

# Reading coaches: Adapting an intervention model for upper elementary and middle school readers

*Stephanie Bacon*

**Today's students need a large reservoir of behavioral tools and reading strategies to be successful. The instruction method described equips readers to take on the demands of modern life with confidence.**

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**For two years** I endured rigorous training to become certified as a reading specialist. The coursework involved coordinated and sometimes hectic participation in research-based classes paired with a one-on-one tutorial with a student. During this training, I applied the information I gained to lessons I would teach under the watchful eye of experienced instructors. Our efforts as reading specialist candidates were directed toward students who were performing two or more levels below their grade and were enrolled in summer school. My experience in this small tutorial setting was intensely rewarding. The two students I worked with responded successfully to the instructional methods used (increasing achievement one instructional level in six weeks). The specific methods that we used evolved over the course of the program to meet the students' needs, the constraints of our schedule, and the learning curve of us teacher trainees. Essentially, we employed a similar lesson plan format to that outlined by Reading Recovery (Pinnell, 2000), and we brainstormed as a group

of teachers and professors to enrich the lessons with different activities.

After completing the certificate program, I was armed and ready to apply what I had learned. Unfortunately, I am employed by a U.S. school district that does not fund reading specialist positions. In response to the realization that I would not soon find myself instructing reading in an intensive one-on-one format, I decided to use my knowledge of the reading process and intervention strategies in my current position as a sixth-grade humanities teacher. After all, few of my students were reading in a manner that would enable them to tackle the increasing demands of a complex and changing society. Although not all of my students were functioning below grade level, all could benefit from the specific instruction, prompting, and reflection that were so fruitfully employed by the intervention model I used during my training to become a reading specialist.

## The ratio challenge

I was faced immediately with the ratio challenge. In an intervention model, one teacher works with one student by focusing specifically on that student's strengths and needs. In my humanities classes, I am one teacher working with 30 students who have an extreme variety of strengths and needs. In an average class I have seven or eight children with learning disabilities, several who consistently test

below grade level in reading, a few second-language learners, a modest number of students in the average or above average range of skill and ability, and one or two students who are designated as gifted. Nevertheless, all of these children need to gain the ability to read critically, make decisions as readers, and understand written information to the extent that they can apply it regardless of their varying abilities. Therefore, all of the students need access to intense, specific, and frequent reading instruction of the type used by reading specialists, the type of instruction that is rarely available due to common student–teacher ratios.

The only way I could reduce the 1 to 30 ratio in my classroom was to increase the number of reading teachers. In a middle school where parent involvement is minimal and paraprofessionals are already stretched beyond effectiveness, I turned to my most plentiful resource, my students. I became determined to take advantage of their social nature and burgeoning independence to meet their collectively diverse needs. I knew I couldn't have 30 reading specialists for my 30 students, but I could have 30 reading coaches for my 30 students. I decided to train these active, thoughtful, socially motivated children to listen, question, prompt, confirm, explore, and reflect on their reading and the reading of their peers. The results of having 30 reading coaches in my classroom have been as dramatic as those I documented during my experience in the one-on-one setting and as diverse as the students themselves.

While each reading group provides a unique dynamic (with various leaders, listeners, and those who need encouragement), all students develop a more keen desire to gather meaning from text. This desire becomes clear to me by the overall increase in self-corrections; questioning (of their peers, me, and the text); rereading; and, at times, passionate discussion of the story that occurs in my classroom. After implementing the reading coaches program, my students seek me out during silent and interactive reading times to get advice on the proper phrasing of a difficult sentence, the pronunciation of a difficult word, or

the interpretation of a complex idea. I am thus relieved because I no longer have to employ crude methods of accountability such as quizzes and reports; I know that my students are reading because of the nature of the questions and ideas they share with their peers and me from the text.

## Adolescence and the zone of proximal development

As a teacher, I give myself the simple reminder that it is my job to bridge the gap between what my students know and what they need to know to be successful. Vygotsky (1934/1978) had a term for this gap. He called it the zone of proximal development. The zone is the difference between a child's current skill level and the skill level that he or she can achieve when guided by someone more skilled. It is common to think that within the realm of Vygotsky's theory the teacher is the most likely candidate to be the "more skilled someone." If this were completely true, then teachers would find themselves haphazardly trying to bridge the learning gap for a plethora of students whose abilities are as different as their faces. However, education has evolved to include the notion that a student's peers are a hearty source of more skilled someones. As a sometimes frazzled teacher, I am consoled by the notion that students are able to scaffold (Pressley, 1998) and thereby increase one another's skill level. This idea lies at the core of my reading coaches program.

