Theory Into Practice, 50:149–156, 2011

ISSN: 0040-5841 print/1543-0421 online
DOI: 10.1080/00405841.2011.558444

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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Socio-Constructivist and Political Views on Teachers' Implementation of Two Types of Reading Comprehension Approaches in Low-Income Schools

Researchers have reported that two types of instructional approaches—strategy instruction and high-level talk about text—lead to reading comprehension improvement in elementary-age students. One hypothesis is that both approaches have similar student outcomes because they de-

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The research reported here was supported by the Institution of Educational Sciences, U.S. Department of Education through Grant R305G030140 to the University of Illinois. The opinions are those of the authors and do not represent views of the U.S. Department of Education.

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velop high-level thinking about text. This article examines the literature on the two instructional approaches (cognitive strategy instruction and responsive engagement instruction), presents socio-constructivist views of teaching and learning, and explains what can happen when a socio-constructivist perspective guides teachers' implementation of either approach in low-income schools. The authors discuss three implementation challenges beyond the frameworks of either instructional approach—the impact of district/school initiatives, movement of teachers from teacher-directed to student-directed instruction, and the selection and use of appropriate texts—and how teachers have met such challenges. They conclude with recommendations for improved classroom practice.

BASED ON THE NATIONAL Reading Panel's (2000) finding that strategy instruction leads to improved reading comprehension, many reading researchers recommend that teachers instruct elementary-age children on how to use strategies while they read. Yet, little evidence shows that children who receive strategy instruction actually use the explicitly taught strategies while reading (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994; Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996). Several researchers hypothesize that strategy instruction's emphasis on processing text deeply, and not students' explicit use of taught strategies, may be what actually results in improved comprehension (García, Pearson, Taylor, Bauer, & Stahl, 2005; Palinscar & Brown, 1984; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994; Taylor, Pearson, García, Stahl, & Bauer, 2006).

Another path toward improved reading comprehension is an instructional focus on high-level talk about text, or what we call *responsive engagement instruction*. Taylor and Pearson (2004) reported that teachers' emphasis on "higher-level questions, [that] engage[d] children in actively thinking about the text and how the information in the text relate[d] to their own experiences" (p. 172) was what characterized classrooms with high levels of student reading comprehension in low-income schools. A recent meta-analysis of classroom discussion studies concluded that certain discussion approaches promoted students' reading comprehension (Murphy, Wilkinson, Sotor, Hennesey, & Alexander, 2009).

Here, we argue that when a socio-constructivist perspective guides teachers' implementation of either approach (strategy or responsive engagement instruction) in low-income schools, implementation issues beyond the frameworks of the specific approaches are likely to occur. To support our argument, we first review literature on strategy instruction and responsive engagement instruction. Next, we define socio-constructivist views of teaching and learning. Then we identify three implementation challenges that impact teachers' effective use of either approach in high poverty schools and discuss how teachers have addressed the challenges. We conclude with recommendations for improved classroom practice.

Cognitive Strategy Instruction

Our interest in strategy instruction focuses on how teachers include it in their reading instruction across the academic year. The National Reading Panel (2000) reported that Reciprocal Teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1984) and Transactional Strategies Instruction (Pressley & Woloshyn, 1995) were effective strategy approaches that helped students to improve their reading comprehension. Reciprocal Teaching focuses on four strategies—clarifying, predicting, questioning, and summarizing; whereas, Transactional Strategies Instruction focuses on ten strategies—the four in Reciprocal Teaching, plus strategies related to monitoring and resolving comprehension problems, using imagery, and responding to text. In a quasi-experiment that utilized aspects of Reciprocal Teaching and Transactional Strategies Instruction for what we called *cognitive strategy instruction* (García et al., 2005; Stahl et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2006), we used year-long professional staff development to help teachers introduce, explicitly teach, and

support students' (grades 2–5) flexible use of five strategies (clarifying, predicting, questioning, summarizing, and visualizing) while reading in student-led small groups. We asked teachers to spend 30 minutes three times per week on the instruction. They initiated the instruction by explicitly teaching each of the five strategies, as they gradually released responsibility to their students for the identification and flexible use of the strategies. By the second semester, students were supposed to use strategies as needed to enhance their small-group discussion and text comprehension.

