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**OPENING OUR DOORS:
A STUDY ON TEACHER COLLABORATION**

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative action research study examined the experiences of teachers participating in a small professional learning community and the implementation of collaboratively designed adaptations for reading comprehension instruction. Participants included two teachers and kindergarten students. The teacher participants attended nine collaborative meetings where they reflected on their teaching, discussed their shared beliefs and vision for teaching and learning, and researched best practices for teaching reading comprehension. Throughout the process teaching strategies were implemented in the kindergarten classroom that included: differentiated instruction, modeling, activating schema, bodily kinesthetic activities, choice, and real-world experiences. Analysis revealed that when teachers work as a community of learners they are participating in a life-long learning process where a level of respect is gained as educators take risks by sharing their beliefs on education. Analysis of student data showed that students had the ability to master reading comprehension when they were collaboratively engaged in taking picture walks, identifying story structure, making connections, questioning, and thinking at higher levels. The data suggests that when educators are proactively engaged in teacher collaboration they are motivated to learn, their classroom instruction improves, and they take the time to self-reflect. The data also illustrates that kindergarten students see reading as an important life-long activity that is fun.

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RESEARCH STANCE

Remember that moment when suddenly a clear vision of a future career gave focus and inspiration to your life's journey. Whether you discover what you want to be in kindergarten, or college, or perhaps you are still figuring it out, our careers have a major impact on who we are. Personally, I picked my future career around the age of three and throughout my life journey I have remained most passionate about the career path I have followed. I am a teacher.

Growing up I was surrounded with a family of educators ranging from my mom who was a preschool teacher to my grandfather who was a college professor. Many times, our daily conversations evolved around school and education was a major value in our home. I loved going to school, and especially enjoyed when I could join my mom in her classroom. On the days when I would visit her school, I had a grand time taking on the role of a teacher helper. I will always remember the wonderful experience of teaching with my mom when I was still a child.

Furthermore, as a student I recall always seeking out friends who needed extra assistance. My teachers would praise me for taking the additional time to help a classmate. For me, I gained a feeling of accomplishment from giving a helping hand. To this day, I still have with me a book that my second grade friend published as a result of our collaboration. I can remember how excited she was to share her success with the class.

As I entered high school, I continued to focus on a future as a teacher. During a senior practicum, I had the occasion to work in an elementary classroom and explore deeper the career of an educator. I looked forward to my days with the students and also enjoyed the discussions that I shared with the experienced teacher. This experience reinforced my desire to study the field of education.

Upon entering college, I continued on my journey to becoming an educator. What I enjoyed most about the courses I took was the opportunity to collaborate with my peers on the topics we were learning. I discovered the power of communication and the endless possibilities when a group comes together to explore and expand on a new concept. We challenged one another's ideas and listened to constructive feedback. The power of communication and collaboration was vivid on my journey to becoming an educator.

Furthermore, during one of my college field experiences I had the opportunity to work with a literacy coach. We would go into a variety of classrooms and provide literacy support for both teachers and students. It was interesting to observe how different teachers embraced this experience. I had a hunch that some of the teachers did not appreciate sharing their classrooms with another educator. Perhaps, the idea of another teacher in the room made other teachers nervous and maybe they enjoyed the seclusion of working behind closed doors with their students.

In addition, during this experience I participated in a book study. Teachers would meet an hour before they needed to actually be in school and they would discuss an educational text that they were reading as a team. It was powerful to observe how the educators would link what they were reading with their own teaching experiences. This group embraced the opportunity to learn from one another and share their ideas. I could not wait for the chance to implement something like this in my future as a teacher. This experience has always remained with me because it was so salient.

After a wonderful college learning experience, my first day of school as a teacher arrived. As the year began it was so rewarding to welcome a class of first graders and begin our journey together as learners. Within the beginning months of school, I joined a book club that my teacher mentor arranged and approximately six teachers joined. Our focus was on student literacy and we read about how to promote literacy in our classrooms. Each week we would meet early in the morning and focus on a chapter of the book. I was amazed with how noteworthy our discussions were about our viewpoints, dilemmas, and successes. By chance, one of the most amazing things I gained from this opportunity was an even deeper passion for teaching and learning. The excitement in the group was contagious and it spilled over into our classrooms. I had an extra dose of energy and a vivid focus on the days I entered the classroom after attending these books studies.

Furthermore, along with a gained desire to collaborate with my colleagues, I began to have a stronger desire to learn more about the field of literacy. I had always loved books and found them to be magical. My classroom library was abundant with stories just waiting to be shared. The question became, how could I improve my teaching of literacy? I attended several programs and began implementing all I had learned in the classroom. Still, I wanted to learn more and realized it was time to head back to school.

Upon entering Moravian College for my master's degree, I was introduced to the concept of teacher inquiry. As an educator, I had always questioned things and searched for answers in books. Never had I recognized this practice as a form of teacher inquiry. Moreover, when reading a text for the course by Weinbaum (2004), I learned that by questioning teaching practices and collaborating with others, teaching and learning improve. This notion became very important in my future as an teacher action researcher.

I began to question why I stopped doing book studies after the first successful one. Furthermore, why are teachers not meeting to collaborate on a regular basis? Should not teacher inquiry and collaboration be happening in all schools? What would a school that collaborates on a daily basis look like? What kinds of teaching and learning questions do my colleagues have?

Next, I observed the atmosphere of the elementary building where I teach. I noticed that great things are happening in classrooms, but little is shared with

colleagues. Faculty room discussions rarely ever began with, “Guess what great lesson I did today. . .” or “I am having a difficult time teaching. . . .Do you have any suggestions?” As educators, one of our greatest references is each other, however, many times we fail to recognize this idea (myself included).

As I continued in my master’s courses, I became a teacher inquirer on a mission to devise a question that embraced who I am and what I would love to learn more about. I recognized that as an educator I find the need to collaborate and reflect with my peers a great tool. All too often I found myself secluded in my only little planet (classroom). I wanted to take a step in opening my door and improving my practice by effectively collaborating with my colleagues.

Communication amongst teachers about learning is one of the most powerful instruments we have in establishing the best learning experiences for all students.

My journey as an individual, my passion for education, the desire for all students to succeed, and a belief in educators has led me to ask an important research question. I ponder, “What are the observed and reported behaviors when a small group of collaborating teachers implement a learning community to improve the literacy achievement of primary students?”

I believe that through teacher collaboration, educators will gain a feeling of ownership for their professional development. Teachers will value these learning opportunities, be intellectually stimulated, and grow as professionals. Educators will have the chance to share and discover new ideas about literacy.

Most importantly, the small collaborating group will provide teachers with the grand occasion to actively participate in their learning. I hope that teachers will gain the same energetic, contagious feelings I did from the book study I participated in.

In closing, my path to becoming a teacher has been an incredible journey. I am hoping as I continue to learn and grow, like my students, that I will promote more ideal learning opportunities for the kindergarten class I teach. Along with teacher collaborators, I am looking forward to exploring best practices for teaching students reading comprehension. Together as a team of collaborators we have great potential to help make ourselves and our students successful learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Call to Arms

Hampton and Purcell (2006) report that millions of dollars spent every year on staff development fails to meet teachers' needs. Educators note that these sessions are often irrelevant and there is no direct plan for implementation or teacher support put in place at the conclusion of the staff development opportunities (Hampton & Purcell, 2006). Mizell (2007) comments on the frequent occasion that staff development disregards teachers' prior knowledge, intelligence, and needs. As a result, educators lose the chance to learn something that will impact their teaching or their students' learning.

Noting a lack of high-quality professional development, Joyce (2004) ponders how educators will be able to expand their present teaching knowledge. For possible answers to Joyce's question, it is valuable to examine professional learning communities. Many researchers report on the outstanding best practices that make professional learning communities successful (Bezzina & Testa, 2005; Engstrom & Danielson, 2006; O'Donovan, 2007). These practices include teacher collaboration, incorporating shared visions and goals, student data collection, engagement, inquiry, and reflection. Of course, there may be roadblocks along the way when implementing a new action plan; however, there is a bright future for schools that partake in professional learning communities

(Chenoweth, 2007; Emihovich & Battaglia, 2000; O'Donovan, 2007; White & McIntosh, 2007).

Professional Development

Educators play a key role in school improvement and as a result they need the opportunity to participate in meaningful professional development (Goodnough, 2005). Goodnough states, "A one-size-fits-all approach to professional development, often adopted in the past by schools and school districts, will do little to foster teacher learning" (p. 88). Teachers need varied choices for professional development that range from conventional sessions to more collaborative programs.

Similarly, Markus (2006) points out, "Professional development can no longer be viewed as an event that occurs on a particular day of the school year; rather, it must become part of the daily work life of educators" (p. 16). Furthermore, Mizell (2007) argues that the term professional development is too broad and as a result teachers participate in trainings that lack quality and detract attention from educators' focus on students.

Like Mizell (2007), Wald and Castleberry (2000) comment on the notion that educators are provided with training sessions in which they are directed to gain new knowledge. The teachers are to then take what they have learned back to their classrooms and transfer the new information to the students who, in turn, will be tested on their mastery. Wald and Castleberry (2000) refer to this concept

as a “training food chain” (p. 7). The cycle involves a continuous broadcast of knowledge to teachers and students that ultimately results in an assessment before it starts all over again. Many times, the professional development provided by school districts is at large group, off-site settings with trainings led by individuals who are considered experts (Wald & Castleberry, 2000). Likewise, Nielsen, Barry and Staab (2008) refer to this transmission of knowledge as a “top-down model” where teachers are expected to follow the criteria handed down at professional development sessions (p. 2).

Wenger (1998) defines effective professional development as an opportunity to meet the needs and interests of professional educators. In this mode, there is a direct correlation with what is being learned and the events happening in teachers’ classrooms. Professional development also focuses on high-quality standards and evidence of student achievement. Wenger (1998) notes that successful professional development happens in professional learning communities.

Professional Learning Communities

The National Staff Development Council (2008) includes in their standards for educators the implementation of learning communities. They define professional learning communities as a form of staff development that organizes teachers in teams with the purpose of improving student learning, keeping in mind

both school and district goals. Moreover, Love (1999) borrows the words of the University of Miami (1998) to give a detailed definition of learning communities:

The most common understanding of the term, at least among those in higher education in the late 1980s and the 1990s, is that a learning community center(s) on a vision of faculty and student--and sometimes administrators, staff and the larger community--working collaboratively toward shared, significant academic goals in environments in which competition, if not absent, is at least de-emphasized. In a learning community, both faculty and students have the opportunity and the responsibility to learn from and help teach each other. (p. 1)

A review of these definitions makes vivid the notion that learning communities are quite contradictory to the workshop-driven approach of many professional development programs (National Staff Development Council, 2008).

The National Staff Development Council (2008) declares that the most powerful form of staff development is found within professional teams that regularly meet to learn together how best to develop school improvement plans for action. The professional conversations are key for effective practice of teacher learning. In addition to collaborative conversations, professional development teams read educational articles, attend workshops pertinent to their areas of focus, take graduate courses, and seek the advice of teacher consultants (National Staff Development Council, 2008). DuFour (2004) shares a vision of

professional learning communities where teachers are working in teams, engaged in a cycle of questioning that results in deep learning. For effective professional development it is essential to know how to implement this type of learning atmosphere.

Implementing a Professional Learning Community

Markus (2006) makes clear that the process of developing learning communities enhances professional growth. This valuable process requires a detailed framework for implementation. Building collaborative teams entails commitment, trust, shared visions, and values (Wald & Castleberry, 2000). In addition, learning communities must answer three important questions that ask where the school has been, what its present state is, and what the future is for where the school would like to go (Wald & Castleberry, 2000).

In Educators as Learners: Creating a Professional Learning Community in Your School, Wald and Castleberry (2000) provide a detailed explanation of how best to incorporate professional learning communities. The authors explain that teacher collaborators must first get to know one another by sharing their names and any information about themselves. Next, through shared conversations group members need to become acquainted with individual perspectives, values, and belief systems. It is then important to explore the history of where the school has been, including successes and challenges. Subsequently, the teacher learners must find a common ground by listening to differences in beliefs and molding an

idea that incorporates a realm of different perspectives. At the conclusion, the group will have attained a shared vision that gives a destination for where teachers are going as they collaboratively work to improve the school community (Wald & Castleberry, 2000).

With a shared vision established it is now important for educators to collaborate on defining the topic by developing a list of terms that everyone will comprehend. Teachers will then enter the exploration stage where a significant amount of time is spent looking at current teaching practices, exploring new practices, and revising their question. In the experimental stage, teachers implement what they have learned in their classrooms. The educators reflect on their new knowledge, ideas, and questions they may have. Lastly, the teacher collaborators share their new insights with colleagues (Wald & Castleberry, 2000).

Additionally, during the learning process, guidelines for professional learning communities will help build a strong team of learners. It is important for collaborative groups to establish a set of rules in order to eliminate sidebar conversations and hurt feelings (Wood, 2007). Some ground rules may include staying on task, giving everyone equal opportunities to speak, and being an engaged listener. It is most important to remember that the cornerstone of professional learning communities is teacher collaboration (Wald & Castleberry, 2000).

Best Practices for Successful Professional Learning Communities

Collaboration

One of the key components of professional learning communities is the collaborative work of school professionals (Bezzina & Testa, 2005). DuFour (2004) writes, “Educators who are building a professional learning community recognize that they must work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all. Therefore, they create structures to promote a collaborative culture” (p. 8). Within a professional learning community, the teachers learn collectively through meaningful social interactions (Bezzina & Testa, 2005).

It is essential to note that for collaboration to occur, teachers must first break down their walls of isolation and become partners in practice for student success (Bezzina & Testa, 2005). Teacher collaboration has the profound opportunity of building a community of educators who opt to form a cohort of sorts to study teaching and learning (Engstrom & Danielson, 2006). During collaborative sessions teachers have in-depth conversations about effective teaching (White & McIntosh, 2007). Clearly, collaboration is a commitment to ideas centered on a high-quality educational experience for all students (O’Donovan, 2007).

Furthermore, collaborative inquiry involves educators coming together to discuss and question their teaching practices in a process involving both self and group reflections of student learning and teacher instruction. Collaborative teams

must partake in ongoing questioning that promotes deep knowledge seeking (DuFour, 2004). As collaborative groups discuss pertinent topics the members gain a more vivid understanding of their experiences. Their ultimate goal is improved student and teacher learning.

A Case Study Involving Collaboration

In order to provide a meaningful professional development opportunity, Goodnough (2005) verbally invited high school science teachers and an additional college professor to join a collaborative inquiry group. Collaborative inquiry entails a process in which a group of individuals develop a team to explore a question about education that they value as important (Weinbaum, Allen, Blythe, Simon, Seidel, & Rubin, 2004). One high school biology teacher volunteered to participate along with the two professors (including Goodnough himself). The three-member collaborative inquiry group worked as “co-learners” to plan, reflect, and act as they explored Problem-Based Learning (Goodnough, 2005). Along with questions about Problem-Based Learning, the group asked how collaborative inquiry might help educators acquire new knowledge and provide a deeper comprehension of Problem-Based Learning.

