

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

The Implementation and Study of Dialogic Buddy Reading in a Head Start Classroom

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The current NAEYC campaign, Early Ed for President (NAEYC, 2015), highlights the power that resides in a strong research practice partnership. This is particularly powerful when an evidence-based practice is initiated and studied in the context of a real classroom using scientific implementation. This research to practice summary shares how single subject research, coupled with qualitative interviews, are used to explore the feasibility and benefits of daily dialogic reading conducted by sixth grade students and Head Start students in a diverse, urban suburban elementary school. Fidelity to dialogic reading done by mixed age reading buddies, or dialogic buddy reading, was attained to varying degrees and doing so led to vocabulary gains in the younger children. Additional benefits were found for both older and younger students, as well as ways to improve fidelity over time or during future replications.

Keywords: reading; shared reading; read aloud, dialogic reading, peer tutoring

The current NAEYC campaign, Early Education for President (NAEYC, 2015), emphasizes the power in our profession. We find ourselves in a well-informed place empowered with intentional teaching by thoughtful and energetic educators. These teachers understand how to filter and focus relevant research in their diverse contexts. This project provides a model for such teachers. The model facilitates the scientific implementation and study of dialogic reading (DR), an evidence based practice shown to increase oral language skills in young children, in daily classroom routines.

Decades of research highlight the positive impact of DR on oral language of young children (Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008). DR is an interactive read aloud structure that prompts the child to gradually take on more and more responsibility for the story telling across multiple rereads. The DR protocol is enacted during the second reading of a soon to be favorite story. The reader periodically prompts that child to tell what is happening throughout the story. Four types of prompts exist along a continuum of sophisticated thinking: a cloze prompt calls for

a single word response, recall prompts a description of a specific action, an inference is prompted based on an open ended question, or a personal connection is prompted through a distance question or model. Following the prompt, the reader evaluates the child's response to determine the most appropriate way to enhance or extend the conversation. The enhancement usually involves the reader restating what the child said in a way that modifies and extends either vocabulary or grammatical structures. Finally, the reader skillfully guides the child to repeat that aspect of the conversation using as much of the enhanced language as possible. This prompt, evaluate, enhance, repeat cycle is remembered through the acronym, PEER; and the prompt options are remembered through the acronym CROWD (Pearson Early Learning, 2002).

The following conversation between a teacher and a preschool student is an example of DR at work while reading, *Whistle for Willie*:

Peggy [Teacher]: "So instead he began to turn himself around—around and around he whirled... faster and faster..." What was it like when he whirled? "He whirled...faster and faster..."

Ralph [Child]: He falls.

Ms. Peggy: He falls? Not totally, but almost! So when he "whirled" he went around and around in circles, right?

Ralph: Fast, fast, fast!

Ms. Peggy: Fast, fast, fast. When he whirled he went around and around in circles really fast.

Ralph: Fast, went around in circles fast.

Ms. Peggy: Let's do it! [Ms. Peggy and Ralph go around and around in circles] I'm whirling! I'm whirling! I'm whirling!

Ralph: I'm whirling! I'm whirling! (Burns, Johnson & Assaf, 2012)

Research supports the use of DR to increase the oral language levels of very young children. In turn, oral language has positive correlations with eventual reading achievement (Lonigan, 2007). Daily dialogic reading could have significant educational impact on children we serve. It follows, then, that we would strive to find ways to bring daily DR into our preschool classrooms. One way is to tap the resources readily available in elementary schools that serve pre-kindergarten through fifth or sixth grade. The teachers involved in this project began to wonder how successful sixth grade students could be at facilitating DR with Head Start students. Various peer-tutoring structures have met with various levels of success and fidelity often has a role to play in these outcomes. There, they considered how the level of fidelity to DR might be measured so as to inform future reiterations of DR projects, creating a scientific implementation of the routine.

THE STUDY

The current work brings the DR research into a new generation of study, shifting DR to dialogic buddy reading (DBR). The project involved a reading specialist and a Head Start teacher collaborating to study the degree to which sixth grade students can facilitate DR with Head Start students in a diverse urban suburban elementary school serving pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. In addition to conceptualizing how fidelity to DBR might be described and measured in

an authentic classroom context, the researchers looked for ways to leverage improvement to fidelity in future reiterations of DBR.

Tools from single subject research and mixed methods research were integrated to create an empirically sound design that was rigorous, yet flexible enough to implement in the classroom using the classroom teacher and reading specialist. Book specific vocabulary assessments were developed to measure how the work in DBR influenced specific word learning in the younger children. Additionally, a fidelity observation checklist was used to describe the extent to which the pairs adhered to the components of DBR. Finally, interviews provided the opportunity to describe how the sixth grade students perceived the work of DBR. The three measures—vocabulary probes, fidelity observations, and interviews—converged to help practitioners understand what DBR might look like in a classroom, determine if it was a valid program to embrace, and consider how it might be improved.

The procedure for implementing and studying DBR involved training the sixth grade students, establishing DBR as a classroom routine in the Head Start classroom, and selecting the pairs for data collection. The training began in October and took place during the 15-minute arrival time for students in the school—the same time DBR would occur in the Head Start classroom once started. The specialist met with 17 sixth grade students in the media center daily to run through various activities that included viewing and analyzing a video tutorial, role-playing and book and vocabulary selection. The older students were paired with the younger students in November and the DBR work began in the Head Start classroom. DBR quickly became a much loved and anticipated routine in the lives of the older and younger children, not to mention the Head Start teacher, her assistant and the reading specialist. The space was energized with so much excitement, laughter and talk about the books and one another's lives.

