

## **Collaborative Conversations About Second Grade Readers**

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## The Setting of My Story

I began this school year full of hope that my second grade students would become lovers of books and all types of text before the end of the year. This was my first year teaching second grade at a public school in lower Manhattan. The population in my classroom is roughly 40% Asian, 30% Latino, 20% African-American and 10% Bangladeshi. Most of my students live in nearby housing projects and all qualify to receive free school lunch. Looking at their first grade reading assessments, I could see that I had a wide range of readers and speakers of a second language in the class. All of my readers at level G or lower were speaking Chinese, Spanish or Bengali at home. I knew that some dynamic teaching was going to have to take place. I was ready to research the best way to accomplish my goal, to do some research on my own, and to meet the state standards at the same time.

## The Question and Rationale

According to New York State Second Grade Reading Standard 1, students should be expected to, “read one or two short books or long chapters every day and discuss what they read with another student or a group.” Standard 2 addresses the component of reading fluency. Specifically, it notes that students should be expected to “independently read aloud from unfamiliar Level L books that they have previewed silently on their own, using intonation, pauses and emphasis that signal the meaning of the text.” Meeting these two standards with a range of readers was going to be difficult.

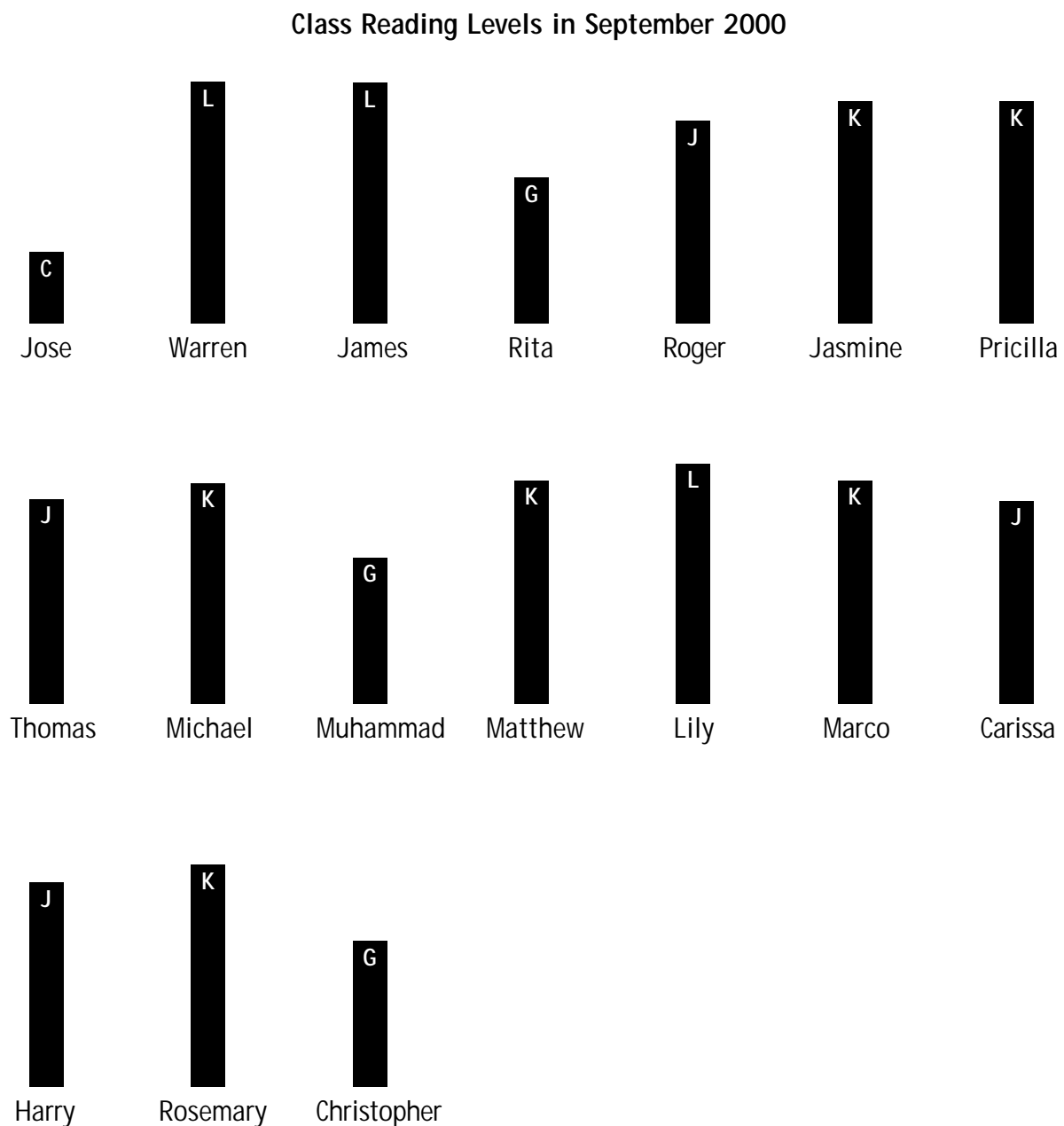
### ***Leveled Books to read for Accuracy and Fluency from the New York State Standards***

