

Supporting Struggling Readers

Using Interactive Read-Alouds and Graphic Organizers

Jennifer Barrett-Mynes, collaborating with Mary Jane Moran and Deborah Tegano, has crafted a piece of teacher research that gets to the heart of learning to read well—comprehending and making sense of written texts. Within the time-honored framework of read-alouds of high-quality literature, the authors show the pedagogical and democratic value of giving more control and choice to children to promote their own reading achievement. Through child-created graphic organizers and peer discussions, the children themselves take on the role of inquirers, using dialogue and graphic representation to focus and organize their ideas and feelings about what they read. It is this kind of textured layering of instruction and inquiry-based learning that holds great promise for deepening the teaching and inquiry work of teachers and for enriching student ownership of and insight into the power of written texts.

—Daniel Meier

The third-graders in my classroom could read the words, but a small group of them seemed to comprehend little of what they read and were unable to pass their reading comprehension tests. Even when they knew the meaning of the specific words, they did not use that knowledge to help them make sense of the story. I did not understand how the children were formatting and structuring the information from the stories they read. The established reading curriculum for my class provided limited small group or one-on-one teaching time, few lessons with a focus on comprehension, and no opportunities for concrete representations.

I decided to explore a different approach to supporting reading comprehension. The study reported here addresses the role of storybook read-alouds. In particular I investigate the role of collaborative discussion combined with the use of graphic organizers as a way to increase children's comprehension.

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Courtesy of the author.

Making the Most of Read-Alouds

“The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is *reading aloud* to children” (Anderson et al. 1985, 23). Trelease elaborates on this idea and advocates continuing read-alouds past the primary grades. During read-alouds, it is important to discuss with children what they are hearing (Fountas & Pinnell 1996). Brabham and Lynch-Brown (2002) compared the effectiveness of three styles of read-alouds: (a) read-alouds only, without any discussion during or after the reading; (b) read-alouds followed by discussion; and (c) interactional read-alouds during which the teacher encourages children to make predictions about the story, attend to particular vocabulary, and draw conclusions. This final style of interactional read-aloud resulted in the largest gain in vocabulary and comprehension scores. An earlier study also found that elementary children’s word acquisition and understanding of oral and written language improved when interactions occurred during read-alouds (Elley 1989). By “processing the information that they hear, children ordinarily accumulate aspects of meaning about new words, as well as information about the logical relations implied by the syntactic elements of language” (Meyer et al. 1994, 73).

During read-alouds, some children need further support to help them organize what they have heard. Children’s comprehension improves more when they create the graphic organizers themselves.

Comprehension Activities with Graphic Organizers

Although read-alouds are valuable literacy activities in themselves, some children need further support to help them organize what they have heard. Graphic organizers are one strategy that can be used (Kim et al. 2004). Graphic organizers can include pictures, diagrams, charts, or other visual representations of the content and meaning of the text. These visual representations can depict the setting, initiating event, problem, goal of the main character, and solution, as well as how these elements relate to one another. Children’s comprehension improves more when they create the graphic organizers themselves than when teachers make graphic organizers as models before the read-aloud (Swanson & De La Paz 1998; Kim, et al. 2004).

With this information in mind, I decided to create a reading intervention that included discussion and the use of child-created graphic organizers during read-alouds to see whether these techniques helped the children’s understanding of the story.

Methods

The study took place in my third grade classroom in a Title 1 elementary school in a mid-sized city in the southeastern United States. This urban school serves children who live in public housing developments and homeless shelters and enrolls an equal number of African American and Caucasian children. The school receives state and federal funding (85 percent of children qualify for free or reduced lunch). The majority of the parents have an education level of high school or below. An informal survey inventorying books in the children’s homes revealed that few if any books were available for children.

Coding for Reading Skills and Participation

Low: Child participated only when called upon. Had great difficulty reading words and exhibiting comprehension.

