

## Accountable Talk

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**Accountable talk**- this term is the driving force behind the reading and speaking standards in a variety of school systems. Students talk; but they need to be taught how to participate in this type of 'talk'. Calkins (2001) says "children must be shown how to cultivate a climate of debate, questioning and multiple interpretations. They must think about how to disagree with each other in ways that allow the other person to *hear* what is being said (p.246)." This year, this was the challenge which I faced as I focused on helping my students increase their level of achievement.

I was particularly concerned about getting them to enjoy reading and respond to the text either orally or in writing? While this may seem like a very simple question, it becomes complex as I think about my class.

This year my fifth grade class consisted of 19 students- 9 males and 10 females. These students have either academic or emotional difficulties that have over time interfered with their academic success. Many of these students have been retained at least once in their short academic lives. Most of my students were functioning below grade level; one student, a recent immigrant, was only reading on a 2.5 -3.0 grade level. One of my students arrived in January. He had been moving from shelter to shelter throughout the Fall. When he started he was often verbally aggressive as well as physically threatening.

Many of my students exhibited evidence of low self-esteem. They refused to make eye contact when speaking, spoke in quiet, monotone voices and seemed unwilling to raise their hands when questions were asked. My colleagues' advice was simple: *Just get them out. Don't try to teach them much, just make sure they pass and leave the school- they have to go.*

Given this portrait of my students and my colleagues, it may seem like wishful thinking on my part to tell my students that our focus would be reading

writing, and improving our skills so that we could master the standards. There were comments from the class almost immediately. Here are just a few:

“The standards- what’s that?”

“Oh, is it another test- we gotta pass?”

“What does ‘standard’ mean anyway?”

Based on these comments, I could see that we had a long road ahead of us if I was going to help them improve their reading and writing skills, let alone doing it!

The reading program consisted of a basal reader and a workbook. Since some of my students had already used this series before, I started them at in the 4.5 level hoping to quickly move them into the 5.0 level. Since I wanted to have heterogeneous groupings and maximize the reading time; I grouped children according to their reading skill which was determined by a reading assessment given in early September. By the end of September/beginning of October, I was running four different groups. Every day I struggled to work with each group for 15-20 minutes. This meant that most of the time, students were working hard to answer the questions they were given, but there was not much time for “talk” about the text. As I listened to them, I heard that their “talk” was not about the story being read or the skill just learned but about some unrelated topic. If students were only working to locate the answer, I thought, how could they learn to engage in the meaningful talk that helps to generate thoughtful discussions that might lead to better reading comprehension? While the students appeared to enjoy reading some of the stories, they made few connections to the text. While they seemed to enjoy the individual attention they were receiving, each group complained when I had to move to the next group. Their independent lessons were not thoroughly completed. What I was seeing and hearing disturbed me because I felt that my students would not be prepared. I was worried that I was wasting their valuable time.

## **Thinking About My Teaching**

I decided that the problem was mine and that I needed to change some aspect of my teaching. I began with a focus on my questioning techniques. Was it possible, I wondered to ask questions that could help my students to think critically about the texts they read?

What if I were to concentrate on using high level questions as discussed by Bloom specifically focusing on questions at the analysis (break into parts from whole concept), and synthesis (use parts to draw new thinking) to evaluation (judging, reasoning) levels. As I began to model these types of questionings, I hoped that the students would think about the text in different ways. Once I realized that they were comfortable on the first level, it was only natural to begin to expose them to the higher levels.

In November, I began to see a gradual deepening of thinking based on their responses in the small groups. In a group that was reading the story entitled the Wreck of the Zephyr by Chris Van Allsburg, some students entered into a discussion of the author's use of "flashback" to tell the story.

T: Chris Van Allsburg uses flashback as a means to tell the story.

Why do you think he does that?

Chris: He wants to teach a lesson.

Woody: What lesson?

Chris: That man needs to work with nature, not against it.

Vinny: Okay, but he could just tell the boy that.

Chris: No, he couldn't- by telling the story he relives it and the boy is able to see the events in his mind's...

Vinny: eye- The mind's eye. I get it- he goes through the experience with him, and it helps him to understand that he should be careful himself.

Woody: Right, so that he won't make the same mistakes as the narrator

T: What mistakes does he make in the story?

Yan: He's too proud, arrogant – he thinks that he doesn't need anyone. He thinks he's perfect. He thinks he can't make mistakes.

T: Can you learn anything from his experience.

Chris: Yeah, maybe to listen to others, 'cause the people in the village told him not to go sailing because of the storm.

Woody: Also, to be patient. If he had waited on the sailor he could have learned how to fly the boat back home without it crashing.

