Reading in Brooke's Classroom: Strategy Instruction that Makes a Difference for Rural Primary Grade Students

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ABSTRACT

As a beginning teacher in a rural, low-income, high minority elementary school in northeast Mississippi, Brooke realized quickly that her instructional strategies needed to be different to teach her students effectively. With a history of low academic performance, minimal parental involvement, and students not quite ready for school, Brooke's students could be described as "difficult." Rather than judging or lowering expectations, Brooke understood that she had to teach her students the necessary strategies to support them academically. The first and second graders in Brooke's classroom engaged in a variety of innovative literacy activities. This article demonstrates literacy strategies Brooke implemented, which in part led to achievement gains that resulted in her school gaining a state-wide ranking in the top ten percent of elementary schools.

Point Elementary School is a small school in northeast Mississippi that serves about 300 students. Point is truly a rural school, cotton fields and forests surround Point Elementary, and many of the students live in communities that are named after the former

plantation owners who once dominated the land. Some students live more than 40 miles from school, and ride the bus an hour each way. The students at Point Elementary are 100% African American and nearly that many, 99%, receive free or reduced lunch. Many students live with their extended family: aunts, grandparents, or great-grandparents, many of whom did not finish high school. Last year, Brooke taught first grade at Point, and this year she looped with her students, and teaches second grade. Brooke earned her Bachelor's degree from Western Governor's University, a National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accredited online university, and since has been working on graduate degrees at the local university. Devon and Nicole are professors who have watched Brooke grow as an early literacy teacher.

Like many schools with a similar population of students, Point Elementary has a history of low academic performance, with some of the worst achievement scores in a state that is already at the bottom of most national comparisons. The school-wide scores on the annual curriculum tests are in the bottom twenty percent of the state. Nine percent of students in grades kindergarten through six are retained each year. Over the last few years, however, achievement at Point has been improving, particularly in grades kindergarten through three. Student performance on early literacy assessments including Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, DIBELS (Farrell, Hancock, & Smartt, 2006), Woodcock-Johnson III (Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001a; 2001b), and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn & Dunn, 1997), place Point Elementary among the top ten schools in the state of Mississippi. Brooke's instruction has contributed to that growth.

The 16 first and second graders in Brooke's classroom are children growing up in poverty, who typically come to school with limited language and academic knowledge. Children from families that receive welfare know, on average, half as many words at 36 months as children whose parents are professionals (Hart & Risley, 2003). These disparities in word knowledge are exacerbated when students begin school. As Gunning (2005) noted, "Students' reading levels are ultimately limited by their language development. Students can't understand what they are reading if they don't know what the words mean…" (p. 16). In addition, children of poverty often come to school with limited experience with books; minimal knowledge of the concepts about print; and insufficient knowledge of letters or sounds (Bracken, 2008; Hojnoski, 2007). These factors contribute to challenges in literacy learning.

Brooke, however, does not define her students by these characteristics. Rather, Brooke engages her students in a wide variety of reading and extensive writing activities during a school day focused on language and literacy. Brooke uses whole group, partner work, and small groups or centers. She integrates science and social studies content into her literacy instruction so that her students become competent readers and writers while gaining content area knowledge and vocabulary. Mathematics content is also woven into the daily schedule but Brooke tends not to integrate it as much because it requires a different skill set.

Brooke teaches reading and writing strategies deliberately throughout the day, and has been working to implement the teaching practices she is learning in her graduate program. After a year of trying new strategies and reflecting on their impact, she is able to read children's literature and quickly identify a literacy strategy to support students'

strategy acquisition. Brooke acknowledges that when she started teaching in this manner, it took a tremendous amount of effort, patience, and planning. Although difficult, she never once lost hope because she knew it would make a difference in her students' overall academic success. The following is a description of Brooke's most effective instructional practices.