Medium: Child participated an average of two or three times daily. Had trouble with one or two words per sentence. Inconsistent reading comprehension.

High: Child participated an average of more than three times daily. Little to no trouble reading all sentences or conveying the meaning of the passage.

The Children

There were three children in the study, a 7-year-old boy, Steven, and two 8-year-old girls, Erica and Sally. Initially there were four children, however Andrea (pseudonyms are used for all children) moved before the study ended. I selected the children based on (1) low participation and basal reading comprehension test scores; (2) responses on a home reading questionnaire about literacy practices in the home; and (3) responses to an orally administered survey of children's self-perceptions as readers.

The reading skills and participation scores reflected how often the child participated in class and the level of ability the child exhibited during reading time.

Home literacy ratings were based on how often the child was read to at home and for how long (twice a week is low, two to five times a week is medium, and five or more times a week is high).

The self-perception scores showed that the children thought of themselves as good readers. Only the 7-year-old boy in this study saw himself as a slower reader.

Design of the Study

The reading intervention lasted for four weeks during late fall and focused on one book each week. On the first two days of each week, I implemented read-aloud sessions with the children for one hour. We read half of the book on the first day and finished the book on the second day. I chose trade books that were above the average reading ability of the children, based on Trelease's view that it is important to read something slightly above the children's reading level to allow for the introduction of new vocabulary. Further, I wanted to read a book to them that they could not easily read to themselves.

During the first week, I began by introducing graphic organizer tools representing the familiar story of Cinderella. I created one character map, one setting sketch, and one sequence of event time line, and I modeled the purpose of the organizers. Then the children began to create their own organizers based on our readings. The first week we read *The Story of Blue Elk*, by Gerald Hausman; the second week, *The Canary Prince*, by Eric Jon Nones; the third week, *Waiting for the Whales*, by Sheryl McFarlane; and the fourth week, *Chin Yu Min and the Ginger Cat*, by Jennifer Armstrong.

My role during the read-alouds was to ask a few questions to enhance the children's comprehension and facilitate discussion. I encouraged the children to initiate ideas about the book and share their ideas with one other. Although I participated in the conversation, I did not control its direction. Based on their discussions, the children created their own graphic organizers for the book. One day each week they made a character map, the next day they drew a picture of the setting, and the day after that the children collaborated to draw an event map—a time line of events. After making their weekly event map, the children completed an Accelerated Reader quiz, which tracks individual comprehension.

Data Collection and Analysis

Five sources of data were collected across the four weeks of the study:

- Focused field notes
- Audio recordings of reading sessions
- The Teacher Observation Rating Scale (TORS)
- Accelerated Reader (AR) quizzes
- Basal unit tests

I collected focused field notes and audio recordings of the read-alouds each week and reviewed them to look for any patterns that might arise with one or more of the children. Was a certain topic causing trouble for everyone? Was one child consistently misreading sentence cues or not expressing an understanding of how to make predictions?

At the end of each week, I completed the Teacher Observation Rating Scale (TORS) and administered the Accelerated Reader quizzes. The TORS (see Appendix, p. 12) is a way of rating children's participation in the reading sessions that takes into account their answers to comprehension questions and the depth of their understanding of each story as represented by graphic organizers. The Accelerated Reader quizzes included basic comprehension questions about whatever book the children read that week. AR quizzes are multiple choice and generally include five questions for shorter picture books and ten questions for longer picture books and chapter books.

Prior to, during, and following the study, I administered Scott Foresman basal unit tests to help determine whether the children were applying their learning from the intervention sessions to their performance with the basal tests.

These standardized assessments allowed me to look at my data from another perspective and to confirm that the children in my small group were improving on their regular classroom assessments in addition to increasing their TORS and AR quiz scores.



Courtesy of the author

Findings

My analysis revealed three findings: (1) children's discussions became progressively more collaborative with each other and less dependent on my prompts and cues, (2) the creation of graphic organizers became increasingly child directed and less dependent on my direction, and (3) the children achieved higher standardized test scores for both the Accelerated Reader quizzes and basal tests throughout the four weeks. Examples of these findings are presented below, followed by implications for future research and practice.