Level L books are markedly different from texts at lower levels. These books typically are longer chapter books with only a few illustrations that provide much less support for readers. The text size is smaller, and the word spacing is narrower.

Level L books feature more characters who are involved in more complex plots. The language structures are more sophisticated, detailed and descriptive. The vocabulary is challenging.

In general, Level L books require higher-level conceptual thinking for students to understand the subtleties of plot and character development. Students must sustain their reading over several days to finish the book. Most of the reading is done silently and independently, but some parts of the books may be read aloud for emphasis or interest. Group discussion may support readers during and after they read Level L books.

I began with students ranging from Level C to Level L.



Meeting their unique needs was going to require an organized schedule of partner reading, individual conferences and flexible guided reading groups. I felt confident about my approach to each reader after meeting with my staff developer, but **I began to wonder if my planning could be any better, and if student achievement would increase if I planned my**

reading workshop with another colleague. Would our talk about both of our students help us get a better handle on the strategies each child controlled, and the strategies they needed to refine in order to meet these standards? It is not typical for teachers to work together in this way; to talk about individual students, to make decisions together and help teach each other's students. But I wondered if these extra conversations would help both of us become better teachers and help our students achieve higher reading levels.

By the second month of the school year, I built a relationship with one of my colleagues in the second grade. Jenny and I began to talk about our children's progress informally and I began to notice the comfort I felt in confiding in a colleague about the curricular decisions I was making for my students. I approached Jenny and asked her if she wanted to meet on Friday afternoons to talk about our children's reading conferences and our flexible guided reading groups. She did not hesitate to join me on this journey of making our instruction more specific to the needs of the students.

## Literature Review

I was inspired by some research already in print about conversations among teachers to increase teacher and student learning. In Sandra Hollingsworth book, Teacher Research and Urban Literacy Education: Lessons and Conversations in a Feminist Key (1994), a group of teachers met to take part in, "sustained collaborative conversation," in order to better serve the needs of their students. They, like Jenny and I, have a philosophy of assessment based teaching. That is, rather than departing a specific set of facts on our students, our curriculum is dynamic, changing depending on the children's needs.

In addition, Japanese teachers have made a routine out of this collaboration model (Lewis & Tsuchida, 1998). The practice of collaborative planning is commonplace in Japan, and as a result, teachers feel less isolated from each other. As Jenny and I both realized, our work could be quite overwhelming and isolating. Talking and analyzing reading curriculum together made us more able to critique each other. These conversations, both between the Japanese teachers and between Jenny and I are contributing factors should increase student achievement.

