TRANSFORMING READING COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTION THROUGH STUDENT CONFERENCING AND TEACHER JOURNALING

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ABSTRACT
When I was asked to teach the entire literacy curriculum to my grade six students in only five months, I implemented reading conferences as an instructional practice to deepen students’ reading comprehension. Classroom events related to reading conferences, student decision-making, and instructional planning were recorded in a journal. This study reflected a shift from traditional teaching to a student-centered approach wherein student learning was used to guide instruction. Findings demonstrated how instructional practices were changed to reflect student learning and how the use of reading conferences promoted dialogue between teacher and student.

INTRODUCTION
Regardless of the grade or the subject, literacy plays a significant role in student learning. Numerous provincial governments and school boards have developed policies related to literacy instruction and student literacy achievement. Such policy implementation, experienced worldwide, has impacted both literacy instruction and student learning. This increased emphasis on literacy has permeated through all levels of the educational system.

After accepting a grade six position I discovered that my school, an English language school, was participating in a pilot for an Intensive French program. This program was structured as immersion style wherein students would be immersed in the French language for reading and writing instruction for five months of the school year. I would be responsible for all grade six English Language Arts curriculum as well as other core subjects, in a five
month period. My school administration emphasized that the morning was for English Language Arts curriculum and with the afternoon for Math and the Humanities. I would have two groups of grade six students: one group during the first half of the year (semester one); and, one group during the last half of the year (semester two). As a teacher of a grade with a provincial literacy assessment, I felt pressure to ensure my students were successful and I wanted to develop literacy instructional practices that would optimize student learning.

While still being responsible for the entire English Language Arts curriculum, I had only half the school year in which to do so. To achieve this I had to compact the curriculum into a five month period. Compacting the curriculum meant looking at my instructional practices, examining the resources and program, and referencing this against student learning to ensure that student learning would be optimized. This article focuses on my search to find an instructional method that would both engage students and deepen student reading comprehension.

I had little experience in teaching grade six and even less experience with compacted curriculum. I spent much of the summer sifting through curriculum documents, class resources, student files, and school literacy goals to ensure that my instructional practices were appropriate for this new challenge. It was then that I realized my past teaching practices would not suffice. I had always structured both the sequence and scope of my lesson plans according to the recommendations of the program manual. I knew what I would be teaching days in advance. I did not stop and reflect on student learning, nor did I use student learning as the compass for my instructional decisions. However, in accepting the grade six position, I could not rely on program manuals to guide me as no manual condensed the year into five months, nor did any manual I used previously integrate curriculum. As such, I turned to literacy instruction research for guidance. I began a transformative process whereby I started to scrutinize my instructional practices. Why was I teaching the way I was? How were students reacting to this teaching?

After reading numerous articles, I decided to focus my teaching practices on reading strategies designed to develop comprehension. More specifically, I focused comprehension development on strategies used by proficient readers: activation of prior knowledge; identification of important ideas and themes; questioning the text; visualizing and other sensory imaging; inferences; retelling; and ‘fix-up strategies’ (Keene & Zimmermann, 2007). This model of comprehension is also known as comprehension strategy instruction and cognitive strategy instruction (Dymock, 2007; Handsfield & Jiménez, 2008). Such an approach to reading instruction identifies specific reading strategies as necessary for comprehension and subsequently successful reading. Dymock (2007) argued that strategy instruction was necessary as students were not receiving instruction related to comprehending the text. Handsfield and Jiménez (2008) furthered this by promoting that reading is thinking – a cognitive process relying on reading strategies. I then selected an instructional practice that would support student learning in these strategies while allowing for the delivery of a compacted curriculum. The practice I chose to increase
comprehension was reading conferences and I designed my research question around this interest:

- How does the introduction of comprehension strategies and reading conferences influence my instructional decision-making?