The Power of Collaborative Discussion

The following examples illustrate how collaborative discussion about a book's meaning during read-aloud sessions served to improve children's comprehension.

During the first session of week two, while discussing the book *The Canary Prince*, the children used the context of the word *witch* to help dispel a group member's belief that the meaning of the word *witch* is always negative.

Teacher: What do you think the *witch* is going to do to help?

E: I think she is going to give him wings.

S: I think she is going to get her and bring her down from the window of the tower.

C: No, I think she is going to turn him into a canary!

Teacher: Why would you think that?

C: Because the book is called *The Canary Prince*.

E: Oh, yeah! The prince *is* going to turn into a canary.

C: I think she's evil.

Teacher: What has she done that was evil?

E: Nothing!

S: She said that they should be together. That is not evil. She is *trying* to help.

During week three, on our second day of reading *Waiting for the Whales*, the children analyzed a sentence, foreshadowing what might happen next to the main characters.

A: The old man stopped doing everything. He said it was time to go.

C: No! He didn't say it was time to go. He said it was time to stop!

Teacher: What does "to go" mean, do you think?

C: To die.

Teacher: So what does "time to stop" mean here?

A and **E:** Time to die.

S: Just that he's an old man and he can't do much anymore.

Teacher: So what is left that he does do?"

S: Sit and wait for the whales. Maybe they have some special power that helps him.

A: I think he is waiting to see them one more time before he dies, because when people say it is time to rest, they always die in the stories.

S: He's going to die. Well, we don't know. He is waiting for them to come back.

A: He needs to save up his energy.

C: I have no idea. I mean, I kind of agree that he might die, but I'm not sure. I don't want him to die!

E: Yeah, I agree about him dying.

Through discussions such as these, I saw the children consider and reconsider the information within the text and reach a joint conclusion about how to interpret it. To do this, they revisited the story for evidence, and they changed their opinion on occasion as they considered the perspectives of others. I believe changes in the children's comprehension during the course of this study were partially due to these social interactions.

Collaborative discussion about a book's meaning during read-aloud sessions served to improve children's comprehension.

Through discussions, I saw the children consider and reconsider the information within the text and reach a joint conclusion about how to interpret it.

Steven's first week character map of *The Story of Blue Elk* shows a lot of detail about the main character (details not giving a clear picture or arranged in a structured fashion), but minimal detail for supportive characters from the story.

- Elk is a magic elk and large
- Medisin Man A very wise man.
- Sunflower blue elk is in love with her hunter killed Elk.
- Blue Elk he was a native american he could not speak a magic elk was there when he was born.
- hunter killed elk



Figure 1

Erica's first week setting drawing of *The Story of Blue Elk* shows the village in the mountains where the main character lived, but not any of the specific settings in which the main events of the story took place.

Erica's second week setting drawing of *The Canary Prince* shows an understanding of the three main areas in which the story takes place (two castles and the forest), but gives little detail and includes a main character (which is neither the *where* nor the *when* of the story).

Using Graphic Organizers

Early in the study, the children needed a lot of direction from me in creating graphic organizers. As the weeks went by, they became increasingly able to generate their own graphic organizers without my guidance.

During the first and second weeks, the children's graphic organizers (see Steven's [Figure 1] and Erica's drawings [Figures 2 and 3]) were simplistic in context, and the information included was often prompted by my questioning. Early organizers included few words about supporting characters, little detail in setting drawings, and few events on timelines.