### **Balanced Literacy**

While I was excited about the progress that some children were making, I was still concerned about their oral and written responses. As I spoke with colleagues teaching in the younger grades they started to expose me to a model that was currently being used in K-2. It was called Balanced Literacy and it is made up of a variety of components. The integral parts of this method are Read Aloud, Shared reading, guided reading, interactive writing and the writing workshop. Gay Pinnell (2000) defines balanced literacy this way: "When talking about balance in this model, the word comprehensive is actually more appropriate. Educators are working towards having comprehensive programs in their rooms which focus on reading, writing and word study. Balanced literacy isn't a set program. It's a rich and integrated combination of approaches. The teacher is the expert " (p. 50)

After reading this quote, I once again looked at my students. What type of literacy experiences did I want them to have? Would they be able to have a chance to meet the standards? Since I am the expert in my room, I decided to concentrate on using the read aloud, shared reading and writing workshop. I figured that these components would be most advantageous to my students and might help them raise their levels of achievement. The term "comprehensive" really struck me because it deals with an understanding not just of materials but

more importantly of how these aspects work together to accomplish a broader task.

### **What the research shows**

When we think about classroom instruction, and the major subjects taught to our children; we rarely think about how to get kids talking about their learning. If we want children to reach the speaking standards, we as educators must teach them how to talk.

In the Art of Teaching Reading, Lucy Calkins states “talk is sometimes valued... but talk is rarely taught. Yet talk, like reading and writing, is a major motor- I could even say the major- of intellectual development(p.226).” It is important for us to engage in the “talk-curriculum” if we want to help our students learn how to respond orally to text. We must read aloud to them so that they can hear what makes sense. It is vital for them to understand that they can’t respond to a text that does not make sense.

Teachers must also allow children to talk, by giving them **wait time** (Mary Budd Rowe). This concept is a hard one to grasp because as instructors we are always imparting information to our students. Think about this: How can we know what is truly concerning them if we don’t stop, wait and listen? We must give them a chance to talk! Remember, for learning to be effective and meaningful; we have to give them an opportunity to teach us.

As Pinnell says” If we want children to write, then we must provide them with examples of good texts, so that they can learn the craft of writing. As children focus in on this craft, they have to practice, practice, and practice again. Students must write each and every day, so time must be set aside for them to do this (p.50)”. They should write about topics close to them, respond to situations in the world around them- but most importantly – just write. They must have models that teach them how to compose sentences, paragraphs and stories. As

we teach, explain your thinking process to the class. The research suggests that students learn better when they are explicitly *shown* how to do something rather than *told* how to do it. (Pinell, p.52)

### **Components of Balanced Literacy**

The ***read aloud*** allows the students to become better readers as the teacher models “thinking” about a variety of texts. Since it usually takes place at the beginning of the reading block, one can focus on one specific reading skill or aim. I was able to zero in on those reading strategies that are needed for the “test”. I began to read aloud using novels like Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli, non-fiction articles found in science texts or from Time for Kids, poetry taken from Shel Silverstein, and folk tales from around the world. As I read these texts, I had two purposes:

- (1) to expose my students to different types and forms of literature
- (2) to provide them with opportunities to respond to literature.

***Shared reading*** provides opportunities for the students to hear how ‘good’ writers should be read. They are exposed to figurative language, helped to increase their vocabulary and to develop a sense of community within the classroom. Students come together and listen; but they also ask questions about things they don’t understand. As we continue to ‘talk’ about the text, they begin to make predictions, discuss changes in a specific character’s behavior or relate these events to what they already knew from personal experience.

The ***writing workshop*** when used in accordance with these components helps the students to become more comfortable responding in written form. Children are writing, editing, and revising independent pieces every day. (Pinell, p.52 ) Their weaknesses are identified and these become the basis for the

*mini-lessons*. These mini-lessons help to drive instruction for the class. In the workshop, the teacher is able to confer with individual students and small groups. These conferences allow students to listen, develop appropriate turn taking skills and most importantly- have an opportunity to practice writing.

### **The Experiment Begins**

After reading the literature and selecting the components that I would use from this model, I set off to prepare my students for the 'test' and to reach the standards. Before the winter break, I started discussing with them some of my new ideas about the 'reading' block and they appeared willing to give it a try. In January when we returned from Christmas break, I collected the basals. The students seemed excited and ready for the challenge.

I told them we would be reading a novel called Gifted Hands. I read the back of the novel, covered the front cover and asked them to make predictions about the story elements. Using a semantic web, I wrote down their responses. Then I handed out the book. There were several comments made- e.g. "Wow, I feel like I'm in junior high", "Are we *really* going to read the whole thing? This looks scientific- there are diagrams and stuff." The comments continue for a while, but I saw something which I had not seen before- enthusiasm and willingness to try something new.