Penny Arnold's NTPI research published in What Matters Most (2000) analyzes the importance of student teachers participation in study groups. Arnold writes, "When teachers are given the time to work together, they concentrate on helping one another solve instructional dilemmas and they improve their teaching skills. Teachers who participate in such collaboration gain confidence, feel better prepared, and become more proficient." I was hoping that the same would be true for full time teachers who were supporting each other.

Finally, Lieberman and Miller (1999) propose that a school can be transformed through the power of these collaborative relationships. They write, "[p]eer observation and consultation contribute to sharpened professional culture in which risks are encouraged, mistakes acknowledged, and learning scrutinized." I wanted our conversations to have this rich level of detail. If Jenny and I began these conversations as second grade teachers, perhaps we could recommend these planning meetings to other teachers who may want help planning their reading workshops. Our school could become a place where these conversations took place in all grade levels. The ultimate impact of my research would be to inspire other teachers to have these collaborative relationships, thus increasing student achievement in other classrooms as well.

## **Research Tools**

I read The Art of Classroom Inquiry (Hubbard & Power, 1993) to decide on the tools I would used to gather my research data. I wanted to record the conversations Jenny and I were planning to have on audio tape as well as take notes on our conversations. I also wanted to include my beginning data on my students reading, specifically my conference notes and their running records. Jenny and I would discuss these running records during our meetings, and as the year progressed they became our main tool for understanding what the children controlled and strategies in which they needed further development. I also decided to tape some of my guided reading lessons so I could watch to see if I was putting our conversation recommendations into my practice.

## The Conversations

Jenny and I began our conversations by going through individual readers running records and making decisions about what they already controlled and what strategies we needed to address in a guided reading lesson. We started to notice trends in our classrooms. We noticed handfuls of children in both of our classrooms that needed help with a specific concept or strategy. For example, In our initial conference we looked at some of Muhammad's running records we noticed that he was using structure cues, but he was substituting words that were disrupting the meaning of the text. Jenny and I also noticed the same types of errors in two of her students' running records. At that same meeting we also noticed that some of our students were gaining control over visual information quickly, and it was time to present them with more difficult reading. Part of our conversation follows:

**Sarah:** With Muhammad, it looks like he sometimes inserts words that make sense, but most of his errors occur when he reads words, or made-up words that disrupt the meaning. Look, 'pusted' for 'pushed.'

**Jenny:** That really disrupts his sense of meaning. I've got two kids who are doing similar things.

**Sarah:** I wonder if it is due to their code switching. Are your kids that do this English Language Learners?

**Jenny:** Hhhmmm. Yes, we could talk to Karen (the ESL teacher) about this too.

**Sarah:** Should I meet with these children for the next two weeks for guided reading to work on this?

**Jenny:** You'd take two of my kids for the next two weeks during reading workshop?

**Sarah:** Yeah, let's make sure we do reading at the same time of the day and look at texts together. I want to make sure we pick something that fits all of them.

Jenny and I scoured our book closets to match a text that would fit the needs of these particular readers. While we looked, we talked about the timing that this unique collaborative teaching would require. About forty minutes later, Jenny and I had selected texts and begun to talk about those readers that needed more challenging texts.

**Jenny:** Well, do you want me to take the three kids in your room that need the more complex text? I could combine them with the three kids in my room that need the same thing.

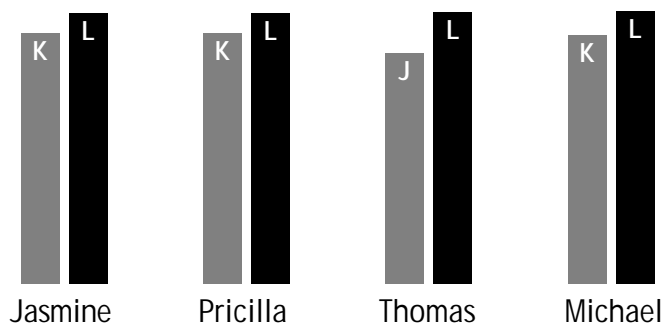
**Sarah:** That's great. They could really start at level K soon. Does that match where your kids are?