Figure 2

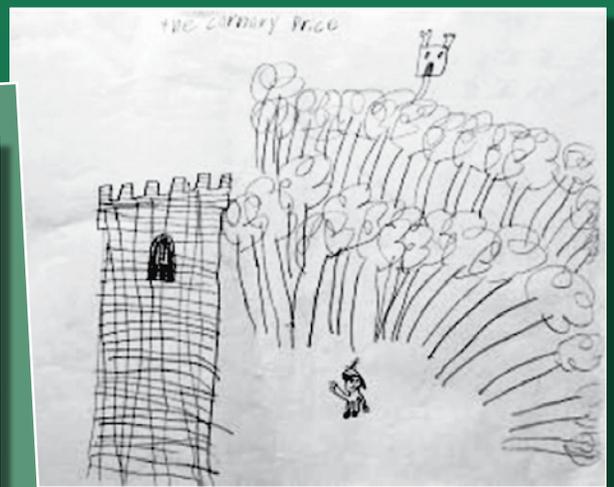


Figure 3

Steven's third week character map shows more detail for the supporting characters, including details about their actions in the story. The main character's bubble is in the middle of the cluster of three.

- Waiting for the wales [whales]
- Weal's come by the garden [overlooking the sea].
 - Little girl loves raspberries [grows] fat as a baby _____
 - Old man plays at [with] his granddaughter's father
 - mother presents baby to her father

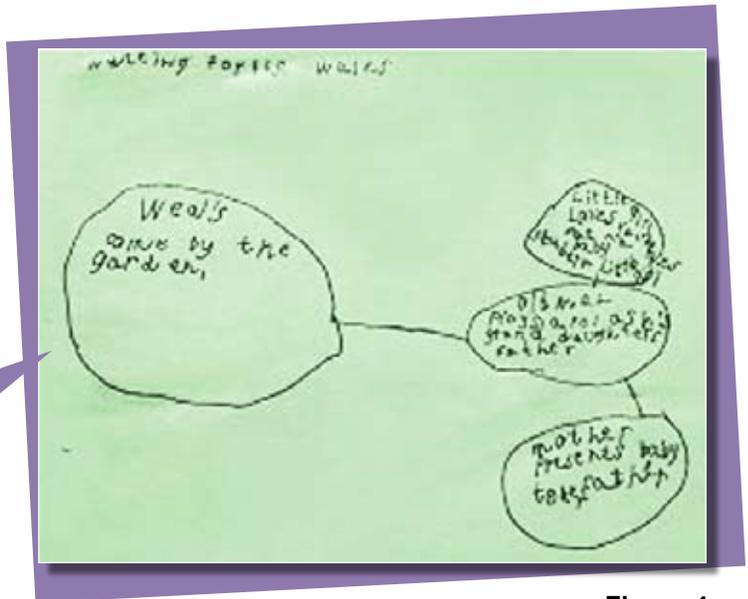


Figure 4

Steven's fourth week character map shows multiple details about every character; he has chosen to refer to the key actions that made them significant characters within the story.

- ginger cat
- Cat good fisher. Easy to trick. He is a ginger cat. Very good. He cares about the old lady
 - Neighbors very nice, kind
 - Old woman selfish greedy [and bossy]. Wants to stay rich.
 - Old man, lady's husband, very rich, died in fires
 - beggar gave old woman her cat. Very nice.