**Reading Conference**

Prior to this teaching experience, I had never used reading conferences in my classroom. As a teacher, I was not familiar with such a practice. I had not read about reading conferences, nor had I ever heard of other teachers using this in their reading instruction. I always assigned texts for my students to read – usually following the recommended texts for students outlined in the program manual. I then measured reading strategies and comprehension through fill-in-the-blank sheets, quizzes about the text being read, and/or structured student presentations. Such an assessment approach resembled what Aukerman (2008) referred to as comprehension-as-outcome. Students were evaluated on knowing the pre-determined meaning of the text. However, I began to question this method. I started to want students to use strategies to make meaning with the text as they read and to achieve this I would have to structure reading instruction around comprehension from day one (Routman, 2003). After researching literacy instruction, reading conferences seemed to be the right as it would enable me to have conversations with students about their reading and about themselves as readers. Reading conferences would provide a window into the student reading experience.

To reach this goal of comprehension, I built reading conferences into my instructional plan. My reading conferences were a meeting between myself and a student and would occur at “any point in the reading process—before, during, or after reading the text” (Rhodes & Dudley-Marling, 1996, p. 167). By being flexible when conferences occurred in the reading process, I was able to meet the needs of my students. To preview the findings of my study, using a student-centered approach to strengthen reading comprehension, some students required conferences before starting the text; requiring support with the initial reading. Other students required support as they read through the text; requiring strategies for and/or discussion of points of difficulty. Remaining students required conferences after reading the text; requiring support with understanding the overall theme and meaning of the text. As Keene and Zimmermann (2007) stated, it is “through conferences that we come to understand each child’s strengths and needs. In conferences, we tailor instruction to promote new learning and new levels of comprehension at the moment a child demonstrates a need” (p. 154-156).

I decided to meet with three or four students each day; allowing me time to confer with my whole class each week. Although this was my original plan for the first month of school, I soon became aware that this would change, due to the needs of the students, as the semester unfolded. Depending on the students’ reading progress, some would need reading conferences more frequently than others. The more support students needed, the more frequent I would confer with them.

During the initial stages of the semester, I struggled with the structure of the reading conferences. I knew that I wanted to promote comprehension; however, I was unsure what
this would look like during the conference. I feared that students would think reading conferences were a chat where we only discussed their book. I decided to shape the conferences to focus comprehension (See Appendix A for sample questions asked during a reading conference) and strategies to develop comprehension. These strategies were being discussed in class and displayed visually on the wall. The wall visual outlined the strategies and listed student questions, comments, and concerns related to independent reading.

I started to change my thinking to reflect that texts do not have a single meaning but multiple meanings when students used strategies as they read. My view of reading comprehension moved from comprehension-as-outcome to comprehension-as-sense-making (Aukerman, 2008); the process of bringing life experiences, questions, and predictions to the text being read. Meaning is taken from the experiences that the individual brings to the text.

Along with this change in thinking for comprehension, I also started to challenge my instructional decisions surrounding text selection. Traditionally, I had always been the one to choose books for students. I believed that for students to progress in their reading, they would need certain books at just the right level of difficulty. However, the more I read about reading conferences, the more I understood the importance of choice (Meyer & Manning, 2007). Therefore, I gradually let students choose their own books. Initially, this involved students choosing a book to read once they finished their assigned work. Over time, I witnessed how students were engrossed in the book they had chosen and decided to provide daily opportunities for students to choose their books to read.

Conferences would be used to “assess a child’s use of what has been taught and to lead them to explore new applications and challenges” (Keene & Zimmermann, 2007, p. 156-157). Although I primarily used the work of Keene and Zimmermann (2007) to structure the reading conferences, I also read Routman (2003) and Miller (2002). Both Routman (2003) and Miller (2002) emphasized the significance of reading conferences, how conferences can be integrated into the classroom environment, what conferences look like, and the benefits resulting from conferring with students. It was the tailoring of reading conferences to the strengths and needs of students that was captivating to me as a teacher and researcher.

