

A Cross Grade Learner Conversation

Linda Kaser & Judy Halbert

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***Overview:** Professionals can talk about students and their learning, but using evidence to improve learning is most powerful when those conversations take place among the students themselves. In this chapter, Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert describe how criteria developed with students for improving their reading can lead to meaningful evidence-informed conversations among the students themselves. Through participating in a networked learning community in British Columbia, Canada, teachers developed sufficient understanding of the principles of assessment as learning to be able to implement them in their classrooms.*

Is there any evidence that the use of clear criteria is having an impact on learning?

Pairs of small heads are busy poring over books and criteria sheets in Debbie K's Grade One classroom in Treeview Elementary¹ in British Columbia on a Friday afternoon in mid May. One of these pairs includes Craig, a Grade One reader and Elizabeth, his Grade Four reading partner. Craig and Elizabeth are part of a buddy reading program linking older and younger learners. For the past eight months, the learning partners have been working together weekly. Let's hear how their conversation starts:

Elizabeth: Hmm, what was our job today? Oh yeah, we were looking at reading goals. I think we should say the George book is finished, what do you think? We'll read Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Then you can write about what we talk about when you write in your response journal. I'd like that if someone helped me with my response journal.

Craig: I want to read Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. My goal was to read to find the important ideas and words.

Elizabeth: That's my goal, too. Do you want to be A partner or B partner?

Craig: Which person records first? A or B?

Elizabeth: That's up to us. Do you have a highlighter? Can I use it? I need my sheet. Do you see my duotang?

Craig: Are you looking for the criteria sheet? It's under the George book.

Elizabeth: Yes, that's it. I need the criteria sheet. Here – let's look. Jessica, are you using a performance standard sheet – today we are supposed to only be using the criteria sheet. I'm going to be A and write everything down today. You'll be B and do the reading.

Craig: I'm supposed to be telling you my criteria that I am using to tell if my reading is getting better. Do you want me to tell you now?

Elizabeth: You tell me and I'll circle it on the criteria sheet or write it down. I'll need to know what I am looking for. Go ahead.

Craig: I'm reading to find the important ideas and words. I want you to notice when I stop reading and talk about the ideas. That would show you that I think it is an important idea. Can I use some sticky notes? I might not want to stop reading, but I may want to use a sticky note so I remember. I like the skinny blue sticky notes, do you have some? Should I get some? Who has the sticky notes? I want to use sticky notes today.

Elizabeth: I've got some sticky notes. You'll have lots. You don't need to get so excited about the sticky notes. I think that as you read, I'll fill in the criteria sheet with what I notice that you are doing. Then we can talk. Oh, I remember, last time, we were talking about you stopping, chunking the story and then telling me the main idea. Let's get going. I really like Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, too.

Craig: At the end of the story, I want to tell you the main idea. How will I know if you know the main idea? Maybe you won't know my main idea. Your main idea might be different from mine.

Reformers and policy-makers often have large ambitions for whole system reform. The success or failure of all reform efforts, however, must be measured by the positive impact the reforms have on individual learners – in classrooms and in schools. Thompson and Wiliam (2007) argue:

Learning – at least the learning that is the focus of the formal educational enterprise – does not take place in schools. It takes place in classrooms, as a result of the daily, minute-to-minute interactions that take place

between teachers and students and the subjects they study. So it seems logical that if we are going to improve the outcome of the educational enterprise – that is, improve learning – we have to intervene directly in this “black box” of daily classroom instruction. (p. 1)

Timperley and Earl (2007) point out in the opening chapter to this book that “significant change in schooling depends on the creation of new knowledge for the adults who are making the decisions.” They argue that important aspects of new knowledge creation by teachers include developing an inquiry mindset and engaging in regular, focused, evidence-based conversations with colleagues. When inquiry mindedness and evidence seeking are routinely cultivated, we believe the changes teachers make in classroom practice are much more likely to have a positive impact on learners and their learning. In the spirit of inquiry mindedness and evidence seeking, what can we learn from listening in on the conversation of two young readers?