Over the period of two years, the collaborative team planned together and implemented what they were learning about Problem-Based Learning in the high school biology classroom. Methods for data collection included documentation of lesson plans, concept maps, and student work. The group conducted semi-

structured interviews with the high school students at the conclusion of the Problem-Based Learning intervention. As a part of their participant observation process, the collaborative inquiry group met for thirty hours to reflect on the project and develop new plans for action. Meetings were audio taped and later transcribed. The team analyzed and coded data.

At the conclusion of the study, the research team noted greater student engagement in the classroom and felt the classroom teacher's practice had been enhanced. The science teacher had been given the opportunity to be challenged and learn more about best teaching practices, indicating that she had become a lifelong learner. The team believed that the supportive atmosphere of the collaborative inquiry group and commitment were factors in the ultimate success of the project. In addition, Goodnough (2005) noted that administrative support was key and pondered how educators might establish and sustain more collaborative inquiry groups as an option for professional development. To engage successfully in professional collaboration, Goodnough (2005) shares that there needs to be an equally distributed power within the group for decision-making and the collaborators must be committed to the group and their project goals.

Collaboration also allows group members to take confusing data and uncover its complex meanings as a team (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). Ultimately, respect from colleagues is gained as teachers listen to everyone share

their expertise (Louis et al.). Teachers learn from one another in the process of sharing their knowledge (Honawar, 2008). Of course, collaboration demands teachers give up working in isolation and participate in a collective approach that will improve student achievement (Honawar). As teachers open their doors and join collaborative teams they will bring to the table their values and beliefs on education that will ultimately become woven into a shared vision.

Shared Visions and Goals

Effective professional learning communities involve a shared mission, vision, norms, and values (Wenger, 1998). Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996) state that fundamental to leaning communities are the common values and expectations everyone shares. More specifically, Bezzina and Testa (2005) share that the power behind professional learning communities is a collaborative focus on both teaching and learning.

Hemphill and Duffield (2007) comment that teacher collaboration needs to match teachers' needs. Core values and beliefs have to be revisited throughout the process. Sometimes disagreements will happen but teachers must remember that it is important to put students' best interests at the forefront (Honawar, 2008). Clearly, the focal point for professional development needs to encompass student learning (Engstrom & Danielson, 2006; Louis et al. 1996).

In addition, staff development has to have long-range plans that focus on a vision and completion of the mission (Hampton & Purcell, 2006). Trusting

relationships need to be developed to maximize communication (McCullum, 2000). As teachers learn to work together and work through individual differences in search of a common resolution, strong relationships are likely to be built. Furthermore, teachers' shared vision for student and teacher success will rely heavily on the collection and review of student data.

Student Data

The National Staff Development Council (2008) states that to improve students' learning, student data are used to help teacher collaborators determine their learning focus and evaluate student progress. Continuous review of student data needs to be the driving force for professional development. Collaborative groups require student data to gauge their discussions. Dialogue should be a reflection of student achievement (Engstrom & Danielson, 2006). Data must help educators make decisions on best practices to be implemented that ensure student learning (White & McIntosh, 2007).

Moreover, ongoing formative assessments need to steer data collection and teacher conversations on school improvement. Collaborative groups create common assessments and as a team analyze the students' answers (White & McIntosh, 2007). Where students have difficulty, the teachers review the test questions and decide if the questions were poorly worded or students did not grasp the concept. Teachers then develop action plans for when and how to

address the problem areas (White & McIntosh, 2007). New lesson plans are developed based on observations from students' assessments and class work.

It is evident that within professional learning communities, student achievement data guide teachers' instructional plans (Nielsen, Barry, & Staab, 2008). Most importantly, student development guides instruction as opposed to the prescribed district curricula. By keeping data on students, teachers are able to see students' successes and lesson plans become child-centered (Nielsen et al.). Common formative assessments help monitor students' progress (DuFour, 2004). The goal is for no student to be left to fail. Most importantly, it is essential to focus on the success of each student (DuFour).

One School's Use of Student Data

Yates and Collins (2006) highlight a study of Brewer Elementary in Columbus, Georgia, a school that was on the list of those needing improvement. The school had a population of 520 elementary students, where 91% of the children were black and 96% of the population received free/reduced lunch. The educators at this school knew they needed to improve student learning, and as a result, the school developed professional learning communities.

The goal for these learning communities was to make Adequate Yearly Progress and be removed from the list as a school needing improvement. For the first two years, teams concentrated their improvement efforts on literacy. The administrator amended the schedule so teachers would have time to look at

student work and gather data on how to address student needs. Group members charted strategies and graphed data to organize information prior to making plans for teaching action. A “war room” was created to keep data visible for teachers (Yates & Collins, 2006). The room displayed students’ standardized test scores, classroom work, practice exam scores, graphs, and trends. The space was a confidential place for teachers to leave valuable data made available for constant evaluation.

In addition, classroom walkthroughs provided an opportunity for teams to observe changes teachers were making that implemented new literacy goals. As time progressed, the students’ reading and vocabulary levels improved. With this achievement, the school set out to improve mathematics scores. The teachers collaborated with students to help them develop number sense. On-going, consistent support was provided for all teachers.

The professional learning communities in this school proved to be a large success and the school was removed from the list of those needing improvement. It is evident that the data in this school provided a successful collaborative community as an alternative to typical staff development (Yates & Collins, 2006). The collaborative process as a form of staff development engaged teachers in developing plans for action.

Engagement

The process of teacher collaboration within professional learning communities is an engaging method. Mizell (2007) states, “Teachers will never improve unless their minds and hearts are engaged in learning experiences they value” (p. 20). In professional learning communities teachers are engaged in teaching, assessing, and observing (Yates & Collins, 2006). By engaging in building level collaboration, teachers feel ownership over their learning (Engstrom & Danielson, 2006). Furthermore, like students, teachers are most interested in learning when it is relevant and when they can see the results of their efforts (Wenger, 1998).

Wenger (1998) asks that teachers be engaged in collaborative and consistent learning as a form of professional development. Overall, engagement is key in promoting valuable learning opportunities for teachers. Educators value development most when it is relevant to their school buildings and classrooms. When learning is made applicable people begin to listen. Teachers need to be engaged in defining their school’s goals by interacting with colleagues and taking on leadership roles (Bezzina & Testa, 2005).

Inquiry

Perhaps, one way to engage teacher learners is to involve them in a collaborative line of inquiry. Joyce (2004) states, “Many teachers need to experience cooperative professional inquiry before they will commit to it” (p.

80). Through inquiry, teachers are able to seek a deeper understanding of how students learn and how to best teach students (Weinbaum, Allen, Blythe, Simon, Seidel, & Rubin, 2004). Inquiry into questions about teaching and learning are pursued by examination of teaching practices and student work.

Often educators work together to explore the answers to their lines of inquiry. As collaborative inquiry groups work together they develop new knowledge and greater understandings of teaching and learning (Weinbaum et al.). Evidence for the answers to educators' questions is found in student work. In addition, as teachers continue to question their practices, it is clear that they are also students learning through inquiry, and they need to take time to reflect on this process.

Reflection

York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, and Montie (2001) say, "Reflective practice is an inquiry approach to teaching that involves a personal commitment to continuous learning and improvement" (p. 3). In other words, reflective practice requires individuals to question their teaching and inquire into ways to improve their practices. This term involves teachers setting aside time to contemplate what they did today and to make plans for how they may change things for tomorrow. Noticeably, reflective practice is good teaching. Reflective teaching gives educators the chance to monitor student learning and see where there are holes in a lesson. A staff development teacher commented that the most powerful

part of professional learning communities is the time spent reflecting (Hemphill & Duffield, 2007). Emihovich and Battaglia (2000) argue that if teacher learning is to be successful teachers need to question and reflect on their practices.

When reflecting in a collaborative community, there is the disadvantage of personal risk (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie, 2001). However, there is also the potential for greater gains when a group reflects collaboratively. York-Barr et al. report that learning and resources are enhanced, there is more support, greater effective interventions are put in place for students, collegiality is improved, and there is a bigger sense of hope. The greatest potential for school improvement is found within collaborative engagement in reflection (York-Barr et al.).

Roadblocks

Inevitably on the road to constructing successful learning communities, there will be roadblocks that may interfere with educators' willingness to continue on their journey. Markus (2006) discusses the difficulty of finding time to collaboratively work with colleagues. Several studies solved the issue of time by providing time in teachers' daily schedules to work collaboratively (White & McIntosh, 2007; Yates & Collins, 2006). The greatest challenge is often getting teachers to open their classroom doors and take a risk by participating in the profound opportunity professional learning communities have to offer for

improved teaching and student learning (DuFour, 2004). Further research is necessary for discovering why educators keep themselves in isolation.

A Vision for the Future

In *“It’s Being Done” Academic Success in Unexpected Schools*, Chenoweth (2007) introduces readers to schools throughout the nation that are failing. Students in these schools are often living in poverty, doing poorly in classes, and graduating at less than adequate rates. What is amazing is that every school highlighted in Chenoweth’s (2007) text dramatically transformed itself to become successful. Chenoweth (2007) contributes success to one of the overarching themes of time provided for teachers to meet and collaborate. When professional development involves the grand opportunity for educators to engage in learning communities, collaborating as they analyze student data, inquire into best practices, take time to reflect, and develop a shared vision that promotes student success, it can indeed be done (Wald & Castleberry, 2000).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Setting

Nestled in the heart of a suburban neighborhood, the elementary school where this study took place was home to approximately 375 students in grades kindergarten through fifth. The student body was quite diverse and there was a significant Hispanic population. All socioeconomic classes were represented in this school. A large percentage of students received free/reduced lunch. Recently, the elementary school lost its Title I funding. It was also important to note that the school did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for the first time, this past year.

Furthermore, because this study incorporated educators, it was essential to look at the dynamics of the teaching faculty. There were three teachers for all grade levels except for first grade, which had four teachers as a result of a class-size reduction grant. There were only two male grade level teachers. In the past few years, several teachers had retired and the majority of the building was composed of teachers just starting their careers in education.

Participants

Participants for the study included students from my full day kindergarten classroom and two first grade teachers. Initially, there were ten boys and seven girls in the kindergarten classroom. One student was an English language learner and he was at the beginner level. An additional male student was autistic and

received speech support for a half-hour once a week. There were no classroom aides present in the kindergarten room.

The two first grade teacher participants chose to participate in this study after being asked to join. The teachers received nine hours of Act 48 credits that went towards their B-flex. The B-flex opportunity provided educators with the chance to flex-out of June teacher in-services. Furthermore, both female teachers were in their third year of teaching.

Data Collection

Prior to collecting data for my study I received approval from the Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) at Moravian College (See Appendix A). All documents were submitted to HSIRB and approved. In addition, my school principal approved my study and received a copy of her consent form (See Appendix B). The teachers participating in the study signed consent forms (See Appendix C). It was also important to collect consent forms from parents for students that would participating (See Appendix D). Risks and benefits of the study were clearly explained to all parties involved and participants were informed that they may choose to withdraw from the study at anytime with no penalties.

Furthermore, MacLean and Mohr (1999) discussed how classrooms are full of data and how teacher researchers are surrounded by data that are inevitably about something (p. 36). When preparing a qualitative research study one of the

most important components was constructing a plan for data collection. Qualitative research entailed a systematic process of gathering data that was eventually analyzed and interpreted. For this specific study data collection included the following:

Field Log

The heart of the study could be found within the detailed body of the field log. Ely (1991) stated, “The biggest of the big ideas about log generation is that *the log is the data*,” (p. 70). Knowing the log was one of the most crucial components of my study, it was important for me to develop an organized framework for data collection documents. I arranged the field log into eight sections. My table of contents included dates, titles, and page numbers for all entries.

The first section of my field log included observations and reflections on students and the process of teaching story comprehension. The notes were typed in tables where the left column was for observation details and the right column was for teacher reflection. The second section of the log was composed of teacher collaboration meeting agendas and was accompanied by observation notes. The third section was a collection of information on teaching reading comprehension. Section four was comprised of learning community documents on our mission and goals. Student work was included in section four and copies of master’s of education assignments were organized in the sixth section.

Sections seven and eight of the field log had documentation on both teacher collaborator and student interviews. The organization of the field log was important when developing a final research report.

Journals

During the course of the study teacher collaborators were asked to keep a journal that included their reflections on teaching and learning. The journal helped serve as a tool for weekly collaborative meetings. Teachers had the opportunity to share their insights, frustrations, and successes that they had taken the time to reflect upon. As a researcher, the journals personally helped me gain a clear picture of the collaborators' experience with the teaching of reading comprehension. There was no required amount of entries teachers needed to make in their journals and they could choose to not share everything they had documented.

Student Work

One of the greatest ways to observe student learning was by analyzing their work. By looking deeply at students' work educators could determine if new concepts taught had been grasped. Sometimes, it became clear that students did not understand a lesson and the teacher needed to go back to the drawing board and devise new plans for teaching a concept. It was interesting to monitor a student's progress by analyzing a succession of an individual's work. Clearly, student work was valuable in determining if an intervention method was

successful. Throughout the course of this study students handed in work that monitored their reading comprehension progress.

Interviews

Interviews served as an opportunity for researchers to question participants and gain deeper insight into the study. It was important when devising interview questions that they were left open-ended and did not serve as a black and white template. While facilitating an interview there needed to be a flow for all questions. Comments made by participants helped give focus to the direction of the discussion. In particular for my study, interview questions were developed as a discussion starter and enabled participants to speak freely without their being a right or wrong answer (see Appendixes E and F). Both student and teacher participants were interviewed at the conclusion of the study to help make vivid their thoughts and feeling on our progress.

Trustworthiness Statement

As cited in Hendricks (2006), in order to assure that I was gathering ethical data, it was essential to look at what Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994) included in their definition of validity. Five components were explained that ensured validity and included: democratic validity, outcome validity, process validity, catalytic validity, and dialogic validity. All of the criteria were important to contemplate prior to implementing my intervention.

To begin, in order to ensure democratic validity, both teachers and kindergarten participants took part as my collaborators. Daily, we worked as a community to improve our reading comprehension. Students were engaged in the study as they worked to display in multiple ways that they comprehended what they were reading. In addition, to achieve outcome validity, I kept a detailed field log that enabled me to check in and assure that I was staying focused on my goal. Moreover, in utilizing process validity, I used research tools that included interviews, student observations, and student work. While collecting data it was important to keep my goal in mind. Furthermore, catalytic validity had the potential to have an impact on how I may improve and change my teaching. I foresaw myself dedicating more time to collaborating with teachers and remembering the value in teacher reflection. Finally, dialogic validity was essential for collaborating with peers. I worked together with my colleagues to gain new insights and receive constructive criticism that was valuable for improvement.