I should also mention that within the sphere of reading comprehension a single student might be more skilled in one behavior and less skilled in another. It is the lively interaction of these varying abilities in the small-group setting that allows students to be the more skilled someone at different times. I make use of this complex interaction to create reading coaches from students who read. For example, within the reading group I highlight in this article, three out of the five students have learning disabilities. I still consider this to be heterogeneous grouping because each of these students has a uniquely potent

strength in one or more behaviors involved in reading. (All names are pseudonyms.) Jay, who has the lowest reading level of the group when tested, has an incredible ability to understand and analyze text when he has someone else read out loud for him. Kellen, a resource student as well, reads quite beautifully aloud but has difficulty remembering events, directions, or ideas in a sequence. Other students in this group offer strengths such as being able to connect stories to real life, reading with theatrical enthusiasm, and facilitating discussion based on text.

If you work with the middle school age group, you probably know that these students have many characteristics that naturally support interactive reading. When prepared with modeling, specific instructions, and boundaries, upper elementary and middle school students can thrive on using their growing skills, social drive, and independence to manage a situation and effectively achieve a desired goal (such as improving reading skill). One characteristic distinguishing these students from those in lower grades is a clear sense of self-consciousness and a strong wish to be looked upon favorably by peers. I've noticed that my students not only concentrate harder to impress their peers with fluent reading but also attend to their miscues and self-correct often. I believe they are aware that their peers are paying attention to their performance (and will correct any meaning-changing mistake that isn't corrected by the reader). After all, if no one is paying attention (including the reader), why bother with accuracy and fluency?

Furthermore, we must acknowledge that middle school children are undeniably social; they love to talk, to share ideas, and to debate. A simple way to take advantage of this is to direct their social activity toward a valuable skill. Atwell (1987) stated that teaching adolescents requires us to allow "more independent activity, more say in what happens in the classroom, and more responsibility for their own learning" (p. 26). Training students to be reading coaches addresses Atwell's recommendation. It also promotes the

growth of each child's zone of proximal development by providing exposure to all kinds of "more skilled" individuals. Finally, coaching allows students to work using developmentally practical behaviors: being in charge, helping others, being looked upon as successful and confident, talking, sharing, and debating ideas.

## Reading intervention model overview

During my coursework to become a reading specialist, I noticed that the two intervention models I studied, Reading Recovery (Pinnell, 2000) and the one we used as part of the Cal Reads Program, had commonalities that I could modify to work in my classroom. (Cal Reads was a grant-funded program that united reading specialists from the University of California, Berkeley, with teachers who wanted to become reading specialists in the Tahoe Truckee Unified School District. The program lasted from 2001 to 2003 and was directed by Rick McCallum.) In essence, many, but not all, of the elements of intervention instruction are captured in the reading coaches program.

Reading intervention is necessarily intense because most students in such a program are performing significantly below grade level. Ideally, the instruction occurs regularly in a one-on-one setting for an hour each school day and for at least six weeks. Students and their instructors follow a lesson-plan format that works at the student's instructional reading level and incorporates word work, rereading, guided reading, comprehension activities, and a connection to writing. (The intervention lesson plans that we used for primary-level readers may contain slightly more structured activities than those for middle school readers.) In addition, one or more specific strategies may be taught to the student with the goal being that these strategies take advantage of the student's unique strengths and then allow him or her to increase in reading skill and ability using them.

While integrating some aspects of the intervention lesson plan, the reading coaches design rests on the more subtle qualities of reading intervention. One of the most difficult skills I had to learn was the art of inspiring children to use their own natural instincts as readers to access meaning in text using different strategies. Of course, I could specifically demonstrate the strategy, but in order for the child to learn it I would have to prompt the child into using the strategy for it to become an active behavior. Prompting children as they read may sound simple, but the way it is done and the follow through after the prompt are crucial to their independence.