Our interest in Craig and Elizabeth’s conversation focuses on whether the use of clear criteria for reading improvement in sustained cross-grade reading partnerships provides any evidence of greater learner agency and self-regulation. What, through this small case study, can we learn about how larger scale reforms look and sound at the level of the individual learner? Does the use of evidence and clear criteria by teachers lead to deeper understanding and application of criteria by young learners? Does this lead to greater self-regulation and agency as readers? Is there any evidence in this conversation that intervening in the black box of instruction through inquiry and evidence-based conversations among adults leads to stronger learning for individual learners?

The Context

The setting for this conversation is in a small, semi-rural elementary (K-7) school in central British Columbia. Learners attending this school come from primarily low to middle income families. Many of the learners live in a trailer court adjacent to the school and many of their parents struggled themselves with their school experience. The 22 learners in the Grade One class and the 28 learners in the Grade Four / Five class bring diverse needs and gifts to their school experience.

Treeview Elementary is one of 250 schools in the province that participate in a networked learning community involved in action research for school improvement using formative assessment as a key improvement strategy. Beginning with inquiry is a fundamental aspect of the Network of Performance Based Schools (NPBS). Participants share a belief that an inquiry mindset helps build capacity in the school for lasting improvement and that a spirit of inquiry rather than the adoption of a specific program encourages teacher curiosity and sense of agency and increases commitment for learners of all ages. The focus for the inquiry at this school is on developing greater learner confidence through cross-grade peer coaching using shared criteria for reading comprehension. In partnership with Colleen an intermediate colleague, and with the support of her principal, Debbie has developed a peer-reading program using the older learners not simply as reading buddies; she and Colleen have worked together to develop the older students as co-faculty, who work in a focused way with their younger learning partners in weekly one-to-one reading periods.

Debbie's school has access to quality classroom criteria in reading that were developed and field tested over a number of years by hundreds of classroom teachers. These criteria, available for teacher and school use on a voluntary basis across the province, are called the BC performance standards. They help to answer the question, "How good is good enough?" and describe and illustrate four levels of student performance in key aspects of reading at each grade level. They also contain sample tasks and samples of student work at each of the four levels. Debbie has been using the primary performance standards for the past few years in planning and adapting her instruction. Her Grade Four colleague, Colleen, has been using the intermediate criteria on an ongoing basis with her older learners. The performance standards for reading literature provide the basis for goal setting, feedback, and planning among the cross grade teams of learners.¹

The Cross Grade Reading Process

In the fall, Debbie's work with the Grade Four / Five learners began by introducing them to the "quick scale" expectations for fully meeting with reading success

¹ The BC Performance standards are available at http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/perf_stands/

for Grade One learners through a set of ten lessons, each 30 minutes in length in which they explored questions like: “Who taught you to read?” “What kind of strategies do you use when you read?” Their discussions led to a shared understanding that most early readers feel that they learn to read by working one-to-one with someone close to them, an exploration of reading strategies, a detailed examination of the performance standards and approaches for working with the younger students to enhance reading fluency and comprehension.

The “beyond buddy reading” program had its initial cross- grade session in October. Each session took place once a week, on a Friday afternoon for a 20-30 minute time period.

Reading Purposes

As the year progressed Debbie led a discussion with her younger learners about why they were learning to read. This question led to some highly individualized responses:

Jessica said she wanted to read to her babies when she put them to bed at night. Brody wanted to be able to read about the hockey teams in the paper with his dad in the morning. He didn't want his dad to have to read aloud to him. Travis just wants to read all the time. He says there are too many books and he has to get started right now. Craig has a younger brother – he wants to be able to read to him every day from chapter books so that he will have a life “in his head” while Craig is at school. Chantel has a moderately mentally handicapped brother – and says it is the most important thing to her parents that she learns to read. It truly makes them proud when she reads to them. She knows instinctively that this is a measure they use to assure themselves that she is okay. Brianna hates fishing and loves to read while the family is in the boat – and she says the day just flies by if she has books with her. Trinity says she doesn't have to do any chores at home when she is reading a book – so she reads all the time! Trase's dad is away three weeks out of every four – but e-mails the family every day and Trase wants to be able to read for himself what his dad has to say.²

² from email correspondence with classroom teacher

The classroom context created an environment where this variety of purposes could find ready expression. However, the teacher was also interested in developing the ability of her learners to self regulate their reading behavior by setting individual goals. Once this goal-setting process was in place, Debbie then inquired of her learners, “How will I know you are reaching your goals?” This led to an exploration of developing criteria as an evidence-seeking behavior.

