Making Meaning: Individual and Group Response within a Book Club Structure

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Purpose
The purpose of this study is to explore the literary understanding of primary-grade students using a book-club setting in the classroom. This practice can be used as a means to offer an instructional structure that allows students opportunities to explore non-linear thinking.

The Article
Barone begins this article by scrutinizing the common classroom practice of using instructional reading time on a single reading program in which students respond to the same predetermined questions. She wondered how students might respond in a book-club setting where the teacher was expected to teach reading from a core reading program, but also incorporate time to engage students with book-clubs. For instance, would students parallel their core reading instruction and respond in similar ways by focusing on literal responses and consensus among peers, or would they vary from this expectation and share personal nuanced understandings? Barone found that student initiated conversations motivated by personal interpretation in the book-club setting led to greater meaning beyond what students could have developed on their own.

What this Means for the Field
The analysis of student-written responses and conversations in a book-club setting has several implications for teachers from a literacy perspective. First, when considering the attributes of active reading and the skill set of expert readers, these students demonstrated each of the crucial elements through their oral and written responses. Perhaps the time to read, discuss, and write parallel the importance of direct instruction from the context of reading comprehension strategies. Students discovered that, unlike skills-based/worksheet-driven programs, there were not always single answers to questions about a text. Second, the analysis showcases responses shared within a group and the individual types of reading-response journeys made by students. While students developed different understandings of the text, even the most seemingly arbitrary and divergent responses to narrative held the possibility for being understood. Importantly, students comprehended the text while they engaged in unique ways of building meaning. Therefore, teachers should not get overly concerned or worried about the idiosyncratic nature of responses. Rather, they should relax and come to understand the individual processes of meaning making experienced by readers. Third, by considering all student responses to the text, the path from literal to inferential to literal responses became obvious.

Citation

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