My many interactions with struggling readers have made me realize that students can learn to “read” my reaction to their statements and thus adjust their answer to get the desired reaction from me. While doing guided reading with a large group, I often witness this behavior. I ask a question and the students respond. Sometimes their answers surprise me because they are not responding in the way that I expected. My face reveals this surprise, and my students begin to revise their answers. Unfortunately, they are not revising on the basis of text; rather, they are changing their ideas on the basis of their desire to get a positive and affirming reaction from me. Without wanting to, teachers like me allow their reactions to focus on the right or wrong answer, which diminishes thinking and autonomy. My students need to know how to examine their *own* reading and thinking, revise both when necessary, and access the tools that can aid understanding without relying on my help. Avoiding the act of reading the teacher and getting the “right” answer is at the core of my intervention-based program.

Fundamentally, reading intervention instruction seeks to create successful readers and thinkers who can function independently, without the teacher’s presence or assistance. Without the teacher as their guide, my student reading coaches are forced to think independently, revise their ideas, acknowledge the ideas of others, use

specific strategies, and seek tools to support understanding when necessary.

## The reading coaches model

In addition to including many aspects of the reading intervention lesson plan (strategy focus, word work, rereading, comprehension activities, and writing), creating reading coaches relies on behaviors that are often already in use in cooperative learning environments. Many of the essential elements of the reading coaches model are applicable to a host of other instructional practices that aim to create a self-motivated, responsible, and respectful learning community. A rapport among my class members is built upon several key attitudes about learning.

Primarily, we understand that mistakes are not black marks on our reputations. Rather, they are based on logical thought processes and can be a great source of learning for all who are attentive to them. Furthermore, we recognize that all individuals have unique strengths and weaknesses, many of which do not always show outwardly in the classroom. Thus, the students in my classroom learn to judge one another not on the basis of skill achievement but on each one’s desire to learn in a way that is respectful and enjoyable.

I also allow my students to have their own unique goals in the coaching experience. I do this because I want each of them to be successful in some way. For example, some are working on word identification, others are working on fluency, a few are focusing on tracking, and many are working on getting their thoughts about the text out in the open.

Finally, I try to make a variety of purposes for becoming a metacognitive reader evident to my class. My students recognize the importance of the activities that I am asking them to engage in more readily when they know the relevance of these tasks to their lives.

I begin to develop rapport on the first day of school by letting my students know that it’s all

right to make mistakes. I do this by sharing with them some of the mistakes I have made that day, such as forgetting to put name tags on the desks or leaving my lunch at home. I don't stop there; rather, I explain the logic behind my mistakes, such as putting the tags where I couldn't see them or waking up late and rushing. And, of course, I briefly mention or allow the students to tell me ways of learning from my mistakes to prevent my making them again. This dialogue only takes seconds, can occur regularly, and illustrates an important point to my students. As the year progresses, I tell them to listen for mistakes that I make while reading aloud. They are quick to point out my miscues, and when appropriate we discuss what I must have been thinking in order to make that mistake.

It is important that my students observe me making mistakes and learning from them for several reasons. First, they can see the teacher as a learner rather than an omnipotent stick-in-the-mud. Second, they can recognize the logical nature of miscues in reading and then begin to strategize on how to avoid mistakes. Third, their observation naturally prompts our dialogue of the complex process of reading, which I am able to develop further as I teach students to be reading coaches. As Pressley (1998) pointed out, "Failures occur. [The teacher should] encourage students to interpret failures as a natural part of learning [and] discourage students from believing failures reflect low ability" (p. 255).

With respect to the unique abilities of my students and their equally unique goals for the reading coaches experience, I spend some time at the beginning of the year highlighting uniquely talented individuals whose skills may or may not have been evident in the classroom setting. We watch the movie *Rudy* (Anspaugh, 1993) to highlight the notion of goal setting and perseverance. We talk about Albert Einstein and many other famous people who struggled in school but were very successful later in life. We discuss multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) and do inventories to find our individual strengths. Most important,

I take brief moments to bring attention to students using all kinds of strengths. I let them know that their grades are individually referenced, releasing many from the strain of unreasonable expectations while challenging those with greater skills to grow to their full potential.

Ultimately, I inspire my community of learners by developing a deep sense of purpose in education and in reading specifically. "When children internalize a variety of personal goals for literacy activity, such as involvement, curiosity, social interchange and self-efficacy, they become self-determining" (Guthrie, 1996, p. 433). By acknowledging children's goals and aspirations regularly, I demonstrate how academic skills such as reading can make those goals more easily attainable. No matter what students want to be—doctors, engineers, teachers, musicians, dancers, accountants, or clerks—I tell them that they will at some point need to read a lot but that good readers make decisions while reading, which makes this process easier. My students and I also repeatedly brainstorm other reasons for reading. We gather ideas such as learning to become a better bike rider, mentally escaping to another place, or learning about people who are different from or similar to ourselves.