Goals, Criteria and Personal Reading Accountability

From February on in her teaching Debbie has encouraged her younger learners to not only set goals but to also think about how they could “prove” to her or an older partner that they had reached their goals. Over a period of a week, the Grade One students identified strategies that they wanted to be able to master. Each student developed their own strategy, and then as a class, seated in a circle, each student said what they wanted to work to improve. This process led to further discussion because some of the students’ goals were strategies in which they were already proficient. They chose goals that were within their comfort zone but not ones that would promote growth. Other students in the class were quick to point out that they had observed that these students were already able to perform these strategies. This then led to a classroom examination of belief systems regarding learning to read. Learners discussed these questions: “Do you take the quick and easy route?” “Do you fine-tune what you can already do?” “Do you take on new challenges?” This discussion led to a whole set of new criteria that was developed for setting a goal:

- A goal must be a new strategy or skill
- My goal belongs to me
- You can have the same goal as long as you want, but when the criteria are met, you must say the criteria have been met and be willing to move on
- You can say you are practicing a learned skill, but you cannot call it a goal

Debbie, reflecting on this discussion and the process of developing the goal criteria, reported:

This whole session actually started me laughing so hard I had to leave the room. It was an incredible conversation between the students. There was a huge range of emotions happening here - indignation, self-righteousness, complacency, “get-out-of-my-face”, and a true

examination of self. Really this is a conversation many adults would have difficulty participating in because you had to be truthful and face yourself.

Having examined the issues and debated how difficult a personal goal should be, the class was able to move back to the discussion of how they could individually prove they were reaching their goal through agreed upon criteria. The class decided to narrow the reading goals down to four:

- I read to find the important ideas.
- I want to be able to talk about the story.
- I think about my reading.
- I want to be able to read at the same speed as I talk.

Using Grade One Thinking to Develop the Older Readers as Coaches

Now that Debbie had clarity regarding the individual and collective goals for her learners, she was ready to communicate her new level of understanding with her teaching colleague. Debbie made a chart listing the four goals the Grade One students had developed. Colleen and Debbie then worked together to assist the Grade Four students with generating criteria for each of the four strategies

Criteria for Grade One Goals	
<p>I read to find important ideas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Stops reading to point out important ideas ○ Writes down or places a sticky note at an important place ○ Can tell you about the story in a few words or sentences ○ Might tell you the Big Idea of the story ○ Discusses what the story is about at the beginning, middle, or end 	<p>I want to be able to talk about the story.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Makes predictions about the story ○ Retells events and talks about the characters ○ Asks questions ○ Makes connections ○ Expresses their feelings or opinions about the book ○ Stops and retells about parts they have read ○ Makes inferences
<p>I think about my reading.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Makes connections ○ Asks “thick” questions – “Why...? I wonder ...” ○ Stops and talks about what they just read ○ Rereads if something does not make 	<p>I want to be able to read at the same speed as I talk.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Good expression in voice ○ Stops (pauses quickly) at punctuation ○ Reading is at a good pace – not too rushed and not too slow

<p>sense</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Gives opinions or expresses feelings about the book ○ Know something about the author's schema ○ May infer or predict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Not reading word by word
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This is the language that the Grade Ones and their intermediate partners are expected to use to discuss their reading skills during the twenty-minute conversation every week. But what *do* they talk about? Let's look further at Craig and Elizabeth's conversation and seek evidence that criteria are a part of the learning process:

The Learner Conversation

The two learners, Craig and Elizabeth, have met close to 30 times during the school year to discuss Craig's reading progress. Generally these conversations are 20 to 25 minutes in length. On this May afternoon a researcher listened to and recorded the partner conversation. The learners appeared unaffected by the presence of an adult listener.

Our analysis of the conversation transcript suggests the following rhythms: 1. getting organized to talk about reading, 2. the younger learner in the lead, 3. older reader takes control 4. mutual enjoyment of the reading and discussion process, 5. confirming the big ideas and 6. setting new goals.

