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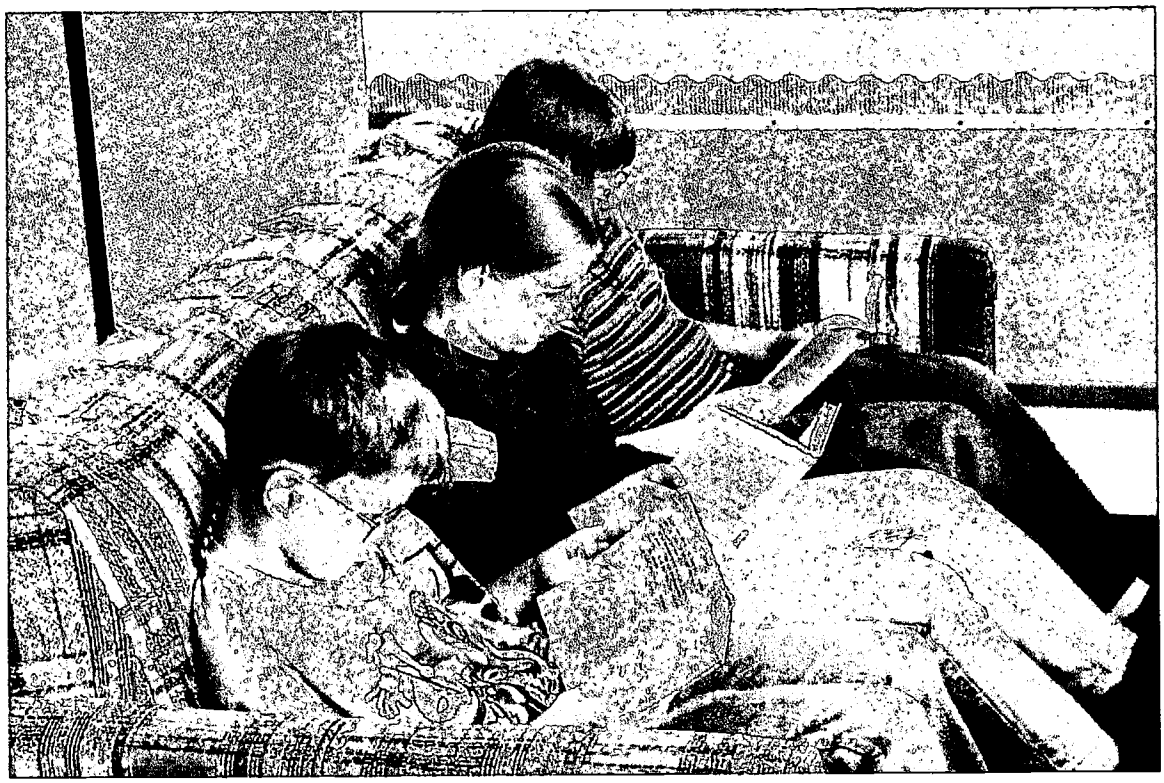
ABSTRACT

This study investigated what would happen when a student teacher incorporated different techniques for improving comprehension into a third-grade reading group consisting of 10 diverse students. The study noted how comprehension changed when students did creative writing in response to literature and how story mapping or character perspective charting changed comprehension. All participating students read at grade level or above. The project involved multiple sources of data. Students completed individual and group interviews. Individual interviews occurred throughout the project. Formal interviews occurred at the end of the project. The group met as a whole for at least 10 minutes every day. At a minimum, before going off for silent reading, there was a discussion of vocabulary and discussion of at least one comprehension strategy. There was more substantive discussion of the book two or three times per week. The student teacher kept notes of his observations during group meetings and silent reading periods. Data analysis indicated that the students' comprehension did not increase as much as expected. The researcher concludes that the classroom culture and student expectations doomed the experiment to failure, as the nonverbal messages to students was that the unique strategies were not important. (Contains 22 references.) (SM)

What happens when a student teacher uses different techniques designed to improve comprehension in a reading group?



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Abstract

A student teacher introduced various comprehension strategies with the ten students in a reading group. The students' comprehension did not increase as expected, leading the researcher to examine what in the classroom caused the proven strategies to fail. He concludes that the classroom culture and student expectations doomed the experiment to failure, as the non-verbal message to the students was that the unique strategies were not important.

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Statement of Intent

Every teacher has had the experience of watching a student read something that really grabs the student's interest, and then asking the most basic comprehension question, only to get a blank look. When that happened to me, I decided to undertake an intensive exploration of what happens when a teacher introduces various techniques that are designed to increase comprehension. I wanted to know what would happen with these children – would they learn to comprehend more, would they enjoy reading more, would they enjoy the reading group more, and would that enjoyment translate into increased comprehension?

My guiding question for this research project was "What happens when I incorporate different techniques designed to increase comprehension in my reading group?" That question led me to also consider "How does comprehension change when I have the students do creative writing in response to literature?" and "How does story mapping or character perspective charting change comprehension?"

Rationale

It has become increasingly clear over the past decade or two that students will become better readers, enjoy reading more, and come to a better understanding of literature when their teachers allow them to use many different modes of response to the literature. These responses may take different pathways – the unifying theme is that they all force the students to examine and express the meaning that they have gleaned from the text.

One approach to the teaching of comprehension that shows some promise is the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies. This approach is independent of the book being read and of the response mechanism used by the teacher. Baumann, Hooten & White (1999) looked at the impact of direct instruction in the strategies of self-questioning, retelling, writing to construct meaning, summarizing, predicting and verifying, and using a story map. They also added in elements of drama (having the students assume the roles of story characters), genre study, journaling, and aesthetic response. They finished the project by having the students participate in discussion or literature response groups. Not surprisingly, given all the techniques employed, they found development in the students' reading comprehension. They made no attempt to determine whether any single strategy helped or whether one strategy may have helped more than another strategy.