In addition, Hendricks (2006) had a myriad of tips for increasing validity. First, I utilized peer debriefing by asking my research support group to look over my study and check for bias and offer different perceptions. Furthermore, the more time I took to collect data the more credible the study was. Data needed to be collected and recorded with accuracy by keeping an accurate field log. Member checks could be made by talking with collaborators to make sure

interpretations of data were correct. Moreover, I made sure to triangulate data collection by using multiple sources of data, which included keeping a field log, researching the subject, conducting interviews, and carrying out student observations. While working on the study, I remembered to use “thick description” by being very detailed in writing about the collected data.

In addition, before even beginning data collection, it was important to be conscious of preconceived notions and set them aside. I recognized my biases and utilized my collaborators to make sure I was recording what I observe and not what I assumed. Hunches and interpretations of the data were discussed with research participants. I wanted to share results of my findings with peers and listen to feed back. It is also very important to “make available an audit trail” by keeping good records of my data. Finally, I took the time to continually reflect throughout the study.

In closing, Holly, Arhar, and Kasten (2005) discussed the ethical importance of data collection. Risks and benefits of the study needed to be explained to all parents, students, and teacher collaborators. It was important that participants knew confidentiality would be used and at anytime they could choose to withdraw from the study. At no time would participants’ names be disclosed of, as anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms. Data would be kept in a secure locked location. Clearly, these guidelines were crucial for being ethical when collecting data.

OUR STORY

The bell rang and quickly the school became a sea of busy fish all heading for the doors. Students hopped on the bus or ran to greet their parents. Teachers jumped into their cars and suddenly the school became still and quiet. There were only three fish left that would soon discover a world of marvelous opportunities.

This was the first day that I would be meeting with two first grade teachers to begin our journey of collaboration. The table was set with agendas, pens, books, and an afternoon treat. I was confident that we were about to embark on a noteworthy experience where we, as colleagues, would examine teaching practices and learn from one another.

At that same moment I was nervous that these two teachers would not find value in our small professional learning community. I knew that these teachers were very busy professionals and their time was precious. I myself was guilty of not devoting a moment to sitting and reflecting on my day. It had been months since I pulled a teaching resource text off one of my shelves. The last time these noteworthy books had been moved was to dust.

There was no question that there was a mix of emotions and puzzlement as we began our first meeting as a collaborative team (see Figure 1).

This is going to be powerful!

I need to talk to her about getting my Act 48 credits. I don't want to go to summer
detention!

I don't get it. What's this all about?

I can't wait to share this wonderful book.

How long do we have to stay?

This better be easy.

I wonder what we will talk about?

*I have so much work to do and I just want to go
home!*

I'm not sure I should have signed up for this.

I am looking forward to seeing what the other teachers
will have to share.

She better get on with it and not try to keep us after

4:00 PM!

Will what we do impact my teaching?

Figure 1. Initial feelings pastiche.

Carol wanted to make sure that she would receive her Act 48 hours and had hoped to sign up for the program quick and easy. Instead to receive credit hours she had to sign up for all nine meetings individually. This was more time consuming.

On the other hand, Angelina was quite curious and said, “I need the big picture. Like a syllabus.” She wanted to know how we would start and where we were going. Her inquisitive nature was valuable and helped to open our discussion on the basis for our meetings.

We began by discussing the definition of a professional learning community. I shared that as collaborators we would engage ourselves in a cycle of questioning, sharing, and learning from one another. Furthermore, I introduced my study and gave my colleagues a vision for what had led me to my research question. I wanted them to see that what we were doing was not arbitrary and that there was a purpose for the adventure we had just begun.

Without further ado, we created a list of ground rules for our meetings (see Figure 2). As a team everyone added something to the list. We agreed that the most valuable rule was to respect one another’s opinions. I knew that I would probably be breaking rule number two several times. Surely, when you sit women down at a table that have been working with children all day, it is quite impossible to expect everyone to stay focused on the topic at hand. What were we thinking; of course our discussions would entail some off topic conversations.

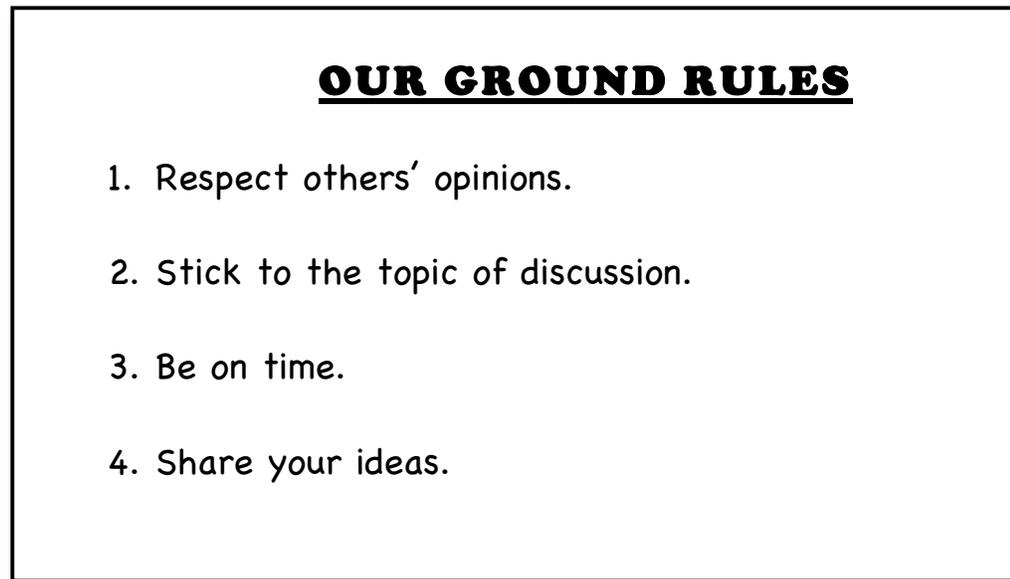


Figure 2. Learning community ground rules.

As a collaborative team our next task was to establish a list that incorporated our perspectives, values, and belief systems concerning education. Wenger (1998) suggested that for professional learning communities to be effective they must incorporate a shared mission. As a group we had never taken the opportunity to share any of our feelings on what we valued as educators. This was a task that required each teacher to be brave by taking a risk and opening their thoughts and opinions up to their colleagues. I myself was curious what the collaborators would share. I had always been open minded about what I value and believe as an educator. However, never had I heard any teachers within our school building bring their perspectives on education to the table. This was an

opportunity to think and talk deeply about who we were as educators. The discussion could best be displayed in the form of a play:

Melissa: Now that we have some ground rules in place it is important to bring to the table our perspectives, values, and belief systems concerning education.

Angelina: There should be high-expectations for all students. If a student can do the work then they need to be pushed to go above and beyond.

Carol: Children need to be able to apply what they learn. (Everyone nods their heads confirming Carol's statement.)

Melissa: Too many times students go through the motions of learning something but never take into consideration the value in what they have just explored.

Angelina: You know something else that I have to share. I really value the time to self-reflect and re-play the day in my head. Wow! It's been a long time since I've actually done this.

Carol: I usually self-reflect on my car ride home. I think about what I've done today and how I'll do things tomorrow.

Angelina: Melissa you've got the mother of all car rides home. (Everyone begins to giggle.) Do you take that time to reflect?

Melissa: Thank you for reminding me about the value in taking time to reflect on

our day. I have to admit that I'm guilty of not taking time to reflect on my teaching. I'm thinking that it's about time I take that time to stop at the end of the day and evaluate how things went and how I'll make tomorrow better. What are some more of your beliefs surrounding education?

Carol: Students need to have positive school experiences. As teachers we need to provide children with the best possible opportunities for them to learn and grow.

Angelina: I think one of the best ways for us to create positive experiences for students is to make sure to differentiate our instruction.

Melissa: YES! I have witnessed too many children struggling to catch up in a race with their peers; only too quickly they fall far behind because we have not given them the legs to run with. Isn't our job to provide opportunities for all of our students to be successful? The finish line for our students is not always the same but still when each student reaches that line we can see that they have been triumphant.

At the conclusion of our sharing we had developed a list that displayed a shared vision of what we believed was an important mission for educators. As a group we were impressed with the positive energy we gained from this discussion. It was refreshing to see that our beliefs surrounding education were so

in line with one another. We had reached a new level of respect for each other as educators. I looked at my colleagues with a newfound optimism. Figure 3 is a list that illustrates our shared vision.

Our Shared Vision

- There needs to be high expectations for all students.
- Teachers should self-reflect on their teaching on a daily basis.
- Students need positive school experiences.
- Students should be able to transfer knowledge across subjects and real-world experiences.
- Differentiated instruction is a must.

Figure 3. Our shared vision.

The Development of a Topic

With ground rules in place and our shared vision in mind it was important to develop a topic that would be the core of our collaborative meeting discussions. Soon, the answer to Angelina's question concerning the big picture would be answered. I began by asking if we could concentrate on something in literacy that was a pertinent topic for both kindergartners and first grade students. We shared that we all loves teaching literacy and as a team we discovered that a common thing we teach is story comprehension.

Angelina shared that she asks her students all the time, "Why do you think I'm teaching you to read?" She wanted her first graders to understand the purpose for reading. Carol said that it is so important for students to make connections with what they are reading. This all got me thinking about my kindergartners and what their thoughts were on reading. Did these young children consider themselves readers? Did they see any purpose for reading? I could not wait to get back to my classroom and start working collaboratively with my students to discover answers to these questions.

Our first meeting was quite successful and I had learned so much about my teammates in such a short amount of time. I hoped that they would gain something from our meeting besides just credits towards Act 48 requirements. Without jumping to conclusions, I thought that both teachers' first steps in our

journey were positive. Personally, I was already looking forward to the next time we would meet.

“What’s the Point?”

The energy from our first collaborative meeting had me so excited to teach the next day. I could not wait to introduce the kindergartners to my study and share with the students that they would be my collaborators. I thought that they would just love knowing that we were going to work as a team to improve our learning. Too often either students or teachers themselves forgot that grown-ups are learners. I had all hopes that our classroom discussion would be a great experience and there was not an ounce of nervousness present within myself as the kindergartners all gathered on the carpet.

As I began to share I felt the excitement in my bones. I loved reminding my students that we were a community of learners. I introduced in children’s language the gist of my study and then wrote on some chart paper the question, “Why do we read?” The basis for this question had stemmed from yesterday’s collaborative meeting when my teammates had shared that they want their students to value reading.

Allison jumped up, “WHAT’S THE POINT? WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?” Initially, I thought, she always had to have a comment for everything. However, her questions were important and as I took a glance around the room I could see that the students looked lost. They were fiddling with their nails,

whispering to friends, and one student even had his head in his lap. My earlier feelings of ease quickly went out the door and I took a moment to rethink how I could make this moment positive and gain the children's attention. I told the kindergartners that I really wanted to know what they thought reading was all about. I admitted that I once did not even like reading and did not see the point in reading. As for Allison, I told her that the point was that we were going to be a team and I wanted to be the best possible teacher for her so I was going to need to have her help me learn. At that, the students all began to eagerly raise their hands and I quickly wrote out their responses. Responses to why we read can be found in Figure 4.

As a kindergarten teacher, it was always a treat to hear what my students had to say because they had not yet learned how to monitor what was appropriate to share. It was evident that they held nothing back and I enjoyed that the kindergartners were not afraid to say what was on their mind. This was a class that loved sharing. Their responses to why we read were quite impressive and incredibly valid. The kindergartners displayed many positive reasons for reading and saw reading as an important activity. I was delighted to see that the children connected reading with school and the home.

Why do we read?

Responses given by kindergarten students. . .

- 1. So you can read to your Mom.**
- 2. So we are ready for first grade.**
- 3. You have to read hard to go to the next grade.**
- 4. To get smarter.**
- 5. So we can learn. (Look can! Our word wall word.)**
- 6. So we can be smart and read to our family.**
- 7. So I can read chapter books.**
- 8. Reading is so good.**

Figure 4. Student responses for why we read.

Monitoring Comprehension

Keeping in mind our collaborative team's focus I thought it was important to take time in my classroom to monitor students' comprehension of the stories we had read over the course of the week. I had the students all gather in a circle on the carpet and asked the kindergartners to share what book they liked the most this week. Before I could finish my last comment Austin jumped in and said, "I'm going to tell you about it. You see *Who's Baby Am I?* Well, it's like a pattern."

I was so excited to hear Austin's response that it slipped my mind that he had even called out. For weeks I had been observing that his responses never correlate with the questions that are being asked. This time, his answer was somewhat relevant. I was impressed that he had discovered the repeating pattern the book follows. Austin loved repetition and perhaps that is why he liked the book.

Within moments all of the eager kindergartners' hands were up and you could hear, "Ooo, ooo, ah, ah, me, me," as the students' hands began to wave with excitement. We went around the circle so that everyone could have the opportunity to share and we would not have to worry about keeping our hands raised.

Janelle shared, "I like the *Bundle of Sticks* because if you work together you won't be like one stick." A wave of shock and excitement hit me. I was

happily puzzled at this profound statement. It was amazing to be faced with the fact that kindergartners can think at such high levels.

Allison chimed in, “*The Bundle of Sticks* see, if you’re like one wimpy stick, you’re a piece of dust and you’ll fall apart.” Once again, I was in awe of the incredible thinking these kindergartners were doing. We had read *The Bundle of Sticks* from the anthology this week. There were no pictures and the students simply listened as I read. We talked briefly at the end of the story and then headed to lunch. Never, in my wildest dreams, did I think that the students would pick this as their favorite story let alone share such deep thoughts about the fable.

It was wonderfully evident that the group share was a valuable way of monitoring the students’ comprehension involving this week’s stories. The informal setting put the students at ease and I was able to record notes on each student’s progress. Of course, some of the kindergartners quickly shared the title of their favorite book for the week but struggled to share why they liked the book. Billy said, “Can you come back to me? I need some time to think.” I wondered if he needed time to think or just wanted to see what his friend’s responses were going to be.

As I continued to monitor the student’s comprehension I was able to make a list of students that I would need to spend some extra time working with. It was amazing in such a small space of time how much I learned about the kindergartners’ progress. I could not wait to take back to my collaborative team

the success of this formative assessment. I looked forward to what they would share as ways to monitor and assess students' reading comprehension.

When talking with my collaborative team they shared some excellent ways in which they monitor their students' comprehension. Carol said that she finds the best time to assess students' comprehension was during her guided reading groups. She explained that it is easier to monitor students' progress when they are working together in a small group. Carol used a chart with the students' names to take notes on the children's learning and check off when they have mastered a concept. Carol said that she found this type of assessment too hard to do with a large group.

In addition, Angelina shared that through lots of questioning she was able to monitor which of her students comprehend the books they are reading. One day she noted, "In guided reading today, I thought about you (referring to me) as I asked a question. I quickly discovered, yeah they're not getting it." Angelina said that in order for her students to get it she did more pre-reading activities to improve the students' comprehension skills. The students in her class worked more on picture walks to preview texts and used sticky notes to record and answer questions for things they wondered. Carol added that she was having her students work more on pre-reading. To help monitor her students she was having them share what they want to know about books and what they find out.