We continued our conversation until dark that first evening, the janitors having to ask us to leave the building at 6:30 PM. We were completely lost in our work and learning. This talk about reading strategies was making us better at identifying students needs and making us more curious about the reading process. Our bond as educators was strengthened and we trusted one another to teach each other's students. We were committed to making our collaborative partnership work. From that night on our friendship and connection as reading teachers grew exponentially.

Jenny and I continued to meet throughout the school year. We talked at great length about the children and solicited advice from our staff developer as well. Kerrie gave us specific guided reading advice, pointing us in the direction of Fountas and Pinnell's Guided Reading (1996). For Muhammad's group Kerrie suggested specific book introductions and prompts. For example, when they made a miscue of inserting a word that disrupted meaning, Kerrie was suggested prompts such as, "does that look right?" Her explicit advice and contributions to our conversations aided in our effort.

For the children that were beginning to enter more difficult text at the New York state's benchmark Level L, I was excited that we were beginning to see lovers of text emerge.

#### Select Students' Reading Levels in September 2000 and January 2001



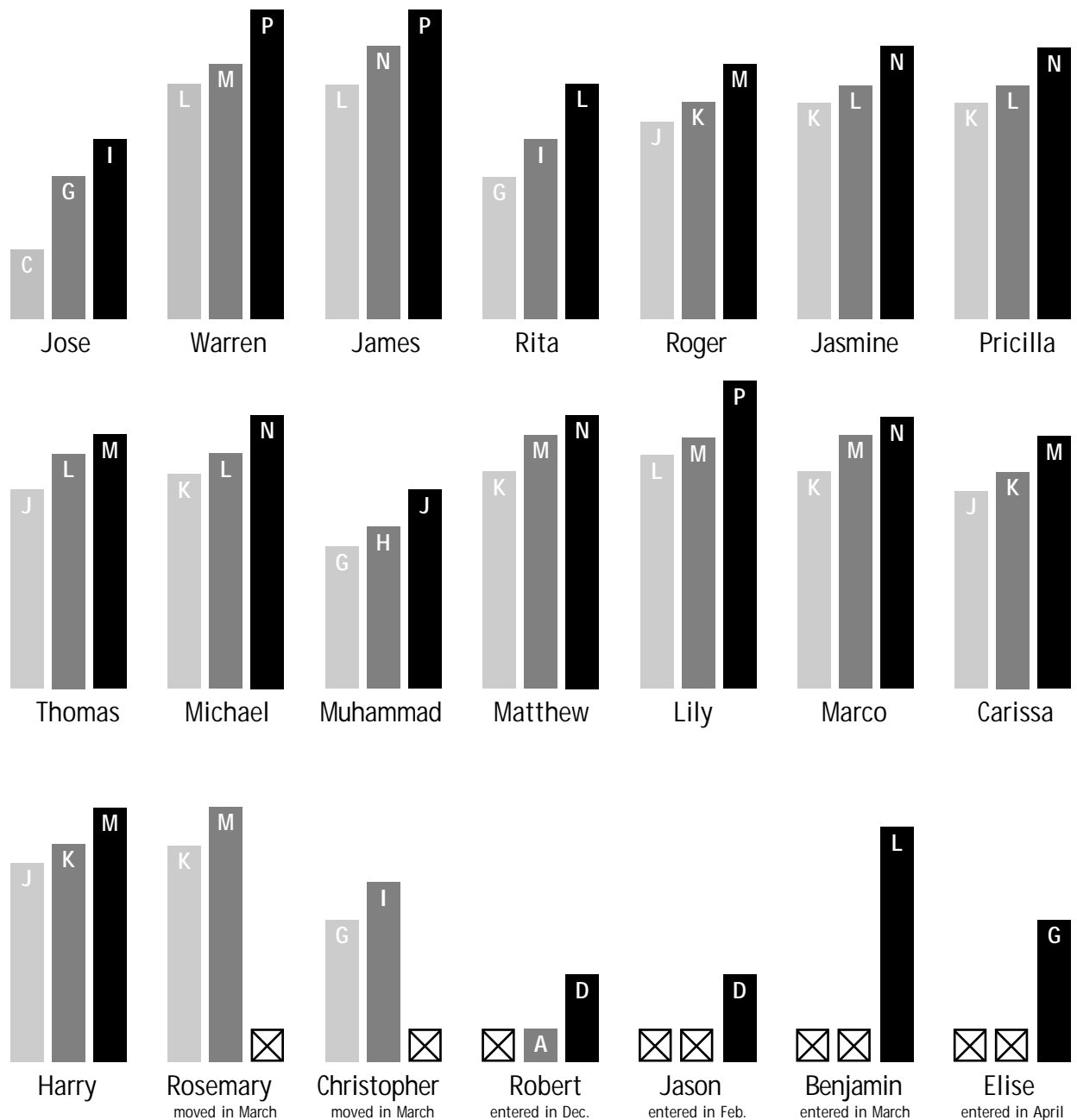
I began to talk with Jenny about the appropriateness of magazine articles, newspaper clippings and Internet sites. It was interesting to see the both of our classrooms shift to more chapter book readers. The children were also starting to have more conversations about books. Jenny and I even started modeling our own conversations about books in front of the the children. The children saw our friendship around teaching and learning grow, and they were becoming a community of readers who talked about text.