METHODS

My decision to use reading conferences was only the initial step. I also needed to examine the theoretical foundation of reading conferences and relate this to my instructional belief that students must be active participants in their learning and that teaching had to be guided by student learning. I wanted to examine reading conferences regarding student engagement while at the same time targeting student reading comprehension. These desires fueled my study and led me towards teacher research (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992).

With my research question identified, I was ready to proceed with my teacher research study. Manning and Harste (1994) stated “there are two kinds of educational research, that
which is done to teachers and kids and the other that is done by teachers and kids” (p. 2). By adopting a teacher research approach, my actions, motivations, philosophies and beliefs would be under the metaphoric microscope. I would be responsible for analyzing the classroom in relation to my research questions. I needed to understand that I would be making decisions as both a teacher and a researcher. I had to be aware of my assumptions, values, and actions; and the role these aspects played in my research (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2008).

Teacher research as defined by Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1992) is the systematic and intentional inquiry undertaken by teachers about their own classroom. This definition correlated closely to what I planned. My inquiry was systematic, in that I was to collect data using a pre-determined method and would analyze such data with a specific lens. I was also intentional, in that the research question – a question that had originated in my classroom and that was authentic to my teaching – was thoroughly planned and would be researched during the semester.

Hahs-Vaughn and Yanowitz (2009) described other advantages of teacher research as being an increase in content and pedagogical knowledge, greater connections between theory and practice, and the development of deep and critical thinking. By developing these skills, teachers are better equipped to analyze and reflect on teaching and learning experiences. Baumann and Duffy (2001) suggested that “the power of practitioner research is to inform teachers about their classroom worlds and to transform their thinking and actions about literacy teaching and learning” (p. 613).

**Data Collection**

Prior to the implementation of reading conferences I assessed student comprehension using a reading record and the Atlantic Canada Reading Assessment Resource (ACRAR). The reading record consisted of a running record with comprehension questions to answer when the reading was finished. The ACRAR consists of a short text and comprehension questions that students are to work on individually and without teacher support. I then compared these results with students’ last progress report as a means of verifying the accuracy of this assessment. Once I had a comprehensive understanding of the comprehension level of each student, I began using reading conferences as part of my daily literacy instruction. As I wanted to use a qualitative approach, I decided to focus using a journal for my data collection. I wanted to use a journal as this would be a flexible data collection tool providing me with the opportunity to write about my thoughts, questions, reflections and observations. There would be no prescribed method of recording data; and this appealed to me as both a teacher and a researcher. Within a qualitative framework, data collection can consist of observations, real life recounts, reflections, questions, and stories (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

My classroom consisted of eighteen grade six students, an Educational Assistant and me, the classroom teacher. Reading instruction usually took place during the morning when there was minimal interruption in the schedule (such as specialist classes and resource withdrawal).
As mentioned, the primary data collection tool I used for this inquiry was a teacher journal. My journal was a place for me to record my thoughts, reflections, questions, and classroom observations related to reading conferences. I recorded a variety of entries in my journal during the course of the study; often trying to write in the journal a couple of times a day. I recorded reading conferences that I felt were successful and reading conferences that I felt were less than successful. I did not record the conference verbatim as my initial focus was on student reading, not transcription of the conference. Beside each of these I would often write questions pertaining to why I felt the way I did. I would record reflections on student questions, experiences and actions during the conferences. Sometimes I would come back to these reflections and write questions. I was conscious to reflect on and record any aspects of these conferences which reflected either Whole Language or Direct Instruction perspectives.

Whole Language (which I will now refer to as WL) instruction embodies the philosophy that students are engaged in their learning and have the ability to provide input into decisions that affect their learning (Meyer & Manning, 2007). WL centers on student needs and abilities as the focus for teaching. According to Smith and Goodman (2008), there is no one set program or manual to teach from. Teachers tailor instruction to the learning needs of students. Weaver (1990) explained that in a WL approach to reading, students learn, develop and master complex concepts and strategies through active involvement with authentic texts. These are not texts based only on words that students can sound out or identify but are texts that have meaning for the child.