Throughout the course of our meetings as teachers we became more conscious of our students' comprehension progress. Carol shared that in guided reading she is doing more comprehension checks with her students. As a result, Carol got more of an idea of where her students are and she had opportunity to switch her reading groups around by moving students up that were becoming more and more successful. Angelina "hammered" into her students' minds the importance of going back and rereading when they were not getting something. She said she was impressed with how well her students are doing. Personally, I was most impressed with my kindergartners and they were far exceeding my expectations. I was excited to see that our meetings were having an impact on our classrooms.

A Learning Quest

As our small collaborative group gathered to begin our meeting, I was eager to share how impressed I was with my students' high-level responses to some stories we were reading. After sharing the students' responses, I took a moment to admit to my peers that although I believed strongly in having high expectations for all students, I failed to provide high-level learning opportunities for my kindergartners. Too often I told myself to not push the young students and provided the children with lower level tasks. I enjoyed this opportunity to seek out help from my colleagues about how I could improve my teaching.

Angelina stated, “I am on a quest to promote higher-level thinking in my classroom.” She admitted that often she makes assumptions about her students’ capabilities and fails to meet their needs. This was something we all confessed that we had done. It was a challenge to meet the needs of each student but not impossible. Angelina’s quest was central to what should be happening in classrooms because when given a challenge most students enjoyed rising to the occasion.

Furthermore, we observed that comprehension in the primary grades was not measured at a high-level. Carol shared that she had noticed that the units in our reading series simply required students to retell a story. She said, “Knowing is just spitting out information.” Are we not robbing our students of higher-level thinking when we ask them to merely retell a story?

This whole concept of rote thinking and learning can be linked to something Freire (1970) once stated. In discussing the concept of banking education Freire said, “Oppression-overwhelming control-is necrophilic; it is nourished by love of death, not life. The banking concept of education, which serves the interests of oppression, is also necrophilic,” (p. 77).

To interpret this quote I related teachers to oppressors that dictate knowledge to the oppressed (students). The educators kill discovery and deep understandings by controlling the rote information that is handed down to the students. For life to be possible, there has to be an occasion where students are

presented with an idea and left to explore and interpret its meaning. This chance would create a possibility for growth and hence necrophilic education would be terminated.

This statement made by Freire (1970) is linked to our discussion that came up when Carol mentioned that our reading curriculum does not teach for true understanding and just simply requires students to re-tell the story. Perhaps, Freire would see this type of teaching as a banking system approach to education. Within our reading plans, students are asked to listen to a story, deposit the information, and then spit back a retell of the story. This type of teaching inevitably stunts true intellectual growth. Students are asked to work at a very low level of intelligence and are robbed of the true essence of reading; making personal connections. As educators, our learning community was shocked by this revelation and we became more conscious of what literacy lessons on comprehension should incorporate.

As a group we then challenged one another to enhance our teaching of reading comprehension by going beyond what the teaching manuals were telling us to do. Carol chimed in that she was doing something new with her students. She said that her students were so literal and she wanted them to expand on what they were reading. A new activity she completed required the students to write the ending for the books that they read. Carol stopped reading the last few pages and had the students come up with a suitable ending. This activity required the

students to think at a higher level and also aloud for Carol to see how students comprehended the majority of the story. Angelina and I loved this idea and were excited to take something new back to our classrooms. Angelina stated, “I would rather do this than those dumb worksheets.” She was referring to the activity pages that the students complete after reading stories from our reading series. Clearly, Carol’s idea helped ignite the desire for us to move beyond what we were already doing and become more creative with our lessons.

More than Dusting

At the conclusion of another collaborative meeting I was once again left with a strong feeling of accomplishment. The energy from our meeting spilled over into my classroom. No longer was I gathering books off the shelf to dust. I paged through texts on thematic units and spread across the classroom tables a slue of craft projects and instruments all used to enhance a unit on pumpkins. It was so refreshing to see so many ideas on how to enhance a literature unit beyond merely passing out a worksheet to go along with a story that was just read.

I observed that the items within the bin incorporated opportunities for students to work creatively in art centers, manipulate photographs to sequence stories, explore the science behind the story, develop their own books, and even practice some math. I decided to take a risk and break from our rote teaching found within the manual and explore something new with my students. As I developed plans for the following week I was more enthused about what I was

teaching. It became evident that it is possible to still cover the required teaching points without needing to utilize the reading series. I was reminded of what my principal always reminded us, “Good teaching is good teaching.” I was confident that the students would continue to develop stronger comprehension skills as we launched our new unit.

Literacy Centers

The kindergartners were a buzz as they observed the centers that were set-up throughout our classroom. Doug said, “We get to make that?” You could hear all of the excitement and the pleas for where each kindergartner wanted to go first. I introduced each center and assured the students that they would all get a chance to work in each spot. We listened once more to the story, Pumpkin, Pumpkin by Jeanne Titherington prior to dispersing to our centers.

As a teacher, it was truly a gift to watch the excitement that filled the kindergartners’ eyes. The reminder from my collaborative team to use my resources and the challenge to go beyond the one book was in part responsible for the learning that was taking place in the classroom. All of the children were engaged in learning as they participated in hands-on activities. Furthermore, I was able to walk around the room observing students’ comprehension. I had the chance to sit one on one with students and offer support where needed.

In particular, I noticed that Doug who usually had his head in lap or was fiddling during instruction was now actively learning. Doug was a very capable,

smart student but he was not a fan of schoolwork (see Figure 5). I yearned for the day that he would show his true potential.

Doug

Oh man! I don't want to read or write. I want to play in the blocks with the cars. Maybe if I finish my work quick then I can be first to play. I don't like drawing or writing. I like books but I want to read about sharks and dinosaurs. Non-fiction books are really good. When Miss Dunne-Porter's talking I like to think about what I am going to play when I get home. Hopefully, I don't have to turn a card because my mom won't let me play my DS. I want a happy face today so I'm going to try really, really, really hard to make good choices. But I don't want to write or do my work. Oh man!

Wow! We get to play to learn today! Cool! We get to make a pumpkin life cycle and play some games. AWESOME! Now I won't get board on the carpet. I love this stuff. I am going to do my very best work. Miss Dunne-Porter will be proud of me!

Figure 5. I-story vignette on Doug.

The students all shined in the areas where they were working. No longer was the room quiet as the kindergartners listened to their teacher talk. The noise in the classroom was the excitement of students conversing as they learned and perfected their comprehension of our unit on pumpkins. As a teacher, I was able to see students that were not always successful rise to the occasion and display that they were learning the concepts being taught. In the art center the students made crafts that displayed the life-cycle of a pumpkin, in the reading center they had the opportunity to read a variety of books that extended the lesson, in the sequencing center the children arranged the story in sequential order, and in the science center the students got messy exploring the insides of a pumpkin. These centers gave the students an opportunity to explore what we read in a hands-on way that was meaningful for them.

An Unforeseen Challenge

As I gained greater confidence in my teaching of reading I lost absolute poise in my ability to successfully manage the classroom. Never had I foreseen the struggles that I would face with some of my students. If someone were to at any time walk into our kindergarten classroom they would have heard shouting and screaming coming from under a table. On most occasions I had a student hitting me as he yelled, "YOU LISTEN TO ME! YOU LISTEN TO ME NOW!" This one particular student would bang his head into the floor and as you would hear his head banging he would scream, "STOP HITTING ME! STOP HITTING

ME MISS DUNNE-PORTER! YOU'RE MAKING ME DO IT!" Needless to say, I cried every afternoon as I worked incredibly hard at documenting the heart wrenching behavior that was taking place in our kindergarten room.

With this unforeseen challenge taking place it became quite difficult to concentrate on the study at hand. Honestly, the safety of my students and the assistance needed for the others became my first priority. Most lessons were interrupted by the incidents that were taking place. Many times I was pulled out of the classroom to attend meetings with a team that worked diligently on gaining access to proper help for these particular students.

During this difficult time I witnessed the most amazing group of children offer a helping hand to their friends who were struggling. The students all opened their hearts to their peers and tried with all their strength to cheer them up. At one point, Jessica joined her friend, Austin under the table and told him how wonderful he was. She asked Austin if he would like to play with her and told him to not be sad. Austin crawled out from under the table and joined Jessica in housekeeping where they began to prepare their own little meal. This was only one of the amazing instances where the kindergartners put their friends needs before their own. It was vivid that this was a remarkable group of children well beyond their years.

My collaborative team witnessed what was going on in the classroom because they could hear the screams in their own rooms. Angelina and Carol saw

the physical aggression as we would walk down the hall and Austin would hit me as he yelled. They reminded me that as much as I wanted to help the struggling students that I needed to remember the other children in the classroom. Eventually, I learned that I had to ignore much of the behavior so that I could teach the students that were prepared to learn.

Breaking Rule Number Two

As our work on comprehension improved and we continued to learn more from one another our group had built a strong bond. This cohesiveness allowed us to take risks by opening ourselves up to sharing our dilemmas in teaching with one another. Originally, when our group generated a list of rules for collaborative meetings we found it important to make a rule stating that we would all stay on the topic at hand. In fact, this rule was listed as rule number two on our list. As time progressed we found ourselves breaking rule number two more and more. Was this a bad thing? I do not think so. Rather, as we became more and more comfortable with each other we became a supportive group for one another.

In our first meetings we would all jump in and say almost in unison, “Would it be ok if I say a little something off topic?” We eventually started to begin all of our meetings with a few minutes of off topic conversation. This occasion became a release for each of us as we poured out our frustrations or struggles that we were facing as educators. It was a gift to get different perspectives from colleagues and this time was absolutely refreshing.

The occasion to speak about our trials and tribulations with colleagues was also wonderful because we could relate to one another. We were three teachers that had an understanding of what teaching entailed. As a group we all understood that too many times we would go home to explain our days to our families and they just could not relate. This was frustrating and it was great to talk with people that could understand.

Furthermore, as a support group we also became friends that were able to offer constructive criticism without having any hurt feelings. During one occasion I discussed how I personally was struggling to make connections with some other colleagues. I asked Angelina and Carol what I should do. Angelina suggested that I should be calmer about things and try to be less intimidating. I was shocked because I never considered myself an intimidating individual but I remembered that this was not the first time I had been referred to in this way. I was happy to hear the suggestion and realized that sometimes I am too pushy about ideas or go too far in depth with things and it bothers others. Throughout the course of our meetings we continued to offer support to one another and were open to listening to suggestions.

Interactive Learning

Like our own students, as teachers we shared that we enjoy learning when it interactively involved us in the discussion at hand. When discussing our last in-service Carol stated, “They were preaching to us and talking at us about phonemic

awareness and vocabulary. There was a long power point presentation and there was no interaction. Everyone was complaining.” She said the difference between our collaborative group and the in-service is that we had a lot of interaction. Carol noted she finds more collaboration in our small professional learning community. In addition, Carol said she thought it would be neat if there was an opportunity for professional learning communities to be established that incorporate teachers from schools that have a variety of extremes, like a Title One school and a Blue Ribbon school. Carol’s thought was that this would be an interactive opportunity where teachers would learn a great deal from one another.

Carol’s comments were energizing and it was wonderful to witness her speaking freely about her thoughts. It was most impressive to see that she found value in the interactive component of our collaborative meetings.

I too have learned a great deal from our small professional learning community and have found this to be one of the most preferable forms of professional development. During teacher in-services, I found very little of what we discussed applicable to my classroom. On rare occasions we were given the opportunity to participate in discussions. The packets I was given always found themselves filed away and I never referred to their content. I never felt compelled to complete what had been discussed because there was never any follow-up to each meeting’s topic. Perhaps, if our teacher in-services incorporated professional development that was interactive and involved teachers, than there

would be more successful learning occurring amongst educators. Clearly, like students, teachers yearn to be emerged in what they are learning through an interactive process.

Moving to Learn

Our collaborative discussion on the value of interactive learning fueled my mission to provide more energizing learning opportunities for my kindergartners. The young students are very energetic and have minimal attention spans. As the children continued to polish their skills on sequencing a story I wanted to get them up and moving. Through movement the kindergartners were able to learn utilizing bodily kinesthetic intelligence.

The movement activity we participated in was called “Cross If.” The students were divided into two equal groups on the carpet. Between the students was a line of large masking tape. I asked questions about a story we had just read and assisted the kindergartners in recalling prior knowledge of the events that had occurred in the book. Then, statements were given and the students had to determine if the events were true or false. If what was said was true then the students would cross the line and if it was false they would remain in place.

Of course, we reviewed the procedures for the game prior to playing. My biggest fear was that one of the children would walk into another as they were crossing paths. I reminded the students that we needed to play by the rules and make sure to be safe. Like many other teachers, I am nervous when I try

something new. However, lately I had most enjoyed experimenting on different ways to enhance my teaching of comprehension.

This opportunity gave me the chance to complete a formative assessment on the students to see which children were able to recall what happened in the story. My collaborative partners warned me to be cautious of students that may just be copying the movements their peers made. This was a great reminder and I took it into consideration as I worked with the students.

As we played you could both see and hear the excitement in the students as they listened intently to each statement. The kindergartners surprised me with how involved they were in the activity. Many of the students actually repeated the statement to themselves before deciding if they needed to move. It was wonderful to see that the students were able to monitor their own comprehension.

The conversations that took place amongst the students were incredible. I believed that the children were listening so intently in part because they really wanted to play the game. I realized that I needed to incorporate more movement activities into my teaching. This activity was a bonus for my students that always have difficulty paying attention. It was a wonderful, quick, and easy way to monitor students' comprehension. I did notice that some of the students had difficulty with the absence of visuals. The children really needed to have good listening skills to be successful with the activity.

“Cross If”

Instructions for the game “Cross If” had been discussed and the students are all ready to play. The children were standing quietly but you could see the excitement in their eyes.

Miss Dunne-Porter: Jamie planted green beans. (The students do not cross.)

Cooper: What, no! (Some of the children begin to giggle.)

Miss Dunne-Porter: First, Jaime plants a pumpkin seed. (The students all cross.

Some begin to jump with excitement.)

Billy: Yeah!

Miss Dunne-Porter: The pumpkin seed then grows to form a pumpkin plant.

(Some of the students cross.)

Allison: It’s a pumpkin sprout first.

Miss Dunne-Porter: Excellent! The pumpkin plant becomes a pumpkin flower.

(The students all cross.)

Zack: This game is just like the book. It’s just like we’re reading it!

Miss Dunne-Porter: You’re right Zack! I am so happy noticed this.

Allison: We get to move to learn and to have fun!

Janelle: This is fun!

Miss Dunne-Porter: I am so happy that everyone is enjoying this game. We’ve been having so much fun that I just noticed we need to get to lunch! We’ll have to play again soon!