Responsive Engagement Instruction

For the same quasi-experiment, we also used professional staff development to introduce and support teachers' implementation of responsive engagement instruction for 30 minutes three times per week. Responsive engagement instruction draws on features of Instructional Conversations (Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999), and reader response instruction (Gambrell & Almasi, 1997; Maloch, 2002). We asked teachers to select rich narrative texts with high-interest themes and expository texts with open-ended issues; to frame discussions of the texts with "big, fat, juicy questions" for which there are no definite answers; to encourage students to make personal connections to the themes/issues; and to use the questions and literature response logs to guide student discussion and comprehension. The end goal was discussion groups in which students conducted their own conversations about texts.

Socio-Constructivist Views of Teaching and Learning

Proponents of socio-constructivism do not consider knowledge to be an objective construct waiting to be discovered. Rather, knowledge emerges when participants collectively share their interpretations of reality (Mertens, 2005; Schwandt, 2000). In designing instruction, many socio-constructivists draw on Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, in which teachers and students create their own learning through their social interactions and collaboration with more expert others (Moll, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Proponents of a socio-constructivist view reject a transmission approach to teaching and learning, in which the teacher educator or teacher is the knowledge distributor. In a transmission approach, learners are supposed to listen to and observe the expert, answer the expert's questions, and follow the expert's directions. In contrast, a socio-constructivist approach involves learners who respond to others with more expertise by collaboratively constructing their own understanding.

When a socio-constructivist perspective informs professional staff development, the use of highly scripted lessons or isolated workshops is inappropriate. Rueda (1998) characterized socio-cultural staff development as joint problem solving between teacher educators and teachers, with a focus on "deliberate, planned teaching with ... interactive, responsive conversation" (pp. 1–2). According to Rueda, it requires the use of shared language to identify and analyze an issue, ongoing expert support and assistance, and teachers' implementation of instructional practices in their own classrooms, so that the instructional change becomes part of their daily instructional lives.

In the following, we share a vignette of students enacting cognitive strategy instruction from a socio-constructivist perspective, after their teacher has explicitly taught the five strategies and supported their use of small group discussions. The vignette shows how the students, not the teacher, are in charge of the identification and employment of strategies to comprehend and construct their interpretation of a reading. Instead of passively participating in the instruction, the students actively problem-solve and construct their own interpretations through social interaction with others:

> Five fourth graders of various reading levels are seated at a table, reading and discussing *The Honest to Goodness Truth* (McKissack, 2000). The group's leader, Raquel, asks everyone to read the next four pages silently. When everyone has

looked up from the pages to signal that they have finished reading, Raquel asks if anyone can summarize what they have read. Joaquin provides a brief summary. Just as he finishes his summary, Cristina says that she needs a clarification. She does not understand why Libby, the main character, tattled on another student. Jaime observes that Libby thinks she is supposed to always tell the truth, no matter what. David explains that he thinks Libby is responding to the scolding she received from her mother for lying. He says that her mother probably did not think about what might happen. Several students agree with David. Raquel asks Cristina if the story now makes sense. Cristina responds yes, but states that she still thinks it is difficult to know when you should or should not tell the truth. Jaime agrees with her. Raquel looks at the strategies chart posted on the wall, and asks if anyone thinks visualization is needed. Joaquin responds that you don't even have to visualize what is happening because the illustrations are so good. Raquel asks if anyone wants to make a prediction about what will happen in the next few pages. Cristina provides a prediction, and Raquel reminds everyone to read the next four pages to see if the prediction is confirmed or disconfirmed.

In a responsive engagement lesson for the same text, similar types of chunked reading and student turn-taking would occur in a small group. However, authentic questions (Should you always tell the truth, no matter the consequences?) or literature response entries related to the theme (Describe a time when you don't think you should tell the truth), rather than strategies, would guide the student discussion. Individual students would answer the questions or share their written responses (e.g., I don't think you should tell the truth about how some people look when they can't help it), and other students would state whether they agreed or disagreed and why, drawing on their personal experience or textual evidence.