Although 17 pairs participated in DBR each morning, the researchers only collected data from six pairs. These pairs were selected randomly. The selected reading buddies read through selected books and chose five they wanted to reread. Vocabulary probes were developed based on the chosen books to find words the younger students did not know before the multiple rereading of the stories. The older students were interviewed in November and in May. Vocabulary and observation data was collected across 10 weeks in March, April and early May.

KEY FINDINGS

Visual analysis of the observation data showed that pairs' fidelity to the implementation of the DBR protocol varied, but that this fidelity can be easily measured via the observation tool. Results from the tool also indicated that additional scaffolding and routine experiences with DBR lead to higher usage of components and completion rates of the PEER cycle. Although fidelity fluctuated across pairs, analysis of the data from the vocabulary measures show younger students increased in their receptive and expressive knowledge of the targeted words. Additionally, the results of the delayed post assessment indicate that this upward trend continued well after the targeted books and scaffolds for those particular words were no longer being used (McIlwain & Burns, 2014). Analysis of the interview data showed several related benefits for both the younger and older child in each pair. These benefits include joint attention, vocabulary or word learning, thinking, relationships and a sense of accomplishment. Misconceptions of the purpose of DBR and distractions influencing decision making during use of the DBR protocol also became evident as the interview data was analyzed. However, these older students also

offered solutions to the obstacles, stating that collaborative choices between the buddies might increase adherence to the DBR protocol and help the pairs bring more cycles to completion (McIlwain, 2012).

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION AND STUDY OF DBR IN CLASSROOMS

The results indicate that DBR is a feasible and sustainable, evidence based practice that can increase the oral language skills used by Head Start students. Additionally, continued study of ways to improve students' fidelity to the DBR protocol during buddy reading might increase these benefits. The power of replication rests in the hands of others interested in joining in the conversation as to how DBR can become a powerful tool in classrooms across the country.

The model shared in this project serves as a starting point for other practitioners interested in the scientific implementation of DBR in their classrooms. The following sections describe the model and offer some variations that may enhance fidelity and ease of implementation and study.

Be Intentional about the Why and the What

Why do you want to implement DBR in your classroom? The research in DR shows that this activity increases the vocabulary and language complexity used by younger students. Both of these benefits have an important impact on future literacy development and academic success. You may want to focus on one or both of these aspects of oral language. Access to reasonable measurements is also part of this decision. Consider the assessment tools you already use to analyze retelling of stories and students' use of language structures. These can be used to monitor the impact of DBR. Other language assessments that are easy to administer include Marie Clay's, Record of Oral Language and The Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (Manning & Patterson, 2004).

Developing individual vocabulary probes as done in this model can be a bit time consuming. Another idea is to collaborate with the speech pathologist in your building to administer a standardized vocabulary test like the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, which is used in many of the studies in DR.

Using a single subject design is a way of staggering data collection so you aren't constantly assessing all of your children. Set up assessment windows of eight to 12 weeks for 6 children. Decide how often the assessments need to be conducted within the window—every week, every two weeks? Rotate a new six pairs into the next assessment period. Repeat the cycle throughout the school year. You can look at the results to see if they are replicated across assessment windows.

Be Intentional about the How

How will fidelity be enhanced, sustained and measured? The observation tool used in this project was very simple but effective (Appendix A). You can set up observation windows that

align with the assessment windows and only observe those pairs during that time. Decide how long you will observe each pair during the sessions and maintain that consistency.

How will the older students be trained? Collaborate with another specialist or resource teacher to conduct training sessions in short bursts, daily during school arrival or dismissal. Resources that support trainings include videos like, Read Together Talk Together, and websites such as, This project did not provide coaching after the initial training sessions were completed; however, ongoing coaching and feedback using the observation checklist could be very powerful for both the older and younger students. This could be done immediately following or even during an observation. Just indicate that the pair was coached during or after the observation period on the observation protocol. Also, you can collaborate with another teacher in the building so one teacher provides coaching to those students not in an observation/assessment window while the other teacher observes those in the observation/assessment window.

Be Intentional about the Way to Sustain and Grow

How will you invite input from the children? Periodically interview the important people in this work—the children. Develop a simple list of interview questions like those used in this project (Appendix B). This will allow you to make adjustments as necessary. You can also interview the parents to see if the children’s reading behaviors are changing at home. Are the children asking to read with their parents more often as a result of DBR being a part of the daily routine? If so, then the next step will be to share the process with the parents so they can conduct DR regularly at home.

Be Intentional about the Sharing of the Learning

Share, share, share what you are learning. Collaborate with a specialist or instructional coach to analyze the data generated from your assessments, observations and interviews. Relay your findings informally to parents, administrators and other teachers through bulletin boards, posters, and brochures. Share your work with a teacher research network through articles and presentations. Partner with a researcher from a college or university for other opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Intentional implementation and study of DBR in the classrooms carries a great deal of potential. The research shared in this article kicks off a new generation of study in DR by bringing an evidence based practice typically conducted by parents and teachers to the daily experience of our children in Head Start classrooms in the form of DBR. Data collected via the observation checklist showed various levels of fidelity to the DBR protocol and assessments showed vocabulary was positively impacted. There is indeed power in our profession, particularly as teachers access evidence based practices through their own intentional and systematic study.

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APPENDIX A

Post Training/Pre Intervention Interview:

1. Tell me how dialogic buddy reading will work for you and your buddy (or your students).
2. What do you think you will like most about dialogic buddy reading?
3. What concerns you about dialogic buddy reading?

Post Intervention Interview:

1. Tell me how dialogic buddy reading worked for you and your buddy (or your students).
2. What did you like most about dialogic buddy reading?
3. What did you like least about dialogic buddy reading?
4. What would you change about dialogic buddy reading?
5. (For teachers only) Describe the how you feel your students' home literacy experiences influence their book interactions at school?