Creating a community of learners is a vital component of my pedagogy because I hope to create vibrant, reflective, lifelong learners. Although creation of this kind of learning environment is perhaps more dynamic than has been stated here, the path to its existence involves accepting mistakes as a potent learning force, appreciating individual skills and abilities, and defining a purpose for one's efforts.

## Creating coaches

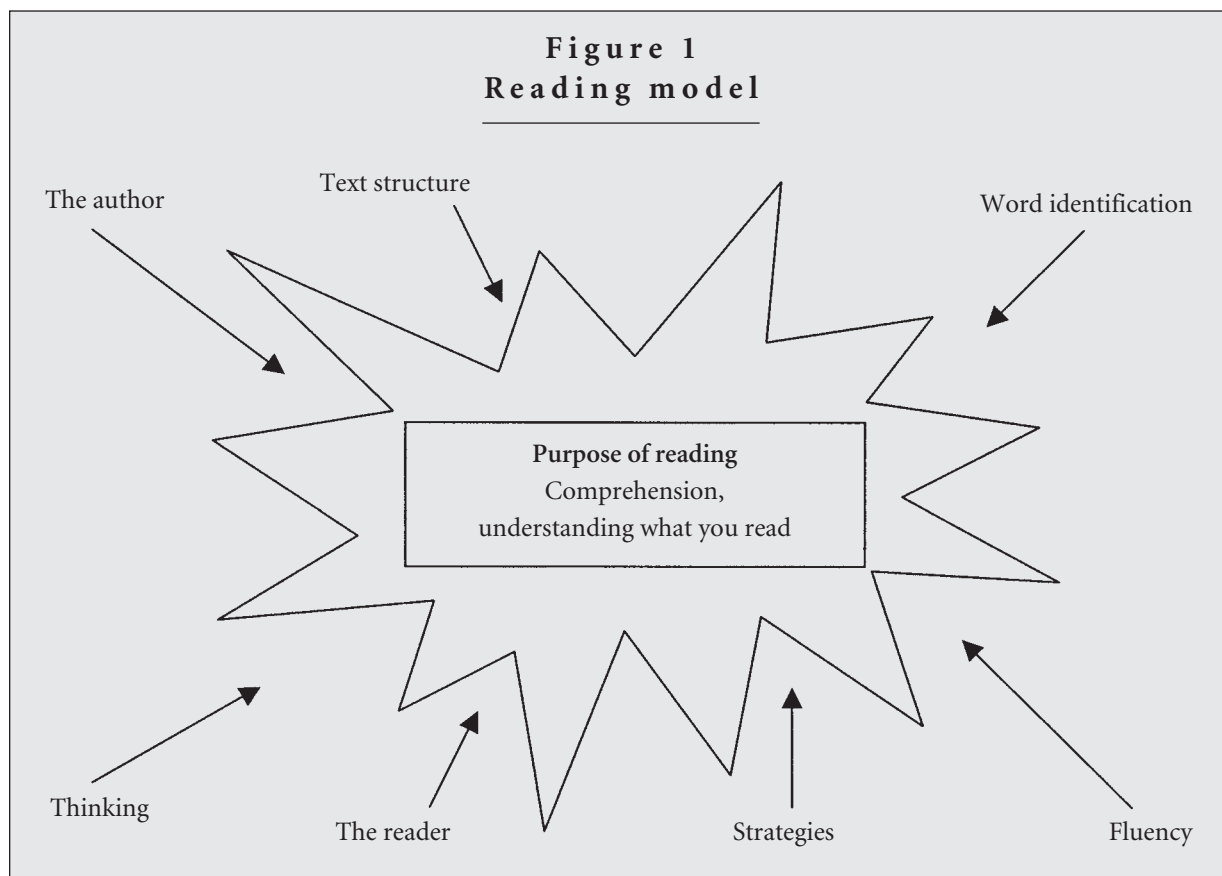
In much the same way that I became a reading specialist, my students become reading coaches: They participate in formal and informal training. On the first day of school, I make my case for the presence of thinking in reading. I tell students that there are far fewer boring books if you think

while you read. (I know this because at age 12 I could fake reading very easily and found most books boring. I later realized that if I thought about and interacted with the text, books were much more exciting than any part of my real life.) I spend a few weeks or more modeling my thought processes as a reader. I acknowledge my miscues; discuss sentences that were hard to articulate fluently; make and reflect on my predictions; and mention the thoughts I have while interacting with the text, including what I pay attention to while reading and what I don't worry about. I do this in short spurts during read-alouds, guided reading, text introduction, activity instructions, and at just about any time I read something to the class. This informal training allows my students to begin to see the metacognitive processes in reading and the decisions readers can make to accomplish their goals.