Strategy Instruction

A strategy is a mental process, a specific set of steps that children can use to solve a problem (Beers, 2003; Duffy, 2002). Students apply strategies when they make connections to deepen their understanding during reading, or when they use a concept map to generate ideas for writing. When teaching strategies, Brooke uses the Gradual Release of Responsibility or GRR model (Miller, 2002; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). This model involves slowly releasing the level of responsibility for strategy use from the teacher to the students. The GRR model begins with a think-aloud. During a think-aloud, the teacher explicitly names and explains the strategy and models her thought processes as she demonstrates the strategy in use. She literally thinks out-loud about the steps her mind uses to comprehend the text. The second step in the GRR model is guided practice, during which the teacher and students engage in a collaborative think-aloud, working together to apply the given strategy. The teacher provides scaffolding and feedback. As students' knowledge increases and they know when and how to apply the strategy, students engage in independent practice. Students attempt to apply the strategy while the teacher monitors and provides feedback. As students gain confidence, responsibility is released fully and students independently apply the strategy as they read or write. The GRR model does not happen overnight. Several weeks might be spent in teacher modeling and guided practice with feedback as students learn when, how, and why to apply each strategy in an explicit and deliberate way, particularly in primary grade classrooms (Miller, 2002).

Brooke's use of the GRR model is not restricted to teaching comprehension strategies alone. From simple classroom procedures, such as how to ask to use the restroom or how to move between centers to complex mental processes such as making inferences or revising or writing for more detail, Brooke models, thinks aloud, and allows for large and small group practice. Additionally, Brooke gives feedback on independent practice before expecting independent performance. Brooke has found that the GRR model supports all of her instructional goals, and that the key to this method is to hand over responsibility as students gain expertise. Table 1 depicts the Gradual Release of Responsibility.

Table 1

What the Gradual Release of Responsibility Looks Like

Process	Description
Demonstration	I do, you watch
Guided practice	I do, you help
Independent practice	You do, I help
Application	You do, I watch

Note. Adapted from Routman, 2005 and Miller, 2002.

How Brooke Teaches Reading

Proficient readers apply strategies before, during, and after reading (Beers, 2003; Duffy, 2002; Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992). Proficient readers activate their prior knowledge before reading by thinking about what they already know concerning the text, which prepares them for the upcoming content and vocabulary. They make predictions about the text, and in doing so become more engaged. During reading, proficient readers make connections between the text and their own prior knowledge, experiences, and other texts they have read. Proficient readers continue to predict. They also construct mental images as they read by visualizing the pictures and imagining the sensory information, i.e., the sounds and feelings evoked by the text. During reading, proficient readers evaluate the relative importance of ideas, identify the theme, and draw inferences based on the text and background knowledge. After reading, proficient readers may summarize or critique the text or engage in syntheses, blending ideas together for deeper understanding. More than anything, proficient readers use metacognition, that is, thinking about their own thinking, to monitor for comprehension and engage in fix-up strategies—re-reading, slowing down, and asking questions—so that the text makes sense. Some examples of ways Brooke teaches these strategies are described below.

Making Predictions and Activating Prior Knowledge

Proficient readers make predictions before they read, and then continue to predict and revise predictions during reading (Tompkins, 2006; Pressley, 2000; 2002). Predictions give students a more definitive purpose for reading. When Brooke introduces prediction to her students, she begins by modeling and then leading the students on a "picture walk" (Tompkins, 2006; Miller, 2002) by looking at each illustration and thinking about what might be happening in the text. Following the picture walk, students document their predictions on post-it notes allowing for confirmation of their thoughts after they read. Using this experience as a starting point, Brooke and her students discuss how predictions—thoughts and ideas—change as they gain knowledge and how proficient readers confirm and revise predictions as they read.

