

Book Club Plus: ***Organising your Literacy Curriculum to bring students to high levels of literacy***¹



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Sit in any staff room or teachers' lounge in the Australia or the United States and it's likely you'll hear teachers talking about the urgent needs of their students and the ever-increasing demands of the curriculum. Teaching today seems far more complex than in the past, particularly in the area of literacy instruction. From public debates to legislative sessions at state and federal levels, from school staff meetings to news articles, and from parent-teacher meetings to conversation with Curriculum Officers, recommendations abound to respond to the question: 'How can we teach all children to read?' Experts from many quarters offer teachers a veritable bazaar of solutions – guided reading, early intervention, literature-based instruction ... the list continues. However, more than any other stakeholders in education, teachers know that no single approach, no simple solution will lead all students to high levels of literacy. Yet, teachers also recognise that defaulting to an eclectic patchwork of approaches fails to give students or teachers a coherent, shared experience of literacy as a cultural tool for thought and communication.

Effective literacy instruction is complex. Practice must be planned yet adaptable, responsive to learners' diversity and changing needs, integrative across the curriculum, and accountable to many, sometimes-competing goals. Given this view of practice, teacher development in the form of skills training and information updates does not afford practitioners the opportunity to learn as flexible, inventive problem-solvers (Spiro, Feltovich, Jacobson, & Coulson, 1992). Teachers and teacher educators need to make sense of a dizzying array of problems and solutions. To do this they need principled conceptual frameworks to guide their thought

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and action. Our article describes one such framework, *Book Club Plus*, designed by a practitioner inquiry network called the Teachers' Learning Collaborative.

Working together to design Book Club Plus

The issue of how to keep children engaged once they have learned to read is a challenging one for teachers. When students reach the middle years, unless they are committed, as well as fluent, readers, they can easily begin to struggle as the text demands of the curriculum increase. To learn to read well, all students need to read thought-provoking, age-appropriate books. They also need to respond thoughtfully to these books in talk, writing, and as they read other texts. Insuring these opportunities – ones designed to promote confidence in reading strategically and ownership of literacy practices – was the aim of the original Book Club program (see Raphael, Pardo, & Highfield, 2002). That framework illustrated ways to organise a literature-based literacy curriculum and engage students in meaningful reading, writing, and peer-led talk about text.

Yet, important as this learning is, independent, self-regulated readers also must learn and practice a myriad of skills and strategies at their instructional level. The variation in classrooms is wide, with students who are reading below, at, or beyond grade level within the same classroom. Readers who are struggling in particular need intensive instructional support, using texts that are at their instructional level. A dilemma facing teachers is how to accomplish both goals: (a) engaging their diverse readers in meaningful activities around age-appropriate text that they may not be able to read independently but can still engage with through response in writing and through talk, and (b) providing instruction appropriate to each student's individual needs – even if the texts at their instructional level are meant for younger students. Our goal in designing the *Book Club Plus* framework was to manage this dilemma (Lampert, 1985) so that all youngsters read with teacher support at their instructional level, as well as practice comprehension skills and strategies in conversation and writing in response to age-appropriate literature. This dual commitment to both age-appropriate and instructional-level text-based activities is the core design principle of *Book Club Plus* (Florio-Ruane & Raphael, in press).

For three years and across social, economic, geographic, and grade level borders, members of the Teachers Learning Collaborative, or TLC, (Dara Bacher, Jennifer Berne, Karen Eisele, Susan Florio-Ruane, MariAnne George, Kristin Grattan, Nina Hasty, Amy Heitman, Kathy Highfield, Jacquelyn Jones-Frederick, Marcella Kehus, Taffy Raphael, Molly Reed, Earlene Richardson, Jennifer Szlachta, Andy Topper, Jo Trumble, and LaToya Wilson) worked together to design and field-test *Book Club Plus*, a user-friendly literacy curriculum framework meeting

three criteria: (1) it guides rather than prescribes, (2) it addresses a common problem but is open to local adaptation, and (3) it reflects current theory and research on the teaching and learning of literacy. In the subsequent three years, Florio-Ruane and Raphael (in press) explored key features of the work of TLC and Book Club *Plus* so that what we had learned could travel to new environments – new cities, new grade levels, new teacher study groups, and so forth. In the next section, three members of the original TLC network describe the conceptual background for Book Club *Plus*, its organisational framework and its implementation in one 3rd grade classroom.