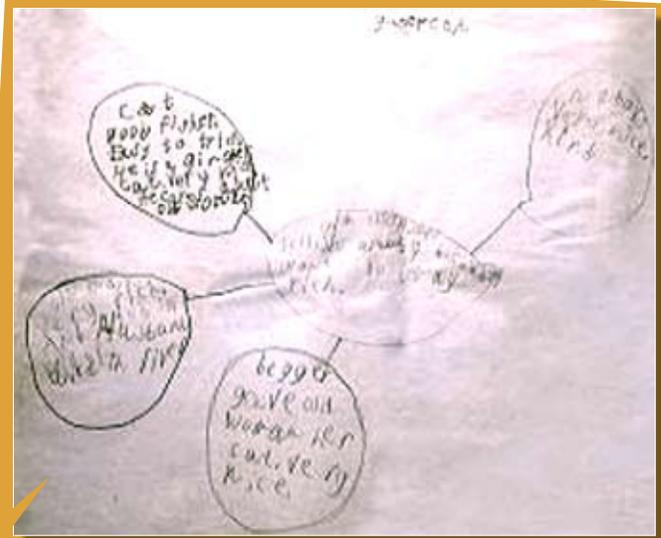


Figure 5

As I gradually began to withdraw from my directive role during the second week, the children used their new understandings of how to use the graphic organizers to create more detailed descriptions of the story's characters, setting, and events. They worked collaboratively to agree on what they viewed as complete information. The graphic organizers enabled them to move toward more organized and focused understandings of the stories.

For example, above are Steven's character maps for the third and fourth weeks (Figures 4 and 5). The setting drawings Erica created for the third and fourth weeks (Figures 6 and 7, p. 8) also show significant improvement.

Erica's third week setting drawing of *Waiting for the Whales* shows all the areas within the story where the main character spent his time. The house's location by the sea is one of the main aspects of the setting, as are the woods near the main character's house, where he spends time walking and reflecting, and his yard, where he spends time gardening.



Figure 6

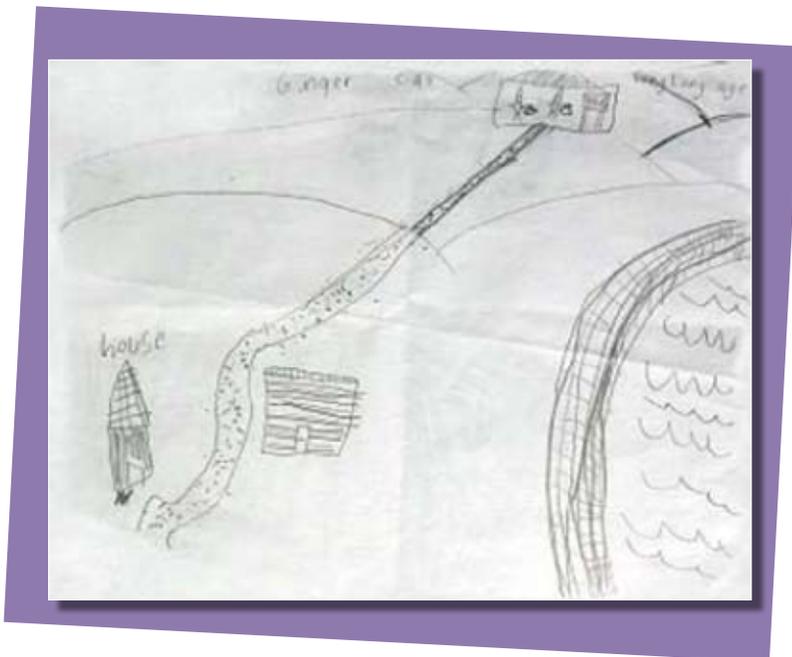


Figure 7

Erica's fourth week setting drawing of *Chin Yu Min and the Ginger Cat* reveals much thought about how the setting helps drive the storyline. The lonely lady's house is far from others and she feels separated from her neighbors. The lake dock on which she finds, and loses, the ginger cat is shown. Her search for the cat down the road to the crowded market is also represented. Erica included these main events in her story event timeline also.

Standardized Tests

The children’s test scores increased over time on both the basal unit tests and the Accelerated Reader quizzes. Before this study, these children had routinely scored below the 70th percentile. During the study, the children’s scores showed considerable improvement, with one child scoring 100 percent and the other two children scoring 90 percent on the final basal unit test.

While it is not conclusive that my new approach to reading caused these gains, the rate of change in comprehension was significant compared to the children’s previous three months of test scores. Standardized test scores gradually increased across the span of the intervention, as did the TORS ratings (Figure 8). In general, an increase was seen in the basal unit test scores (Figure 9) and the Accelerated Reader quiz scores (Figure 10). Children who had previously scored lower than their targeted peers showed some of the largest increases in comprehension scores, in some instances even moving from the lowest- to the highest-scoring children in the targeted groups.

