

Focus Project  
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**How can I deepen the level of conversation my students have about their reading?**

I would like to focus on the comprehension component of reading, particularly when students are using others to communicate with about their reading to build their understanding. As I've read a few chapters in the Harvey-Daniels text, I've begun to feel really proud of my nonfiction reading unit in which students are in small groups to research with about animals. A lot of the components Harvey and Daniels say are key for having a successful collaboration are things I've fostered in my nonfiction reading unit. I've also seen success in student book clubs when my students have time to talk about their reading. I still have a long way to go however and I've been interested in having more long-term partnerships and groups in reading. I feel my students would benefit from more partnership work and conversation in reading but I'm not sure how to get my students talking without me being so present.

I plan to research using the MSU e-library for research articles about reading partnerships as well as texts about student conversations in reading instruction. I have one text already by Jennifer Serravallo called Teaching Reading in Small Groups that addresses a variety of topics from placing students into small groups to conferring with small groups of readers to forming book clubs and partnerships. I'd like to find out how I can get my students to open up with so that they feel comfortable with being honest with one another in partnerships. I'd like to learn strategies for getting my students to use in partnerships the reading vocabulary we talk about in minilessons. I'd like to feel

comfortable letting groups of students talk about their reading for an extended period of time so that they can build meaning from each other's ideas.

Right now I'm planning on my project being a resource for my colleagues and me when using partnerships and groups in reading workshop. I plan to create documents that can be used in reading workshop like rubrics for assessing partnerships, bookmarks to remind students of conversation points, a way to track conferring with small groups like an anecdotal record. I'd like to develop a plan for building a community of learners that have the social skills to hold a conversation about their reading.

### **Resources That Address my Question**

A lot of the resources I found from the MSU e-library were older and focused on the literature circles Harvey Daniels made popular. I found a lot of useful and moving information on the power of talk through these articles and strategies for modeling talk around literature and getting students to deepen their conversations.

Some articles were studies of literature circles in classrooms and the effect it had on students and teachers in the classroom. For example the Matthews, 2003 article studied the social implications of working in groups. He found that "When children join a group, their peer- and academic-status characteristics influence how they behave as well as how others behave toward them." (p. 231) Students who had high social status, regardless of their academic ability were listened to by group members and their ideas were taken more seriously. Literature circles, when structured, are beneficial to diverse learners. "For gifted students, literature circles was a time where reading was slowed down for them and they were able to see they were missing text events or literary

elements." (Certo et al., 2010) Learners help each other comprehend with their own unique abilities and strengths. The collaborative learning benefits apply to reading partnerships as well.

I synthesized the literature circle articles with research in Harvey & Daniels and Serravello books about collaborative learning and teaching reading strategies. They emphasized the Gradual Release of Responsibility approach to teaching discussion skills as well as comprehension strategies. Modeling exactly what is expected of students is crucial for all aspects of partnerships.

### **What I Found Out**

From the beginning of the year, students need to see their teachers valuing discussion about reading. Teachers talk about literature, especially read-aloud books that the class now has in common. Teachers think aloud to model to students that there is a lot that people can think about while reading. They also model excitement around talking about books, encouraging students who talk about their reading with others. Teachers compliment students in their thinking, whether it's expressed clearly yet or not. It's important to encourage students to get them talking about their reading.

Teachers then transition from thinking aloud to modeling how to put their thoughts onto paper in the forms of sticky notes or a reading journal. Students see the value in this when they see their teacher referring to their notes when they discuss the books they've read with others. Again, this is often modeled with a class read-aloud book. Students are given time during read aloud time to write their thinking down on paper. Afterward, during a class discussion students see their teacher using their

written response to drive their contributions to the conversation. Students are encouraged to write on sticky notes when they read to track their thinking in their book to prepare them for their future conversations with a reading partner.

During conferences, teachers ask students thick questions, the kind of questions they would want students to ask of each other. This inquiry serves as a model for asking questions that get others talking as well as a way to get kids thinking deeply about what they're reading. Conferences about comprehension serve as the foundation for strong partnership conferences students will have with each other.

Students are paired based on reading levels, interests and unique strengths. Partners are flexible and can be changed as students change. Students meet to talk about their reading regularly and share their thoughts and opinions of their reading with each other. Students use their writing as the foundation for their talk. The teacher joins partnership conferences in different quantities. The teacher can act as a partner or as an observer. The teacher could whisper to one partner to encourage them to ask certain questions or could ask clarifying questions themselves. The teacher evaluates progress in a variety of ways to drive future lesson planning and partnership pairs.

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