Implementation Issues

When a socio-constructivist perspective guides teachers' implementation of cognitive strategy instruction or responsive engagement instruction, several implementation issues may ensue. In the following, we discuss three implementation issues drawn from our research with 89 teachers in 22 low-income schools across three different states.

Impact of District and School Initiatives

Because cognitive strategy instruction and responsive engagement instruction do not include all of the components of effective literacy instruction recommended for students in grades 2–5, they have to be integrated with other aspects of literacy instruction. How well this works varies according to the politics that surround literacy instruction in the district or school. When the entire district or school embraces the approach, and changes the structure of its literacy instruction to fit the approach, then there rarely are integration problems. For example, in a school district in which key features of cognitive strategy instruction and responsive engagement instruction were already emphasized in the state's recommended Reading First instruction, integration problems did not exist.

In another state, teachers who already had agreed to implement the instructional approaches had the misfortune of being in a district that, due to a fiscal deficit, was taken over by the state. Researchers (Avila, Zacher, Benson-Griffo, & Pearson, in press; Benson-Griffo, Kohansal, & Pearson, 2007) described how the teachers struggled to implement the approaches under four different curricular mandates, which explicitly contradicted the approaches. For example, the mandates required teachers to use a specific basal reading series, strictly adhere to the teacher's manual and the district's pacing guide, use time-consuming assessments to monitor student progress, and participate in professional development that negated a socio-constructivist perspective by emphasizing explicit curricular training and compliance. They noted that the teachers' compliance with the mandates reduced the time available for the assigned approach, the depth to which they implemented it, and their own professional development and prerogative.

Nevertheless, many of the teachers persevered in their attempts to merge the approaches with the mandates. For example, Avila et al. (in press) reported that the teachers used what they were learning about their assigned approach to critique the required basal, to offset problems the basal created, and to extend and use the basal in creative ways. Participating in the professional staff development for the instructional approach seemed to facilitate their development as professionals, although their actual implementation of the instructional approach was limited.

In another state, Stahl (2009) showed what happens when not all the school's teachers participate in cognitive strategy instruction, and conflicting instructional mandates, such as the Joplin Plan, are required. Per the Joplin Plan, students were assigned to grade-level homogeneous reading classes, according to their reading test performance, for one hour daily. When individual students' reading test performance changed, they were moved to a different homogeneous reading class and a different teacher. Due to the periodic change of students in the reading classes, it was impossible for the participating teachers to implement cognitive strategy instruction during their formal reading instruction. Because they could not use the basal literature anthology series that was employed during the Joplin Plan, they also had to find their own texts. The teachers partially resolved the aforementioned problems by implementing cognitive strategy instruction during their homeroom instruction, in which they taught the same heterogeneous group of students throughout the school year, and by collaboratively selecting texts. However, they often could not provide the amount of time required for the instruction.

Movement From Teacher-Directed to Student-Centered Instruction

Another implementation challenge is the extent to which teachers in low-income schools are comfortable with student-centered instruction as compared to teacher-centered instruction. In a study that looked at the implementation of the two approaches with bilingual students (Spanish–English speakers) in an urban school district, García et al. (2006) reported that regardless of the assigned instruction, it took most of the school year for teachers who were used to whole-class, teacher-directed instruction to move to student-led small group instruction. One of the problems was that similar to other teachers in urban school settings (Padrón, 1994), most of the teachers previously had not effectively used student-led small groups for their instruction. In response to the situation, midway through the school year, staff developers provided video clips of effective student-led discussions, which were shared and collectively analyzed; frames for discussion starters and conversational moves (I agree with Rosa because ..., I disagree with Rosa because ..., What makes you say that?); and modeled simulated classroom discussion groups in which teachers played assigned student roles (e.g., the captain to lead the group, the summarizer, etc.). The teachers reported improved small group discussions when they assigned students specific discussion roles, worked with them to develop rules for small group participation, and shared the discussion starter frames and video clips of small group discussions with them.

One of the most effective tools was the use of a fishbowl, in which students who effectively worked in a small group participated in a student-led small group discussion while their classmates observed. With the help of their teacher, the students who observed, along with the small group participants, commented on what went well in the discussion and on what could be improved. García et al. (2006) reported that as the teachers saw their students benefit from discussing text in student-led small groups, they were more willing to relinquish teacher control of the discussion groups to the students.