Dermondy & Speaker (1999) also found value in direct teaching of comprehension strategies. They incorporated teaching of the strategies into literature-circle discussions, and found that the strategies of making predictions,

generating questions, and summarizing did enhance the comprehension of their students.

Baumann, Jones & Seifert-Kessell (1993) point out that there is a connection between comprehension metacognition (student understanding of whether comprehension is taking place) and the student's use of comprehension strategies. That is, students who are using the strategies of self-questioning, predicting and verifying, retelling, rereading, and withholding judgment and reading on, are more likely to understand and retain information, and are more likely to be aware of their comprehension.

A related technique, which could also be embedded into literature circle discussions, is character perspective charting. Shanahan & Shanahan (1997) started out working with story mapping to increase comprehension. They eventually discovered that students developed a deeper understanding of the text if they used two story maps, side by side, with each story map mapping the story from the perspective of a different character. When looking through the literature, they discovered research that established that children who only consider a story from one perspective do not have as deep an understanding of the story as those who consider more than one perspective. Shanahan & Shanahan found the same result in their research – children had a deeper and richer comprehension of text when they looked at a story from the perspectives of more than one character.

Another creative mode of response is through literature discussion or "grand conversation" groups. The leading authorities in this area, Peterson & Eeds (1990)

say that, "through dialogue, the group (teacher and students together) works to disclose meaning, thereby potentially expanding the meaning of the work for all participants. Because a text's meaning is embedded in the mood of the story, in the ordering of time, in the creation of place, in the way the characters cope and develop, in the story structure, in the point of view, and in the use of language and symbols, these elements of literature will surface naturally through dialogue" (p. 13). As should be clear from this passage, the authors do not believe that literary elements should be taught directly, leaving them for teachable moments that arise during literature discussion.

They do believe that it is important for the teacher to have those elements of story firmly in mind because those elements anchor the students' thinking and prevent dialogue from being no more than a collection of fleeting moments. Teachers have to be listening closely to the ongoing dialogue and be ready to slow down the discussion – perhaps with a "Let's think more about that point." Students will be able to make connections that make story elements real for them in a way that direct instruction cannot accomplish.

In setting up "grand discussion" groups, students are first encouraged to share their personal aesthetic responses to the literature. This is an important first step and must not be slighted. The goal of any literature group has to be to get the children into the text and the broadest pathway into text is through how the text affects the reader on a very personal basis. The teacher must eventually help the students see that personal response is not all there is to a literature experience, but they must wait

until after the children are comfortable with sharing personal response before they can move on to the question of "What is this book all about?" Once the discussion has been started, children will eagerly carry it forward, given encouragement and appropriate selection of reading material.

Teachers can assist in the continuation of the discussion by using encouraging, synthesizing, and inquiring comments. Wells (1995) found that encouraging comments keep the conversation going by showing the listener's interest and involvement. Synthesis comments include empathetic responses and labeling or repeating the speaker's ideas. They encourage students to carry on the conversation implicitly by showing involvement and explicitly when they are accompanied by a request for agreement that a label or paraphrase is accurate. Inquiry comments are those that show the teacher's thought processes – the teacher engages in inquiry as the group together seeks meaning in the text.

It is important, particularly with young children, to set guidelines for the discussion. The most important one must be that talk does not go through the teacher, as it so frequently does in regular classroom discussions – children must be free to respond to each other directly. McGee (1995) suggests that the discussion take place in a circle, that only one person talk at a time, that everyone listen to one another, that the speaker stays on topic (defined broadly as the book being discussed), and that everyone talk once but no more than three times before everyone has had a turn.

Perhaps the most important factor in making literacy discussion groups work is devoting adequate time for the discussions. Many studies have recognized that one of the most significant drawbacks to direct instruction associated with literature circles is that the direct instruction tends to overwhelm the reading and discussion time. Fielding & Pearson (1994) found that the most important parts of a successful reading instruction program are allowing adequate time for peer and collaborative learning and for small group discussions of what has been read.

Peterson & Eeds do not limit their "grand conversations" to oral discussions. They have reservations about the benefit of response journals for some students (and the ability of teachers to use journals profitably), but think that journals can be a useful tool. Writing can be a time when personal connections are made and questions and interpretations set out, but it is important that the focus remains on constructing meaning from the story.

Others do not agree about the limited role that journals should play. Several authors believe that journals, either for the student's use alone or as part of a written dialog with the teacher, can play a very important role in increasing student comprehension of the text.

One proponent of dialogue response journals thinks that the most important role the journals can play is in allowing students to set the direction for the discussion more readily than in oral discussions. Nash (1995) found that dialogue response journals allow teachers to "lead from behind" – letting the students set the direction for the discussion, but also allowing the teacher to occasionally influence the

direction by the responses. She found that the journals provided important insights into the students' reading behaviors, book choices, author's craft and literary elements, endings, plot development, characterization, and point of view. The students' understanding of these matters deepened with time, which is to say that their comprehension became deeper and richer.

Several researchers have found that a combination of several approaches has resulted in increased comprehension. The work by Baumann, Hooten & White has been mentioned above. Linik (1998) similarly described the increased comprehension that resulted from using comprehension questioning, literature circles, creative activities, and journal writing.

Spiegel (1998) particularly considered the place that literature response groups should play in a balanced literacy program. She found that literature response groups have led to students thinking of themselves as successful readers, becoming risk takers, becoming metacognitive about reading, becoming reflective readers, and developing an understanding and appreciation of elements of literature. She pointed out that the social interactions of the literature group are an important factor in student learning because the social interactions invite the readers to extend their thinking and prolong their involvement with the text.

There are many kinds of response to literature. Zarrillo (1989) discovered that successful literacy teachers were using five categories of response: Teachers asked students to speculate, either about what would happen next or what would have happened if something had changed; students were asked to evaluate a character's

actions; students responded from a different point of view; they shared an experience related to the story; and they were asked to make open ended responses. McGee & Tompkins (1995) include as examples of literature response writing a journal from a character's perspective, writing a simulated newspaper article, rereading the story to collect details from a character, writing a poem using images from the book, and writing a sequel to the story.