1. **Getting organized to talk about reading.** As the two learners meet, their initial conversations are about what Craig is reading, why he has abandoned a particular author, and making an agreement that they will read and talk about the book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. This leads to a more detailed discussion of how they will proceed:

Craig: I want to read Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. My goal is to read to find the important ideas and words.

Elizabeth: That's my goal, too. Do you want to be A partner or B partner?

Craig: Which person records first? A or B?

Elizabeth: That's up to us. Do you have a highlighter? Can I use it? I need my sheet? Do you see my duotang?

Craig: Are you looking for the criteria sheet? It's under the George book.

Elizabeth: Yes, that's it. I need the criteria sheet. Here – let's look. Jessica, are you using a performance standard sheet – today we are supposed to only be using the criteria sheet. I'm going to be A and write everything down today. You'll be B and do the reading.

Craig: I'm supposed to be telling you my criteria that I am using to tell if my reading is getting better. Do you want me to tell you now?

Elizabeth: You tell me and I'll circle it on the criteria sheet or write it down. I'll need to know what I am looking for. Go ahead.

Craig: I'm reading to find the important ideas and words. I want you to notice when I stop reading and talk about the ideas. That would show you that I think it is an important idea. Can I use some sticky notes? I might not want to stop reading, but I may want to use a sticky note so I remember. I like the skinny blue sticky notes - do you have some? Should I get some? Who has the sticky notes? I want to use sticky notes today.

2. **Younger reader as reading agent: how can I be confident you know enough?** Much of the next part of the conversation has Craig in a lead role. He challenges Elizabeth to demonstrate that she knows enough about the story to assess his thinking about his reading. She is not the least bit affronted and enters into a negotiation with Craig that resolves in shared problem-solving.

Craig: You have different background knowledge. You haven't read the book. I don't know if we should just read the chapter of the book together. You'll have missed lots of the proof that I'm telling you the main idea. I'll have to prove stuff to you.

Elizabeth: I read the book – about two years ago and I saw the movie. How about we try reading the chapter, and if we differ ideas, then you can show me your proof in the book. You should be able to find stuff in the chapters you've already read, shouldn't you? How long have you been reading this book? Will you have forgotten? Think, what could help you and me.

Craig: You should read my response journal first. Then you'll know what I've been thinking about the book.

Elizabeth: Get me your response journal.

Craig: Here – read my response journal.

Elizabeth: Okay – (reads aloud, asks him who the characters are) Okay, I’m ready. You wrote lots about the book – almost a whole nother book! I think I have a better remembering of the book.

3. **Older reader takes charge and sets the scene.** In the next part of their conversation, Elizabeth seizes the conversational initiative and lets Craig know her very clear expectations for his reading. The sticky notes take on a new meaning as a key link in the reading accountability experience.

Elizabeth: Here’s what I’m listening and looking for.

-I want you to stop reading and tell me the important details

-I want you to mark the important ideas with sticky notes

-I want you to tell me the ideas after you finish reading the chapter.

I want to have a discussion with you about the chapter, so don’t forget anything. See my sticky notes! Beware the sticky notes! I have sticky notes and I will be using them. Where’s my pencil? I need my pencil to write on my sticky notes.

After you read that chapter we are going to have a detailed dialogue. Do you know what a dialogue is? You and me and we are both going to be doing the talking. You’ll be A and I’ll be B. You can talk first and I’ll listen until you give me the sign. What’s the sign going to be? I need to know what our sign is going to be – we’ll thumb wrestle – that’s our sign – then it will be my turn to talk and your turn to listen until I thumb wrestle with you. Now, let’s read. Tell me again, what are you reading to practice?

Craig: I’m reading to find the main idea. I’m going to chunk, then talk about the reading. I’m going to tell you the main idea. Okay. [Craig starts reading. Reads in chunks, pauses, marks ideas with comments (this is important because it introduces a new character) or sticky notes.] Are you going to know the important parts?

Elizabeth: It’s okay. I’ll make do.

(Craig reads aloud four pages and uses one sticky note per page.)

4. **Enjoying and discussing the details of the story.** In this part of their conversation, Craig is invited to “dialogue about this chunk of the chapter”. The two readers proceed to discuss various entertaining aspects of the plot and the characters where

they in a relaxed manner, make connections to their own life experiences. A short excerpt illustrates the nature of this part of their conversation.

Craig: Tell me what you think is important. I think getting the two tickets was really important. I think it's foreshadowing. It makes me feel really nervous for Charlie.

Elizabeth: Well, There were five golden tickets and four dreadful children won them. They got to go the Chocolate Factory. And Charlie won a ticket, too, He was a poor kid – poor but good.

Craig: I would like to have a chance to win a ticket. But maybe I would share, too. Maybe Charlie should have it instead of me. He's very poor. I would love to sleep in the same bed as my grandma. I miss my grandpa, and so does my grandma, but I don't want to be that poor. I wonder if anyone shares in this book? (Continues to read)

Elizabeth: Oops – better reread that sentence. It didn't make sense to me. Do you know what stilettos are?

5. **The coach leads a discussion to examine the big ideas.** Elizabeth leads the discussion in the direction of exploring the main idea of the chapter.

Elizabeth: Let's stop okay. Let's try stopping more often and talk more about the main idea. We need to stop and talk.

Craig: Oh. How can he have another chance to get the ticket? Did one of the bad kids share? Did he buy a ticket? Did he find one somewhere? Did he steal it?

Elizabeth: Well, you've made lots of predictions. I don't want to tell you the answer. I want you to find out when you read. So let's talk some more about this chapter. What do you think is going to be the main idea?

Craig: Almost all of the tickets are gone. Should we have hope? Two were found before this chapter.

Elizabeth: I think that there's two main ideas and I think they're connected to the two kids, one who chews gum and one who watches TV. Authors often make the main ideas about the characters and their actions.

Craig: Oh – so I should think about Mike Teevee and Violet Beauregard?

Elizabeth: Probably you should do some thinking about them. Remember, the main characters and their actions.

Craig: I think the main idea is that these kids are not deserving of the tickets. That's what I think the grandparents would be thinking. They would be thinking that Charlie is the only one special enough to get a ticket.

Elizabeth: I totally agree. Okay, let's talk about your reading. What do you want me to know?

6. **Coming to agreement on meeting the criteria and setting a new goal.** As the conversation winds to a close, Elizabeth makes sure that Craig can support how he has met his current goal. Their dialogue then focuses on setting an appropriately challenging new goal.

Craig: I'm ready to make a new goal for next time.

Elizabeth: Oh yeah? How do I know?

Craig: I stopped reading when I wanted to talk about a main idea. And I used my sticky notes. I can tell you about the story. I asked some questions about the story that helped me think. I think I got a really good big idea – the kids are not deserving of the tickets. And I can show you the parts in the book that prove that they are not nice – remember all Mike Teevee's guns? I know all about the story.

Elizabeth: Good for you! I think you did a great job, and I checked off all the criteria boxes. You need to let Mrs. Koehn know that you are ready to move on to a new goal. On Monday, cause when I see Mrs. Koehn on Thursday, she's going to let me know what your new goal is, cause I got to do some thinking about it before Friday. And pick a goal that's already been talked about, okay? So I don't have to think up the criteria – I can borrow it! Anyways, I'll talk to you on Monday – choose from the grade three performance standards – no easy stuff for you!

Craig: I'm doing really good.

Elizabeth: Yup.

Observations and On-going Inquiries

For the past few years, schools in the Network have been focused on understanding and applying ideas and strategies connected to assessment for and as learning. Schools have been provided resources (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2003, *Assessment for Learning, Putting it into Practice*; Earl, 2004, *Assessment AS Learning*; Earl & Katz, 2005, *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind*; Clarke, 2005, *Formative Assessment in Action*) and are expected to try out some

new strategies and be prepared to discuss their findings with colleagues at network meetings.

As we reviewed the transcript of the conversation between Craig and Elizabeth, we asked ourselves the question: “Is there any evidence in the learner conversation to suggest that the emphasis on developing teacher knowledge about assessment for learning through extended classroom-based inquiry is having an impact?” While recognizing that one short conversation between two learners provides a very small view into the learning world of Debbie and Colleen’s classrooms, we think that there are some observations that are reasonable to make. We have organized the thinking about formative assessment into three ‘big ideas’ and adapted the five general key strategies identified by Wiliam into six strategies appropriate to the context of BC schools.

What follows reflects the major ideas and the key strategies the teachers have been thinking about and the evidence we can see from this conversation about the possible impact that teacher inquiry, collaboration and growing knowledge is having on learners.

Big Ideas	Conversation Excerpts / Evidence
<p>1. Metacognition for Learners</p> <p>Learner self coaching through learning self assessment is the goal of deep learning work. Earl (2006)</p>	<p><i>Craig: I’m ready to make a new goal for next time.</i></p> <p><i>Elizabeth: Oh yeah? How do I know?</i></p> <p><i>Craig: I stopped reading when I wanted to talk about a main idea. And I used my sticky notes. I can tell you about the story. I asked some questions about the story that helped me think. I think I got a really good big idea – the kids are not deserving of the tickets. And I can show you the parts in the book that prove that they are not nice – remember all Mike Teevee’s guns? I know all about the story.</i></p>
<p>2. Nimble and Responsive Teaching</p> <p>Teachers need to practice nimble and responsive planning and teaching to make formative assessment and learning a way of life. Wiliam (2006)</p>	<p>To prepare and scaffold for the kind of learning partnership experienced by Elizabeth and Craig, both Debbie and Colleen planned extensively together and adapted their planning as individual learners met their goals. By May, when</p>

	<p>this conversation took place, Debbie was confident enough with the progress of her Grade One learners to involve them in the development of specific criteria for their individual goals.</p>
<p>3. Inquiry Mindedness as a Way of Learning Life</p> <p>Inquiry mindedness – using thoughtful strategies and then looking for evidence of deeper learning – is a necessity for learners, teachers and leaders.</p>	<p><i>Craig: You have different background knowledge. You haven't read the book. I don't know if we should just read the chapter of the book together. You'll have missed lots of the proof that I'm telling you the main idea. I'll have to prove stuff to you.</i></p> <p><i>Elizabeth: I read the book – about two years ago and I saw the movie. How about we try reading the chapter, and if we differ ideas, then you can show me your proof in the book. You should be able to find stuff in the chapters you've already read, shouldn't you? How long have you been reading this book? Will you have forgotten? Think, what could help you and me.</i></p> <p><i>Craig: You should read my response journal first. Then you'll know what I've been thinking about the book.</i></p>
<p>Key Strategies</p> <p>1. Provide learners with clarity about and understanding of the learning intentions of the work being done – this means that learners should be able to tell someone else in their own words what the learning intentions are and how they connect to life beyond school.</p>	<p><i>Craig: I want to read Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. My goal is to read to find the important ideas and words.</i></p> <p><i>Elizabeth: That's my goal, too.</i></p> <p><i>Craig: I'm supposed to be telling you my criteria that I am using to tell if my reading is getting better. Do you want me to tell you now?</i></p> <p><i>Craig: I'm reading to find the important ideas and words. I want you to notice when I stop reading and talk about the ideas. That would show you that I think it is an important idea.</i></p>
<p>2. Provide to and co-develop with learners the criteria for success. This means that learners have clear criteria for quality and know what part they</p>	<p><i>Elizabeth: Here's what I'm listening and looking for.</i></p> <p><i>-I want you to stop reading and tell</i></p>

<p>are aiming to get better at.</p>	<p><i>me the important details</i> <i>-I want you to mark the important ideas with sticky notes</i> <i>-I want you to tell me the ideas after you finish reading the chapter.</i></p> <p><i>I want to have a discussion with you about the chapter, so don't forget anything. See my sticky notes! Beware the sticky notes! I have sticky notes and I will be using them. Where's my pencil? I need my pencil to write on my sticky notes.</i></p> <p><i>After you read that chapter we are going to have a detailed dialogue. Do you know what a dialogue is? You and me and we are both going to be doing the talking. You'll be A and I'll be B. You can talk first and I'll listen until you give me the sign. What's the sign going to be? I need to know what our sign is going to be – we'll thumb wrestle – that's our sign – then it will be my turn to talk and your turn to listen until I thumb wrestle with you. Now, let's read. Tell me again, what are you reading to practice?</i></p> <p><i>Craig: I'm reading to find the main idea. I'm going to chunk, then talk about the reading. I'm going to tell you the main idea.</i></p>
<p>3. Provide regular, thoughtful feedback that moves learning forward for the individual learner. This means that, over time, learners get used to knowing how to improve.</p>	<p><i>Elizabeth: I think that there's two main ideas and I think they're connected to the two kids, one who chews gum and one who watches TV. Authors often make the main ideas about the characters and their actions.</i></p> <p><i>Craig: Oh – so I should think about Mike Teevee and Violet Beauregard?</i></p> <p><i>Elizabeth: Probably you should do some thinking about them. Remember, the main characters and their actions.</i></p>
<p>4. Design and use thoughtful classroom questions to lead discussions</p>	<p>In preparation for the partner reading sessions, Debbie works with the Grade</p>

<p>that generate evidence of learning. This means that learners practice being ready to think and know that “no hands up” and individual responsibility for thinking about the question are regular parts of learning life. It also means that teachers work together ahead of time to develop strong questions to use part way through a learning sequence.</p>	<p>Four’s to help them develop the kinds of skills necessary to pose useful questions to their reading partner.</p> <p><i>Elizabeth: Well, you’ve made lots of predictions. I don’t want to tell you the answer. I want you to find out when you read. So let’s talk some more about this chapter. What do you think is going to be the main idea?</i></p>
<p>5. Put learners to work as learning/teaching resources for each other. This means that learners know strategies and have internalized quality criteria so that they can be productive with their same age and older and younger learning colleagues.</p>	<p><i>Elizabeth: Good for you! I think you did a great job, and I checked off all the criteria boxes. You need to let Mrs. Koehn know that you are ready to move on to a new goal. On Monday. Cause when I see Mrs. Koehn on Thursday, she’s going to let me know what your new goal is, cause I got to do some thinking about it before Friday. And pick a goal that’s already been talked about, okay? So I don’t have to think up the criteria – I can borrow it! Anyways, I’ll talk to you on Monday – choose from the grade three performance standards – no easy stuff for you!</i></p>
<p>6. Do everything you can think of to make sure that learners are the owners of their own learning. This means that learners are genuinely engaged in learning and confident that they can learn and think about their own learning.</p>	<p><i>Craig: I’m ready to make a new goal for next time.</i></p> <p><i>Elizabeth: Oh yeah? How do I know?</i></p> <p><i>Craig: I stopped reading when I wanted to talk about a main idea. And I used my sticky notes. I can tell you about the story. I asked some questions about the story that helped me think. I think I got a really good big idea – the kids are not deserving of the tickets. And I can show you the parts in the book that prove that they are not nice – remember all Mike Teevee’s guns? I know all about the story.</i></p>

Reflections

Elmore (2002, 2003) and others have been persuasive about the need for educators to focus their change efforts in the areas that actually make a difference to individual student learning. We are interested in learning more about how to answer the

question of what classrooms look like and sound like when regular learner-to-learner, inquiry-oriented conversations are a way of life.

After considerable reflection on the dialogue between these two young learners, we suggest that an additional way of thinking - and moving to action - about learning improvements resides in creating environments where older learners acquire the strategies and the motivation to work in a focused way with younger learners. Within this type of learning environment, both older and younger learners can practice and develop inquiry-oriented and evidence-seeking habits of mind.

We believe we will gain a great deal of productive knowledge from the work of Peter Tymms, Keith Topping and his colleagues in their comprehensive study of cross-age learning in Fife, (in process 2007). Perhaps our challenge, in addition to “creating new knowledge for the adults who are making the decisions” as suggested by Timperley and Earl (2007) is also to put emerging knowledge into use. We believe that a key challenge is using the knowledge currently being generated in the areas of self-regulated learning and formative assessment to assist teachers to make such practices a way of life. Business writers Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) have written convincingly about the challenges involved in closing the knowing-doing gap. They argue that closing the knowing-doing gap is more important than closing the gap between ignorance and knowing.

Given that our observations are based on a single partnership from two classrooms in one school, our reflections are obviously very tentative in nature. Many more partnerships would need to be developed, additional conversations need to be scaffolded, recorded and analyzed. Nevertheless, we do think that there is sufficient evidence in this “micro” sample to substantiate a belief that carefully examining classroom conversations between learners provides a productive lens for teachers and researchers interested in knowing the extent to which the emphasis on reading strategies and formative assessment practices leads to great learner agency.

We see evidence in this conversation that the use of clear criteria for reading improvement has been internalized in the literacy practice of these two young readers. The individualized nature of the goal setting, evidence seeking and use of a set of clear criteria that provide both content and process knowledge for reading success makes it

more likely that these two learners are acquiring greater learner agency and the habits of self-regulation. Contrasting their strategy use with work being done with secondary learners in an ongoing study of learner self regulation in classrooms in British Columbia and Quebec (Cartier, Butler and Janoz 2006) would suggest that these two readers have made a very productive start on a set of strategies that some adolescent literacy learners have yet to develop.

Craig appears to set personal goals quite confidently. He has a strategy for monitoring his learning that he can articulate to his reading partner and he controls, in a negotiated way, his motivation for reading comprehension. In this conversation he seems to exhibit many of the characteristics of a self regulated learner and he clearly enjoys the interactive conversation about a book that would generally be considered quite a challenge for a grade one male reader.

An interesting avenue of inquiry regarding Craig and other young readers is the role that the “tools of the thinking trade” play in making partnerships and conversations productive. In this single case, for example, the ‘skinny blue stick its’ and the ready availability to the learners of the performance standards criteria in a partnership duotang, seemed to play an important role in organizing the learning tasks and making the evidence of reading strategies readily available for use. We are curious about the role of these tools in helping Craig to be appropriately confident. In the terms of Kanter’s (2004) view about the importance of confidence in creating winning streaks, we might even go so far as to suggest that the partnership between Elizabeth and Craig is contributing in a positive way to Craig being on a “winning streak” in his literacy comprehension practice. The conversation seems to point in the direction of what occurs in winning streaks:

...that individuals can perform miracles, that they do indeed walk on water. But every water walker needs the stones to make it possible to move across the water. Knowing that what’s underneath will hold you and help you rise to victory is the essence of confidence. (p. 369)

If similar recorded learning partner conversations provide additional evidence that clear criteria, strategies and a well prepared learning partner create learner confidence, we might reasonably argue that these conditions create the foundational ‘stones’ to support young readers as they develop personal reading strength. This may stretch the

implications of this conversation too far. What can be reasonably suggested, however, is that learning rather than fixed mindsets (Dweck, 2006) are evident in the language and behavior of both these young readers. When thoughtful criteria are made available to, and internalized by, primary and intermediate age learners who work in learning partnerships, greater self-regulation and pleasure in reading can reasonably be assumed to result.

Perhaps when the shift to a “narrative of inquiry” that Ball and Cohen (1999) called for in their examination of teacher professional practice becomes a way of life for cross-grade learners examining their evolving literacy practices, our research lens can move appropriately even closer to the learning action. Ball and Cohen created a blueprint for developing practice and practitioners that, if put in place, would change replace a “rhetoric of conclusions” with a “discourses of practice:”

This discourse would emphasize more the “narrative of inquiry.” Instead of a definitiveness of answers and fixes, the focus would be on possibilities, methods of reasoning, alternative conjectures, and supporting evidence and arguments. It could legitimate and invest authority in a stance of deliberative uncertainty in and about practice. With such conversations, conducted from such a stance, teachers’ practice could be improved by acknowledging the limits of knowledge in practice, expanding teachers’ capacity to grasp the nature of these uncertainties, and improving their capacity to manage and learn from them with thoughtful analytic – that is, not purely idiosyncratic – consideration of alternatives. (p 15)

Expanding the frequency of inquiry-oriented, evidence-informed conversations by learners, their teachers, and members of their school communities – as well as by policy-makers - would, in our mind, lead to more powerful learning experiences for all learners. Possibly we can draw on the learning partnerships of Craig and Elizabeth, and of Debbie and Colleen, to provoke our thinking as we do so.

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