Direct Instruction (which I will now refer to as DI) resembles a skills-based approach to reading instruction. The DI model of reading situates the teacher as the knowledge dispenser in the classroom (Jordan, 2005). Typically, the teacher relies on a teaching manual that is developed by publishing companies and is the basis of the reading program. In DI, student learning is thought to be linear whereby students master one skill at a time (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, & Lankshear, 2002). Students learn small bits of information and then put them together. This belief is often referred to as the part-to-whole (Meyer & Manning, 2007).

As part of a school initiative, all teachers were required to use a common assessment tool to assess student reading. I included entries related to this assessment in my journal as it was part of the reading experience of students. In my journal I connected reading conferences in my class to what I was involved with outside the classroom, such as professional development, school initiatives, and teacher discussion. This journal was a place to record events, questions, answers, reflections, insights, and any other information that may be relevant to my research questions.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

Data analysis is a significant aspect of teacher research and it is during this phase that the researcher analyzes and interprets the data collected. An important consideration of this phase is “to see what is there—not what we expect to be there” (Merritt & Labbo, 2004, p. 408). However, data analysis does not necessarily occur at the conclusion of data collection.
During the course of my research, I analyzed data throughout the research process instead of having it as a separate step (Merritt & Labbo, 2004). I would constantly look back and reflect on my journal entries to reflect. Not only was this therapeutic, being able to answer past questions but it was also a form of analysis that was intertwined with my data collection.

At the end of each day, I would sit down with my journal and read through my writing. I would reflect on written observations, think about questions that I had written, and see if there were any connections between the contents of the journal. When reading, I would ask myself why I wrote this and what this meant in regards to my instructional philosophy. My journal was my sounding board, a place that I could write any thoughts, questions and/or comments about my instructional practices and student achievement without feeling that I was being judged.

For the purpose of this research study I analyzed my journal. During data analysis, I examined the data to identify emerging themes and trends. This process evolved throughout the study. The language of data analysis pertaining to my study was “coding, identifying emerging patterns, recognizing themes, and challenging interpretations” (Merritt & Labbo, 2004, p. 414). I coded journal entries to identify the themes and patterns that were present. “Finding the patterns within data, viewing each bit of information as a part of a larger puzzle which you must unscramble” (Power & Hubbard, 1999, p. 35) was imperative during data analysis and assisted me in working through and with the collected data. Initially I examined my journal entries looking for events and activities, comments, and/or questions that reflected a student-centered approach to reading instruction. These entries represented classroom instances in which I based my instruction on student strengths and needs versus a program manual. I flagged these entries and coded them to reflect emerging themes and trends. I used coloured highlighters to identify patterns in the words I used to write my observations, questions, and comments. I later used post-it notes to identify patterns over a period of time. Once themes were identified, reading conferences, instructional practices, and student reading comprehension were selected as headings. Critically reading through my journal with these headings in mind, I narrowed the themes to include the following: instructional planning, reading conference scheduling, and student engagement. These three themes represented reading and comprehension strategies which significantly influenced my instructional decision-making. Entries recorded under each of these themes demonstrated instances in which the strengths and needs of students dictated the frequency and content of reading conferences, the instructional practices utilized in the classroom, and the development of reading comprehension goals for each student.

**DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

In my initial journal entries there were numerous comments, questions, and reflections on how I structured reading conferences. I believed that conferences during the first few weeks of the semester had to be sequenced so that student learning would be optimized. The following entry documents a reflection I wrote at the end of the first month:
My reading conferences have evolved during the past few weeks. Originally, I had a script for my conferences. What comprehension strategy was I to focus on? What questions would I ask to promote strategy acquisition in students? What questions would I to ask in order for students to demonstrate the application of strategies?

Nearing the end of this month, I now go into reading conferences with a flexible plan. I have a goal for each conference (developed with students from the previous conference) and understand that the conference will take shape based on student questions and responses.