Modeling Sometimes Equals Copying

A discussion on the success of my movement activity, “Cross If,” brought up a talk on how students often copy not only their peers but their teachers too. Carol commented that her students rely heavily on the think aloud modeling that she does. She shared that the connections her students make are copies of the modeling she has done. Angelina chimed in, “I talk about me but then they just make the same connection that I did.” As a group we clearly all agreed that our students need modeling but they also have to remember to make their own connections. I shared my sample of a model I used to illustrate my favorite part of the book, *On the Go* by Ann Morris. My favorite form of transportation was a sailboat and Jessica, Lisa, Sean, and Jacob picked the same thing out of twenty-seven other forms of transportation (see Figures 7-10).

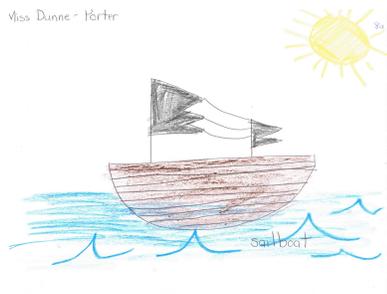


Figure 6. Miss Dunne-Porter's work.



Figure 7. Jessica's work.



Figure 8. Lisa's work.



Figure 9. Sean's work.



Figure 10. Jacob's work.

Modeling is a very important component of primary teachers' lesson plans. The question for our group was, how can we model for our students but then make sure the children do not just copy our examples? We realized that if our students are just copying us then we assume that they do not comprehend the stories we have worked on. It can be a struggle to get students to work independently and complete their own work and not develop mirror images of what the teacher has done. I shared with my peers that every now and then I do

not do a model for my students. I have the children try to complete the task on hand by themselves. While the children are working I walk around and give students that need modeling the extra help. Sometimes I even work with a small group to give more guidance. Most of the time the other children are able to complete a task without my help. I wonder what Jessica, Lisa, Sean, and Jacob would have picked as their favorite form of transportation if I had not shared a sample? Perhaps, they would have still picked the sailboat.

The Power of Pictures

As we continued to both teach and monitor our students' reading comprehension the power of pictures became clear. Carol opened one of our discussions with an important reflection that she had written in her journal. The running records she was completing on her students did not contain any pictures. Carol realized that in the early stages of story comprehension students need pictures. We had taught our students to use the pictures to help them discover what is happening in a story and yet the test the first grade teachers were asked to administer was void of any illustrations. Angelina said that her low level learners were lost without the pictures.

As we continued our discussion on the how the value of pictures helps students, we realized how crippling it was to take pictures away from children and expect them to still understand a story. Carol stated, "My low readers couldn't do anything without the pictures because the illustrations are a security blanket for

them.” I discussed how traumatizing it was for my students when I tried reading a chapter book to them during quiet time. The fact that there were no pictures in the book stunned the kindergartners. Eventually, I passed the book along to Allison to take home and read because she loves chapter books. The other children were relieved that I put the book aside.

Pictures are so important for young readers. When I had introduced the kindergartners to reading I told them that they were all readers. I used environmental print to show the children that they could read. The children learned that when they do a picture walk by previewing the story they are actually practicing a skill that good readers carry out. Initially, the kindergartners would read books to their friends by just discussing page by page what was happening in the story.

We collaborated more on the topic and realized that it was important to teach our students how to visualize in their minds what is happening in the story. Angelina decided to read a book to her students and have them keep their eyes closed as they listened. She paired a musical selection to go along with the book to help the students comprehend the story without utilizing any illustrations. One of our new focuses was to teach students how to visualize a story by listening intensely to the words the author had written and creating a picture in their minds.

A New Sage on the Stage

The kindergartners were all gathered on the carpet and most of the children had their eyes closed. They were focused on listening to *The Lion and the Mouse*, a story from our anthology. As I read I modeled fluency and paid attention to each word to help the young students create a picture of the story in their minds. At the conclusion of the story the children all looked up at me to see what our next plan of action would be.

I asked the kindergartners if they could please help me better understand the story. I shared with the students that perhaps we could best picture the story if they could act it out. At once every ones' hands shot up and the children were eager to take on the roles of the lion, mouse, man, and women. "OoOo me! I want to be the lion," shouted Cooper. "Can I be the mouse?" Allison asked. I called on a few volunteers and took a back seat as the actors began to perform their version of *The Lion and the Mouse*.

Within moments the story of *The Lion and the Mouse* came to life as the young actors got into their roles. The audience watched with enthusiasm as their peers brilliantly made real the fable we had just read. There were giggles and whispers reminding the actors about what the characters in the story said and did. The lion was fierce and the mouse played the role of a wonderful little friend.

I was amazed with how well the different groups were able to use the language of the book to so beautifully express the story. The actors really got into

their roles. This became an excellent opportunity for me to monitor the students' comprehension of the fable. Clearly, in this instance all of the students really understood what was going on in the story. It was impressing to see how the kindergartners were able to take the fable from the anthology and bring it to life on their own little stage.

For students that had struggled because of the lack of pictures they were now able to see the fable from a three-dimensional perspective. The kindergartners gained ownership for their learning, as they became the sages on the stage. It was marvelous to observe from the sidelines and see how the children made sure that each of their friends got the opportunity to act out the story.

This was an easy activity to do that required no extra materials. I was happy that I took a risk and tried something new. In the future I planned to do more acting out of stories. This was an excellent formative assessment and I was able to vividly see which kindergartners comprehended the fable. I could not wait to share this success with my teacher collaborators.

Upon meeting with Angelina and Carol we discussed the value of giving our students a multitude of ways to work on the stories they read. Carol shared that her first graders love making character masks and acting out the books they read. She said the students get very involved in this activity. Both teachers also have done readers theatre with their students to not only practice reading with

fluency but also work on story comprehension. We all agreed that it is so important to find ways to help make books come to life for our students.

Student Work

One of the driving forces for collaborative meetings was the continuous review of student data. During our learning community time we utilized samples of students' work as a springboard for discussions. It was interesting to listen to my teams' perspectives on the kindergartners' work. Initial ideas that I had surrounding the students' difficulties and successes were easily modified after taking into account Angelina and Carol's insights. I eventually realized that I was judging my kindergartners' work more harshly. Angelina and Carol were impressed with the kindergartners' data that clearly displayed great levels of story comprehension. Of course, there were a few work samples that made their eyes bug out of their heads because they were definite causes for concern.

The student work that was sometimes alarming helped to guide our plans for action. We questioned one another on what we could do for our students that were struggling to be successful readers. Angelina and Carol were able to connect some of their first graders' comprehension difficulties with my kindergarten concerns. As a team, we discussed the value of reteaching our students important reading strategies. We promised one another to continue to do more re-reading and questioning with our students. Understandably, student work was a crucial component of our professional learning community.

There's Nothing Like Real World Experiences

During one of our collaborative meetings Carol discussed the struggle that students have making text to world connections. She said, "All my students ever relate to outside our classroom is video games. They don't see the world beyond their TV!" We all chimed in and agreed that this is a big dilemma for our students. As educators we talked about how we can provide real world situations for our students that get the children to see beyond their flat screens. At this moment I began to share the incredible opportunity my class had that connected our literature unit with the real world.

As the school bus turned down a narrow dirt road you could hear the excitement from the kindergartners intensify. "LOOK! I see a yellow pumpkin." "WOW! A pumpkin flower!" "There is little green." "YES! We are here!" The bus packed with eager kindergartners pulled into the pumpkin patch and I too was so thrilled for my students. For several weeks we had been learning about the life cycle of a pumpkin and our class had read an incredible amount of wonderful literature on the subject. However, nothing could compare to the opportunity to actually step foot on the grounds of a real pumpkin patch.

The farmer came to greet us and he told the children that they would go on a hayride, pick pumpkins and gourds, and explore a corn maze. The students were jumping up and down absolutely energized for the memorable experience. For many of the children this was the first time they had traveled beyond the walls

of their home and school. The closest they had ever been to a pumpkin patch was when we looked at photographs of one. It was a gift to see how magical this experience was for the students.

There was no better way to enhance our literacy unit than to give students this real-world experience. As the children walked through the pumpkin patch you could observe them recalling the books. Doug yelled to Janelle, “Look there’s the pumpkin plant. Remember in the book first seed, then plant, and flower. Over there is little green and yellow.” He proceeded to go and find himself a big orange pumpkin to take home.

This was an experience for the kindergartners that no other lesson I taught could compete with. Furthermore, in promoting this type of ideal education for students Dewey (1938) states:

A primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principle of the shaping of actual experience by environing conditions, but that they also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth. (p. 40)

Dewey is stating that teachers are accountable for acknowledging the variety of experiences that students have come from. It is important to recognize both past and present experiences of each child and make these connections in our teaching. Furthermore, when providing the best educational experience for

students it is necessary to connect new concepts with the world that exists beyond our classroom doors.

As we continue to work on improving our story comprehension it was so important to, when possible, provide real-world experiences for our students. As a teacher it was important that I recognized my students' life experiences and found ways to make things real for students. A child may not comprehend a story because they have not experienced the situation before. A goal of story comprehension is for students to make connections with what they are reading. For this to occur I needed to make relevant the texts by providing real-life examples that would help students to understand books and grow as learners.

Without a doubt, our trip to the pumpkin patch was a memorable experience for the kindergartners that helped bring to life the stories we read. The chance for students to see and touch the prickly vines and variety of pumpkins was phenomenal. It was crucial that learning was made real for these young learners.

Reading Through the Eyes of Kindergartners

As the students continued to grow as readers and absorb new stories it was important to pause for a moment and ask the kindergartners once again about reading. This time there were no shouts asking about the point of this discussion. The students were all eager to share and they quickly raised their hands (see Figure 11).

READING IS. . .

I think it's fun! (Jacob)

It helps us learn. (Lisa)

I love reading with my mommy. (Nicole)

It's learning so you can get better at spelling and thinking.

(John)

If you read books you get smarter and you get to know more. (Billy)

I think all the time about reading books or letters or numbers. I like reading books. I love reading!

(Cooper)

I think reading is good because it can take you places.

You don't have to worry. I really like it. I like to read books. (Allison)

Reading is great because it helps you get smart. You read books and you get smarter.

(Doug)

Reading is really great because it helps you get really smart. It's also good because you can learn new words and books can help you learn lots of stuff. (Janell)

I like reading because we get smarter and learn more. Reading is fun. You'll get better and better. (Zack)

I like reading because we get to take home books. Our family gets to read our books. (Sean)

Figure 11. Reading is pastiche.

In our classroom reading was well liked and the students saw the activity as making them intelligent individuals. It was not to say that the kindergartners were all picking up books and fluently reading the stories cover to cover. However, the children saw themselves as readers. They had learned that reading was more than just deciphering the words on the pages.

Books had started to come alive for the students as we participated in a myriad of activities to help understand the stories we read. Jacob said, “I like acting out books because it’s like we’re in the story.” Cooper added, “I like acting out the books because it’s kinda fun.” Nicole and Lisa shared that they have enjoyed making things to go along with the stories. Allison liked having the opportunity to critique the books we read (see Figure 12). Of course, everyone loved going to the pumpkin patch to culminate our literacy unit on the life cycle of a pumpkin.

Figure 12. Allison’s reader response.

Teacher Collaborators' Reflections

Carol

I can't believe that we are finished with our collaborative meetings! They were really positive sessions and I got a lot of great ideas. Usually, with the hustle bustle of things I never make the time to stop and think about my teaching but because we met I really got into more reflecting.

I liked how the meetings were set-up and I loved the organized agendas (see Appendix G). I especially enjoyed being able to all bring our own strengths to the table. With my special education background, Angelina's high-level teaching and Melissa's ideas I really learned so much. It was also great to see what happens in kindergarten. It would be neat to continue our meetings and invite second grade to join us. We would be able to see the academic progression that students make in the primary grades.

This was a wonderful professional development opportunity. It showed that when professional development is done right we learn things that are applicable to our classroom. It's so nice to not be talked at and get the chance to share.

As for my students, they are finally starting to make connections because I've really been pushing them to work harder. Before I just covered the basics and now we're really moving along. The children are able to make some connections without my help now!

Figure 13. I-story vignette on Carol.

Angelina

I just talked to Carol and told her I can't believe we're not meeting anymore. I really enjoyed our collaborative meetings and loved getting advice from my colleagues. I've taken a lot back to my classroom and my guided reading has gotten better. Our group meetings served as a reflection of our teaching. I can definitely say that when we don't meet I forget to take that time to analyze my day.

Our meetings were so organized and I loved having an outline so I could see our topic (see Appendix G). I need to see what's going on so there's not a cloud or fog over what's going to be discussed. It's important for me to know where we're going. I am hoping we can do this whole professional learning community thing again next year. I would love to have more people join.

I have to admit that as a district we have these in-services that seem to be a waste of my time. I like when teachers share what they've come up with. It's so boring when we spend a whole block of time listening to someone talk at us. Give me a break! We're teachers and we can learn more from one another like at our professional learning community meetings. Our collaborative meetings were authentic learning.

Also, I must say that I do feel slightly guilty because I have a group of higher-level learners than the other first grade classes. I have my students that can do more than their peers working really

hard. As far as the whole reading comprehension component, I am using our series but I'm putting my own twist on it. I see evidence of comprehension in my students writing, participation in class, and during guided reading. I think I'm doing a much better job with guided reading. I'm spending more time on comprehension and I feel more relaxed teaching. My students are able to do more on their own and they are not relying on me as much. I've become a better teacher.

Figure 14. I-story vignette on Angelina.

Summary

The collaborative nature of the study and the opportunity to work on reading comprehension collectively with teachers and students was incredible. Dewey spoke highly about the existence of TEAM. In particular, while sharing insights on social control Dewey (1938) exclaims:

In all such cases it is not the will or desire of any one person which establishes order but the moving spirit of the whole group. The control is social, but individuals are parts of a community, not outside of it. (p. 54)

Dewey shared that successful stability in a group was possible when individuals were a team that worked together. A community was triumphant when everyone had the opportunity to decide on how things would work. In other

words, successful communities do not result from the establishment of a dictatorship role.

In my study, I formed a learning community that was successful because the educators and students had the opportunity to be the part of a collaborative team. Decisions about topic discussions and action to be taken occurred as a result of combined decision-making. The teachers and students felt ownership for their learning because there was no dictator telling them what to learn or how to implement the new concept in the classroom. The establishment of a community was key for the success of both teacher and student learning.

DATA ANALYSIS

Bogdan and Biklen (2002) referred to data analysis as a systematic process of reviewing and organizing data. Throughout this qualitative study data analysis was an ongoing process. During our nine collaborative meetings descriptive notes were taken to go along with meeting agendas. Furthermore, while teaching story comprehension to the kindergarten children a detailed plethora of data was collected via observational notes, student work, and interviews.