As the year continued, our groups changed and our teaching became more flexible. After each meeting with Jenny and/or Kerrie, I would plan my guided reading lessons with detail. I followed my notes from our conversations while planing and kept in mind each child's most recent running record. When I videotaped my lessons I discovered that I needed to be more prepared for the unexpected miscues of the children. Thus part of my planning began to involve predicting which words or phrases may cause trouble for the children. I talked with Jenny about the prompts she I thought were appropriate for each group of kids. Having the support of another colleague was incredibly valuable as we were there to remind each other to make sure the students were doing the majority of the problem solving. We did not want to do their reading work for them. I do not think I would have learned to be such an efficient prompter if I had not had these conversations with a colleague.

Near the end of the year we could see definite progress in each of our students. Although it is difficult to prove that their progress was caused all because of our conversations and collaborative planning, I do not think it would have happened if I would have done the teaching and planning on my own. These conversations made my teaching more informative, interesting and enjoyable for me and my students. As seen in the following chart, nearly all of the students in my class are reading at the Level L benchmark. Those who are not there yet are students who have recently immigrated to New York City from China and Bangladesh. They are quickly learning the language and within a few more months, they should be at the benchmark.



Class Reading Levels in September 2000, January 2001, and April 2001



### Policy Implications

The conversations Jenny and I had about our children's reading is not what most teachers do when they plan for children's reading instruction. Nowhere could this be more true than in New York City where the constant teacher shortage makes it difficult for teachers to stay at the same grade level, in the same building. Jenny and I took time after our regular work

hours to have these conversations, often staying late on Fridays to review the previous week's work and plan for the next week's lessons. It is a unique relationship, but I do believe can be duplicated by others. Some school policy recommendations follow.

- 1) Teachers should be given the opportunity to have some collaborative teaching time during the school day. This time to talk about student progress is incredibly valuable. It may be difficult to convince teachers to give up their time after school hours to have these vital conversations.
- 2) At the contractual level, teachers should be given the option to work and extended day with added time for this collaborative planning.
- 3) At the classroom level, teachers should be encouraged to seek out collaborative relationships in their building.
- 4) Also at the classroom level, teachers should group students in flexible reading groups based on authentic assessment, such as running records.

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