect together and share our experiences and ideas, we choose to change our practices as we carefully consider how and why our students learn. Taking into consideration what the experts say and what the current trends are, we feel confident in creating learning environments based also on our own knowledge and observation of our students.

What I can state clearly in conclusion is the feeling of empowerment that conducting action research gives me. I am learning and changing because I choose to do so. When I am asked why I am doing something in my classroom, I can explain my reasons and thinking. As I focus on particular aspects of learning as I have done in this study, I deepen my understanding of the teaching and learning process and open myself to further questions and challenges. Maxine Green (2000, p.12) has a beautiful way of stating my sense of empowerment. "Once granted the ability to reflect upon their practice within a complex context, teachers can be expected to make their choices out of their own situations and to open themselves to descriptions of the whole." If I continue to ask of all the learning opportunities I create for my students, what are they truly learning and are they learning how to learn, then I will continue to refine my practice and hone my skills as an action researcher.

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