As we continued reading this novel, I focused on my questioning techniques. I wanted to make them **think** about the text they were reading and analyze the content of the statements. The questions I asked were based on the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (synthesis, analysis, and evaluation) because I knew that these types of questions would appear on their reading test in May. However, even more important, I knew that engagement with high level questions held the possibility of helping my students to become better readers and writers.

Here are a few sample questions that I asked:

Why is it so important that Ben control his temper?

Does Ben change in chapter 13? Provide evidence to support your answer

Discuss the significance of the title Gifted Hands. Why is this term used to describe Ben?

What decisions does Ben have to make? Evaluate his choices?

If you were in the same situation as Ben, would you make similar decisions? Why or Why not?

What role does TRUST play in the relationship Ben has with his mother?

How do your past experiences affect the way you treat others?

As the students became more familiar with my questioning techniques, they became more comfortable responding with thoughtful conversation. Here is a small excerpt from one conversation.

T: So, do you think Ben's mother is strong or a woman of strength?

Joanie: She's strong because she tells his father to make a choice.

Chris: I agree, she realizes that it is not good to have him going back and forth. It's not fair.

Aisha: You know, she's strong because even though she is hurt, she never cries in front of Ben and Curtis. She always protects them and is there for them.

Nicholas: I agree with everyone- but I think she is a woman of strength because she takes charge of her life and she makes decisions that will help her sons even though it is hard. She is like my mom- she only wants the best no matter the cost.

On many occasions, students engaged and debated different points of view. The best part of the dialogue for me was that I was able to become a facilitator in the discussion. It was also interesting to see how some of my students began to substantiate their oral responses with evidence provided in the text. Often



during a conversation one could hear: “Where does it say that Ben did... or prove to me that he should go to Australia because I feel that he should stay...”

These types of exchanges made me realize that my students were finally engaging in *accountable* talk. Yes- they were finally discussing the text, no longer just highlighting the story elements. My students were working towards reaching the standards without even knowing it. Most importantly though, my unmotivated students seemed excited about reading and they appeared to be enjoying this experience.

### **From talk to writing**

Once the *accountable* talk began, it was time to begin working on the student’s writing. In the Art of Teaching Reading, Calkins states “ ... we hope to show children that readers write about their reading because writing helps them *think* more deeply and generates good conversations (p.232).” My students were more reluctant to write than to speak. They often asked if they could tell me their opinion as opposed to writing it down.

At first, I had them write about their reaction to read alouds. Many of them wrote that they liked or did not like the story, mentioned a main character all in a sentence or two. Some children seemed not know what to write; it was if they had no thoughts about anything. I decided that before I could have them respond to literature, they had to get used to the physical act of writing. Therefore everyday we all began to write for a specific period of time. We started off writing for five minutes; then we moved to ten minutes. I gradually increased the time increments so that they would not have enough time and then would have to ask for more time. During these sessions, they were allowed to engage in free writing activities.

Since I wanted them to be able to respond to literature, I started to give them writing assignments based on issues that arose in our novel. We would discuss these in class, and then for in-class assignments or for homework, I

would have them begin answering essay type questions. I modeled how to answer questions as a group process. The students gave me information that I could use from the text to answer the question. In this way, they were able to see how I was *thinking*, and using appropriate vocabulary to convey my thoughts and opinions.

Some examples of writing assignments were:

Is Ben's mom a strong woman or a woman of strength?

How does Ben's belief system effect the decisions he makes?

When you get angry like Ben did, describe what it feels like. What does it look like?

Has there ever been a time when you doubted your ability to complete a project?

Ben has a dream in chapter 8. What do you think the dream means?

Describe how Ben has changed throughout the story? What do you think Has caused this change?

What qualities does Ben possess that will make him a successful leader? Is he ready for this challenge? Why or why not?

In order to respond to these questions, the children had to show their comprehension skills, but they were also being asked to apply the information given. Many of these questions centered on reading objectives like: point of view, cause and effect, author's purpose, drawing conclusions and making inferences. It seemed to me that the best part of this type of teaching was that my students were being taught reading skills in a contextual environment as opposed to isolated reading skill lessons.

### **The results**

The classroom discussions became more interesting. The students were able to engage in meaningful conversations about the various themes in the

novel. Many of them stopped looking to me for reassurance and began to utilize their text to support their conclusions. They were also able to begin identifying different reasoning skills as questions arose in the room. Some students would comment “ Hey that question is asking us to make an inference” or “you’re being asked to draw a conclusion.” It was exciting to see them identifying skills that they would need for the test. They also started to make connections with events that were taking place in the text. One student remarked “ You know, Ben is just like me because my dad left us, too, and now he lives in Connecticut.” This was just one example of a text- to-self connection. As teen issues arose, the students seemed to be able to discuss them in a mature manner. Observe this interchange:

T: Describe what is happening to Ben in Chapter 10?