Heald-Taylor (1995) assembled a broader list as a result of her review of the literature, breaking the activities down into categories of communication, art, and writing. In communication, she includes role-playing a conversation between characters, considering alternate ways of solving a problem from the book with a small group, telephoning a character and giving some advice, and making up a song, chant, or cheer. For artistic responses, she lists making a mural, making a picture book of favorite scenes, making a diorama, or designing something for a character in the book. The writing responses listed are writing a letter to the author about what the student likes about the book, writing a song or poem about the book, writing a job advertisement for a character, writing a resume for a job that might exist in the story, and writing about a personal experience that the story makes you think about.

Writing in response to literature is one very important piece of teaching comprehension. There should be two parts to the writing connection – students should write regularly, probably daily, in response journals. There should also be periodic written responses, selected by students, from a list of some of the options listed above.

As set out above, the research supports a conclusion that using a variety of comprehension tools can enhance comprehension. The comprehension tools work best when used simultaneously, as students need multiple strategies to become competent readers.

Procedures and Process

The researcher is a 45 year old former attorney who has returned to school to participate in an intensive, one-year program that will lead to a Masters of Arts in Teaching and an elementary education teaching certificate. As part of that program, I interned in one classroom for an entire year.

The research was done in a third grade classroom at Gastineau Elementary in the City and Borough of Juneau, Alaska. Juneau is a city of about 31,000 people. It is somewhat more isolated than is indicated by size alone, as there are no roads out of town; everything, whether people, food, or supplies, comes in by airplane, boat, or barge.

Juneau is the capital of Alaska, and state government is the largest employer; state, city, and federal government employs 45% of the workforce. There are still limited populations employed in natural resource extraction, but tourism has become a major part of the economy. The median family income in Juneau is $54,088, and only 5% of the population live below the poverty line.

Gastineau is located on Douglas Island, which is connected to Juneau only by one bridge. The former City of Douglas merged with Juneau in 1970. Gastineau has about 350 students, servicing all of the families on the Island, making it the smallest school in the District. It has 16.5 students for each certified teacher. Its population has little "middle," whether considered in terms of academics or socio-economic status. It has a very high proportion of students either in gifted or remedial

programs. Its service area includes two low-income housing projects and a low-end trailer park; it also has many of the most expensive homes in Juneau.

Juneau has a significant Alaska Native (Tlingit) heritage. Tlingits currently make up 13% of the population and 21% of school age children. Those numbers are higher at Gastineau Elementary, in general, and specifically in the subject classroom. The mentor teacher is Tlingit and many Tlingit parents request his classroom, so 33% of the students are Tlingit. Another 10% of the students in the class are Hispanic.

The research group consists of ten students who are in Gastineau's "middle." The other students in the class are with the gifted or remedial teachers while this group meets for 45 minutes, four days a week. All of the students in the group are reading at or above grade level, some well above. The group has been together since the beginning of the year, and has largely been taught by the researcher. In terms of ethnic mix, there are four Tlingit students and one Hispanic student.

Before this project began, the instruction was fairly structured. The students read a designated amount each day, and then completed a worksheet, generally consisting of fill-in-the-blank and short answer questions. There was a quiz in the middle of most books and a comprehensive test at the end of each book. There was little discussion of the books and no creative response to the literature.

This research project was originally designed to start at the same time as my student teaching. Unfortunately, another unit (the "fairy tale" unit) ran long, causing a couple of difficulties with this project. The fairy tale unit was the brainchild of the gifted and talented teacher, who does one unit a year that mixes the children in

different combinations, putting non-gifted students into her room. The students selected their own books and read at their own pace. When they finished a book, they filled out a story map and then did a project. The projects generally used more creative modes of response to literature than the students were used to seeing.

The first problem resulting from the fairy tale unit was simply the amount of time available – nearly two (extra) weeks were lost to the fairy tale unit, which was time sorely needed for this project. More importantly, it was a poorly supervised unit. Because of lack of coordination between the five teachers involved (two classroom teachers, the GT teacher, and two reading specialists), and the mixing of the groups (resulting in teachers not knowing many of the students), there was little accountability for either the quantity or quality of the students' responses. As a result, the students coming out of that unit had a much different approach to literature groups than they would have had going directly from the more traditional approach normally used in the classroom. The research consequences of that difference are discussed below.

This project involved multiple sources of data. The students were interviewed personally and in informal groups. The individual interviews took place throughout the project, with a formal set of interviews at the end of the project. The group met as a whole every day for at least ten minutes. At a minimum, before going off for silent reading, there was a discussion of vocabulary and discussion of at least one comprehension strategy ("What do you think will happen next?"). There was more

substantive discussion of the book a couple days a week, that varied depending on the book.

I kept notes each day of my observations during the group meetings and the students' silent reading periods. The students produced some tangible response nearly every day, and I retained those artifacts. Finally, I interviewed the students individually as the project was wrapping up.

When the reading group was reconstituted (after the fairy tale unit ended), the group read The Secret Moose, by Jean Rogers, then Goodbye, My Island, by Jean Rogers, and Winter Camp, by Kirkpatrick Hill. The students read at a designated pace for the first two books, then proceeded at their own pace with Winter Camp. That meant that there was limited literature discussion with the latter book.

Analysis & Insights

I believe that the data shows that these students did not learn as well using the techniques I introduced as they did with the previous approach. That result may have more to do with the classroom culture than the worth of the techniques, but the techniques did not work for these students.

A. Book One – Creative Responses

The first book, The Secret Moose, is a lovely story about a young boy in rural Alaska who looks up from the dinner table one night to see a moose walking across the back yard. He stays quiet about his discovery, and goes looking for the moose after dinner. He finds the moose laying on an island in a stream near his home. The moose is seriously wounded and does not seem able to get food for itself. The boy very tentatively starts trying to feed the moose. When he returns the next day, he sees that the moose is pregnant. He eventually witnesses the birth (almost) and watches the moose and calf leave. He never tells about what he has seen.