That my third graders benefited from these read-alouds also called into question the idea that children past the age of preschool or kindergarten benefit less from read-alouds and read-aloud activities. The findings from my classroom support Trelease’s view that read-alouds have value throughout the span of a child’s formal learning.

Figure 8. Teacher Observation Rating Scale

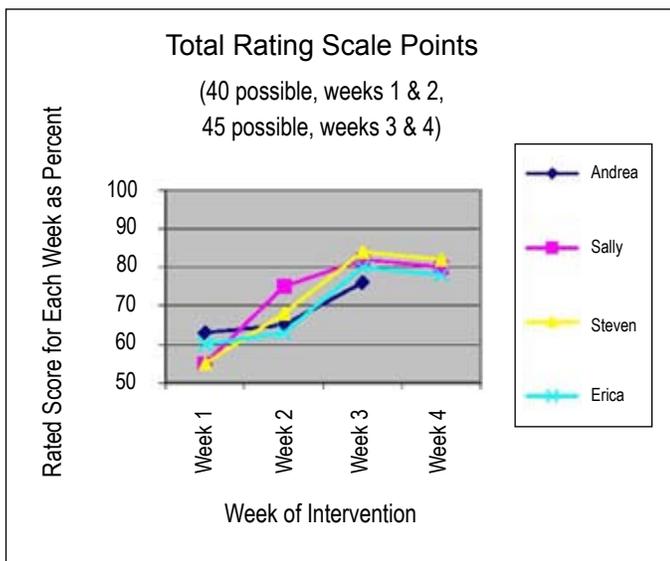


Figure 9. Basal Unit Tests

Data are not included for Andrea in the basal unit tests because she had not completed a total battery of tests due to school absences.

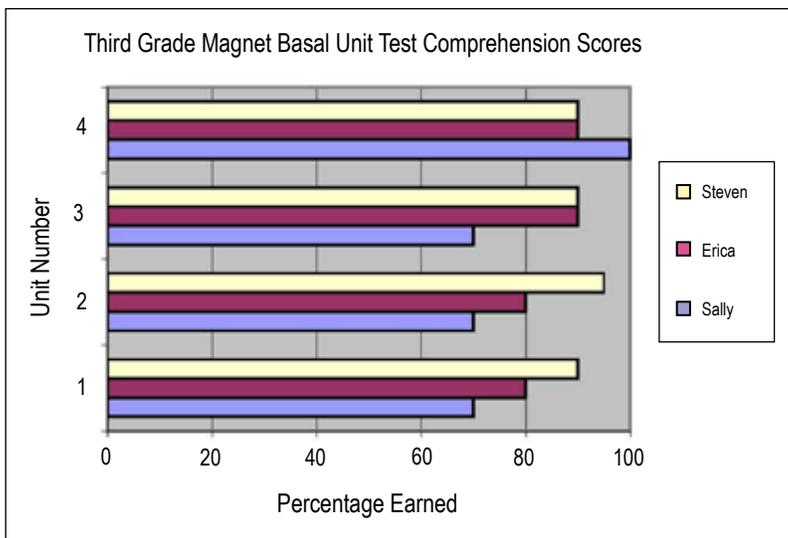
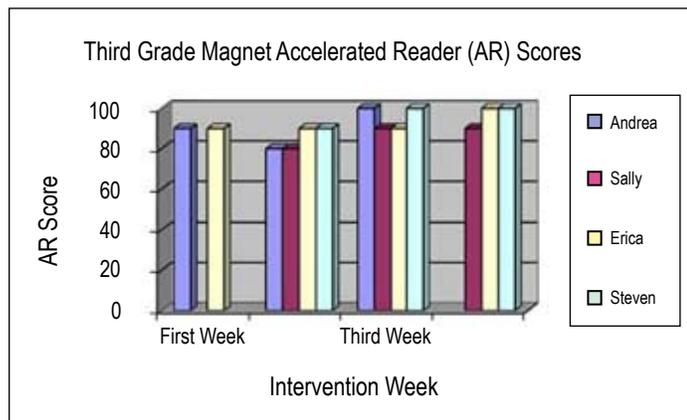


