

The Intermediate Grades

“I thought about it all night”: Readers Theatre for reading fluency and motivation

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Diana: [Reading is] for when we're bored.

Yolanda: Yeah.

Diana: Like when our parents call us from our friends' house.

Yolanda: And it would just be for a few minutes.

Diana: Yeah, when I don't have nothing to do.

That conversation between Yolanda and Diana (pseudonyms) took place in an interview about out-of-school reading attitudes and habits conducted at the beginning of the 2001–2002 school year. The girls' comments are not surprising. Students in the intermediate grades have many things on their minds other than reading. According to Ryan and Patrick (2001), “More so than at any other stage, young adolescents doubt their abilities to succeed at their schoolwork, question the value of doing their schoolwork, and decrease their efforts toward academics” (p. 439). Yet, these years are crucial for developing the independent literacy skills students will need in middle school, high school, and later life.

In our combined 40 years in education, with a recent focus on students with challenges in reading and motivation, we have found one instructional activity that not only combines several effective research-based practices, but also leads to increased engagement with literacy even in very resistant readers. The activity is Readers Theatre, in

which students rehearse a poem, joke, story, script, speech, or appropriate text until they can read it with fluency and expression and then perform it for an audience. Readers Theatre differs from other kinds of performances in that participants *read* rather than memorize their parts. The use of props and physical actions is minimal, and the focus is on how the participants convey meaning through their interpretive reading. Unlike more elaborate performances, Readers Theatre can be a regular instructional activity rather than limited to special occasions. It especially benefits challenged readers, who are rarely given speaking parts in major dramatic productions. With regular reading performances, all students have the opportunity to practice, successfully perform, and increase their self-confidence. Because the level of difficulty of different parts within a script can vary widely, Readers Theatre is an excellent activity for grouping students by interest rather than reading level.

Diana and Yolanda, for example, began participating in Readers Theatre as part of a research study in their classroom that focused on motivational reading materials and instruction. They were both part of a group that performed a script based on Bobbi Salinas's *The Three Little Pig (Los Tres Cerdos): Nacho, Tito, and Miguel* (1998). As they practiced for the performance before their classmates later, Yolanda (as the

first pig, Nacho) spontaneously said “I love that part that says, ‘No way José, I won't let you in. Not by the hairs on my chinny-chin-chin.’” Diana, who was playing José the wolf, chimed in, “Yeah, yesterday I was going around the house saying, ‘Carnitas y chicharrones for supper tonight!’ I thought about it all night.” The girls' performances were outstanding, and their enthusiasm has carried over into their reading habits. Both now read avidly at home and at school, and the extra practice is evident in their increased reading proficiency.

Anecdotal evidence is important, yet it is also essential that instructional practices be based on sound theory and research. Readers Theatre meets this qualification while effectively addressing the areas of reading fluency, comprehension, and motivation.

Theory and research behind Readers Theatre

Fluency is an essential aspect of reading. Children's ability to read fluently does more than make them sound like good readers; it is evidence that they comprehend what they are reading (Dowhower, 1987; Samuels, 1979/1997). The reason for this evidence is still under debate. Does fluent reading lead to improved comprehension? Does good comprehension lead to improved fluency? Although the exact nature of the relationship remains elusive, there is

undoubtedly a reciprocal relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension (Strecker, Roser, & Martinez, 1998). The backbone of Readers Theatre is repeated reading, a tested and proven method for increasing reading fluency in short-term studies, (see review in the National Reading Panel report, 2000). However, the most common types of oral-fluency instruction employing repeated reading target only rate and accuracy. While research studies have documented the effectiveness of these components (Dowhower, 1987; Samuels, 1979/1997), there is a danger that these narrow focuses might give students the impression that reading is about "saying all the words right" and reading quickly. Students need to understand that the goal of all reading is constructing meaning, and it is important that instructional activities have a clear purpose that matches students' needs and interests. Repeated reading, while clearly effective in the short term, may not hold students' attention over long periods.

Readers Theatre, as well as other kinds of reading performance, gives students an authentic reason to engage in repeated reading of texts (Rinehart, 1999; Tyler & Chard, 2000). It is an inherently meaningful, purposeful vehicle for repeated reading. Effective performances are built upon positive social interactions focused on reading, in which modeling, instruction, and feedback are natural components of rehearsals. Even resistant readers eagerly practice for a Readers Theatre performance, reading and rereading scripts numerous times. Reading performance encourages students to read at an appropriate rate rather than to simply read fast without attending to meaning. When students read and interpret texts regularly and evaluate others' performances, they make progress in all aspects of reading.

Choosing and writing texts for performance

There are many ways of "doing" readers' performance or Readers Theatre, and all kinds of material can be used. Many teachers start with books or websites devoted to Readers Theatre but soon find that they need to supplement what is currently available by

writing their own scripts. Most scripts are based on fictional picture or chapter books. According to Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1998/1999), texts chosen for performance should not be above readers' instructional levels. They should have straightforward plots that present characters working through dilemmas requiring talk. It is also helpful to use books from a series or by the same author to capitalize on familiar plot structures, language, and characters (e.g., books in the Fox series by Edward Marshall). Picture book versions of folk and fairy tales are also excellent sources for writing scripts. We have used traditional fairy tales (e.g., Galdone's *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, 1981), variants of the Cinderella story (e.g., San Souci's *Cendrillon*, 2001), and "fractured" fairy tales (e.g., Scieszka's *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, 1992; Ross's *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, 1991). Some books, such as *Hey, Little Ant* (Hoose & Hoose, 1998) are already written in script form. Scenes or excerpts from chapter books and novels (e.g., Ryan's *Esperanza Rising*, 2000; Park's *Junie B. Jones Loves Handsome Warren*, 1996) provide ways to introduce books or follow up with interpretive activities.

Poetry and famous speeches also provide formats for performance and meaningful contexts in which to focus on fluency. Both lend themselves to rhythmic choral reading as well as to independent and group performance. Writing scripts based on information books may seem difficult at first because expository text does not immediately seem adaptable to performance. However, books and poetry related to content area topics in science, history, and math are excellent for improving fluency as well as for supporting conceptual knowledge. In a personal communication, a colleague told me that Christopher Maynard's *Micro Monsters: Life Under the Microscope* (1999) was one of the most popular scripts in her collection. In one performance, several students in her class played the "roles" of mites, lice, and other microscopic insects, describing them in gory but accurate detail while the audience struggled to keep from turning green.

Paul Fleischman's book of poetry about insects, *Joyful Noise: Poems for*

Two Voices (1988), is tailor-made for reading performance, as are well-known speeches. With initial support from the teacher, students can and should write their own scripts for Readers Theatre. They can use song lyrics, raps, and poetry for performance. We have found that student scripts are often more creative than teacher scripts. In our classes, we have seen an advertisement for *Freckle Juice* (Blume, 1978), a series of short scenes from the Junie B. Jones books, and transformations of poems by Judith Viorst and Shel Silverstein, all written entirely by students.

Preparing for performances

It is important that students practice until they can read their parts fluently. Ample rehearsal time makes the difference for struggling readers in any kind of performance. Some struggling readers or reserved students may not want to perform in front of a group initially, but most lose their fear with opportunities to practice a script with a teacher, tutor, or friends in a safe atmosphere. Students can plan, practice, and perform new texts as often as every week. It is important to remember that, as in all group and independent work, students and teachers will need time to plan and establish routines and appropriate behavior. It may take several weeks of explaining, role modeling, and guided practice before such activities run smoothly. As students learn what is needed to prepare for a successful performance, they are motivated to work and practice together productively. This allows the teacher to move from group to group, listening and offering instruction and feedback as students practice.

Unexpected benefits of Readers Theatre

Readers Theatre has made its way into many classrooms in our school district as we have shared the practice with preservice and inservice teachers and their students. Time after time, teachers have reported that it is the single most motivating, effective reading activity they have used. Recently, two teachers shared some further benefits for students.

In one teacher's third-grade class, a child who had never chosen to read in

class before without being required to do so, spontaneously went to the bookshelf, chose Eugene Trivizas's (1997) *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* (the book he was performing for Readers Theatre that week), and took it to his desk to read. Several students in that class have reported practicing their Readers Theatre scripts at home with family members. Brothers, sisters, and parents have taken turns

reading the various parts, and parents have supported students with their fluency and expression. Parents also helped their children to make simple costumes for upcoming performances.

Another teacher reported that using Readers Theatre with her fifth-grade bilingual students has contributed to the maintenance of their home language. For example, a fluent English reader whose mother expressed great concern

because he was "losing his Spanish," participated in an all-Spanish performance of *Estrellita de Oro* (Hayes, Perez, & Perez, 2002). On his first reading he stumbled through the words, embarrassed that, for once, his reading was not among the most fluent in the class. The next day, the boy read his part fluently and expressively after practicing with his teenage sister.