After the first couple of chapters, I asked the students to put themselves in the boy's situation and write about what they would do. The writing prompt for the day was: "If I found a wild animal, I would like it to be a ____. I would do _____ with my wild animal." Even though the story had warned about how dangerous wild animals can be, and the boy was extremely reluctant to approach the moose, many children said that they would immediately start playing with their animal – several even said that they would ride their animals. Alex wanted to find a fox. If he did, he "would take a nap with [the fox] so we can feel warm. I would ride his back around

the house." Kathy thought that she would keep her elephant secret from everyone so that she could "ride on it, like a house." Ross took the assignment into fantasy, wishing for a vampire bat that he could train to "feed on poisonous snakes, like a Fer-de-lance."

Several of the students did reflect the message of the early chapters of the book. Samuel was perhaps the most realistic, starting with contacting a grown-up or animal control. He might try to feed the animal, but "I wouldn't touch it. I mean would you…..?" Neil also understood the need to call "911 or my mom or dad."

We started the second day with a longer discussion of the book. As might be expected from the written responses, the students' recall was erratic. Several students got into a discussion that seemed very important to them about whether the boy had a younger or older sister. Students were pulling things out of the book, particularly the illustrations, to support their positions, but nobody's mind seemed to be changed. We shared the written responses from the previous day – the discussion that followed seemed to cement the idea that you had to be careful of wild animals, and stay away.

Nevertheless, the responses from some students after reading on still showed little understanding of that basic message. The prompt was: "Draw a picture that shows something important about Gerald and the moose." On one extreme, Tamar

and Kathy showed perfect understanding of what was happening in the book, portraying the boy sitting and looking at the moose from a distance. [Figures 1, 2]

Figure 1, Tamar's drawing

Figure 2, Kathy's drawing

At the other extreme, several students showed high level of involvement with the moose, from Marty petting the moose, and Alfred riding on his moose, to Neil, engaged in a hot game of Nintendo 64 with his moose. [Figures 3-5]

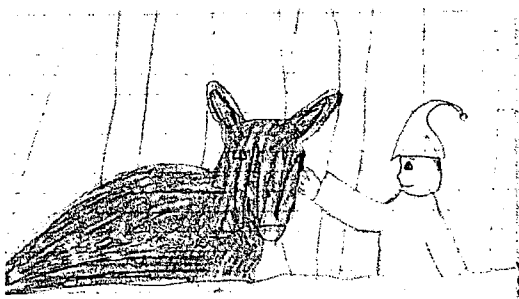

Figure 3, Marty's drawing

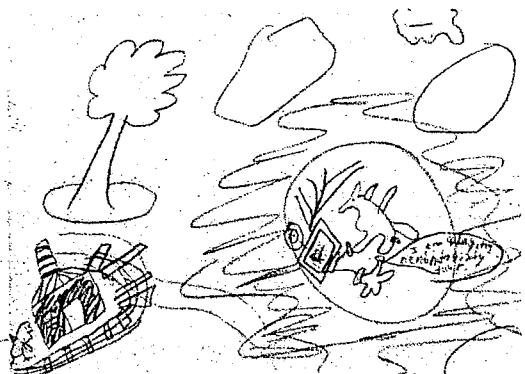

Figure 4, Neil says, "I am playing Nentindo [*sic*] sixty four" with his moose

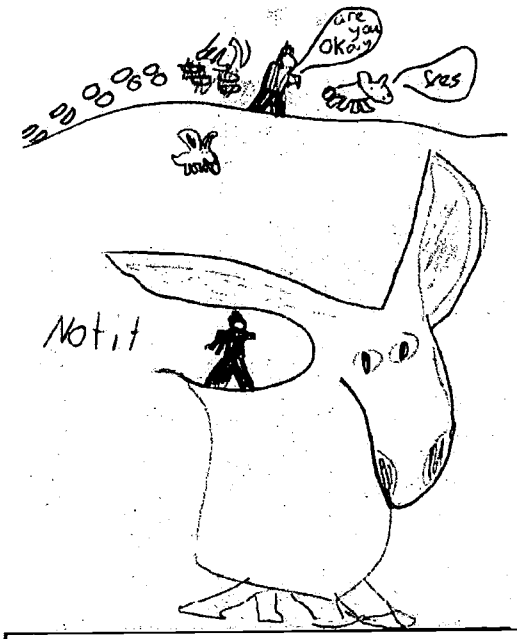

Figure 5, after checking in with his moose, Alfred goes for a ride.

Despite the great work some of the students showed, the level of effort invested was not as high as I would have expected. I had chosen an artistic expression to give those who do not write well an alternative mode of expression, so I was surprised that the same students, some of them very good readers, who do not get written responses done also did not provide much of a graphic response. I was disappointed by the level of comprehension shown in this creative response as I had hoped to see more comprehension displayed than I had seen in student writing in the past.

It was also noteworthy that those students whose drawings were furthest from reality were those who struggle the most with reading. It is not clear whether there is

a problem with focus or decoding, but a couple of these students do need a teacher or student to sit with them and take turns reading aloud if they are going to progress at anywhere near the group average speed. Another of these students frequently reads aloud to herself. On the other hand, Tamar had time for so much detail in her drawing because she finished the reading so rapidly. Giving the slower students more time to respond would not have made a significant difference as those students had drawn everything they intended to draw within the time allotted.

In discussion group the next day, despite the whimsy of the drawings, everyone seemed to understand what really was going on in the story, and what would happen in the real world. After a fairly lengthy discussion, I gave the mid-book quiz. [Appendix 1] It asked students to identify characters, setting, and motive, things that we had discussed several times. Almost everyone got the character, setting, and motive questions right, though several of the answers were somewhat unusual. I did not think that this initial part of the quiz told me much about comprehension, as it was limited to basic story elements. Moreover, because we had discussed everything on the test, it tested listening skills as much as reading comprehension.