Figure 10. Accelerated Reader Quiz



Teaching Reflection

During the course of my study, the children's work and comprehension were not the only changes that took place. My practices also changed. Through a repeated cycle of planning, acting, reflecting, and revising plans and subsequent actions, I was able to adapt my practices to better meet the needs of the children in my classroom. I learned to give up some of my authority in directing the learning and helped the children take more control of their own learning.

During the first week, I introduced graphic organizers for character maps, setting sketches, and sequence of events time lines based on the Cinderella model (p. 3). When the children began to make their own graphic organizers for *The Story of Blue Elk*, I was their main source of direction.

During the second week I did not introduce any adult-created graphics to demonstrate the purpose and use of organizers.

As the children made their graphic organizers, I continued to provide directed questions but noted that the children were now relying more on each other and less on my prompts to review information from the story. I began to use preplanned questions that would allow for higher order thinking to help guide the children's conversation beyond the basic descriptions of character, setting, and sequence.

During the third week I used higher order thinking questions to help stimulate collaborative discussion among the children. I would ask them about specifics like the motives behind a character's actions or the meaning of a particular phrase, such as what they thought the old man meant, in *Waiting for the Whales*, when he said it was time to go. I then stayed in the background during the children's conversation as they helped one another come to a better understanding of the text. By this time in the study, the children were using information from the book as proof to defend the shared ideas that they subsequently used to develop their graphic organizers. During this week, my main goal as a teacher was to discuss grade-level literacy standards to help the children think about the elements of the story and how they fit together.

I learned to give up some of my authority in directing the learning and helped the children take more control of their own learning.



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During the fourth week, I posed minimal questions and did not ask about specific grade-level skills as I had the previous week. The children collaborated with minimal prompting to reach agreement and put the information into their own words as they created their individual organizers.

Now the children have reached a new level of mastery and independence in organizing their understanding of a story. They create and use their graphic organizers without direction from the teacher. The children discuss the story elements, and then record those thoughts in their own words on paper.

Collaborative discussion and child-created graphic organizers is a promising practice for scaffolding children's comprehension of stories.

Conclusion

Using collaborative discussion and child-created graphic organizers to enhance read-alouds is a promising practice for scaffolding children's comprehension of stories. The graphic organizers became tools that helped the children structure their thinking about the story's elements. The peer discussion enabled them to construct new knowledge and also to share it with the group.

I noticed that the combination of my initial questioning and the deliberate decrease in my direction created a context in which the children had new opportunities to take ownership and collaborate to develop more sophisticated graphic organizers. As a result, their comprehension and vocabulary test scores rose, mirroring similar rises in their individual Teacher Observation Rating Scores. As a teacher I believe I have a new teaching strategy on which I can expand as I continue to support the reading comprehension of children in future classrooms.

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The Teacher Observation Rating Scale

1. In general, the student remains engaged and attentive during read aloud.

1 2 3 4 5

Behaviors that show this:

2. The student participates in discussion during and after read aloud.

1 2 3 4 5

Behaviors that show this:

3. The student asks relevant questions during the discussion of the book.

1 2 3 4 5

Behaviors that show this:

4. The student's body language remains positive during discussion questions.

1 2 3 4 5

Behaviors that show this:

5. The student appears to have a firm grasp of the:

characters in the story	1	2	3	4	5
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plot of the story	1	2	3	4	5
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setting of the story	1	2	3	4	5
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sequence of events in the story	1	2	3	4	5
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Behaviors that show this:

6. The student's comments are relevant and show an attempt at deeper thinking.

1 2 3 4 5

Behaviors that show this: