

# Professional Development that Promotes Powerful Interactions: Using Teacher Book Clubs to Reflect on Quality in Teacher-Child Relationships

*Teachers work best when they can collaborate and have time to reflect about their methods with other teachers. Professional book clubs are a good way to encourage teachers to work together and share their experiences.*

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Ph.D.**

For a majority of teachers, traditional professional development workshops lack relevancy (Burbank, Kauchak, & Bates, 2010; Lieberman, 1995) and leave teachers on their own to implement what was learned. Workshops are frequently structured in ways in which teachers are seen simply as recipients of information handed down by trainers (a more passive role) versus those who reflect on and construct their own knowledge. Furthermore, decisions regarding the content of the professional development are often made by administrators and, therefore do not always reflect more immediate needs of teachers. When combined, these factors often leave teachers less interested and less personally invested in professional development.

In order to be most effective, Darling-Hammond (1996; 2005) argues that professional development should involve learning that is sustained and supported over time. Teachers need opportunities to reflect on their own work in collaboration with other teachers who may be able to provide alternative viewpoints and challenge one another's thinking. Research has shown professional development that actively involves teachers can be very effective (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Lang & Fox, 2004; Saavedra, 1996).

Professional (or teacher) book clubs are one model of professional development in which teachers are actively involved and learning is sustained over time. Book

clubs generally involve a small group of teachers coming together to discuss a common text. In most book clubs, knowledge is co-created, as teachers have an opportunity to discuss issues of importance as they make their way through the text. While a book club may have a designated facilitator, often discussions follow the lead of the teachers' interests and ideas. This separates a book club from more traditional professional development models often led by a presenter.

## Previous Research on Book Clubs

Previous research on book clubs has shown them to be a powerful source of professional development for teachers (Burbank, et al., 2010; Dail, McGee, & Edwards, 2009; Gardiner, Cumming-Potvin, & Hesterman, 2013). Gardiner and colleagues (2013) used a book club approach to help preschool teachers develop greater knowledge of best practices for new literacies. This qualitative study followed seven teachers who met as a book club five times over six months. They read multiple selections given the major aim of the professional development was to help participants become more familiar with multimodal resources and digital texts. In general, participants appreciated the book club format given it met multiple times over an extended period of time, versus traditional professional development workshops that often meet once and provide no follow up (Gardiner, et al., 2013). They also liked the book club because it required them to be active learners instead



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*“Collaboration with peers can make a better educational experience for teachers and for children.”*

of simply listening to a facilitator. Investigators noticed how collaborative the group became and observed multiple examples of participants scaffolding one another’s learning, which led to changes in practice. For example, one teacher shared how she was using a new iPad app and then others offered ideas for how she might extend the lesson to further engage her students. Participants also commented that having time to think about and reflect on what was learned in between book club meetings was beneficial.

Beyond increasing their knowledge of effective instructional strategies, book clubs can be used to transform teachers’ beliefs about what is important for young children. Dail and colleagues (2009) formed a community book club comprised of preschool teachers, parents and community members with the goal of increasing participants’ engagement in reading. The group met 11 times over two years; each time they read one children’s book and one young adult or adult novel. As a result of the book club, participating teachers and parents reported reading more often, wanting their children (or stu-

dents) to read more, and purchasing more books for their children (Dail, et al., 2009). Participants also reported making (and sharing) more personal connections with texts and reported engaging in discussions about books with others more frequently, serving as great models for the children in their care.

Book clubs provide a powerful opportunity for teachers to reflect on their individual practice in a supportive context. Burbank and colleagues (2010) facilitated book clubs with both preservice and practicing teachers. Participants chose from one of several books and met weekly across the semester. Results indicated book club meetings provided teachers with opportunities to critically reflect on their practice and provided motivation to try new instructional strategies. The participants felt the book club enabled them to discuss larger educational issues in a non-threatening environment (Burbank, et al., 2010). Given the sense of community created in a book club, oftentimes participants also report higher satisfaction with this type of professional development (Smith & Galbraith, 2011).

## Previous Research on Teacher-Child Relationships

Teacher-child relationships are important for children’s learning and development in early schooling. Preschool and kindergarten children in relationships regarded as higher in closeness exhibit stronger social skills and better relationships with peers and subsequent teachers (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Howes, Hamilton, & Philipsen, 1998; Howes, Philipsen & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000). Closeness in the preschool teacher-child relationship is also associated with better work habits in elementary school (Baker, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2001) and with higher scores on language and literacy assessments (Baker, 2006; Burchinal et al., 2000). Children in relationships regarded as high in conflict report liking school less (Birch & Ladd, 1997) and experience more frustration and less tolerance (Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997). These children also demonstrate more problem behaviors and sometimes experience setbacks in developing social competence (Pianta et al., 2005). As such teachers must be knowledgeable and informed in order to better interact with their students, particularly those who are very young.

Research on existing models of professional development aimed at improving teacher-child relationship quality often involves intensive coaching. For example, preschool teachers provided with web-based consultation in the use of Banking Time (time spent one on one with students in a child-directed activity), were able to develop relationships with students regarded as higher in closeness (Driscoll, Wang, Mashburn, & Pianta, 2011). Similarly,

teachers using Teacher-Child Interaction Therapy (TCIT; a model in which teachers are coached directly by psychologists in how to appropriately address children's problem behaviors) saw decreases in children's disruptive behaviors and increases in compliance (McIntosh, Rizza & Bliss, 2000). They were also observed to have more positive interactions with children following use of the intervention.

While interventions such as those mentioned above have been successful in improving the quality of teacher-child interactions, book clubs may be another option for teachers seeking to improve their practice. Yet, few studies evaluate the use of this approach for early childhood teachers. Furthermore, given the complexity of social relationships, improving teacher-child relationship quality is not something that can be done overnight or by simply following a training manual. In order to be most effective, teachers would need time to critically examine their existing relationships and individual interactions with students and then reflect over time and with the support of others. In this article, I will share the results of a small research study aimed at evaluating the efficacy of a professional book club for improving teacher-child relationship quality in preschool classrooms.

## The Book Club Study

### Participants

Five preschool teachers from four different schools participated in the book club, which was facilitated by the author of this article (who is also a college professor). All but one of the teachers were working with four-year-old children, the fifth teacher taught a class of three year-

olds. Each teacher signed up for the book club voluntarily in response to advertisements sent to their schools. All five teachers were White females teaching in classrooms that served more than 80% African American students located within a large school district in the Southeastern United States.

**Previous research on book clubs says they are powerful professional development tools.**

### Plan for Book Club Meetings

The plan for the book club was drawn from practices identified as effective in research on professional development, including how the discussion was facilitated, how the group functioned over time, and how the environment was set up for book club meetings (Pelletier, 1993; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi & Gallagher, 2007). The book club facilitator began each meeting somewhat informally. As teachers arrived, they each discussed their day. Then, the facilitator asked participants to discuss what they found most interesting about the assigned section(s) of the text. In general, the conversation flowed well because teachers naturally built on one another's comments, sharing ideas and supporting one another as needed.

The book club met every other week for 12 weeks and the participants read two books, *The Power of Observation* by Jablon, Dombro, and Dichtelmiller (2007) and *Powerful Interactions: How to Connect with*

*Children to Extend their Learning* by Dombro, Jablon, and Stetson (2011). The facilitator created the schedule for the readings with input from the group. Book club meetings lasted approximately one hour each time. Meeting multiple times over the course of several months provided a source of support for a longer period than most traditional methods of professional development.

### Collecting Information

Data included transcripts from individual teacher interviews conducted at the conclusion of the book club. The interview included 12 questions aimed at capturing each individual's perspective on the efficacy of the book club as a source of professional development. The principal investigator also took detailed notes during each book club meeting, often recording direct quotes from participants. The principal investigator, using a coding system generated through multiple readings of the interview transcripts and book club meeting notes, analyzed data qualitatively. A graduate assistant and another expert in the field to validate the coding scheme used then reviewed data analysis. All were in agreement with how the data was analyzed.

## Results

### Impact of Book Club

Data from teacher interviews and book club discussions indicated the biggest change in instructional practice came in participants taking more time to reflect on their practice. More specifically, the book club readings and discussions helped them critically think about their interactions with individual students and how those interactions shaped

children's learning and behavior. For example, the idea of needing to "quiet the static" (Dombro et al., 2011) in order to focus on individual children really resonated with several of the teachers. They realized their responses to children's challenging behavior set the tone in the classroom and wanted to be more cognizant of that.

It was also apparent that the teachers were becoming more aware of their own interaction styles and temperaments and how these influenced their relationships with individual students (and families, for that matter). One teacher noted how she had realized her own interests in the arts and in literacy kept her from making strong connections with the "block builders" in her room. She made an attempt to sit with those children and observe their work more often so she could better connect with them. Another teacher mentioned how she was hoping to change her approach to a young girl in her room regardless of the challenges she faced with the child's mother. This teacher found that her interactions with the child's mother were limiting the teacher's ability to connect with the child. As a result of the reading and book club discussion, she vowed to start putting aside her thoughts about the parent in an effort to better connect with the child.

As a result of the book club, teachers also became more intentional in their teaching, a key characteristic of effective early childhood teachers. Intentional teachers are those who act purposefully, plan thoughtfully and are goal oriented (Epstein, 2007). In particular, the book club teachers became more intentional in their efforts to build stronger relationships with students. Several times they mentioned foregoing

planned activities in order to "stay in the moment" with children and connect with them. They also, as a result of a variety of strategies shared by one another, began using a variety of tools to help their students connect with one another. For example, one teacher mentioned her use of a class flowerpot. Each time children were noticed doing something kind for one another the teacher added a flower to the pot. Eventually children were allowed to give flowers to one another in order to honor a peer's kindness. This strategy worked well for the teacher who described it, so several of the other book club members expressed enthusiasm about trying it in their own classrooms. Another teacher mentioned how she tried to take advantage of snack and mealtimes as opportunities to get to know students better. Because her classroom used "family-style" dining and stayed in the classroom to eat, she was able to sit with her students and have informal conversations with them. She decided to make an intentional effort to sit beside the line leader each day, so that she would have an opportunity to take turns sitting with each child in her class. In subsequent meetings, she described learning invaluable things about her students' individual interests and family lives and she discussed how she would use this information to inform her interactions with them.

**Learning from others helped teachers feel more connected to the profession.**

Teachers in this study also became more intentional in their use of language. Several indicated finding more opportunities to introduce and use more advanced vocabulary. They were becoming less afraid of using "big words" with young children. The book's emphasis on seeing children as "thinkers" also had an impact on these teachers (Dombro, et al., 2011). At least two of them mentioned specific instances in which they found opportunities to model their own thinking and encouraged students to further discuss their thinking in relation to problems presented in class. For example, they described moments in which they told students to "put their thinking caps on while talking through a problem." Another mentioned her attempt to better capitalize on children's curiosity. She told a story about a student who had asked her where rice came from. She then decided to bring in several materials for the children to explore in order to help them understand the process and its connection to local culture.

Teachers were choosing to focus more on children's strengths as a result of the book club. Several began viewing children's behavior challenges as opportunities for learning. Part of this resulted from the support the teachers provided to one another. It was important for them to realize they were not alone in feeling frustrated by particular behaviors. It also seemed to help them think of each day or week as an opportunity to start over with a child. One teacher told a story of a student in her class who was rather challenging to control. He was described as impulsive and seemed to go out of his way to be the center of attention. Yet, over the course of the book club, this teacher began focusing more on his strengths and began finding

opportunities to highlight them. When she did this, she mentioned, “he became much happier” at school.

Finally, after participating in the book club, teachers also indicated they were feeling more confident in defending developmentally appropriate practice in discussions with administrators. Armed with new knowledge of the importance of powerful interactions, it seemed the teachers began to feel a stronger need to advocate for space to include these in their daily routines. In the final interview, one teacher said, “I was encouraged that it’s okay to slow down and focus on the kids. I knew this was appropriate but now I have the research to back it up.” They also felt better prepared to educate parents. For example, after reading about providing appropriate wait time after asking a question, one teacher decided to talk with her students’ parents about the topic. She had noticed several parents were providing answers to children rather than waiting for them to formulate their own answers. With parent conferences approaching, she decided she was going to include this as a topic of conversation during each conference.