Just yesterday, one of my students asked to talk more about synthesizing their understanding of the book. They wanted to connect all the pieces that they had read thus far. The other two students in the group thought that sounded helpful to their reading so that is what we discussed. Both the students and I were directing the conference together.

Conferences initially were controlled by the teacher, the sequence of the instruction was decided by the teacher, the student was passive in the transaction, and the teacher was the knowledge dispenser (Meyer & Manning, 2007; Shannon, 1989). As the weeks progressed, decisions and control were shared by both the teacher and the student(s) (Shannon, 1989). The recorded entry above of students selecting the conference topic based on their needs as readers provided me with evidence that I was on the right track. Instead of the conference’s focus being determined by me, it was being determined by the student – a movement toward shared decision-making between me and the student. Sharing control of the conferences provided students the opportunity to identify their strengths and needs as readers.

During the course of the five month research study, my instructional practice evolved from ensuring each student participated in the same number of conferences to arranging reading conferences based on student reading needs. More specifically, conferences began to be scheduled based on where students were in relation to their reading and any questions they had. The following entry illustrates this belief:

Conferencing with each student every week was not working as some students did not need weekly conferences. I had a few conferences during the first month of class where the students demonstrated proficiency with strategies, had no questions for me, and demonstrated great reading. I also had conferences where I felt little progress was made with students because time was limited and students needed more one-to-one time with me, the teacher. As such, I began to schedule conferences based on need. Conferences began to reflect more of a differentiated instruction because scheduling was done based on student reading. If students were struggling and needed one-to-one instruction, they would have one or two conferences a week. If students were demonstrating progress in their reading, I would meet with them less frequently; I would still
touch base with everyone weekly. The difference being that sustained reading conferences may not be as common for students demonstrating reading growth.

Last week I met with one reading group three times. The students in this group were struggling to visualize the events of their book. They would continuously tell me at the end of class that they were having difficulties. So, this group and I met Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday to strengthen their use of the visualization strategy. While I had never met with a group three days in a row, these students were eager to start each of the three reading conferences. By Friday, they were able to explain to me how they were now able to apply visualization while reading and how this cemented their understanding of the events within the book.

The scheduling of reading conferences also began to reflect a student-centered approach to reading instruction as it was the needs of the students that became the rationale for scheduling conferences (Meyer & Manning, 2007). I based my instructional decisions on student learning, not a teaching manual or generic lesson plan. I met with some groups more than others. Students were able to ask for times to meet or to let me know that they were doing fine with their reading and did not need to meet that day. During each conference, it was comprehension-as-sense-making that was the focus. Students were using the strategies to strengthen their understanding of the book.

The books used for reading conferences were selected by the students. I gave this decision significant thought during the planning stages of my reading instruction. I wanted students to read texts that they selected and that meant something to them, as reflected in the following journal entry:

I noticed substantial excitement in my classroom the past few days when students realized they could select their own books to read. I provided the option of choosing books from the classroom library, school library, and home. There were graphic novels, traditional novels, non-fiction texts, magazines, newspapers, and reference books. Students would gravitate toward books related to their personal interests or to books that were recommended by peers. During one particular conference, the students informed me that they enjoyed reading texts that they chose. They explained that they found it easier to understand texts related to their interests. Students shared that they felt free to explore the text instead of reading for one particular meaning.

The notion of students self-selecting their reading material is a cornerstone of a student-centered approach to instruction (Meyer & Manning, 2007; Spiegel, 1992). This self-selection of texts afforded students the opportunity to read material that was pertinent not only to their interests but also to their life experiences. Such a relationship resulted in a reading environment where students were free to take risks to make meaning.
REFLECTIONS
Initially, my instructional practices were not reflective of a student-centered approach. Reading conferences were not being utilized to strengthen student reading comprehension but were checklists of sorts. I would select a comprehension strategy, address it in a conference and then move on. Students were not afforded the opportunity to share in the decision-making. Their questions were not being asked nor answered. I wanted to identify and implement comprehension strategies that would influence my instructional decision-making and increase student reading achievement. A student-centered approach to reading conferences enabled me to meet the individual needs of my students. The discussions I had with students were genuine in that it was them who were communicating their strengths and needs as readers, not a program.