Conceptual foundations of Book Club Plus

The Book Club Program (note that the capitalised Book Club refers to the program, lower case book club refers to the student-led discussion groups) grew out of four understandings from educational theory, research, and practice.

Language is fundamental to thinking

The first understanding is that *language use is fundamental to thinking*, that what is learned by any individual begins in the social interactions in which he or she engages (Gavelek & Raphael, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999). Thus, in Book Club *Plus*, it is important to provide multiple contexts, or activity settings (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Wertsch, 1985) in which students engage in the language practices that support their literacy work. In some teacher-led contexts, the teacher engages in explicit instruction, modeling and scaffolding. In others, the teachers' role is as facilitator or participant (Au & Raphael, 1998). Some contexts involve students working in student-led groups, from dyads and project teams to book club discussion groups. Some require students to work independently. By means of interactions with teachers and peers, thinking again 'goes public', and students have the opportunity to hear the language of literacy and learning. Moreover, with the range in activity settings and the differences in how one participates, all students can legitimately participate in all aspects of literacy practices. Through their interactions across activity settings, learners use language to achieve collective and personal goals.

Literacy is a foundation for reading instruction

The second understanding is the need to *increase the role of literature in reading instruction*. Used here, the term 'literature' includes text genres of literary quality, expository genres such as textbooks and brochures, and transactional ones such as Internet documents. Scholars advocate using authentic text to teach a broad repertoire of reading practices (e.g., Galda, 1998; Short, 1998). With this recommendation comes the proviso that we avoid 'basalising' texts, honoring their forms and functions

rather than treating them simply as vehicles for instruction. In addition to basing literacy instruction on interesting, high quality literature, the use of such text invites instruction in literary response and literary elements. Perhaps less obvious, literature provides a vehicle for exploring culture and society, for literature itself reflects the accumulated understandings of humanity (Birkerts, 1994) – our values, beliefs, and history.

Literacy education includes learning substantive content

Literature's content directly relates to a third understanding – foundational to the design of *Book Club Plus* – that *school-based literacy education should prepare students to live and work in a diverse, democratic society* (Hiebert, 1991). Studies of culture and its social, historical, personal, and political dimensions tend to be slighted in the texts and contexts of both teacher education and classroom learning (Florio-Ruane with deTar, 2001; George, Raphael & Florio-Ruane, 2002). Literature study in the company of others offers a mirror reflecting our own lives and a window into people, places, times, and cultures that readers might never have the chance to experience directly (Galda, 1998). As such, literature can become a powerful tool for critical thinking, helping students and teachers understand their own perspectives as cultural and therefore limited and, in many ways, different from experiences of people in other times, places, and groups (Dasenbrock, 1992).

Narrative thinking is central to literacy teaching and learning

Some Collaborative members had opportunities to experience a similar kind of learning about culture and identity as participants in graduate courses and autobiography book clubs sponsored by Raphael and Florio-Ruane (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, Kehus, George, Hasty, & Highfield, 2001). These experiences are reflected in a fourth fundamental understanding of *Book Club Plus* – that *narrative plays a central role in understanding and in sharing our understandings with others*. Adapting the *Book Club* program to teachers' learning, for example, Florio-Ruane found that response to text in book club discussions often took narrative form. This narrative response to text can be a powerful form of reading in which difficult ideas like culture are explored by way of the literary imagination (Florio-Ruane with deTar, 2001).

A look at *Book Club Plus*

Based on these four understandings from research and theory, we designed *Book Club Plus* to promote all students' learning and incorporate skills and strategies associated with reading acquisition and critical thinking required for living in and contributing to a democratic society. Its structure and thematic content build from understanding self to understanding others, and promote engagement through compelling and personally meaningful texts and activities. TLC members drew on

multiple information sources as we field-tested various aspects of inquiry into using the Book Club *Plus* framework: participant observation in teachers' classrooms; tracking low achieving readers' progress using qualitative and quantitative methods; assessing overall class learning; comparing student learning between TLC and comparison classrooms using observations, standardised, and informal measures of reading; and administering the Qualitative Reading Inventory to the five lowest achieving readers in each third grade using an informal inventory (though two students moved before spring post-tests occurred).

Among the most encouraging findings in field-tests in TLC third grade classrooms was that the thirteen lowest-achieving readers using the Book Club *Plus* framework showed accelerated growth in reading across the school year. All of these students made at least one year's progress as measured by the Quality Reading Inventory (Leslie & Caldwell, 1995). Further, over three-fourths (83%) made more than a year's progress, and slightly more than a third (42%) were reading at grade level by the end of the year. In addition, on the Metropolitan Achievement Test, Book Club *Plus* students were at no disadvantage on this high stakes test when compared to students in the comparison classrooms. This was despite the fact that, as described in the next section, students in the Book Club *Plus* classrooms spent half the time as did those students in the comparison classrooms on traditional basal reading program activities that tend to more align with high stakes tests than do many of the more in-depth literacy work required in Book Club.

As the examples below illustrate, both organisational structure and thematic content help weave a meaningful fabric out of diverse activities, texts, and youngsters. The framework helps teachers make literacy learning coherent for students across different instructional contexts and activities. We describe framework features that applied across settings, then illustrate their local adaptation with examples from three settings. Most of our examples are drawn from a 3rd grade classroom (8–9 year-olds) taught by MariAnne George, one of the original members of the TLC. However, we will draw on a few examples from 4th and 5th grade teachers, respectively, Elisabeth Trost and Chanmi Lim, who are members of the Book Club *Plus* for English Language Learner teacher study group in Chicago, Illinois, USA. Like the TLC, this group networks teachers who teach in different schools. Unlike the TLC, however, all but one of the participating teachers who began meeting in 2002 have taught in the Chicago Public Schools. Further, these participants are building on the principles of Book Club *Plus* already developed by the TLC members, extending their curriculum work to focus on supporting students for whom English is not their native language. Together, these teachers provide a window into how Book Club *Plus* looks across the middle grades in a variety of contexts.

Table 1. Organising the year

Unit	Stories of Self	Family Stories	Stories of Culture
Theme	Autobiography – Presenting and “re-presenting” our lives	An individual’s identity is embedded in family’s story	Family stories are embedded within the narrative of our cultural heritage
Selected Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Tarantula in My Purse</i> (J. C. George, 1996) • <i>Tell Me Again about the Night I was Born</i> (Curtis, 1998) • <i>26 Fairmont Avenue</i> (dePaola, 2000) • <i>My Life in Dog Years</i> (Paulsen, 1999) • <i>The World of William Joyce Scrapbook</i> (Joyce, 1997) 	Books by Patricia Polacco, e.g., <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Meteor</i>, 1978 • <i>Some Birthday</i>, 1991 • <i>Picnic at Mudsock Meadow</i>, 1992 • <i>My Rotten Red-headed Older Brother</i>, 1994 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Molly’s Pilgrim</i> (Cohen, 1983) • <i>From Miss Ida’s Porch</i> (Belton, 1993) • <i>Grandmother’s Latkes</i> (Drucker, 1992) • <i>Pueblo Storyteller</i> (Hoyt-Goldsmith, 1991) • <i>A Birthday Basket for Tia</i> (Mora, 1992) • <i>Journey to Ellis Island: How My Grandfather Came to America</i> (Bierman, 1998)
Unit Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student timeline of his/her life, event/year • Personal narrative about critical life event • ‘Snapshot’ autobiography using school photo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview family member from or about grandparents’ generation to identify a family story • Learn a family story to share with class • Oral presentations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare/contrast family stories among texts and students’ lives • Interview family about cultural heritage • Create heritage quilt square for class quilt and present to class • Essays on family’s journey to USA
Content Connections	Student’s & family’s roles within cultures community		Study native and the immigrant experience

Organising the year

Teachers in TLC organised Book Club *Plus* instruction within three literacy units, each of which could last from three to eight weeks. The overarching, year-long theme, 'Our Storied Lives,' built from Unit 1: 'Stories of Self', to Unit 2: 'Family Stories' and Unit 3: 'Stories of Culture'. See Table 1 for unit themes, resources, writing activities and related unit work.

When Book Club *Plus* travelled to a new setting in Chicago, teachers such as Chanmi and Elisabeth followed a similar model, though their unit themes varied slightly. For example, Elisabeth's 4th graders (9–10 year-olds) were placed in her English Language Learning classroom to develop stronger skills in English. Many of the students were recent immigrants to the United States. Thus, Elisabeth's first unit adapted the Stories of Self theme to focus on making adjustments in new situations (using *Molly's Pilgrim* by Cohen, 1983). For her second unit, she refocused Family Stories to explore the journeys families take, using *Sarah Plain and Tall* as the core book. Her third unit took the notion of Stories of Culture, but focused it on Freedom and Courage – the strength that each of them has had to find within themselves to succeed in their new country. Similarly, Chanmi made adaptations to unit themes for her 5th grade students, such as shifting the Stories of Self unit to focus on 'My American Story'. A key principle for all Book Club teachers is planning units with content that meaningfully taps students' lived experience using themes that bring coherence to the school curriculum.

Organising the week and day

During the three units, students participate in the two conceptually linked contexts for learning: Book Club and Literacy Block. In Book Club *Plus*, the two contexts occur in two- or three-day cycles within a given week. As Figure 1 illustrates, these thematically linked contexts provide opportunities for teaching the full range of language and literacy skills students need in order to become literacy users, critical thinkers, and citizens in a democratic society. Each context is described briefly below.

Book Club. Within Book Club, four components – community share, reading, writing, and book club – interweave to support students' learning to read, respond to, and discuss literature in student-led discussion groups (see Figure 1). These components vary in length of time for each depending upon students' needs and teacher goals.

Community Share. Opening 'community share' is a teacher-led, whole-group activity introducing students to elements of literature discussion and previewing specific skills, strategies, and knowledge useful as students read, write, and talk about their book club's book. Closing community share reconvenes the small groups to share ideas and issues that emerged in their book clubs' discussions.

Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.
Teacher Daily				
Book Club	Book Club	Book Club	Literacy Block	Literacy Block
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Opening community share [5-15 minutes]•Reading [10 - 20 minutes]•Writing [10 - 15 minutes]•Book clubs [5 - 20 minutes]•Closing community share [5 - 20 minutes]			<ul style="list-style-type: none">Guided Reading GroupsSkills CentersWWW searchesJournalingUnit Work/	
Social Studies connection				

Figure 1. Organising the week

Reading. The 'reading' component involves students' gaining access to the book to be discussed. Their reading can be independent or supported by adults, buddies, audiotapes, and other resources. What is crucial is that all class members, regardless of reading level, have access to the literature to be discussed in book clubs and each student writes in response to and discusses the book. Book Club teachers choose texts that elaborate the themes and provide opportunity to learn and use both the tools of reading and the strategies and processes of comprehension.

Writing. The 'writing' component involves writing into, writing through, and writing out of the themes. Thus, writing into the theme involves a range of opportunities for students to build or access relevant background knowledge. MariAnne's students, prior to the Stories of Self theme, began to develop a timeline of their lives, with a key event from each year displayed on each section of their timeline. Chanmi's students worked on reports on the lives of migrant workers who move from place to place, following the harvest patterns for crops such as peaches and artichokes. This background helped them place the My American Stories Book Club unit novel, *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000) in its historical context, as well as understand some of the challenges the main character was facing as a new immigrant to the United States in the 1930s. Writing through the unit occurred in the daily response in students' reading logs that helped them prepare for upcoming discussions, and, in Elisabeth's

4th grade classroom, to also engage in vocabulary study related to their Book Club novels. Writing out of the unit occurs when writers' workshop activities connect thematically (e.g., similar genre, theme, content, author craft) to the book club books, as students reflect on what they have read and talked about within the unit and extend their thinking to new literacy activities. Elisabeth's students, after reading *Number the Stars* in their Freedom and Courage unit wrote about the meaning of freedom and courage in their daily lives.

'Book club' is the student-led discussion group for which the program was named. Students are divided into heterogeneous groups of four to five, varying in reading level, gender, classroom status, verbal abilities, and so forth. Students remain in their book clubs throughout a unit. On some occasions, all book clubs read and discuss the same book. On others, they read different books encircling the shared theme. In all cases, the books are theme- and age-appropriate and sufficiently complex to warrant and support in-depth discussion and a range of responses. Within book clubs, students discuss ideas that emerged from their reading and log responses, airing questions, confusions, and related personal experiences. Students are taught norms for appropriate behaviour such as listening with respect, building on others' ideas, debating and critiquing ideas, assuming leadership, and following another's lead. Thus learning to read, write, and talk in book club embodies democratic processes and learning within community.

Literacy Block. Literacy Block is the second key site. Here, the focus is instruction and practice of skills and strategies. This occurs in guided reading groups (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) where students are placed at one of three levels – at, above, and below grade – and read thematically linked literature at their instructional level with extensive instructional support.

Independent Work. When not meeting with the teacher, students work independently to practice subskills (e.g., spelling, grammar, handwriting) and work on theme-related writing assignments. Some classrooms organise these different activities using 'centres', some have an area for guided reading while other students remain at their desks, going to areas of the room only to pick up needed materials. Some use a combination.

Book Club Plus in a 3rd grade classroom

To more fully illustrate Book Club *Plus*, we draw on the 'Family Stories' unit used by MariAnne, who organised the week to include a balance of Book Club and Literacy Block days, a daily read-aloud from Polacco books students may not have the opportunity to read on their own, and writer's workshop. In addition to the language arts contexts, MariAnne

used social studies to further develop connections among history, family, and community.

Book Club activities (in contrast to Literacy Block) centred on *Chicken Sunday* (Polacco, 1992a). Mini-lessons during Opening Community Share over a three-day period included dialogue use as a beginning focus on authors' craft, vocabulary concepts related to family and to sensory words, and how to search the World Wide Web for information on authors and illustrators (e.g., Patricia Polacco, a well known author/illustrator from Michigan, in the Midwestern United States). Students read the book club book independently or in one of the support contexts, wrote individual reading log entries, and met to discuss the book. During students' book clubs, MariAnne observed one group at a time, keeping notes on individual students' and the group's progress. She audiotaped groups she could not directly observe to listen to, and assess, later. MariAnne ended each day's Book Club events with closing community share. She followed the pattern of first asking students to share substantive ideas from their book clubs. Students discussed Polacco's craft (e.g., how her illustrations tell part of her story, how she builds suspense) as well as story content (e.g., stories told from the two sides of her family – Russian immigrants and Michigan farmers). Following the book discussion, MariAnne asked students what they thought had gone well in their book clubs and, 'What was hard for you today?' Thus, students began with a focus on content and discussion strengths before examining problems.

On Literacy Block days, MariAnne spent approximately 15 minutes with each of the three guided reading groups, using a Polacco book written at, above, or below third grade, depending on the group level. She focused on areas of reading instruction from her district's reading/language arts curriculum guide and the scope and sequence chart from the district adopted commercial reading program. While MariAnne met with the guided reading groups, students worked at their desks on a variety of tasks: (a) handwriting practice sheet, (b) spelling, (c) journal entries, (d) dictionary skill – using guide words, (e) writers' workshop and the family story preparation, and (f) internet searches related to authors and illustrator.

Writers' workshop focused on developing a family story. Students prepared for and interviewed a family member from their grandparents' generation (or, if not available, someone with stories from that generation). From the interview, they chose a family story to share in class. They wrote notes, developed an oral presentation of the story, rehearsed, then presented their family stories. The home connection involved parents in sharing family stories, facilitating connections to family members, and helping to identify or – if needed – recreate an artefact around which the story was based.

Each week, under the umbrella of Family Stories, all students engaged

in meaningful work with age-appropriate literature and had opportunities to learn and practice skills with text at their instructional level. Visiting the classroom, an observer would be hard pressed to find the rich getting richer and poor getting poorer. Each student met at least twice in a guided reading group, engaged with peers in 2–3 book clubs, participated in whole class instruction 2–3 times. Daily, they read independently, engaged in whole class book discussion, engaged in a variety of writing, and practiced skills – some related directly to reading and discussing books, others to reading, writing, spelling, and grammar subskills. Every student used literate practices to learn and communicate about the theme of family.

Learning in Book Club Plus

We now look at three students in MariAnne's class – Rikki, Patrick and Nami – to illustrate how Book Club *Plus* supported diverse students' learning. Rikki and Patrick represent two kinds of struggling readers, both poorly served by a diet of drill and practice or by a laissez faire approach that slights instruction. Rikki reads below grade level, so MariAnne's challenge is to design a learning experience rich in both skill instruction and opportunities to use literacy in meaningful practice. Patrick, on the other hand, while able to read grade level materials, is disengaged. He has not enjoyed reading during his first few years in school. Re-engaging him in written language is an essential problem to be solved if he is to progress at his grade level. Nami is a high achieving student exceeding grade level goals, functionally bilingual in English and Japanese. She challenges the teacher to support and extend her literacy development.

Rikki: A struggling reader succeeds

Rikki, the youngest student in MariAnne's third grade class, entered third grade reading on a beginning 2/2 level (using the Scholastic Placement Test, which accompanies the district adopted reading program). Labeled as a 'transitional reader', she had worked with the school's learning consultant since first grade. She had summer tutoring after first and second grades. By the end of third grade, Rikki scored 80% on the Expanding Level Scholastic test (70% is passing), thus leaving third grade reading on grade level. Her writing showed similar growth, though – as writing samples will reveal – she still struggles with language conventions such as spelling and punctuation.

To see what she was learning in Book Club Plus, we analysed several samples of Rikki's writing. The writing samples come from Rikki's sustained writing during Literacy Block's writing workshops. Changes in content, structure, and conventions can be seen over the school year and are linked to the Book Club *Plus* activities and themes. In the fall, Rikki typed the following final draft (note her typos are preserved):

My Bird

My bird is friendly. He does not have a crown. His name is Aber. He likes to play with the next door neihbor's bird. He is vary neat. he is good at work, and he is a roben. He is king of all the robens in city. But he is not the king of all the robens in the world. But he inangs it. & I love him.

MariAnne had read Paulsen's (1999) *My Life in Dog Years*, conveying the author's autobiography through his relationship to his dogs. At this time some students in the class were independently reading J. C. George's (1996) book, *There's a Tarantula in my Purse and 172 Other Wild Pets*, in which the author uses the same convention of telling her life story through her pets. Both books were very much a part of whole class discussions in community share, and thus may have influenced Rikki's writing about a pet bird.

The sample in Figure 2, written in February, describes a car trip taken by Rikki's family, during which older siblings, especially her brother, terrorise her.

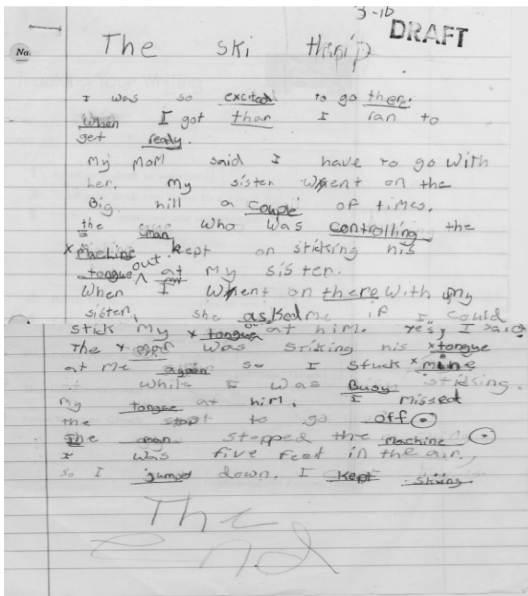
When I was going to go to
Whalt Disney Wold My sister and brother
cept on tesing and poleing my hair
out. I cept saying stop it but
they gust said oh you're a litel
BaBy crieving. Well my Brother
cept on saying That. My sister
cept poleing my hair. For an
Hour and a 15 min. Soon my sister
Stoped poleing my hair. But My
Brother cept onying me. He said
I bet you cant count to 100!
My parints whar to striket
about all the nows. The wher
getting oniyd to! Finily my sister
said ly of Ricki. By
the time we got Thar
allmost all my hair was gon.

The end.

Figure 2. Rikki's winter writers' workshop story

Again we can see Rikki learning to use a trope found in her study of literature. This time her theme and text structure are influenced by her hearing Polacco's (1994) *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother*. A bit later, in March, Rikki writes of a family ski trip, but this time she is very much a part of her sibling's fun and games (see Figure 3).

Here she seems ready to step outside the literary models and develop her own family story theme.



Rikki Process Writing
3/10/1999

- Consider how this text functions in the world
 - Positioning herself relative to sister and 'machine man'
 - Positioning herself as skier in opening and closing
- Conventions to support text flow & story development
 - use of dialogue
 - vocabulary choices

The ski trip

I was so excited to go there. When I got there I ran to get ready. My mom said I have to go with her. My sister went on the big hill a couple of times. The man who was controlling the machine kept on sticking his tongue out at my sister. She asked me if I could stick my tongue at him. Yes, I said. The man was sticking his tongue at me again so I stuck mine. While I was busy sticking my tongue at him I missed the stop to go off. The man stopped the machine. I was five feet in the air, so I jumped down. I kept skiing.

The end.

Figure 3. Rikki's spring writers' workshop story

Across these three pieces we see her texts become longer and her sentences more complex. Further, applying the school district's benchmarks and standards to these samples revealed growth in Rikki's knowledge and use of authors' craft including voice, theme, character development, and elements of narrative structure.

Patrick: An unenthusiastic reader becomes re-engaged

Patrick entered third grade reading on grade level, though according to his mother's report at fall conferences, he showed little interest in reading in or out of school. While very inquisitive, during the fall Patrick was easily distracted. He showed difficulty focusing on reading

and written work whether working independently, in small groups, or in whole class activities. By the end of the year, however, the picture of Patrick's learning and engagement had changed. In MariAnne's end-of-year reflections, she noted:

I saw a dramatic change in Patrick throughout the year. He loved the autobiography literature and the group discussions. I saw him become engaged in reading both during structured reading time and independent reading time. He really blossomed in March with the culture focus – this brought in his deep interest in science and history.

For Patrick, success came through his engagement with school literacy activities related to autobiography and culture, themes he found compelling.

Patrick eagerly wrote stories about his own life and grew increasingly interested in his ancestry and in cross-cultural connections within families and among people. For example, as one of the culminating activities of the year, students were asked to create a quilt square that conveyed their cultural backgrounds. Patrick's square, shown in Figure 4, captures his mixed ancestry – German (the autobahn, beer, and the peace symbol reflecting the Berlin wall's demise), English and Irish (sheep, mountains, and the potato famine that led his ancestors to immigrate to the United States).

His opening line for his end-of-year essay was 'Hi! My Name is Patrick. I like culture and I'm German and English mostly.'

When a visitor entered the classroom, Patrick proudly announced that the students represented over 27 different cultures and their classroom community showed how cultures connect and change. His March



Figure 4. Patrick's Quilt Square

16th log entry conveys his engagement with texts as sources of cultural information, as he contrasts his own cultural background with those of the characters in *Chicken Sunday* (Polacco, 1992a) (see Figure 5).

My culture to Mr. Kodinsky's
I have a different religion. I'm Catholic and he's Jewish. He's been to Russia and Europe and I haven't.
My culture to Babusha
She's from Russia and I'm not. We have very different religions and she makes real Pysanky eggs. See all cultures are different. Cultures have a lot of different traditions like I always go up north for the Fourth of July.

Figure 5. Patrick's log entry 16 March

On another occasion, his interest in others' cultural backgrounds came through in his writing a story of a bullfighter. During writers' workshop, Patrick asked one of his Spanish-speaking classmates for assistance. He wanted his characters' names and important parts of their dialogue to be written in Spanish, and thus authentic to the language they actually would speak.

Patrick's end of the year Scholastic Expanding Level reading test score was 93%. However, Patrick's success, as measured by his scores, conveys only part of the picture. More important is his growing interest and excitement over literacy and about culture. In his writing, his oral presentations, and his choice of reading, he demonstrated the power of the unit themes for re-engaging not only readers who struggle with skills, but also those who may have turned away from the joy that literature and literacy can bring. He left third grade telling his teacher he was going to become an anthropologist and study cultures. He told his young neighbour, Adam, that he was fortunate to be able to be in Book Club *Plus* the following fall.

Nami: A successful reader moves beyond classroom literacy practice

A good reading program for diverse learners addresses all students' needs. Rikki illustrates the power of such a program for struggling readers and Patrick reflects success for students able to read and write, but not particularly interested. But, what of the already successful and engaged reader? Nami, our third focus student, suggests that when students see literacy as a powerful tool, they seek to use literacy abilities beyond the confines of the classroom and curriculum. Nami was a high-achieving girl who, at 31/2 years old, had moved to the United States

from Japan with her family. Successful in her language and literacy learning, she was in the top reading group and ended the year scoring 96% on the Scholastic Expanding Level test. In addition to her academic work in public school, she also attended Japanese school on Saturday and was becoming literate in both languages. Nami could easily have been bored in a conventional literacy program. Yet, as she read many published autobiographies, Nami began to consider publishing her own story. She crafted a fictional account of the life of a short pencil, perhaps a metaphor for not being swayed by superficial physical traits:

I AM COOL TOO!

I am a short pencil. Everybody calls me short head and teases me. Grandpa said, 'A short pencil can be loved more than a long pencil.' But if I think hard, I'm just laying in a corner of a desk without anyone using me. When I was long and handsome, I was in a backpack and people took me to school. But now nobody uses me. Why does everyone always use long and good pencils? I don't mind if I get very short so, I want to be used more. 'I am cool too,' even if I am short.

Using the Japanese she had been learning in Saturday School, she translated her story (Figure 6) and submitted it to the Japanese-American newspaper, where it was published on April 16, 1999.

In school, Nami used the reading and writing opportunities within the unit to explore both her own immigrant experience and her feelings about returning to Japan. In February, she heard *b at Mudsock Meadow* (Polacco, 1992b) in which the main character, William, suffers from constant teasing when he fails to win any of the contests at Mudsock Meadow's annual Halloween picnic. Following this, she wrote of a recent experience when her parents took her back to Japan for a visit. She sees her friend who she describes as 'pretty mean' because she 'always teased me.' Sadly, Nami was unable to tease her back because 'nothing

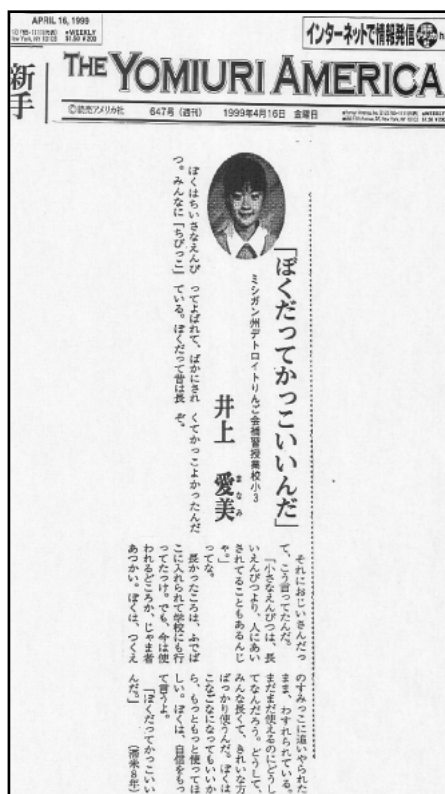


Figure 6. Nami's newspaper article

popped into my head.’ Through her writing she understands her natural desire – like William’s – to want to tease back, her frustration and, in the end, her sense of being special because ‘I had something that makes me be nice. My friend had none of that.’ Like William, she gains self-esteem as she reflects back on the experience.

Not surprisingly, her end-of-year writing sample reflects some of her ambivalence about returning to the land of her birth. In this essay first draft, she states that ‘I was born in Japan and I moved to America. That is my life.’ She defines her life in terms of place, an idea woven throughout her essay. Through her literacy activities within this unit, she was able to use literacy as a tool for many different purposes: extending her school activities into her Japanese community by publishing in the newspaper and becoming a published writer in the process; exploring her feelings as an immigrant who, in some ways, has become more familiar with her adopted country than her homeland; and coming to terms with this experience because ‘This place, Michigan, was so great ... even when I go back to Japan, I won’t forget about my life in Michigan.’

Concluding comment

A framework is only as good as the learning it affords. In Book Club *Plus*, our goals for students’ learning included growth in literacy knowledge and skills that can be demonstrated on traditional tests, as well as on informal assessments (e.g., reading logs, process writing samples). We were committed to promoting students’ engagement and ownership of literacy processes. And, because of the nature of the unit content, we encouraged students to develop their ‘voice’ and ‘identity’ as shown through their family stories. While we were particularly interested in how this framework facilitated literacy learning of struggling readers, we believed that an effective curriculum should sustain the interest and promote the learning of students across all ability levels. Further, the framework should provide a way for teachers to create a coherent literacy curriculum that frames literacy activities within settings that guarantee that our dual commitment can be met: that all children will be provided access to texts designed for their age-level, while simultaneously, these same children will be insured instruction appropriate to their reading levels. Meeting these dual commitments occurs in Book Club *Plus* through activity settings that share the following features. First, the curriculum is thematically organised within literacy and between the language arts and other school subjects. Second, the students work in activity settings which, because they do not always or necessarily separate students by reading level, afford students chances to observe and demonstrate a range of achievements, diverse background knowledge, and contributions to a whole-class effort. Third, the texts that are used in all activity settings elaborate the themes and provide

opportunity to learn and use both the tools of reading and the strategies and processes of comprehension. Fourth, the content of the texts read and the assignments that relate to the texts meaningfully taps students' lived experiences. Fifth, through the different activity settings, students experience a blend of teacher and peer leadership. And sixth, all students – regardless of their language abilities and reading levels – have access to the full complexity of the practices and the content being learned.

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