Selection and Use of Appropriate Text

Another implementation challenge is the selection of narrative and expository texts appropriate for the assigned instruction. Teachers implementing cognitive strategy instruction need texts challenging enough to warrant the authentic

and flexible use of strategies, whereas teachers implementing responsive engagement instruction need texts with complex themes or issues that facilitate the use of "big, juicy" questions to enhance students' comprehension and discussion. For both approaches, texts with well-developed plots or concepts and rich vocabulary are necessary (Stahl, 2008). We found that modeling the use of appropriate texts, and providing teachers with sample copies and lists of multicultural texts that especially lend themselves to responsive engagement, seemed to help with text identification. Teachers who were required to use basal readers sometimes could use the basal texts. However, it was imperative for them to read the texts ahead of time to plan for their instruction and to preselect focus vocabulary. By working together on the selection of texts and development of instructional plans, teachers reduced the amount of time involved.

Identifying texts that the students could comprehend and read independently was a common problem. To initiate either approach, we recommended that teachers read-aloud authentic texts as they introduced key aspects of the assigned instruction. Many used shared reading to get the students to read independently, first reading the texts orally as their students read along in their own individual copies; then, students read aloud the same texts again in pairs or in small groups, followed by independent reading (Stahl, 2008).

Finding appropriate second-grade texts was not easy. Some teachers implemented guided reading with leveled *little books*. These texts, at least in the first half of second grade, were too simple to warrant much strategy use or theme discussion. Encouraging the teachers to conduct teacher read-alouds of authentic literature for their assigned instruction temporarily solved the problem for narrative text. By the middle of second grade, the guided reading texts were more complex and warranted the use and discussion of strategies, making it easier to implement cognitive strategy instruction. However, guided reading texts rarely involve complex themes or afford the use of big, juicy questions, making the implementation of responsive engagement difficult. To offset this problem, we encouraged teachers to continue to read narrative texts aloud and to use shared reading when they had multiple copies of texts. By the end of second grade, teachers reported that the use of complex narrative texts, often with multicultural themes, enabled the children to connect to books in ways that the little books at their instructional reading level had not made possible.

The minimal amount of second-grade expository text that warranted strategy or responsive engagement instruction was problematic. Most of the published informational texts for novices are descriptive, and not open to controversy. Occasionally, the teachers implemented the instructional approaches by having the students read and discuss short expository essays on animals or pollution from basal readers or trade books by Seymour Simon. They often had to approach the topic thematically, combining several short texts on the same topic, to facilitate students' use of strategies or expose them to multiple viewpoints.

Final Thoughts on Improved Classroom Practice

Consistent with a socio-constructivist perspective, we consider the most effective way to improve classroom practice to be the professional learning of teachers. If we want teachers to release the responsibility for effective comprehension to their students, then administrators and curriculum directors need to release the responsibility for instruction and curriculum selection to their teachers. The best way to support teachers is through sustained professional staff development in which teachers are not just provided with new tools, but also given multiple opportunities to try out the tools, to plan their use, and to discuss their implementation with their peers. Such an approach emphasizes teachers' problem-solving development, and provides them with the opportunity and motivation to persevere in their efforts to address the reading comprehension needs of all their students and to adapt their instruction to the messy life of schools.

In terms of specifically improving classroom practice, it is important to remember that reading

comprehension is a dynamic construct that requires readers to personally and socially transact with texts. Teachers can help students improve their engagement by providing them with tools—such as strategies, big, juicy questions, and/or literature response logs, along with social opportunities to apply and share the tools with others in authentic situations. Minimally, effective instruction requires extended blocks of time that allow for the reading of complex and rich text, instruction with guided practice, and authentic opportunities for students to try out what they have learned, to make personal connections, and to participate in high-level discussions of text. We are convinced that a socio-constructivist perspective, with its emphasis on expert modeling, shared knowledge, social interaction, and authentic instructional contexts, is the most effective way to improve teachers' professional learning and classroom practice.

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