The students' responses to the setting question were interesting. All of those students who appear to be better readers said that the two settings were in the boy's house and on an island. Less competent readers were more likely to list "the barn," which only appeared in one minor scene. However, that minor scene did focus on riding a horse and having to do chores for a sibling – perhaps important issues to

those children. One of those who listed the barn has the same family structure as in the story – younger boy and older sister -- which suggested the influence of the reader's schema on comprehension.

The final question on the quiz did give me some information about the students' comprehension. It asked the students to predict what comes next in the story. The difference between stronger and weaker readers was very pronounced. The better readers all predicted that the moose would have a baby, which was not yet apparent from the book; no one else made that prediction. This finding suggested that the discussion group was not helping the weaker readers. They were not getting the information from the text, and the discussion was not adequately supplementing their understanding.

In the chapters read during the next session, the boy was getting worn out from the effort involved in getting food to the moose. The response prompt was: "If [the boy] had found a wounded _____, how would the story be different? What would he have to do to feed the _____?" I allowed the students to fill in the blank as they wished, only rejecting choices that were too close to a moose. I got responses for finding lynx, minks, tigers, and elephants.

The purpose of this exercise had been to increase student investment by giving choice, and to aid comprehension by setting a task that required understanding of the story. I did not feel like this approach achieved its goal. The students were certainly involved, like the student who gave the following answer:

> It would be way different if [the boy] found an elephant. Because [he] would have to live in Africa. He would have to live in Africa because

> elephants have to live in hot places. He would have to feed it peanuts and lots of other stuff. If it had a baby, he would have to stay away because the mom would probably trample him.

However, this exercise did not seem to be accomplishing the goal of sending students back to the book to delve for deeper understanding. The most popular answer was that the story would be different because the boy would have to feed the animal meat. That seemed to be an answer showing a very limited understanding.

Everyone finished the book the next day and chose their end-of- book project from a list I had. Most chose to do an illustration for the book or a story map. One student chose to write an interesting "Dear Diary" entry:

> Dear Diary, I saw a moose when I was eating breakfast. It was going to one of the island in the backyard. The moose was chewing its cud. I followed the tracks and went to the island. There were a lot of willow trees and the moose was laying under then. The moose has a cut on its leg. It seemed like a pretty bad scrape and there was dark blood that coagulated. I watched the moose. It freaked me out because it could have died.

The detail and recall are very impressive, but it is the omissions that are more interesting. The moose has a calf, which is one of the biggest events in the story, and this student omits that event entirely. The moose's departure, and the boy's attempt to say goodbye, are the major focus of the book and those were also omitted. I saw the glaring omissions as evidence that this type of response was not helping comprehension, at least for this student.

The story maps seemed to make a big difference in the comprehension of two boys. They had not shown detailed understanding of the book in their responses or in group discussions. However, after doing story maps, they both got "outstanding"

on the objective test given the next day. Of the five short answer questions, two asked for literal recall, two asked for inferential responses, and one asked for application ("What would you have done?"). [Appendix 2] Those boys performed equally well on all types of questions. (Which was roughly true of the entire group.)

Reflecting as a teacher, I did not feel like it had been a very fruitful two weeks. The creative response modes did not enhance comprehension and may even have distracted some students from focusing on comprehension. The readers who already had good skills prospered because the book was easy for them and those who have struggled continued to do so. In previous books, they all had to find or figure out the answers, but they always had a worksheet every day to tell them what was important (and to force them to participate). The more free-form approach taken with this book allowed some of them to drift away – the direct accountability quotient was definitely down, and that had a significant effect on several students.

B. Book Two -- Focus on Discussion

I did not want to go back to the more direct approach taken in the past, so I resolved to do less written response and a lot more discussion about the next book. In Goodbye, My Island, the narrator is a young Eskimo girl who lives in a very small village on King Island, Alaska. The villagers are losing their store and school, so they will not be able to stay in the village any longer. It is a fascinating introduction into another culture, as well as a poignant story. The cultural aspect was particularly important to me, as I was simultaneously teaching about Alaska Native cultures.

The students did only two written responses to the book, both related to deepening cultural understanding. The first asked the students to discuss the ways that the King Islander's homes were different from theirs, directing their attention to specific details. [Appendix 3] They required a lot of assistance in completing this assignment. The students have had mini-lessons on the strategy of re-reading, and have demonstrated that skill earlier in the year, but that strategy did not seem to occur to them in this context. Several students seemed quite surprised when I suggested they re-read the book to find the answers. With worksheet-based study, they expected to have to return to the text, but they were surprised by the suggestion here -- I started to wonder if there was a subtext to assignments that I was not seeing.

The book spent quite a bit of time talking about preparations for and celebration of Christmas. It drew an explicit contrast between the King Islander's celebration and traditions of people from the Lower 48. I thought this was an accessible point, since children are very familiar with Christmas celebrations, and an important point in terms of understanding how different other cultures can be. Those thoughts led to the second written response, asking the students to discuss five ways that the King Islander's Christmas is different from theirs.

The responses had limited range and detail, with few students coming up with more than the bare minimum list of things that might be different. One thing that was interesting was how they dealt with popcorn balls. Nearly all the Caucasian students mentioned that the King Islander's tradition of popcorn balls was different because they did not make popcorn balls. None of the Tlingit students mentioned

popcorn in that context. The closest anyone came was Shilo's statement that "Their popcorn balls are different because they're red and green," implying that she makes popcorn balls of a different color. This difference brought to mind again the influence of schema on what the reader takes from the text.

The students were getting more used to the idea of discussing the books, and understanding what was expected of them. They were occasionally engaging in rich discussions about the book. Most students participated freely in the discussions, and the comments seemed to show understanding of the essence of the book. The students treated each other's ideas with respect (or simulated respect), but felt free to disagree.