My field log was the heart of the data collection process. MacLean and Mohr (1999) stated, “The log is a place to record questions, observations, reflections; it is a place to think, plan, observe, reflect, read, reread, rethink, analyze, and, occasionally, celebrate,” (p. 17). It was important that throughout the data collection process I made time to analyze and interpret the information I was collecting. I developed analytical questions to help lead me to my answer. I even had questions about my questions. One of the most helpful components were the memos I wrote to myself that gave details of my thinking process throughout the course of the study. In addition, the more data I collected on my topic the better, because it added depth to my thinking.

During the data analysis process I read the works of the noteworthy philosophers John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Lev Vygotsky, and Lisa Delpit. The thinking involved within these intellectual texts gave me a fresh look at my study.

I was able to review my data through different lenses and engage in reflective dialogue with the philosophers.

In addition, while examining my field log I completed a figurative language analysis. Saban (2006) explained that metaphors give researchers the opportunity to see in a new light what already exists. The process of playing with metaphors and analyzing their underlying meaning proved to be quite thought provoking.

As I continued to keep the purpose of my study in mind, I persistently read through my log searching for reoccurring themes. I began a process of coding and categorizing my field log notes. I kept an index of all codes and recorded the times that each code reappeared throughout the log. Patterns and reoccurring data eventually emerged as themes for my study. I developed distinguished bins for each theme and included codes that went hand in hand with each topic. Eventually, I created graphic organizers to display the bins and themes for teacher collaborators and the kindergarten students (see Figures 15 and 16).

Perhaps, one of the most important pieces of data I analyzed were the responses to both teacher and student interview questions. I had constructed interview prompts (see Appendixes E and F) in order to give my participants the opportunity to answer open-ended questions and avoid a black and white template. The answers to the prompts allowed me to analyze the study through participants' eyes and I was able to see what they had learned from the process.

In addition, to help bring to life all the data I was analyzing I incorporated several displays that added voice to my story. Through I-stories it was possible to incorporate the thoughts and feelings of both a student and the teacher collaborators. I used pastiches to show the mix of emotions that participants displayed during different periods of the study. Plays were written to help see the transmission of dialogue in the classroom and during our collaborative meetings. The process of developing these displays furthered my analytical process and once again helped me to vividly see emerging themes.

MacLean and Mohr (1999) remind researchers that data analysis is an ongoing process that assists in helping make sense of all the information that has been collected. Throughout this course I kept my study's purpose in mind and participated in a deep thinking process. I paid close attention to detail and through interpretative analysis composed several themes for my study.

Figure 15. Teacher bins

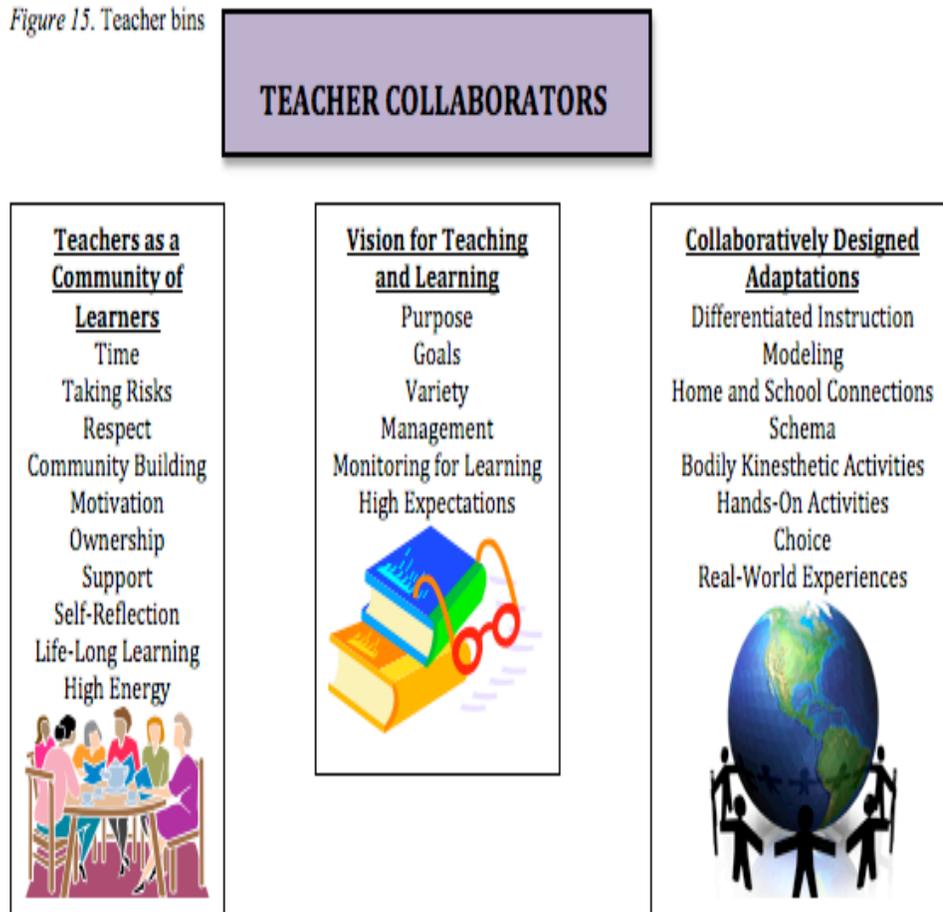


Figure 16. Student bins



FINDINGS

The purpose of my study was twofold. The first was to collaborate with my colleagues by building a community of learners that self-reflected and discovered ways to create the best possible learning experiences for our students and ourselves. The second purpose was to implement new ideas for teaching reading comprehension in order to develop successful young readers. During the course of this study I worked diligently with two first grade teachers and my kindergarten students. On our collaborative journey several overarching themes emerged. The big ideas were organized to display outcomes for both teachers and students.

Teachers as a Community of Learners

Theme: When teachers take a risk by opening their doors and joining in the journey of self-reflection and collaboration they gain feelings of motivation and ownership as they participate in the process of life-long learning.

As I walked down the hall of our school, daily I had observed teachers doing extraordinary work with their students. It was evident that great things were happening in our classrooms yet, our conversations in the faculty room and halls of our building rarely focused on teaching and learning. Prior to implementing a professional learning community Angelina, Carol, and I seldom spoke as professionals and instead our friendly conversations focused on things happening outside of school.

After reviewing several texts on the power of professional learning communities I learned how effective professional conversations could be (see Appendix H for a list of books on professional learning communities). I gained great enthusiasm for this process and began on my journey. My first step in implementing a professional learning community was finding teachers that would want to participate. Bezzina and Testa (2005) stated that for collaboration to occur teachers must first break down their walls of isolation and become partners in practice. Keeping that thought in mind I approached Angelina and Carol and asked them to join because I had a hunch that they would agree to participate. I thought that we already had a relationship as friends and that is what made it possible for us to engage in open and honest conversations about our practices.

Prior to our first meeting Carol was concerned about signing up for the Act 48 and flex hours that were provided for participating in the learning community. In order to earn all of the hours the teachers had to sign up individually for all nine meetings. This was a time consuming process and I had a feeling Carol did not like the inconvenience of signing up nine times. One of the biggest roadblocks for professional learning communities is time (Markus, 2006; White & McIntosh, 2007; Yates & Collins, 2006). It would have been ideal if the time to work collaboratively fit into our daily school schedules. However, at the conclusion of our professional learning community meetings Angelina said she shared with Carol that she could not believe we were not meeting anymore. Both

teacher collaborators shared that they inevitably valued the priceless learning time we spent together.

Throughout the duration of our meetings we gained a level of respect for one another as we took risks and shared our values, visions, and beliefs on education. One of our rules for our professional learning community was to respect one another's opinions. We were honest with one another as we discussed what was happening in our classrooms. I admitted that one of my beliefs was to make sure my teaching was developmentally appropriate yet, I really did not know exactly what developmentally appropriate meant for my students. Admitting this took courage but I knew that my colleagues would listen, respect what I said, and share their opinions. Angelina opened up by discussing that she learned and taught best in a structured setting. She wanted to learn how to provide her students with lessons that had more unprompted conclusions.

Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996) stated that a level of respect is gained as teachers listen to one another share and uncover the underlying complex meanings of data. Our collaborative conversations incorporated guidelines that helped build a strong team of learners. Wood (2007) wrote that it is important for collaborative groups to establish a set of rules that made sure to eliminate the occasion for hurt feelings. As a collaborative team one of our ground rules was to respect others' opinions. The level of respect that we had for one another as a group of educators was invaluable. As a team of learners we brought to the table

a wealth of knowledge and understanding that helped build a successful learning environment for our students and ourselves.

Participating in the collaborative group was a community building activity. As a team of learners we had developed a shared vision for teaching and learning. We learned from one another and asked questions of each other. In addition, our hall conversations had now focused on lessons we were teaching and our students' successes. On one particular day Angelina stopped me in the hall to share that she had put her teaching manuals aside for a day and taught her students using the story *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*. Angelina thanked me for inspiring her to use different sources for teaching.

Wenger (1998) defined effective professional development as an opportunity to meet the needs and interests of educators. The occasion for teachers to be involved in their learning was a motivational process. Carol shared that typically she was used to professional development opportunities where teachers were "preached to" and shown power point presentations. She said that the difference between our collaborative group and in-services was the level of interaction. Carol said that she was motivated as a result of our meetings and felt ownership for her learning during collaborative discussions. She added that our professional learning community was superior because she could use what we discussed in her classroom.

The feelings of motivation and ownership were a result of professional development that was made applicable for teachers. Angelina stated that our professional learning community had involved her in authentic learning. She said that our discussions on story comprehension became a focus in her classroom and that she was motivated to try new things. Personally, the motivational energy I gained from our collaborative inquiry was contagious and spilled over into my classroom. I too began to focus more on my students' reading comprehension and I experimented with different teaching strategies.

As our teaching improved as a result of motivational conversations we also developed a level of support for one another. In my classroom I struggled with severe behavioral issues. I was hit and yelled at by one student while another kindergartner punched dolls and screamed and an additional child stayed hunched in his cubby crying. All of these actions interfered with my teaching and left me feeling hopeless. Carol and Angelina gave me support and helped me to realize that I needed to focus on the students that were ready to learn. The level of support my colleagues offered was what kept me going back into my classroom and still sharing my passion for learning with my students. As a team that supported one another we were able to offer constructive feedback. The exchange of advice from different perspectives was a great tool that collaboration provided.

Furthermore, our professional learning community shared the value of self-reflection. We kept journals that had records of our thoughts, questions, and

observations. As a group we recognized that reflective practice was good teaching. Emihovich and Battaglia (2000) stated that for teacher learning to be successful educators must question and reflect on their practices. Angelina discussed how our meetings helped serve as a reflective time. She said that our collaborative time reminded her of the value in self-reflection. Carol admitted with the “hustle-bustle” of our school days she easily forgot to take a moment to think about the successes and complexities of her day. As a group we all agreed that self-reflection was invaluable and helped improve our teaching. The professional learning community served as a reminder of how important it was to provide time to self-reflect.

As a collaborative group we built a community of learners that participated in motivational conversations, supported one another, and self-reflected on our teaching and students’ learning. Without a doubt, we were sharing in a process of life-long learning. Dewey (1938) stated that, “The most important attitude that can be formed is that of the desire to go on learning,” (p. 48). The professional learning community promoted life-long learning as we engaged in a process of questioning and searching for answers found within literacy resources and on educational websites (see Appendix I).

During one of our final collaborative meetings it was evident that there was a level of high-energy as we interchanged ideas. We all had paper out as we intently listened to one another speak of successes and we jotted down the

lessons. It was evident that as a group of learners we really enjoyed the opportunity to talk as professionals and gain new insight into our teaching. Angelina spoke with me and said that as a result of our professional learning community she was more into her teaching. As teachers we had opened our doors and joined in a collaborative journey where we brought to the table our values and beliefs on education that became woven into a shared vision for student success.

Vision for Teaching and Learning

Theme: Teaching and learning must incorporate a purpose and goals along with consistent monitoring of students' progress.

As a collaborative group one of our first topics of discussion focused on our vision of what teaching and learning had to entail. We developed a shared vision that reflected our values and belief systems. It was both engaging and powerful to observe our group discuss such pertinent topics. Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996) stated that fundamental to learning communities are the common values and expectations everyone shares. This notion became clearly vivid. Our vision for teaching and learning included the need to present students with the value and purpose for lessons along with goals. Additional key factors were to provide variety and be aware of classroom management. By chance, the most important visions incorporated monitoring student learning and have high-expectations for all students.

Prior to teaching something new the stage was set by having the students discover the value and purpose for learning fresh material. Angelina shared that before she began to teach reading she asked her students, “Why do you think I’m teaching you to read?” She had her students share their understandings on the value of reading and then began to teach the first graders to read. I too had the kindergartners develop a list that described what reading was. The students shared that reading made you smart and that it got you ready for the next grade. I believed that by setting the stage and discovering the purpose for reading the students not only gained a greater understanding of the subject but also were more motivated to learn.

Along with aligning teaching with value and purpose we saw the need to set goals. With a focus on student reading comprehension our collaborative group wanted our students to be able to make connections with what they were reading. This goal kept us grounded as we began to explore the best ways for teaching students how to make connections with books. By examining texts like *Strategies That Work* by Harvey and Goudvis (2000) we learned that there are three ways to make connections that included text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world.

Moreover, with a focus on reading comprehension, Angelina, Carol, and I began to move beyond the basics. We started to utilize a variety of tools rather than just making use of our prescribed teaching manuals. Carol recognized that the manuals we were using just taught basic retelling. As a group we wanted to

do more with our students. Carol started reading stories and stopping a few pages before the end to have her students write the ending of books. Angelina was having her students develop questions prior to reading like, “I wonder. . .” and she was using more supplemental stories. I rummaged through all of my thematic bins and brought back into my lessons more opportunities for students to explore the themes we were reading about.

With our students gaining greater reading experiences we quickly were reminded that management still played a role in student learning. Angelina and Carol provided wonderful support during the time that some of my students were exhibiting severe behavioral problems. They reminded me that I needed to focus on the other students in my class and make sure I was providing effective learning opportunities for the students that were ready to learn.

Angelina also faced a management issue that interfered with her students’ learning. She had two students that consistently called out during shared reading. These particular students were making text-to-world connections with the books the class was reading. During one of these interruptions one of the students began connecting a book with the Vietnam War. His high-level thinking interrupted the flow of the lesson because his peers did not understand what he was saying. Both Carol and I suggested to Angelina that she have the particular students record their connections in journals that she could review and discuss individually at a different time. It was evident that our collaboration helped solve classroom

management issues so that we could concentrate on continuing to promote student success.

Throughout the process of our professional learning community meetings we discussed how we monitored for student learning. We all believed that data collection was an essential on-going process. Carol shared that she monitored student comprehension during guided reading. She recorded students' progress by keeping a list with each first grader's name and she gave the students a check plus if they went above and beyond, checks for satisfactory progress, and a minus if the child did not grasp the concept. Carol also added anecdotal notes to give more details about each student's growth. In addition, she shared that as a result of our meetings she was focused on completing more comprehension checks. As a result of Carol's ongoing data collection she was able to have more movement in her guided reading groups. Students did not remain stagnant in one particular leveled group.