As prediction making discussions ensue, Brooke engages the students in a dialogue concerning their schema (Miller, 2002; Rumelhardt, 1980). Brooke's classroom definition of schema is "everything you know about something or the junk in your head." From Brooke's perspective, students need to understand that *the junk in your head* (the students' explanation) is important and relevant to what is learned at school. Thus, students are given the opportunity to use their schema to engage in the strategy of activating prior knowledge (Tompkins, 2006) and share these thoughts with classmates. For example, if a book has a dog on the cover, a discussion might occur involving everything students know about dogs; e.g., where they live, what they do, what they eat, what kind of people have dogs, etc. Discussions of this type activate students' prior knowledge and allow them to relate to the topic, build confidence for reading, and support vocabulary development.

Making Mental Images

Brooke's first and favorite strategy to teach in her classroom is the concept of making mental images (Miller, 2002; Tompkins, 2006). Before Brooke uses this strategy with a book, she invites students to discuss the sensory images evoked by magazine pictures or advertisements—to consider what the images make them see, hear, taste, and smell. This builds students' comprehension of reading the material by activating all of their senses. Brooke has found it best to use several pictures or advertisements during the introduction phase of making mental images and to employ the GRR model. She first models describing the sensory images and then engages students in small group and partner work. Eventually students are able to discuss with each other the various mental images they have created.

Brooke gradually moves into the strategy building process. After using magazine pictures or advertisements, she uses poems and riddles to reinforce the ideas of making mental images. Poems and riddles lend themselves to the creation of vivid mental images. A simple way to engage students in the thinking process is by using a short poem or riddle. If there is an illustration to accompany the text, it is better not to let the students see it so that they rely on their own mental images to make sense of the text. After Brooke and her students read and discuss poems or riddles, the students illustrate what they have imagined, share those images, and discuss the words in the poem that helped them to decide what to draw.

From advertisements to poetry, students move on to making mental images or "mind movies" (Marcell, 2006), as they read longer narrative texts, including chapter books. But first, Brooke has to think-aloud to model her own mind-movie-making process with more lengthy reading material. As with any think-aloud, Brooke holds the book up as she reads the text out loud, then lays it in her lap or on a table as she talks about her thought processes. This physical demarcation makes it easier for students to visibly tell the difference between her reading and her meta-cognition about strategy use.

The students take part in guided practice after Brooke models how she makes mental images with a variety of texts. For practice with the mental images strategy, Brooke selects image-evoking texts such as *The Great Fuzz Frenzy* (Stephens, 2005). In this book, a tennis ball that falls into a prairie dog hole and the prairie dogs attempt to

guess what the big, yellow, round thing is. They tear the object into pieces and describe how it looks, how it feels, and how it could be used. Brooke adds an element of mystery to the book, by covering the illustrations of the tennis ball with post-it notes before reading. The students cannot see the object and must create mental images as the fuzzy yellow object is described in order to make sense of the text. Brooke reads half of the story to the students and then gives them time to sketch their mental image on a half sheet of paper. After they have completed their illustrations, she reads the remaining part of the story. Upon completion of the story, Brooke has the students draw their mental image again to see if it has changed. Brooke uses this opportunity to discuss how proficient readers, revise mental images during reading. By creating rich mental images or mind movies, students are able to involve themselves in the reading and be pulled in to the story.

Making Connections

Teaching students how to make connections during reading is another important strategy to use when building reading comprehension (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2003; Miller, 2002; Tompkins, 2006). Brooke teaches her students to make three types of connections: text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world (Miller, 2002). Text-to-self connections allow readers to see connections between what they read and their own lives. Text-to-text connections support deeper understanding as students see similarities between the text they are reading and other texts, such as books, movies, television shows, advertisements, and more. Text-to-world connections are made when readers see connections between what they are reading and events in the larger world (Miller, 2002).