Through data analysis of my journal I understood there was no one-way to facilitate reading conferences. I needed to structure reading conferences to the strengths and needs of my students. This meant reading conferences looked different than the ones I was reading about and may look different from student to student. This represented a significant shift in my teaching practices toward a student-centered approach. Attempting to pre-determine all aspects of the reading conference in isolation from student input was not conducive to a productive environment; and conflicted with my emerging pedagogical belief that students should be active participants in their learning. My initial reading conferences had an artificial atmosphere and followed a one-size-fits-all approach. It was not until students were provided the opportunity to determine the frequency of reading conferences and the content that conversations and meaning-making flourished. By shifting to a student-oriented approach, reading conferences were not a forum in which I asked questions and students answered but instead facilitated dialogue about the text, about the reading, and about comprehension.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS
Reading conferences allowed me to examine reading from the perspective of the student and to use their reading as the impetus for instructional decisions. Both the students and I worked together to address their reading progress. Using a single comprehension test would not have enabled me to elicit the responses from students necessary to effectively shape reading instruction. The engagement of students during the conferences was evident as they explored their reading, needs, questions, and comments. Instead of looking through program manuals for instructional direction, direction arose from the reading conferences themselves as students discussed their reading journey. This individualized approach to reading instruction was indicative of a student-centered model in which student specific strengths and needs were used to determine individual learning goals.

My experience with reading conferences impacted my teaching practices throughout the curriculum. By using conferences in other subjects I noticed how student engagement improved in both writing and mathematics. I found that I was able to better identify student needs and tailor instruction to each student based on discussions with them during the conference. In fact, students asked to have conferences with other students. Students took an active leadership role in the classroom and in their learning.
During the introduction of reading conferences in my classroom, I came to understand that I could not pre-determine every aspect involved. In order for comprehension strategies and reading conferences to influence my instructional decision-making students needed to be active participants. They required the opportunity to steer the direction of the conferences. Although I had my students for only five months of the school year I learned that rushing into conferences with a pre-determined vision of what the outcome would be could have resulted in disengaged students. Teacher and students must have input into both the planning and implementation of conferences for there to be engagement. I can honestly say that I may not have had this realization if I had not used a journal. My journal was my sounding board and enabled me to conduct my research without fear of judgment or mistakes. Throughout the process my journal provided me the opportunity to transform my teaching practices through continuous reflection on reading instruction and student learning.

This research study afforded me the opportunity to examine my instructional practices in relation to student engagement. Seeing the progress students made as my instruction became more reflective of a student-centered approach has left me questioning my teaching practices in other areas of the curriculum. Future research may involve a deeper examination of my instructional practices across the school day and the effect of these practices on student engagement and achievement.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Sample questions used to guide students during reading conferences

- How did you decide to choose that book as your independent reading selection?
- Have any of your friends read this book? If so, have you heard them say anything about it?
- What prior knowledge and/or experience(s) do you have that helped you in reading your book?
- Have you experienced any stumbling blocks as you read your book? What helped you work through these stumbling blocks?
- What would you like to tell me about this book?
- What has happened in your book since .............?
- What do you think will happen during this book?
- Do you like this book? Why or why not?
- What advice/suggestion would you give someone who will read this book?
- What reading strategies did you rely on when reading this book?
- Did you have to re-read any parts of the book to comprehend?

Questions may be asked related to the specific content of a book, such as:
- Characters?
- Events?
- Plot?
- Setting?
- Theme?
- Text-to-self connections?

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

David Costello is the Numeracy Consultant for the Western School Board of Prince Edward Island. He recently graduated from a Master’s degree in Literacy Education with a focus on literacy instruction and student learning. David is enrolled in a PhD (Education) program where he plans to continue his research in literacy.