Shenika: He wants to be like the other children, he is afraid to be different.

Woody: Ben wants to wear fancy clothes even though he knows his mom can’t afford them.

Richard: He, he wants to fit in. He hangs out with the bad kids, and he gets bad grades. He’s failing.

Vinny: Ben is not listening to any adults, he wants to have his own way.

T: What is Ben’s problem?

Nicholas: Ben is experiencing peer pressure. He is more concerned with what his friends think, than what he should do.

Yan: Yeah- that’s like us. We have peer pressure- we do things that get us in trouble because our friends are.

T: So is “peer pressure” good or bad? What do you think?

Vinny: It’s both- sometimes your friends can help you but sometimes they can get you in trouble. Like if they are taking drugs -- you know its wrong but you *might* try anyway.

Joanie: Or they might be picking on someone that you know, but you don’t help- you just laugh.

Rakiyah: But peer pressure can be good. Like when you don't want to study or you need help your friends can help you. You know, like work on a report or quiz for a spelling test.

Nicholas: So peer pressure can be both. The person just has to decide when they are going to follow their friends and when they won't.

It was impressive to see them exhibit appropriate turn taking skills. They were listening to one another and trying very hard to respond appropriately, but they were also determined to support their responses with examples and details from the novels or stories which we read.

Although the class was progressing nicely in their oral conversations, the writing aspect was a little more difficult. I did not have to put a time constraint on them because they had already developed the physical stamina needed to write; but they seemed to have difficulty transferring their thoughts to paper. Some of them would attempt to answer the question, but lose the general focus of the assignment. Others were not able to effectively organize their answers so their writing appeared rambling.

Through the workshop environment, students began to work with a buddy. The purpose of the buddy was to provide the immediate feedback that they often needed, while I conferred with a select group of students. As a community, we began to analyze the elements of writing that needed to be fine-tuned so their writing would become clearer. I tried using mini-lessons, after which they would 'try-it.'

Another method that I used involved selecting a child's written response, and then revising it as a group, focusing on how the piece could be made stronger. The interesting part of this process was that the children began to

realize that they were learning from each other, not just from me. Some of them began to use details from the stories as a means to support their responses to essay questions. They started to make connections in their written responses which helped to further substantiate their comprehension of a specific concept or idea.

The content of their writing improved drastically, and they became more willing to share with others. The students would voluntarily come and begin sharing ideas with their partners prior to beginning their first drafts. They started to pay attention to writing conventions such as word choice, grammar and sentence construction. Once the ideas were on paper, they also became more concerned with writing mechanics like spelling, punctuation and capitals. However, the “mechanics” of writing were no longer a hindrance to their desire to write.

### **The state exams**

The state examinations took place in May. I wondered- Would they be ready? Do they have the skills necessary to pass the test? The day of the reading test arrived and the children worked consistently and thoroughly. After the test, the class debriefed about its contents. They voiced concern about the length of the selected passages and the wording of the questions. This was exciting to me because in September these students would not have even cared about the exam and now they were critiquing the contents. It was also refreshing to hear them talk about how they used certain strategies to help them answer the questions. They were able to have *accountable* talk about an exam that they dreaded at the start of the year. When the results came back, 16 out of the 19 students had passed the test.

## **Research Implications**

It seems clear to me that ...

Students need to learn in a structured context. No matter what you are teaching, it is important to provide a context for them to learn. While test prep is important and plays a vital role, children don't benefit from skill taught in isolation. Children must see how these skills are applied and how they can be used. We can't stop educating our students in order to prepare them for the 'test'. We must show them how to prepare for tests as we show them how to study, think and analyze the texts they read.

Questioning. The standards require our children to think critically about the texts they read. Is it possible for them to do such, if we as educators refuse to ask higher level questions. It is impossible to generate much discussion, debate or conversation if we are asking questions that only require our students recall basic understanding. Revisit Bloom's Taxonomy-there are six levels of questions that are discussed. Ask yourself: On which level do my questions fall? Can I raise my standard of questioning? Do I help my students to think critically?

Talk. The NYC State speaking standard states: students are to participate in group meetings. We must give them the tools so that they will be able to meet this goal. We must teach them **how** to talk. Students must be encouraged to think as they read, so that they begin to focus on the larger themes, and ideas presented in various texts. If they are going to have meaningful discussions then they must be exposed to quality texts and literature.

When it comes down to it, as educators we must continue evaluating our own practice in order for our children to reach and master the greatest standard of all – LIFE.





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