Text-to-self connections are the easiest for students to make. Even the youngest student is usually able to find something in a book that reminds him or her of something familiar. Brooke's students successfully produce numerous connections through her modeling of connections. She accomplishes this by using "this book reminds me of" as her think aloud phrase. In fact, a big part of teaching students to make connections is helping them to determine which connections help them to understand the meaning of the text more deeply, and which are distractions that should be quickly forgotten (Miller, 2002). Brooke's model distinguishes between meaningful and distracting connections by reading *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good,* and *Very Bad Day* (Viorst, 1972). After reading, she talks about the lamp in the book that reminds her of the lamp she has at home. Unfortunately, this connection does not relate to ideas in the book. However, when she remembers getting in trouble for fighting with her siblings, she can relate to Alexander's feelings and better understand the story. By modeling how she discerns between connections, Brooke helps her students understand the text in more complex ways, while at the same time, reducing their chances to be distracted by trivial details.

To introduce text-to-text connections, Brooke uses traditional and modern retellings of classic fairy tales, such as *The Three Little Pigs* (Gladone, 1970). She thinks-aloud about how she recognizes similarities between texts. Brooke completes a Venn diagram with the students, helping them identify the similarities and differences between various versions. She continually emphasizes the meaning and point-of-view of the

stories when discussing multiple versions of the same text to aid in her students' understanding.

For very young readers, text-to-world connections may be the most difficult to learn, because their world is, most often, themselves. However, when students consider moral issues, such as thinking about right, wrong, and consequences for behavior, they are making text-to-world connections. A powerful text for teaching this type of connection is *The Man Who Walked Between The Towers* by Mordicai Gerstein (2003), although not a book about the September 11 attacks at the World Trade Center (an event that Brooke's students can recall), it contains images of the Twin Towers and helps Brooke's rural students understand the magnitude of that event. The students are able to visualize the massiveness of the towers from different perspectives; effectively creating a personal understanding of what they were like.

Questioning

Proficient readers ask themselves questions before, during, and after reading. These questions include, "What's going on here? Does this make sense? What's that word mean? What do I think? Why did the author do this?" as well as other questions that clarify understanding and support engagement with the text (Gunning, 2008; Miller, 2002). To answer their own questions, students can infer, make connections, reread, use their *mind movies*, look for clues in the text or illustrations, or even go to an outside source.

To demonstrate how to use the questioning strategy, Brooke begins with a read-aloud. She charts questions that she has about the title and cover illustrations before reading. As she reads, she documents questions that emerge and stops to model how she answers each question. One text Brooke uses to teach questioning is *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963). This text leaves many things to the imagination allowing it to be an effective book to use when introducing the questioning strategy. She focuses on key words, like "mischief" and "rumpus" and asks herself how the main character's dinner was still hot even though "he sailed off through night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year." She thinks aloud about questions regarding the wild things such as where they came from, how they survive, and what they eat. Though many of these are not questions that can be answered by the text, thinking aloud about them helps her understand the book more deeply and to make inferences, increasing her comprehension and enjoyment, all of which she models as she reads the text.

After Brooke has modeled the questioning strategy with one text, she selects another text for the students to use in small groups. *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* (Van Allsburg, 1984) is an excellent text for this strategy because students are able to focus on one illustration and form many questions about what is happening. Students are also able to include previously learned strategies to generate questions. Brooke provides each group with a three-column chart that has spaces for listing before, during, and after reading questions. As a question emerges, students write on a post-it note and place the question in the correct column. When the group finishes reading the text and have generated all possible questions, the class, as a whole, reviews each question and identifies answers as well as where or how the answer was found. If the class cannot

formulate an answer based on the text or connections or inferences they make, they then discuss other sources of information that might provide answers, such as the Internet or informational texts.

Using Informational Texts

Many primary classrooms focus almost exclusively on reading narrative texts (Duke, 2000; Symons, McLatchy-Gaudet, Stone, & Reynolds, 2001), perhaps assuming that young children prefer stories. However, young children can both enjoy and learn from informational text (Duke & Bennet-Armistead, 2003; Miller, 2002). Informational text teaches vocabulary, introduces students to concepts, and is often engagingly written.