There were days that were better than other days, and discussions that were better than others were. I did note a trend in my observations of many times when students would start to say something, seem to get confused, and withdraw. Marty in particular would start to participate, stumble over what she was trying to say, then shake her head fiercely and say, "Never mind, someone else go ahead." Were they having a problem with the discussion format or were they just not having adequate recall of details without going back to the book?

When we finished the book, and had our final discussion, the students had a test. These students have had a test at the end of every book they have read, so it is part of what they expect. This test used a very familiar format, starting with matching characters or items with what they did or are. The bulk of the test was ten short answer questions, all of which had been the subject of discussion during group

meetings. [Appendix 4] In fact, when writing the test, I went back to my observation notes and drew questions from what had been discussed.

There was little correlation between the importance that I thought had been assigned to questions that came up in discussion and correct answers on the test. For example, one of the most important things in the book was the reasons why the King Islanders would not be able to return the next year. The author explicitly brought the reasons up several times, generally as a way of explaining why someone was acting in some way or why someone was making a particular argument. Those reasons were discussed at least three times in the literature group. The test asked, "What were the two biggest changes that forced the King Islanders to stay in Nome all year?" (The Islanders usually spent the summers in Nome and the winters on the Island.) Only one student got full credit, saying that the store and the school were closing. Several students did not even attempt an answer.

The reasons why the King Islanders could not return to King Island had been emphasized in discussion group so the limited answers were not caused by lack of exposure. The fact that the responses were so underwhelming on such a pivotal point raised a substantial question in my mind about the efficacy of the discussion model for these students – if discussions helped the students learn, I certainly would have expected better answers to this question.

The limited answers to some questions were in stark contrast to the answers to the test questions that were taken from the writing prompts. In many ways, these prompt-derived questions were much "harder" than other questions – the students

had to remember four ways that the King Island homes were different from theirs and three ways that Christmas celebrations were different, while no other question required more than one or two facts. Nevertheless, nearly every student got full credit for the two questions that tracked the writing prompts.

Something clearly was going on. The students demonstrated much better recall of the information that they had written down than the information that they had discussed. Was that because it is easier to write an answer once students have already written the words? Or did they remember more because they had to go back to the book to respond to the writing prompt? Or is it that making these students write something sends a message to the student about the importance of the information?

It is interesting, in a couple of contexts, that the test was heavily slanted in favor of literal questions. Indeed, eight of the ten questions are ones where I could point to the place in the book where the answer could be found, and therefore would be appropriately labeled "literal." (The other two questions were the ones drawn from the writing prompts, and not far from literal themselves.) Tests in the past had been much more evenly balanced between literal, inferential, and applicative questions, and that change from the past may provide a partial explanation for the generally poor test results. However, that does not account for the fact that the test questions were drawn from my notes of the conversations among the students -- if the questions were literal, it was because the discussions were literal.

If you discuss literal facts and then test on those facts, you would expect reasonable test results, all other things being equal. The fact that I did not get the expected result raises interesting questions. One possibility is that different types of information are best learned through different approaches. For example, it is possible that these students need to write literal facts to imprint them on their minds, but can easily learn inferential matters through discussion. Another possibility is that this group of students simply does not learn things well through discussion.

When I stopped to reflect on what I had learned, I decided that I needed to step back to the approach that I (and my students) believed worked better for them. The students had a fairly negative view of the approach we had been taking. Tamar, the only person to do well on the last test, said that she "just didn't learn as much" as under the former system. Others generally agreed, and expressed a desire to return to the old approach.

C. Book Three – Return to the Future

Winter Camp is a much more difficult book than the last two, in terms of size, vocabulary, and difficulty of concepts. The main characters are Toughboy and Sister, two Athabaskan orphans living in a remote village. In a previous book (Toughboy and Sister), they lose their mother to childbirth and their father dies shortly after taking them to an extremely remote fish camp. After surviving alone for months, a village elder, Natasha, rescues them. In this book, Natasha decides they need to learn traditional ways and takes them to the winter trapping camp.

When we started the study of Winter Camp, I reintroduced worksheets. They went back to the earlier model of vocabulary words and statement-based questions. The only changes from pre-research books were inclusion of occasional creative response questions and allowing students to set their own pace with the reading. Allowing that choice of pace eliminated the possibility of much discussion, but made it easier for faster readers to stay involved in the book.

The decision to take another approach has been affirmed by student performance and by the individual interviews conducted after two weeks with Winter Camp. With Winter Camp, we returned to the model of brief discussion at the beginning of literature time, generally focusing on vocabulary, time for independent reading, and a worksheet to complete after every three chapters. The worksheets generally list any unusual vocabulary found in the reading selection, followed by sentences with blanks that correspond to the vocabulary words. The worksheets usually have five statement-based responses ("Putting family pictures up is a waste of time and space. Agree or disagree, and explain your answer" [Appendix 6]). This was varied occasionally with a short answer or other written response ("Write a report card for Sister," who is a main character [Appendix 9]).

The first chance I had to evaluate the choice to go back to worksheets (outside of the worksheets themselves) was the mid-book "project." This writing prompt asked the students to take what they knew about the characters and use that to make predictions about what is coming next. [Appendix 10] All of the responses

showed a good understanding of the plot and essence of the story to date, and had reasonable predictions, as can be seen from the following:

> Neil: Probably Natasha will teach the kids all about hunting that they need to know, and probably after they get taught Natasha will die. Then they will live with Billy and they will go to the same place that they went hunting with Natasha.
>
> Tamar: I think Natasha will teach them everything they need to know and I also think they might get stuck on an iceberg or they might get lost in the woods and not be able to get back fast. I also think they might encounter a wild animal like a bear or something else. Natasha might teach them trapping by sending them to winter trapping camp.
>
> Dennis: I think that they get lost in the woods and then they find each other and then they stay there for a long time trying to find their cabin. They hunted and at nighttime they slept by tree roots where there was no snow so they would not get wet because they had no change of clothes. Then at the end of the book they find their cabin and someone adopts them.
>
> Kathy: I think Natasha will teach them a lot of things then I think Natasha will die of old age. I think it will be 50 below zero soon, and no one will be there to help them but themselves. I think they will finish the trapline. And when winter is over a man will come and pick them up. Then they will learn to take care of Natasha's house.

Several of the students predicted that the children would have to survive without Natasha, and that is very close to what happened. In the book, an old miner (Billy) got stomped by a moose while visiting the winter camp. After Natasha left with the old-timer's dog team to go for help, the temperature plummeted and it was not clear that anyone would survive. Natasha did make it, and a helicopter finally arrived for the miner and the children.

None of the students had their predictions exactly right, but I was very pleased at how realistic the predictions were. All of the predictions were ones that might have happened. This was a startling contrast to the predictions made in the

middle of The Secret Moose, where nobody was particularly close and several students were not even in the right ballpark.

D. Student Perspective

In the individual "exit" interviews [Appendix 11], the students said that they much preferred the primarily statement-based approach taken in the Winter Camp study over the other techniques attempted during this project.

The students were very aware of the different things that we had tried. They were able to list most of the strategies we had tried in literature group throughout the year, including the rare creative response from early in the year. That recall did not have any independent significance for me, except that it validated their other responses. If they did not remember the other things we had done, I would have been concerned that their preference for what we are doing now would be no more than a reflection of the limitations on their memories.

The students were very clear about their preferences and reasons for their preferences. Nearly all said that they preferred the statement-based worksheets that were completed in the Winter Camp study. Tamar started out telling me how much harder these worksheets were, because they covered three chapters each, and how little she liked them. As the discussion continued, however, I learned that she thought that she learned more using this approach than any other approach she had seen. Her reasoning was that these worksheets forced the students to go back to the book to find the answer, and that having to read it again helped to solidify the information. In fact, her criticism of literature discussion was that students were not able to do that -- that the discussions were limited to what students remembered and they did not have the advantage of reviewing the book.

Tamar's insight about the power of reviewing materials is born out by the richness of the worksheet and mid-book project responses for Winter Camp. Her insight is also consistent with the work of Baumann, Jones & Seifert-Kessell (1993), who pointed out that retelling and rereading were strategies that made it more likely that students would understand and retain information.

Another student agreed that statement-based worksheets were the best, though his reason was that they were best because there were no wrong answers. Another student thought that worksheets were easier than writing prompts, and that he also learned more doing the statement-based work. Implicit in his interview was the point of view that any writing project worked better for him than discussion.

I concluded all the interviews with asking the students what the classroom would look like if they were designing the book study. Nearly everyone focused on the statement-based approach, consistent with their belief that they learned more that way.

The exit interviews were very illuminating, but they brought to light another problem that I had with this project. The time frame for the research spanned Spring Break and the parents of several students decided to leave early or come back late. I was able to have meaningful interviews with only seven students because the rest had missed enough time to reduce the significance of their responses.

Summary & Meta-Analysis

Something went wrong here. The research indicates that reading comprehension will increase when various techniques are used, but I did not see any positive changes. The students reported that they enjoyed the other approaches less and that they felt like they learned less. Upon reflection, it seems that there were two things going on in my classroom that got in the way of the results that I would have expected. One problem was situational and the other cultural.

The situational problem had to do with the fairy tale unit mentioned earlier. The students' "normal" approach to literature involved expectations that literature is serious and that they will be held accountable for understanding what they read. With that framework in place, the only change for the research project would have been convincing the students that the new approaches were worthwhile. Instead, given the lack of accountability and structure in the fairy tale unit, I had to work to reestablish the old framework while introducing new (less structured) approaches. The result was that we were not able to reach the balance of seriousness and enjoyment that is necessary for a successful experience with literature discussion groups.

The related cultural issue has to do with the culture of school and the effect of student expectations. Stigler and Hiebert (1998) pointed out recently that teaching, and by implication learning, is a cultural activity. They say that cultural activities "do not appear full-blown but rather evolve over long periods of time in ways that are consistent with the stable web of beliefs and assumptions that are part of the

culture." In this classroom, the message to the students every day is that if something is important, they will have to write about it in some form shortly after it is taught. The teacher uses the Excel math program, where students turn in in-class assignments every day and have math homework every night. They are expected to read every night, and to work on spelling every night; both have forms to fill in after each activity. After every direct instruction period in the classroom, the students have to complete a worksheet or other form of response. They even have worksheets they are expected to complete during and after any video or filmstrip.

The drum roll message to the students is that if something is important, the teacher will signal that it is important by giving you something concrete to do to demonstrate that you understood that important thing. The corollary in student expectations is that anything not followed by a worksheet must not be important. Research has demonstrated that student expectations have a strong impact on their performance. For example, Jamieson (1986) demonstrated that students with a positive expectation concerning their teacher's competence have more appropriate and less inappropriate behavior during instruction and finished with better grades on the unit than did students with no expectations.

In this case, the classroom teacher worked hard, though perhaps unconsciously, to establish student expectations about what is important. This research project attempted to turn those expectations topsy-turvy and expected to get positive results. Anyone familiar with Stigler and Hiebert's work would have realized that positive results were unlikely because cultural expectations and scripts cannot be

readily changed – "Cultural activities are highly stable over time and they are not easily changed."

This research project was fascinating. I developed much greater understanding of the multitude of things that go into creating a positive learning environment. Students have scripts, just like teachers, and it can be difficult to get them to vary from their script. More importantly, their scripts may create expectations about what is or is not significant. If the teacher does not understand what is going on, he or she will be left scratching his or her head, with children who are not learning.

It also is an important reminder of something I learned the first summer of my teacher training -- you cannot do two contradictory things because the messages cancel each other out. The example then was teaching whole language and phonics at the same time, but the same premise applies when you tell students that worksheets signal importance and then do not give them worksheets.

This research has created several interesting questions that I hope to resolve in the future. One question has to do with the nature of learning -- do students learn some types information more readily in one way than another? For example, do they best learn facts by writing them, but concepts by discussing them? I think the cultural question also deserves more examination -- what other student expectations are teachers unconsciously creating? How often are teachers creating their own problems by giving students inconsistent messages?

I still think that the alternate approaches to literature discussion are extremely valuable, but I will have to wait until I have my own classroom, and can create my own student expectations, before giving them a real test.

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The Secret Moose By Jean Rogers

Mid-book Quiz

Characters-Match the characters listed with what they did down below.

A) Anita B) Charcoal C) Gerald D) The Moose

1)_____ He's the main character and is trying to keep a secret.

2)_____ The wounded animal, who eats willows.

3)_____ Gerald's older sister.

4)_____ This character is a horse.

Short Answer

1) Name two places this story takes place.

_____

_____

2) Tell why Gerald is keeping a secret.

_____

_____

3) Predict what you think will happen to Gerald and the moose.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

My Secret Moose By Jean Rogers
End of Book Test

Part 1. (2 points each) Match the characters with the descriptions.

A. Gerald _____ Gerald hated having to care for him.

B. Anita _____ Spent all of her free time in the barn.

C. Charcoal _____ Raked willow buds off the trees.

_____ Looked out the window during breakfast.

_____ Usually fought with Gerald about baths

Part 2. (5 points each) Short Answer.

1. What does a mother moose do to her baby right after the baby is born?

_____

_____

2. Why did Gerald follow the moose's trail at the end of the book?

_____

_____

3. Did Gerald feel good or bad about the moose and calf leaving? Why?

_____

_____

4. Gerald told lies to his mother and sister about what he was doing in the willows. Was it OK for him to do that? Would you have told a lie in his situation?

_____

_____

5. How did the moose show that it was OK with her that Gerald hung around?

_____

_____

Goodbye, My Island Worksheet, Chapter 1-3

Discuss the ways that Esther's house is different from your house.

Door? _____

_____

Windows? _____

_____

Stove? _____

_____

Lights? _____

_____

Toilet? _____

_____

Water? _____

_____

Goodbye, My Island By Jean Rogers
End of book Quiz

Part I- (2 points each) Match the word or name with what they are or have done in the story.

a) Lewis b) Esther c) Dixon d) Roger & Marie e) Muktuk

f) Oomiak g) auklet h) tuberculosis i) Father Tomas

____1) A disease of the lungs.

____2) An open boat used to carry several people.

____3) The teachers.

____4) A white boy who lived on King Island for one year.

____5) Wrote the school log.

____6) A bird found on King Island.

____7) Whale fat.

____8) The religious leader on King Island.

____9) Brother of the storyteller.

Part II- Short Answer – Three points each. Go for clear, complete, interesting answers. More complete answers earn more points.

A) Where did planes land in King Island?

_____

_____

B) What did King Islanders make "ice cream" out of?

_____

_____

C) What did King Islanders use to store their food?

_____

_____

D) What instruments did King Islanders use to dance to?

_____

_____

E) What had to happen before the women and children could go fishing on King Island?

_____

_____

F) Name four ways that King Island homes are different from yours.

_____

_____

G) What were the two biggest changes that forced the King Islanders to stay in Nome all year?

_____

_____

H) Name three sea mammals the King Islanders hunted.

_____

_____

I) Why did the move to Nome not work for the King Islanders?

_____

_____

J) Name three ways King Island Christmas is different from your Christmas.

_____

_____

Winter Camp Worksheet #1

Vocabulary

Dingy	*hutlanee*	trapline
Rawhide	superstitious	pneumonia
Abruptly	outhouse	

1. The _____ kid would not walk under ladders.
2. I got a bad cold and then I caught _____.
3. The boots had _____ laces.
4. The Athabaskan thought that it was _____ to look at the dark.
5. In the remote cabin, I had to use the _____ to go to the bathroom.
6. The old paint was very _____ and dark.
7. The man was rushed, so he _____ jumped up and ran off.
8. It takes a long time to check all the traps in a _____.

Questions

1. Putting family pictures up is a waste of time and space.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Explain.

_____

_____

2. Toughboy and Sister liked living with Natasha.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Explain.

_____

_____

3. It is OK for an Athabaskan to say, "I am going bear hunting."

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Explain.

_____

_____

4. Missing school for two months is no big deal.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Explain.

_____

_____

5. There will be lots of entertainment at Winter Camp.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Explain.

_____

_____

Winter Camp Worksheet #6 (Ch. 16-18)

Questions

1. Trappers must kill lots of animals that they do not want.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Explain.

_____

_____

2. Trapping does not hurt the animals that get caught.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Explain.

_____

_____

3. Toughboy was smart to grab Sister by the hood. (Think -- what if the ice had broken under him? What should he have done?)

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Explain.

_____

_____

4. Rabbit skin underwear sounds great!

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Explain.

_____

_____

5. Leaving the trail must be OK -- I do it all the time in Juneau.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Explain.

_____

_____

Short Response

Write a report card for Sister. How is she doing at winter camp so far? What is her grade for trapping? Why? What about chores? What is her grade for following instructions? How well has she learned the old fashion ways?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Winter Camp Mid-Book Project

Now that you are about in the middle of the book, I want you to stop and think about what will come next. How will the trapping go? Do you expect anything particular to happen to any of the characters? Will Natasha teach the kids everything they need to know? Tell me anything else that you think will happen. We will get together when the book is finished and see who had the most accurate predictions.

Try to fill this page. Write on the back if you need more space.

Interview Questions:

The basic questions posed during the interviews were:

- What did we do differently when we studied the last three books?
- Which of those things did you like the best?
- When did you learn the most?
- If you could plan the next book study, what would it look like?

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