Formal training of coaches begins when I feel comfortable with the learning environment

in the classroom, usually after 8 or 10 weeks. Once I train the students we can use the idea of coaching for the rest of the year with various texts. This specific preparation takes about a week to complete using a series of minilessons that take about half an hour each.

The first lesson involves making a visual model of the reading process. On this visual illustration the students then add their own personal characteristics or knowledge. (See Figure 1.) In the second lesson, I teach the students specifically about word identification. I show them how to write a miscue (miscue over text) and then how to analyze it to discover what logic the reader was using that would cause the miscue. The students eagerly participate in this part of the training in which I read a short story out loud and they catch and write down the miscues I make. In the third minilesson, I teach the students the basic ideas of fluency and comprehension.



To address fluency I talk about rate, accuracy, and attention to punctuation. I model different levels of fluency. Most important, I acknowledge that an individual's fluency can fluctuate depending on the text, attentiveness, or energy level. (I remind students of the times when their sleepy-eyed teacher was unable to read with her regular expression, enthusiasm, and fluency.) When I discuss comprehension, I use open-ended questioning to elicit the understanding that comprehension is a primary goal in reading and that it is accomplished by thinking. I then give examples of thinking prompts and questions that ask a reader to justify or modify his or her thinking, depending on the text. The final lesson involves teaching the format of a formal reading coaches meeting and allowing the students to practice in the "fishbowl" (one group performs while the other students watch and give tips or compliments).

## Format for formal meetings

In my classroom, the reading coaches interact in heterogeneous groups and come together by a mutual desire to read a given text. As I choose the groups, using the students' text preferences, I am conscious of and do acknowledge the more prevalent learning needs of some students by placing them in more easily accessible text. I also realize that the goals of the reading coaches may be slightly different for each student in the group depending on his or her abilities. For example, my hope for most of my students is an increase in fluency and comprehension; however, with a few students I am aiming for only an increase in comprehension or simply an increase in interaction with text.

The formal group meetings involve different activities aimed at improving skills in word identification, fluency, and comprehension. I keep these meetings quite structured so that my students are able to consistently practice their thinking and verbalization of text interaction. The students meet formally once or twice per week, and meetings take between 35 and 45 minutes.

The first activity aims to address comprehension; students make predictions or revise previous predictions based on information gained in the story. They write these ideas down briefly and share them with their group. After this short warm-up, the students select the three readers who will be reading out loud during the meeting. (Sometimes I have the students sign up ahead of time to read at a given meeting so that I can scaffold this experience by prereading it with a student who is struggling.)

The main part of the meeting is a read-aloud. While the first reader reads for five or seven minutes (I use a timer) the students listen and follow along in the text. If the reader miscues, there is a brief discussion if necessary. The first thing the group can ask is "Did it change the meaning?" If the answer is no, the reader rereads correctly and moves on quickly. If the answer is yes, the students can write it down (I ask that they write down at least one of their miscues), swiftly determine the cause of the miscue, reread, and move on.

After the reader has read for the given amount of time, the students pause for discussion. They first take a minute or two to talk about the reader's attention to punctuation. Readers score themselves on a scale of 1 to 3 (1 = "needs work"; 2 = "OK, with room for improvement"; 3 = "expressive and clear, ready for Broadway"). I tell the students that most of us, including me, are going to be working at a 1 or a 2.

Next, the students discuss the content of the text that was just read using open-ended prompt cards. One student, the "coach," is in charge of asking the questions at each meeting. The coach begins by asking a question from the blue cards. The blue cards contain initial prompts that a reading specialist would use to unobtrusively access the readers' thoughts ("What is your opinion of the story right now?" "Did you picture anything in your head?" "What do you think will happen next?" "Did you learn anything new about one of the characters?"). To probe deeper into the thoughts of the group, the coach can ask

the members questions from green cards, which force the reader to justify his or her thinking (“What supports your idea?” “Why might that be important to the story?” “What made you decide that?”). I do not regulate the format of this conversation, but gradually the thinking comes out as the students develop their own method of questioning one another fairly.

The reading out loud and the comprehension discussion are repeated for each of the readers and concluded by a conversation that aims to create students who confirm or revise their thoughts based on the text. The coach asks questions on yellow cards, such as “Was your prediction correct?” “Did your opinion change?” “Did any of the events in the story surprise you?” The students then respond for about three or four minutes.

The final part of the formal meeting is completed independently. The students go quietly to their desks and reread the section that they read with the group. I ask them to concentrate on the strategy focus for the week, for example making sure to visualize events in the story. At last, the students write a concise reflection that I call “Two Stars and a Wish” (The High Success Network, 1993). The stars are written about what went well in the formal meeting, and the wishes are for things that could be improved. I collect these reflections, read them, and do a short minilesson using students’ thoughts to improve the next formal meeting. These short reflection pieces are invaluable to me as they allow me to respond immediately to students’ experiences in this group dynamic. Comments such as the following ones give me a picture of how the group reading is going so that I can either troubleshoot a problem or reinforce a reading-related skill.

Star: I like getting to talk about the story right away. It makes me feel like I get it.

Star: I like listening to Nick read. His voice brings the story to life.

Wish: I wish this story didn’t have so many hard words.

Wish: I wish Jay would stop goofing around.

With these notes in hand, I can, for example, emphasize the way that conversation can support understanding. I could ask the students to tell me how a person’s voice can give life to a story (this conversation can easily lead to a discussion of fluency). Or I might take a moment to brainstorm with my students on how to deal with difficult words or a goofy group member. The beauty of teaching students to become reading coaches in the formal meeting is that they become so attentive to the reading process that they can’t help but coach one another and me at other times. After the coaching experience, my students rarely let one of my miscues (in anything from instructions to sample essays) go unnoticed. The conversations that result from this attentiveness are remarkable. While previewing one story, I said “a dog” instead of “the dog.” A couple of students drew my attention to the error. Just as they did so, a couple of others began to protest, saying that the miscue should be ignored because it didn’t change the meaning. Without major pandemonium, a polite student spoke up and said, “Well, it kind of does change the meaning because, if you think about it, ‘the dog’ means it’s just a special dog. But, if you say ‘a dog’ it sounds like any old dog.” The key here is that the students are *thinking* about how the miscue could affect the understanding of the text. Thinking is at the core of reading; thus, I feel strongly about teaching this intangible behavior. When students are engaged as coaches in deciphering text, they think actively about their thinking (metacognition) and learn to *interact* with text. It is this thinking that cultivates their independence as learners.

## The richness of reading coaches

What I enjoy the most about reading coaches are the times when I merely sit down with a group and watch the students run the show. (When I join a group, I insist that they act like I am not there.) I simply observe my students read, self-correct, help one another address challenging

words, question, argue, and explore the book that they are reading. While evidence of student growth manifests significantly in test scores, my colleagues and I agree that the richness of reading coaches lies in the interactions, conversations, and reciprocal support that my students give to one another. While preparing to write this article, I watched several reading coaches sessions that I had videotaped. The potentially monotonous task of transcribing the video was surprisingly fun. All of the students were videotaped in a room without a teacher present. (Imagine for a moment, 5 sixth graders alone in a room with a camera.) Rather than a chaotic frenzy of freedom, the camera caught the beauty and spirit of young people trying to help one another with the amazing process of reading. As the excerpts illustrate, the students were attending to text, working to improve fluency, and wrestling with ideas in order to make meaning.

## Meet the students

Nick's creativity often surpasses his skill level. He is quite self-conscious about his sometimes "choppy" reading. I guided him toward a lower reading-level text so that he could use his theatrics to bring life to the story without being overwhelmed by difficult phrasing or vocabulary. Many of the reflections by his group mates include comments that it is fun to listen to Nick read. Jan is a student of average ability who tends to disengage in the whole-class setting. She is much more vocal in her reading coaches group. In this interaction she provides more details and ideas than I have ever witnessed during whole-class discussion. Jay, a student with learning disabilities, has a strong ability to summarize information and often jumps (literally) to answer recall questions. Kellen has learning disabilities as well and is keenly aware of her difficulty in remembering information or events in a sequence. She listens intently to the comments of her group mates during instruction. Finally, there is Marc, who consistently scores at the first-grade level in word identification but is quite a sophisticated

thinker. Although he does not read aloud in front of the group, his mature thinking often guides the conversation.

The following transcription demonstrates how each of the students can use his or her strengths to improve the group reading experience while engaging in a forum to improve areas of weakness. (Only the significant reading events are recorded here.)

After a brief warm-up activity (writing predictions) and reading one page without a miscue, Nick reads the following text (quotes in italics are from Beurskens, 2001, pp. 30–31):

Text: *She pulled out some dried yarrow from her pack. It grew in the mountains and her grandpa had shown her how to dry it and use it to help wounds stop bleeding.*

"She pulled out some dried...y[*pause*]...."[Marc jumps in, "Yarrow."]

Nick says, "Yarrow, what's yarrow?"

Marc responds, "A plant or something, dude. Keep reading, find out."

Nick continues reading the part where the text reveals more information about yarrow. He does not miscue until the following text appears.

Text: *She decided to continue hiking. What if I see Jennifer?*

Nick reads, "She decided to continue hiking. Was she...?"

Kellen and Jay look up and say "Beep." Jan and Mark look up.

Kellen continues, "It'll change the meaning."

Nick quickly rereads, without further discussion, "What if I see Jennifer?" and then continues on until the next interaction.

Text: *She hoped Jennifer had already gone ahead. She went much slower this time.*

Nick reads, "She hopped..."[Kellen makes a *pssst* sound.] Nick then reads, "She hoped Jennifer had already gone ahead. She went m...u...ch slower.... She went much slower this time" [reread for fluency].

Text: *"I'm not going to let Jennifer decide where I am going." She spoke out loud.*

Later in the text above, Nick brings meaning to it by enunciating character voice: "'I'm...[changes voice to sound like female character] I'm not going to let Jennifer decide where I am going.' She spoke out loud" [said in a more flat narrator's voice].

The discussion based on Nick's minor miscues is thrilling because it shows that the students are thinking and using strategies (such as reading on) to make sense of the text and the world (learning about yarrow). Nick is gently corrected by his peers and self-corrects to make sure that the text makes sense. He is also attempting to enunciate words to add meaning to the story by both rereading the statement with emphasis on a meaningful word, *much*, and by changing the pitch of his voice to bring a character to life.

The following discussion was based on the section of text that Nick had read.

Coach (Nick is the coach at this meeting and is using prompt cards to guide the discussion): "Jan, what do you think will happen next?"

Jan offers a detailed explanation: "Gabby is ticked at Jennifer. Feelin' left out, you know. So they're gonna go their separate ways, and something bad is going to happen. They're going to fall on the causeway. Jennifer doesn't know where she's going, and Jennifer and Gabby are going to get lost."

Coach (Nick): "What happened in the book that supports your idea?"

Jan: "Because in the chapter before chapter 5 it says 'trapped in the white wasteland.'" [Students look back into text (Beurskens, 2001, p. 22) for Jan's reference.] "And the next chapter is called 'A Cry for Help' [p. 29], and that kinda supports my idea because a cry for help can mean that you are hurt or lost."

In this dialogue, Jan is making predictions that will aid comprehension. The other group members refer back to the text to justify her predictions. This process highlights that meaning is contained in the text and how ideas can be formulated and revised based on the text. Jan is also engaging in a behavior that will be valuable throughout her life, that of referring to specific passages in text to develop and explain her thinking as well as sharing her ideas with others.

As the discussion continues, other students get involved.

Coach (Nick): "Jay, my friend, what did we just learn about the story?"

Kellen, aware of Jay's talent for summarizing, leans in to hear what he has to say. She hopes his comments will help her understand the story better.

Jay responds, "Well, everything was following as she [Jennifer] planned. Jennifer was following to the left while she [the other main character] was going to the right. And now the storm is coming in and she is trying to get there."

Coach (Nick): "What made you decide that?"

Jay: "'Cause it said it in the story, man."

Coach (Nick): [Looks for a more appropriate question card] "Can you make a new prediction based on what just happened in the story?"

Jay: "My prediction is that she is going to eat her snacks and go on more. Or that she is going to run into Jennifer."

Kellen: "And don't forget about the hill...they're going to have to go up the hill to run into each other."

Jay: "Oh yeah, they'll probably spend a whole chapter going up the hill."

Jan [cutting in on Jay's comment]: "No they won't. The girls are going to get hurt or lost soon. You can tell by the name of the chapter!"