Brooke introduces and reads informational texts with her students from the beginning of the school year. One strategy that she employs to assist students in distinguishing between narrative and informational text is to have them select two texts on the same topic—one that tells a story and one that presents information. After students read their texts, they complete a Venn diagram about the material documenting the differences and similarities such as forms of words, print, illustrations or photographs, and information included in the text.

Brooke teaches her students to use reading strategies they have learned with narratives to aid in their understanding of informational texts. Students are shown how to predict and activate prior knowledge, make connections, and ask questions. Brooke also teaches students to use text-features (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000) to read informational texts. Text features such as captions, table of contents, glossaries, indexes, cutaways, bold and highlighted text, and maps, each have a purpose. Students need to learn how to use these features to read informational text efficiently. When introducing non-fiction text features, Brooke chooses one or two features to examine and explain everyday. She provides texts with multiple examples of each text feature for the students to view and discuss. Once students know what the features are and how they will assist them in understanding the text, the features become powerful comprehension resources.

Brooke models and then students practice using text features to find specific information, such as information found in captions or on charts or under particular bold-faced headings. As she models and as they practice finding information, students realize that they do not have to read the informational text from cover to cover to locate specific answers.

Conclusion

The teaching of reading comprehension strategies is a cyclical process in Brooke's classroom—once her students have learned a strategy, she does not leave it behind. Students, especially those from rural, low-income backgrounds, need repeated exposure and practice using the strategies so that they are able to use them independently. Brooke continues to model and include previously learned strategies in the lessons, even when teaching new strategies; essentially, building the students' arsenal for reading. Ultimately, the purpose behind teaching multiple reading comprehension strategies to

students is to empower them to select and use the best strategy for a specific text or to apply multiple strategies at one time. As Brooke's students learn to predict, activate prior knowledge, make mental images, make connections, and ask questions with both narrative and informational texts, they become independent readers, even in first and second grade.

In their work at the local university, Devon and Nicole visit numerous schools and catch glimpses of teachers practicing their craft regularly, but rarely do they see the caliber of teaching they see in Brooke's classroom. The rich, engaging curriculum gives these students, many of whom are officially labeled "at-risk," an enormous push forward. The level of success that Brooke achieves with her students is quite often not found in even in suburban schools, particularly not in the primary grades. Brooke develops a sense of competence in her students by making use of *all the junk in their heads* and showing them that where they live and what knowledge they have is relevant and useful in school. What Brooke does with these students is truly remarkable!

When Brooke first began teaching, she did not use many of these strategies. However, over the last three years of teaching, Brooke has realized that these strategies make a difference. Her students have become more engaged when reading and their scores on the DIBELS (Farrell, Hancock, & Smartt, 2006) and Peabody Vocabulary Test (Dunn, & Dunn, 1997) have improved Most importantly, her students are more interested in reading and as a by-product have become more effective writers as well. Her students have become independent readers and should experience continued success in school.

Brooke credits her graduate program with supporting her strategy instruction. She had multiple courses in which she read about strategy instruction research. In these classes, the instructors modeled strategy instruction themselves. They also required field experiences that required her to plan, teach, and reflect on strategy instruction both in her own classroom and with other students of multiple ages. These courses encouraged her to attempt strategy instruction in her own classroom. As she saw the impact, her teaching continued to change.

Brooke's decision to implement what she was learning in her Master's program in the classroom was supported by the administration at Point Elementary. The administrator expressed confidence in her teaching ability and did not impose many restrictions on teaching practices or curriculum, as long as Brooke could demonstrate that she was meeting the state standards and students were achieving. Brooke was a bit of a renegade in her district, her fellow teachers did not use similar schedules or teaching approaches. With the support of her teaching assistant, Brooke was able to accomplish amazing things with her students.

Brooke's greatest feat occurred when her students began to have impromptu conversations about what they had read. Her students began to share information about new books they were reading and had spent a significant amount of time reading independently. Now, when Brooke's students engage in literacy activities, they have a deeper and more thorough understanding of what they are doing.

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