Angelina shared that she worked more on questioning with her students to monitor their reading comprehension. She asked the students to go further into detail when retelling stories. Angelina assessed her students in reading conferences through dialogue. She also observed students working and made notes of which first graders grasped new concepts. Class participation became another way that she monitored students' progress. Like Carol, Angelina also

found guided reading to be an excellent time to observe which students mastered new concepts.

Data collection was a driving force for our collaborative meetings and helped focus our discussions on how to best teach reading comprehension. White and McIntosh (2007) wrote that data must help educators make decisions on best practices to be implemented that ensure student learning. As a result of our learning community I also became more conscious of monitoring my students' progress. During classroom discussions I used a checklist to record students' reading comprehension development. When the kindergartners discussed their favorite books I asked them to explain why they liked the book. As a group we were reminded that if our students did not understand new concepts we needed to take a step back and approach our teaching in a different way.

A final vision we had for teaching and learning was to promote high-expectations for all students. Angelina shared, "I am on a quest to promote higher-level thinking." Personally, as a kindergarten teacher I was afraid of expecting too much from my students. I admitted to my collaboration team that the previous year I did not ask my students many high level questions, I did not have a designated writing time, and I certainly never incorporated guided reading into my lessons. I struggled with what developmentally appropriate meant for my students.

This year as a result of our ongoing collaborative inquiry I have raised the bar for my students. The kindergartners amazed me with how much they truly can do. I witnessed that when teachers have high-expectations for their students that children will rise to the occasion. The kindergartners arrived in September as readers that were able to decode environmental print. Months later they were picking up leveled readers from our classroom library and reading the books to their friends. One day Janelle told me that if I wanted she could read the big book to our class. I took her offer and she actually read the story to her peers. It was a magical experience. Having high-expectations helped make my students successful and I could not have done this without the encouragement of my colleagues.

Collaboratively Designed Adaptations

Theme: Students are motivated to learn when teachers provide adaptations for them that help the students build on prior knowledge, make connections, and actively participate in their learning.

Our professional learning community shared the belief that differentiated instruction was a necessity in our classrooms. While discussing differentiated instruction, Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) wrote, “Its *primary* goal is ensuring that teachers focus on processes and procedures that ensure effective learning for varied individuals,” (p. 3). Both experts on differentiated instruction added that it should focus on the students we educate, where we teach, and the steps we take

when teaching. With our goal of developing successful young readers it was essential to provide the best learning opportunities for all students. Differentiated instruction was the focus as we developed adaptations that would assist in making every child succeed.

Students experienced differentiated instruction when they worked in their guided reading groups. Each group had a different level text they read that also included varied vocabulary. Along with this all children experienced success in different ways according to their learning goals. For instance, Sean was working on building language skills by concentrating on using pictures to talk about the books we read. On the other hand, Allison was learning how to compare and contrast the books she was reading. While, Austin had the goal of learning to listen and respond to a story. Angelina shared that she developed extensions for some of her students in a continued promotion of high-expectations. Some of her first graders developed skits to go along with the books they read. In addition, a couple of the first graders researched the topics that the class read about and they developed classroom presentations. As a group of collaborators we recognized the varying abilities of our students and provided differentiated instruction that would make each child triumphant.

When Regie Routman (2003) discussed modeling and interventions in her book *Reading Essentials* she wrote, “Our students are more likely to increase their reading comprehension when we show them how we understand a text and model

a variety of strategies (such as asking questions, predicting, summarizing, and clarifying),” (p. 122). Our professional learning community recognized the profound need of modeling for our young readers. During read aloud, shared reading, and guided reading we modeled the strategies that our students were working on. As the kindergartners continued to practice identifying story structure I would stop throughout my reading and say, “I want to remind myself of what has happened so far in the book.” The children would all raise their hands and take turns sharing the sequence of events. We also worked on making predictions and I would stop my reading and ask myself, “I wonder what is going to happen next?” The kindergartners enjoyed making predictions and then discovering if their educated guesses were right or wrong.

Angelina shared that she worked on modeling pre-reading skills with her students. She modeled for her first graders how to preview a text and ask questions prior to reading like, “I wonder what the solution will be for the character’s problem?” Furthermore, Angelina noted that many times the work her students produced was mirror images of her modeling. Carol and I agreed that many of our students copy by example. I was reminded of how I modeled for my students how to illustrate and label their favorite form of transportation from a book we had read. Several of the kindergartners copied my model. As a group we agreed that although modeling was essential, eventually we wanted our

students to think for themselves and have the reading strategies we displayed come naturally for them.

By chance, one of the most important components of our lessons for teaching reading comprehension was providing students with the opportunity to make connections by activating their prior knowledge. In the text, *Mosaic of Thought*, Keene and Zimmerman (2007) stated, “It has been known for some time that one of the most effective ways to improve comprehension is to “activate mental files” before, during, and after reading,” (p. 72). Through classroom discussions we wanted to make connections with students home and school experiences.

Angelina worried that too many times she made assumptions about her students’ prior knowledge and experiences. For instance, once she assumed while reading that everyone in her class could connect with the character’s feelings as he went down a slide into a pool. Angelina learned that not all of her first graders had ever even been in a pool. She needed to find a different way to help some of her students make a connection with the new information.

Both Carol and I had our students share morning news. This activity helped us learn about our students’ experiences. We made mental notes of what the children shared. During reading Carol and I were able to implement schema from what we had learned about our students. As a team of learners we all

recognized the need to be aware of our students' experiences so that we could help the children become critical readers by activating schema.

It was important that we involved students in their learning as they continued to master story comprehension. Through bodily kinesthetic activities, hands-on learning experiences, and student choice the young readers were highly motivated to learn. During the activity "Cross If" the students listened to statements about a story and would cross over a line of tape on the floor if the statement was true. On one particular day after the activity Allison noted, "We get to move to learn and to have fun." Zack added, "This game is just like the book. It's just like we're reading it." The students were not only having fun but they were learning.

An additional bodily kinesthetic activity that the kindergartners truly enjoyed was acting out the stories we read. As the children took on the roles of the characters in the books we shared, the stories began to come alive in our classroom. The students were able to use the language of the books as they roared like the lion in *The Lion and the Mouse* and offered help as the mouse. Jacob commented, "I like acting out books because it's like we're in the story."

Furthermore, to promote reading comprehension we provided more hands-on activities for our students. Carol had her first graders make puppets to go along with the books the children read. The students were able to use the puppets to retell the stories. After reading a book on pumpkins my students completed a

project that displayed the life cycle of a pumpkin. The students also got to explore the insides of a pumpkin by getting messy as they looked for seeds in the pumpkin's pulp. Hands-on activities provided our students with meaningful extensions to the books we read.

Many of the hands-on activities were incorporated into literacy centers. The kindergarten students were able to choose to work in art, writing, sequencing, poetry, and reading centers. In the art center students would complete activities like using paints to recreate a scene from a book we had read. The writing center gave children the opportunity to record a response to literature that usually was about their favorite part of the book. In the sequencing center the kindergartners used text pictures and hung them on a clothesline in sequential order. The poetry center had a poem that went along with our book's theme. The students read the poem, identified words they knew, and used word cards to match to the words on the sentence strips. In the reading center the kindergartners participated in a conversation about the books we were working on. Cooper stated, "I like working in reading centers." In addition, Doug shared, "I enjoy having choice."

Clearly, our students were engaged in a successful process where they were motivated to learn. However, as we continued to work in our professional learning community we recognized that our students continued to struggle with text-to-world connections. Carol said that when she asked her students about the struggles Christopher Columbus faced on his journey, one of the children

responded that the problem was the alligators in the water. She added that too many of her students experiences implemented what they saw on TV or in video games. As a group we needed to discover ways to help our students make text-to-world connections. This involved providing the children with real-world experiences. Through the use of technology we learned that we could show our students images and video clips that would bring to life the experiences we had discussed.

Ultimately, one of the best ways to provide students with real-world experiences was to go on field trips. After reading several books about the life cycle of a pumpkin the kindergarten students had the opportunity to visit a pumpkin patch. The children were excited as they observed the life cycle of a pumpkin in action. There was no better way I could have enhanced my lessons then by giving the students the chance to participate in this real-world experience.

By providing adaptations for our students the children were motivated to learn. The variety of teaching strategies helped make each student successful. As teachers our lessons were enhanced. We all shared that as a result of our collaboration we had provided better learning opportunities for our students and become more successful educators.

Students as a Community of Learners

Theme: A community is triumphant when everyone has the opportunity to decide how things will work.

Throughout this study the kindergartners grew as a community of learners. I was reminded of the words of Dewey (1938) who said:

In all such cases it is not the will or desire of any one person which establishes order but the moving spirit of the whole group. The control is social, but individuals are parts of a community, not outside of it. (p. 54)

Dewey shared that successful stability in a group was possible when individuals were a team that worked together. In other words, successful communities did not result from the establishment of a dictatorship role. Both the students and the teacher worked together as a community by sharing ideas, helping friends with issues such as self-esteem, and working together to make decisions. Ultimately, as a result of collaboration students became excited, engaged learners.

One of the most important components of our classroom community was communication. We began the day with morning news and the students had the opportunity to share anything they wanted. During morning news we learned more about our friends likes, dislikes, and life experiences. We also participated in an activity called turn and talk where I would stop reading a story for a moment

and the children would share with a partner what they were thinking. The discussions focused on the strategies we were working on. Routman (2003) said that when students communicate thoughts with their peers they get the opportunity to listen and talk more while improving their understandings.

Communication incorporated the opportunity for the kindergartners to collaborate on new concepts. Together the students shared their thoughts on the books we were reading. The children discussed their experiences and helped their friends comprehend new information. For instance, once Billy was trying to get my attention because he did not understand the reader's response activity the students were completing. I asked Allison to please help her friend. She got the Thanksgiving book we were reading and looked through it with Billy. Then, Allison shared the work she was completing with her peer and told him that she was thankful for our time period and her family. Billy exclaimed, "Oh, I get it! I'm thankful for my brother." He thanked his friend Allison for her help and got to work. This is just one instance that proved how student collaboration was far better than the help I could have offered. It was wonderful to observe that through communication and collaboration the kindergartners helped make one another successful.

As the kindergartners continued to grow as a community of learners I witnessed the most amazing example of peer-support. Austin was under the table shouting, "I'm not a reader." I tried to talk him into coming out and joining our

group but he did not listen and continued to shout. Jessica crawled under the table and joined Austin. She told him that he was very smart and said that she would love to work with him. Jessica continued to praise her friend and help build his self-esteem. Within a few minutes time Austin came out from under the table and joined his friend as they began to work in the reading center. This example was a vivid image of how the kindergarten students had built a cohesive community.

The community the young students built was powerful. The children's excitement for learning was contagious as they continued to grow and engage in scholarly work. Young readers were taking books off our classroom library shelves and asking to read them to their friends and family. During parent-teacher conferences the parents shared that their children were very excited to come to school. The parents were amazed with how much their kindergartners had grown as readers.

Kindergartners now participated in a decision-making process where they decided on which learning centers to work in and evaluated books. Allison stated, "I like circling if we like the book." She was referring to a reader's response activity we completed where the children decided whether or not they liked a story. My hunch is that the students were surprised that they could make this type of decision and that they did not have to agree with their peers. The students were triumphant as they actively worked as a community of learners.

Student Reading Comprehension

Theme: Students master reading comprehension when they participate in a detailed process that involves recognizing story structure, making connections, and ultimately thinking at high levels about a text.

In their book, *Strategies that Work*, authors Harvey and Goudvis (2000) declared that reading comprehension is the most important aspect of reading. Reading comprehension entailed a deep thinking process where students activated schema, asked questions, and drew inferences. For the kindergarten students the first challenge in learning reading comprehension was to perfect listening skills. During shared reading we made sure to “put on our thinking caps” and “make sure our ears were turned on for listening.” Throughout the reading of stories I stopped to monitor comprehension by asking questions to ensure that everyone was both listening and understanding the books. The students quickly discovered the importance of being good listeners so that they could actively participate in book discussions.

To help build on students’ comprehension we took picture walks to preview texts. The students shared what they saw on the pages and built on their vocabulary. Picture walks helped set the scene for the books we were going to read. The students became engaged in sharing what they saw and were eager for me to read the words on the pages.

A major focus for reading comprehension in kindergarten was for students to be able to retell the beginning, middle, and end of stories. Prior to reading, I reminded the students to pay attention to what was happening throughout the story. The students learned that there were three parts to a story and we compared the three sections to a sandwich. The beginning was the first piece of bread, the middle was all the good stuff (details), and the end was the second piece of bread. This analogy had worked for previous students when discussing writing and it also was successful in helping the kindergartners remember story structure. The kindergartners could retell a story through dialogue, sequencing picture cards, acting out the book, and completing a response to literature.

Beyond identifying story structure it was important for the young readers to make connections with what they read. Routman (2003) stated, "If kids can't apply what we teach them, our teaching is a big *So what?*" (p. 50). As teacher collaborators we wanted our students to be able to value what they learned by making connections. In *Reading with Meaning*, author Debbie Miller (2002) shared how she introduced schema to her students by telling the children that it was all the stuff that was in their heads including the places they had been, activities they had participated in, and other books they had read. She told the students that by using their schema they would better understand new books. While reading new books to the students I opened lessons by having the kindergartners make connections. For instance, prior to reading *The Mitten* the

students discussed things they had lost in the past. The discussion focused on this because in the story the main character lost his mitten. I wanted the students to be able to relate to the character. This was just one example of how prior knowledge was activated to help students make connections.

As the kindergartners continued to grow as readers they asked questions that led to higher level thinking. Questioning allowed the students to deepen their understandings and clarify meaning. While reading *The Bundle of Sticks* Janelle asked why the farmer wanted his sons to break sticks. Then, while discussing the author's purpose Janelle stated, "I like *The Bundle of Sticks* because if you work together you won't be weak like one stick." Allison added, "*The Bundle of Sticks*, if you're like one wimpy stick, you're a piece of dust and you'll fall apart." I was highly impressed with the kindergartners' ability to decipher the meaning of the story.

Keene and Zimmermann (2007) stated that key to studying comprehension was the implementation of asking questions. Proficient readers asked questions that added focus to our thinking and allowed us to pause for a moment and think about the author's message. It was evident that the students' reading comprehension was successful as a result of perfected listening skills, practiced pre-reading strategies, understanding of story structure, the ability to make connections, and the implementation of questioning.

Kindergartners' Perceptions on Reading

Theme: Kindergartners see reading as a pleasurable life-long activity that helps you learn and if you use your imagination can take you places.

Ultimately, the goal of teaching was to instill a passion for learning in my students and make vivid the reality that learning is a life-long process. In the beginning of this study I asked my students to share with me why we read. Allison boldly asked, "What's the point?" Other children responded to the question by saying we read so we are ready for first grade, to learn, to get smart, and reading is good.