Without formal knowledge of foreshadowing, the students are building on one another's knowledge of story structure and of this story to recognize the author's upcoming intensions of doom. Nick is craftily facilitating the conversations as the coach. Kellen is jumping into the conversation after getting a little scaffolding from other group members and is gaining respect and responsibility as she reminds Nick to refocus when he becomes overly theatrical. Jan is feeling safe enough to articulate her thoughts in front of a group (albeit a small group). And Jay is gaining the esteem of his classmates by providing a detailed synopsis of events in the story. While building on his own strengths, he is scaffolding others in understanding the text.

After two more students read, they all respond to Nick's final question ("What is your opinion of the story right now?") and a lively discussion ensues. Jan replies that the story is "a little dull," and Marc adds that it is "predictable." Then

without prompting they have an interesting discussion of how to improve the story. Jay suggests, “They should add more exciting things...having one of the girls break a leg so they needed a helicopter.” Nick responds, “Yeah, like a big caboosh, or blood or something.” The group laughs.

During the formal reflection, the writing of Two Stars and a Wish, the students decide that they want to share what they’ve written out loud. As they make the transition to sharing, Jay looks up and says, “I don’t think that we should have a wish. I think that everything went really well.” Others in the group nod an enthusiastic yes, but Jan holds her paper to her chest with a secretive look of disagreement. Marco then takes this time to let the group know how he feels, “My stars are that everyone shared and everyone got to talk. My wish is that Nick wouldn’t goof around.” The others gasp at his honesty, and Jan nods in agreement. As a teacher, I am bemused by this exchange. (After watching the video of this group several times, I might call Nick’s behavior dramatic but certainly not disruptive. It seems the students are much more serious about behavior than I am.) I am glad, however, that they are all reflecting on and articulating their opinions on the behavior of group members in a safe and honest way.

After Nick gives a hearty laugh in self-defense, Jay details his stars. “I think everyone read good, answered questions good, and Nick asked ’em good.” Jan then jumps in, “I think if everyone works on their reading, not to be rude or anything, but if all of us work on our reading, the book might be a little more exciting.” Nick waves hands in agreement, and she continues, “And if people are a little more serious about it—” Nick interrupts, “a little more voice, emotion,” and Jan continues, “Yeah, maybe get into the book a little more and...my wish is that everyone do good again the next time ’cause I think everyone respected each other.” Without the guidance of a teacher these students are discussing fluency, chatting about the meaning of text, suggesting things that make a good book, reflecting on the group experience, and sharing their feelings. This

reading opportunity not only makes them better readers but also makes them better communicators, friends, teammates, and peers.

## Reflections on my experiment

During the initial phases of this little teaching experiment, questions of doubt riddled my mind. I wondered about the students’ fragile self-image and delicate peer relationships, and I hoped that they would not be scared by revealing individual skills and abilities. I worried about miscue interruptions taking away from the story and that shallow discussions would prove meaningless. I thought that maybe being reading coaches would put too many cognitive demands on my precious pupils. Nevertheless, in the spirit of learning, I tested my idea anyway. The results, while informal in documentation, were nonetheless stunning.

I measured the success of the program in many ways. I have taken running records and done a QRI (the 1995 Qualitative Reading Inventory–II) on my students before and after the reading coaches experience. All of the students who were tested were able to attain a higher instruction-level QRI score. The students highlighted in the transcription increased their instruction reading level on the QRI by a range of 1 to 3 levels, with an eight-month gap between pre- and posttests. I attribute their performance to an increase in accuracy and self-corrections inspired by the students’ more profound desire to attend to text and monitor their reading. The students seemed to be no longer satisfied to read statements that didn’t make sense. Thus, they made the effort to clarify meaning.

As I mentioned earlier, I assess my students primarily by listening to them read and discuss and by looking at their reflective notes. Here are some of their reflections:

“I wish we could keep reading because we are at a really interesting part right now.”

“We hardly needed the cards because we had such good discussions.”

“Everybody tried to help the reader with hard words.”

“Everyone was focusing on reading fluently and paying attention to punctuation.”

“We had fun reading!”

When I read these comments, I get goose bumps because I am so amazed by the students' ability to learn from one another and reflect on that process. Without further analysis, I'll conclude by letting the statements from the students linger in your mind, for they illustrate what learners need to be—responsible, self-directed, attentive, enthusiastic, and having fun.

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