### Efficacy of Book Club

When asked about the efficacy of the book club as a model of professional development the theme that was most prevalent across teachers was the notion that the book club provided a sense of community that was really missing from their work with teachers at their own sites. Teachers found it extremely helpful to collaborate with one another and share ideas that furthered their understanding and application of points made in the texts they read. Furthermore, they benefited from



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*“Understanding that they were not alone in the challenges of teaching was very helpful to the research participants.”*

hearing each other’s perspectives on ideas presented in the texts. In her final interview, one teacher said “each person brought something different to the table so the book club allowed us to learn more than a prescribed seminar.” During book club discussions, participants often provided encouragement and support to one another, especially when someone had a challenging day. In the final interview, one teacher stated, “It was reassuring to listen to other teachers who are experiencing the same challenges. It made me feel less alone.” The book club discussion also allowed them to work through individual problems they were having in their classrooms.

These teachers also appreciated that the book club provided them with professional development that was individualized and applied. Many of the other professional development opportunities provided to them were not always appropriate for their grade level. Since a majority of the teachers in the group were housed in public elementary

schools, content of the other sessions often addressed the needs of older children. Participants found the opportunity to discuss and problem solve issues they were having with individual students and families to be beneficial. Other professional development offerings do not always provide teachers with an opportunity to discuss what is being learned. Instead, teachers are largely expected to sit back and listen while a trainer does the talking. The book club allowed them to take away what they needed. Since the discussions largely followed the lead of the teachers and what they found interesting, in many ways, the group directed their own learning.

Teachers found the book club model to be more practical and timely than other professional development experiences they had participated in. Given that the book club met during the school year, teachers were able to immediately apply what was learned the next day/week in their classes and then could report back to the group at the next

meeting. Most of the professional development sessions they had experienced in the past were delivered prior to the start of school and did not always provide an opportunity for teachers to later discuss implementation of what was introduced.

## Conclusion

Consistent with previous research (Burbank, et al., 2010; Dail, et al., 2009; Gardiner et al., 2013), results indicated the book club described in this study served as an effective form of professional development for participants. In general, teachers became more reflective, more intentional and were able to learn new strategies for use in their classrooms. They also found time to collaborate with teachers across sites to be extremely valuable. This is consistent with previous research indicating teachers appreciate opportunities to collaborate with colleagues working in situations similar to their own (Burbank, et al., 2010). While some places offer district-wide professional development opportunities, often these are single workshops that do not allow teachers to form lasting relationships with one another. One of the greatest benefits to a professional book club is the sense of community created by such an approach (Burbank, et al., 2010), as was seen in the present study. Administrators should provide opportunities for teachers in their individual schools or centers to collaborate with others across sites whenever possible.

The opportunity to learn from others who were working in a similar context helped teachers in the current study feel more connected to the profession. Several in the group became stronger advocates for developmentally appropriate

practices, especially those focused on relationship building. Armed with new knowledge on the importance of teacher-child relationships for children's academic and social-emotional development, the teachers felt better able to justify making time for relationship building in discussions with their administrators.

In responding to interview questions about the efficacy of this type of professional development, teachers appreciated the timeliness and practicality of the book club model. This is consistent with previous research on book clubs (Gardiner, et al., 2013). In general, it seems traditional professional development models do not always prove valuable for all teachers. It is clear we need to pay more attention to individual teachers' professional development needs and then offer multiple options for teachers to pursue topics of interest in a variety of formats. If the true purpose of professional development is to change teacher practice, then we need to make sure we provide teachers with time and space to reflect on what they are doing, giving them time to assess the impact change has on their own students. This is the only way to create lasting change. Teachers need to see for themselves how change in practice leads to improved student outcomes, including increased closeness in teacher-child relationships.

Finally, while the current study led to important insight, clearly more research is needed on this topic. Future studies should pay particular attention to the long-term impact of this type of professional development for early childhood teachers. If professional development is effective it leads to long-term change. Yet, too often we assess teachers shortly after the professional development has

concluded but not a year or two out to see if what was learned led to lasting change. Furthermore, additional research is needed to determine which teacher characteristics are most influential in determining the success of this type of professional development. Perhaps, the fact that these teachers voluntarily participated in the book club says something about them. This deserves further attention in research before we can assume book clubs work well for the larger population of preschool teachers. As mentioned previously, some teachers may prefer this type of professional development and others may not. We cannot keep assuming all delivery models work for all teachers. We do not believe that to be the case for children, so why should we believe it to be true for adults? While we have more to learn about how to implement such a model with a wider audience, it would be important for those working with early childhood teachers to consider using professional book clubs as an avenue for more purposeful professional development, especially when it comes to reflecting on how to facilitate more powerful interactions with students.

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