Throughout our collaborative journey we absorbed new books and had grand conversations about the stories we read. The students actively engaged in learning as they worked in literacy centers, acted out books, and played games like "Cross If." As a group of learners we questioned the author's purpose for stories and made connections with the books we shared. The kindergartners were successful readers not because they could decode all of the words on pages but rather as a result of their ability to comprehend the stories they read.

At the conclusion of the study I revisited the question, "Why do we read?" This time Allison did not ask what the point was and instead she said, "I think reading is good because it can take you places." I asked Allison to explain deeper what she meant and she told me that when I read she likes to close her eyes and imagine she is right there in the book with the characters. She added that she gets

to go lots of places just by imaging she is a part of the story. It was vivid that Allison found great pleasure in reading.

In addition, more than half the class responded that reading was fun and that they enjoyed reading. The students saw reading as an opportunity to learn new things and become smarter. Janelle stated, “Reading is really great because it helps you get really smart. It’s also good because you can learn new words. Books help you learn a lot of stuff.” The kindergartner’s perceptions on reading were inspiring.

NEXT STEPS

The collaborative community that was built amongst teachers and students as a result of this study was superb. The motivation to learn was inspiring as both teachers and students participated in a life-long learning process. Teaching and learning experiences were enhanced as a result of providing students with a multitude of adaptations. Ultimately, students learned to value reading and teachers were reminded of the essential need to self-reflect.

Our professional learning community began our journey with a focus on student reading comprehension and the ability for readers to make connections. During collaborative conversations we learned not only how to improve our literacy teaching practices but we also formed a supportive bond as we listened to one another's daily trials and tribulations. The process of collaboration entailed teachers taking risks as we broke down our walls of isolation and gained a new level of respect for one another.

As a teacher action researcher I recognized that the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data is a never-ending activity. As I continue on my path of teaching and learning I may later discover new insights to my study. In addition, as a result of my research I developed new questions that I would like to explore.

The teacher collaborators expressed the desire to continue with our professional learning community this upcoming fall. They would like to invite

more teachers to join from other grade levels. The hope is for educators across grade levels to become aware of the succession of curriculum from kindergarten and beyond. Both first grade teacher collaborators shared that they enjoyed learning about the kindergarten curriculum and would like to explore the second grade program. My future research question is, what are the observed in reported behaviors when teachers from a variety of grade levels meet to explore and improve the primary literacy curriculum? My hunch is that continued work in a professional learning community will once again prove to be an exceptional learning experience for educators.

In addition, at the conclusion of our weekly meetings we reviewed several professional literacy books. As a group we decided that we would like to read *Mosaic of Thought* by Keene and Zimmermann (2007). I was so excited that the teacher collaborators wanted to continue our process of collaborative inquiry that I already purchased the book for my team. We plan on establishing a book club this August where we will read, discuss, and implement the text in our classrooms. My question is, what are the observed and reported behaviors when educators read professional literature to enhance their literacy instruction? I foresee the implementation of noteworthy literacy texts as being a powerful component of improved instruction and a way to provide more opportunities for students to learn in varied ways.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It is no mystery that as educators we are faced with an abundance of demands all in an effort to leave no child behind. With the hustle, bustle of our days it is important to remember to still take a moment at the end of the day to self-reflect and think about how things may change for tomorrow. Teacher collaboration within professional learning communities has the profound ability to give teachers that occasion to reflect on their teaching and enhance their students' learning experiences. As educators, we need to open our doors and join in a collaborative journey.

“Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is a progress.

Working together is success.” –Henry Ford

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

MORAVIAN COLLEGE
A SMALL NATIONAL TREASURE

1200 Main Street
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania 18018-6650
TEL 610 861-1300
WEB www.moravian.edu

September 8, 2008

Melissa Dunne-Porter
1917 K Hoover Ave.
Allentown, PA 18109

Dear Melissa Dunne-Porter:

The Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board has accepted your proposal: "Building a Community of Leaders." Given the materials submitted, your proposal received an expedited review. A copy of your proposal will remain with the HSIRB Chair.

Please note that if you intend on venturing into other topics than the ones indicated in your proposal, you must inform the HSIRB about what those topics will be.

Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this letter, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSIRB before implementation.

This letter has been sent to you through U.S. Mail and e-mail. Please do not hesitate to contact me by telephone (610-861-1415) or through e-mail (medwh02@moravian.edu) should you have any questions about the committee's requests.

Debra Wetcher-Hendricks
Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board
Moravian College
610-861-1415

APPENDIX B

Administrator Informed Consent

September 12, 2008

Dear [REDACTED]

Currently, I am enrolled in the Master's of Education in Curriculum and Instruction program at Moravian College. This is an action research based master's degree program that is designed to promote reflective teaching. As a requirement for my masters, I will be conducting a study on teacher learning communities, entitled, "Building a Community of Learners." The study will begin August 26, 2008 and conclude on December 20, 2008.

The action research I will be conducting will allow me create an optimal learning experience for educators, with the goal of student achievement. As a part of my study, teachers will collaborate on literacy strategies to implement in the classroom. Educators will meet weekly to collaborate, reflect and develop action plans for the teaching of literacy.

All students will take part in regular classroom activities. Data will be used only from students who have permission to participate in this study. Student data will include scores on literacy assessments and student work. In addition, data collected from teachers will include a pre/post survey, an interview and blog entries. All data used for my study will be kept in a protected location.

Student and teacher participation in this study will be confidential. Anonymity will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms for all students and faculty. No participants' names will appear in my final report. Furthermore, there are no anticipated risks for those who choose to participate.

At anytime, parents may choose to have their child discontinue participation in this study without penalty. Teachers may also elect to withdraw from this study without penalty. If you have any questions feel free to contact my professor, Dr. Shosh by phone at (610) 861-1482 or email at jshosh@moravian.edu. Additionally, feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns at MDunnePorter@gmail.com. Thank you in advance for your time.

Fondly,
Melissa Dunne-Porter

I hereby confirm that as the principal of the teacher conducting this study I have read and understand the consent form and received a copy. Melissa Dunne-Porter hereby has permission to conduct research at Clearview Elementary School in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Principal's Signature _____
Date _____

APPENDIX C

Teacher Informed Consent

September 12, 2008

Dear Teacher Collaborator,

Currently, I am enrolled in the Master's of Education in Curriculum and Instruction program at Moravian College. This is an action research based master's degree program that is designed to promote reflective teaching. As a requirement for my masters, I will be conducting a study on teacher learning communities, entitled, "Building a Community of Learners." The study will begin September 8, 2008 and conclude on December 20, 2008.

The action research I will be conducting will allow me create an optimal learning experience for educators, with the goal of student achievement. As a part of my study, teachers will collaborate on literacy strategies to implement in the classroom. Educators will meet weekly to collaborate, reflect and develop action plans for the teaching of literacy. As a participant, your expectations will be to attend weekly meetings, share in group discussions, reflect on your teaching in a BLOG entry format and provide student data in the form of assessment scores and student work.

All students will take part in regular classroom activities. Data will be used only from students who have permission to participate in this study. Student data will include scores on literacy assessments and student work. In addition, you will be asked to complete a pre/post survey, an interview and blog entries. All data used for my study will be kept in a protected location.

Student and teacher participation in this study will be confidential. Anonymity will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms for all students and faculty. No participants' names will appear in my final report. Furthermore, there are no anticipated risks for those who choose to participate. However, in the event of unanticipated psychological distress contact Mrs. Felicia Bates by phone at (610) 868- 5994 (ext. 4).

At anytime, parents may choose to have their child discontinue participation in this study without penalty. You may also elect to withdraw from this study without penalty. If you have any questions feel free to contact my professor, Dr. Shosh by phone at (610) 861-1482 or email at jshosh@moravian.edu. Additionally, feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns at MDunnePorter@gmail.com. Thank you in advance for your time.

Fondly,
Melissa Dunne-Porter

I hereby confirm that I am a classroom teacher willing to participate in the research project conducted by Melissa Dunne-Porter. I have read and understand the consent form, and I've received a copy.

Participant's Signature _____

Date _____

APPENDIX D

Parent Informed Consent

September 12, 2008

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Currently, I am enrolled in the Master's of Education in Curriculum and Instruction program at Moravian College. This is an action research based master's degree program that is designed to promote reflective teaching. As a requirement for my masters, I will be conducting a study on teacher learning communities, entitled, "Building a Community of Learners." The study will begin September 8, 2008 and conclude on December 20, 2008.

The action research I will be conducting will allow me create an optimal learning experience for educators, with the goal of student achievement. As a part of my study, teachers will collaborate on literacy strategies to implement in the classroom. Educators will meet weekly to collaborate, reflect and develop action plans for the teaching of literacy.

All students will take part in regular classroom activities. Data will be used only from students who have permission to participate in this study. Student data will include scores on literacy assessments and student work. All data used for my study will be kept in a protected location.

Student and teacher participation in this study will be confidential. Anonymity will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms for all students and faculty. No participants' names will appear in my final report. Furthermore, there are no anticipated risks for those who choose to participate. However, in the event of unanticipated psychological distress contact Mrs. Felicia Bates by phone at (610) 868- 5994 (ext. 4).

At anytime, you may choose to have your child discontinue participation in this study without penalty. If you have any questions feel free to contact my professor, Dr. Shosh by phone at (610) 861-1482 or email at jshosh@moravian.edu. Additionally, feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns at MDunnePorter@gmail.com. Please return the bottom portion of this form to school only if you choose to have your child participate in this study. Thank you in advance for your time.

Fondly,
Miss M. Dunne-Porter

I hereby confirm that I am the legal guardian of the aforementioned child and have read and understand this consent form. Additionally, I agree that my child may participate in the study and know that at anytime I may choose to remove my child from serving as a research participant.

Parent/Guardian Signature _____
Child's Name _____ Date _____

APPENDIX E**TEACHER INTERVIEW PROMPTS**

1. Tell me about your experience in our collaborative group.
2. Tell me about reading comprehension in your classroom.
3. Tell me about the way we have set-up our collaborative team.
4. Tell me what you think about professional development.

APPENDIX F**STUDENT INTERVIEW PROMPTS**

1. Tell me what you think about reading.
2. Tell me about reading comprehension in our classroom.
3. Tell me about the activities you like to do that go along with the books we read.
4. Tell me about what activities you would like to see happen in our classroom when we read books.

APPENDIX G

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY AGENDAS

Primary Professional Learning Community

September 29, 2008

Agenda:

I. What is a professional learning community?

II. Setting the Ground Rules

III.

Our Perspectives, Values and Belief Systems



Common Ground



Shared Vision



Topic

IV. Closing Comments

Primary Professional Learning Community

October 6, 2008

I. Review Our Shared Vision and Topic

II. What's happening in our classrooms? How are we teaching story comprehension?

III. Movement and Story Comprehension

IV. Additional Discussion...

**Primary Professional Learning Community
October 13, 2008**

- I. Did you learn anything new at the in-service?**
- II. What is going on in our classrooms with story comprehension?**
- III. How do we assess story comprehension?**

Primary Learning Community

October 20, 2008

- I. Comprehension in Our Classrooms (What's working and perhaps, what's not?)
- II. Student Work
- III. Proficient-Reader Research (Metacognitive Strategies)
- IV. Teaching Comprehension
- V. Additional Discussion. . .

<p style="text-align: center;">Primary Professional Learning Community Meeting Agenda October 27, 2008</p>

- I. Sharing-What's going on in our classrooms? How can we help one another?
- II. Student Work
- III. Schema
- IV. Plans for this Week
- V. Journaling

**Primary Professional Learning Community
Meeting 6
November 3, 2008**

Agenda:

I. Sharing

- o What's happening in our classrooms?
- o How are we assuring that our students are all comprehending what they're reading? (DI)
- o Questions or Concerns

II. Comprehension Strategies

III. Future Plans



<http://www.busyteacherscafe.com/images/synthesis.jpg>

**Primary Learning Community
Meeting 7
November 17, 2008**

Agenda:

I. What's going on in our classrooms? (journaling)

II. Student Work

III. Story Comprehension Lesson Ideas

IV. Web Site:

<http://mason.gmu.edu/~cwallac7/TAP/TEST/comprehension/1.html>

V. Some Research

VI. Plans for Our Future Meetings



Primary Learning Community Meeting

November 24, 2008

Agenda for Meeting 8:

- I. Share Journals
- II. How are our students progressing in story comprehension?
What more might we do to help struggling learners?
- III. Text-to-World Connections and Our Cultural Units
- IV. Additional Discussion. . .



<p style="text-align: center;">PRIMARY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY Meeting 9 December 2, 2008</p>
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Agenda:**I Share Our Reflections**

- o Have you tried anything new when teaching story comprehension?
- o Did it work?
- o What were the outcomes?

II. Student Work

- o What activities have you done to reinforce reading comprehension?
- o What have you learned from your students' work?

III. Assessments

- o What formative assessments have you done?
- o What summative assessments have you completed?

IV. Revisiting Our Shared Visions and Goals**V. Professional Resources for Teaching Reading Comprehension**

- o Mosaic of Thought, Second Edition: The Power of Comprehension Strategy Instruction
by Ellin Oliver Keene & Susan Zimmermann
- o Reading With Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades
by Debbie Miller
- o Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement
by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis
- o Teaching for Comprehension in Reading, Grades K-2
by Gay Su Pinnell & Patricia Scharer
- o Teaching Comprehension Strategies All Readers Need: Mini-Lessons That Introduce, Extend, and Deepen Reading Skills and Promote a Lifelong Love of Literature
by Nicole Outsen & Yulga Stephanie

APPENDIX H

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES ON LEARNING COMMUNITIES

- *A School Leader's Guide to Excellence: Collaborating Our Way to Better Schools* by Carmen Farina & Laura Kotch
- *Educators as Learners: Creating a Professional Learning Community in Your School* Edited by Penelope J. Wald & Michael S. Castleberry
- *On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities* Edited by Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, & Rebecca DuFour
- *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* by Richard DuFour & Robert Eaker
- *Restructuring Schools for Collaboration: Promises and Pitfalls* by Diana G. Ponder

APPENDIX I
RECOMMENDED RESOURCES
FOR TEACHING COMPREHENSION

- *Mosaic of Thought, Second Edition: The Power of Comprehension Strategy Instruction* by Ellin Oliver Keene & Susan Zimmermann
- *Reading With Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades* by Debbie Miller
- *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement* by Stephanie Harvey & Anne Goudvis
- *Teaching Comprehension Strategies All Readers Need: Mini-Lessons That Introduce, Extend, and Deepen Reading Skills and Promote a Lifelong Love of Literature* by Nicole Outsen & Yulga Stephanie
- *Teaching for Comprehension in Reading, Grades K-2* by Gay Su Pinnell & Patricia Scharer

WEBSITES

- www.Readinglady.com
- http://www.busyteacherscafe.com/teacher_resources/literacy_pages/comprehension_strategies.htm