One boy's story is typical of what happens when resistant readers participate in Readers Theatre. That fourth grader, reading more than two years below grade level, put reading at the top of his "not-to-do" list. According to his teacher, he never chose to read on his own; during free-reading time his attention wandered. Despite the teacher's sincere and skillful attempts, the boy remained apathetic about reading. During the spring, the teacher started a unit on Readers Theatre. She predicted that he would not be enthusiastic, not only because of his dislike of reading, but because he was introverted and reserved. Fortunately, she was wrong. The first set of scripts she used were based on Marc Brown's Arthur series (e.g., *Arthur's Birthday*, 1991). The teacher allowed students to choose the script they wanted to perform, and the students negotiated how to choose the parts in their groups. Not surprisingly, the boy chose the part with the fewest lines (two), and the group began preparing for their performance. At the end of the day, he asked if he could take home one of the scripts to read with his cousin. Trying to hide her shock, the teacher handed him several copies to take with him. The next day the boy came to school reading his part perfectly and even with a hint of expression. As the unit progressed, he began to request "the biggest part" and to *become* his character in the performances. Readers Theatre made an amazing difference in that student's motivation to read on his own, in his comfort level in the classroom, and ultimately in his reading proficiency. The teacher's only regret was that she had not begun using Readers Theatre sooner.

In addition to references on the effectiveness of Readers Theatre and fluency instruction, we have included a short list of books to get started on your own Readers Theatre library (see Sidebar).

Readers Theatre suggestions

Internet

Shepard, Aaron. (1997). *Aaron Shepard's RT page*. Retrieved April 14, 1997, from <http://www.aaronshelp.com>.

Picture books

- Brown, Marc. (1991). *Arthur's birthday*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Galdone, Paul. (1981). *The three billy goats gruff*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Hayes, Joe, Perez, Gloria O., & Perez, Lucia A. (2002). *Estrellita de oro/Little gold star: A Cinderella cuento*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.
- Hoose, Phillip, & Hoose, Hannah. (1998). *Hey, little ant*. New York: Tricycle Press.
- Marshall, Edward. (1983). *Fox at school*. New York: Puffin.
- Minters, Frances. (1994). *Cinder-Elly*. New York: Penguin.
- Ross, Tony. (1991). *The boy who cried wolf*. New York: Penguin.
- Salinas, Bobbi. (1998). *The three little pigs (Los tres cerdos): Nacho, Tito, and Miguel*. Houston, TX: Piñata.
- San Souci, Robert. (2001). *Cendrillon: A Caribbean Cinderella*. New York: Aladdin.
- Scieszka, Jon. (1992). *The stinky cheese man and other fairly stupid tales*. New York: Viking.
- Trivizas, Eugene. (1997). *The three little wolves and the big bad pig*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Williams, Linda. (1992). *The little old lady who was not afraid of anything*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Chapter books

- Blume, Judy. (1978). *Freckle juice*. New York: Bantam Doubleday.
- Clements, Andrew. (1997). *Frindle*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Park, Barbara. (1996). *Junie B. Jones loves handsome Warren*. New York: Random House.
- Paterson, Katherine. (1997). *Bridge to Terabithia*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Ryan, Pam M. (2000). *Esperanza rising*. New York: Scholastic.

Information books and poetry

- Fleischman, Paul. (1988). *Joyful noise: Poems for two voices*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Florian, Douglas. (2000). *Mammalabilia*. New York: Harcourt.
- Maynard, Christopher. (1999). *Micro monsters: Life under the microscope*. New York: Dorling Kindersley.
- Pinczes, Elinor J. (1993). *One hundred hungry ants*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Scieszka, Jon. (1995). *Math curse*. New York: Viking.

For more suggestions on using reading performance in your classroom, see Worthy, Broaddus, and Ivey (2001), and Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown (2001).

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- National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. Bethesda, MD: National Institutes of Health.
- Rinehart, S.D. (1999). "Don't think for a minute that I'm getting up there": Opportunities for Readers' Theatre in a tutorial for children with reading problems. *Journal of Reading Psychology*, 20, 71–89.
- Ryan, A.M., & Patrick, H. (2001). Peer groups as a context for the socialization of adolescents' motivation, engagement, and achievement in school. *Educational Psychologist*, 35, 101–111.
- Samuels, S.J. (1997). The method of repeated readings. *The Reading Teacher*, 50, 76–81. (Original work published 1979)
- Strecker, S.K., Roser, N.L., & Martinez, M.G. (1998). Toward understanding oral reading fluency. In T. Shanahan & F.V. Rodriguez-Brown (Eds.), *National Reading Conference yearbook* (pp. 295–310). Chicago: National Reading Conference.
- Tomlinson, C., & Lynch-Brown, C. (2001). *Essentials of children's literature* (4th ed.). New York: Allyn & Bacon.
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